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Israel and the Middle East News Update

Friday, May 31

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News Excerpts

May 31, 2019

Ynet News

New Polls Show Israel's Political Deadlock would Continue

A Channel 13 poll published on Thursday evening showed that Israel's political deadlock would be maintained if elections were held today. The poll, which surveyed 720 Israelis and had a 3.8% margin of error predicted 57 seats in the 120-member Knesset for the Likud-led right-wing bloc, and 54 seats for the centrist-left-Arab bloc, led by the Blue and White party of ex-IDF chief Benny Gantz. Holding the balance of power: Liberman's Yisrael Beytenu, with 9 seats. Liberman, however, refused to partner with Netanyahu during the past coalition negotiations that culminated in Netanyahu's admission of defeat on Wednesday night, and Liberman stated on Thursday that he would not back Gantz as prime minister after the next elections. See also, ["POST' POLL: LIKUD, YISRAEL BEYTENU RISE AFTER CRISIS" \(JPost\)](#)

The Guardian

Political Chaos in Israel Deals Blow to Jared Kushner's Peace Plan

Jared Kushner's visit to Jerusalem to promote his troubled Middle East peace plan appeared to abruptly lose its remaining energy after an overnight crisis in Israeli politics plunged the country into a months-long election campaign. With no guarantees that Benjamin Netanyahu's Trump-friendly government will stay in power past the summer, any progress made with Kushner – Donald Trump's son-in-law and adviser – is at risk of being revoked by the next Israeli administration. One month after Israelis voted in a national poll, Netanyahu failed to form a government by the deadline of midnight on Wednesday and chose to push parliament to disband rather than risk political foe Benny Gantz snatching the premiership from his grasp. See also, ["TOO BAD' THAT ISRAEL IS HEADING FOR NEW ELECTIONS, SAYS TRUMP" \(JPost\)](#)

Ha'aretz

PA Officials Believe Elections Will Delay Release of Trump's Plan

Senior Palestinian Authority officials are predicting that the release of U.S. President Donald Trump's Middle East peace plan will be delayed due to the dissolution of the Knesset and new elections in Israel scheduled for September 17. A senior Palestinian official told Ha'aretz that talks held by the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah on Wednesday with foreign visitors strengthened the expectation that the American administration would not release the details of its peace plan until a new Israeli government is formed. Noting that the peace plan was deferred as a result of the Knesset election two months ago, it will also be put off as a result of the September vote, they predicted.

Reuters

New Israel Election Likely to Widen a Swelling Budget Deficit

Israel's budget deficit problem is about to get bigger as the country heads for its second election this year, after Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu failed to form a new government. The deficit swelled to 3.8% of gross domestic product in April, considerably exceeding this year's 2.9% target. Analysts, the central bank and the International Monetary Fund have warned of consequences if the country does not rein in its budget. Tax increases and spending reductions were expected once a government was formed following April 9 elections. But Netanyahu failed to put together a coalition and parliament voted on Thursday to dissolve itself. A new election will be held in September.

Ha'aretz

2 Wounded in Jerusalem Stabbing Attack; Suspect Killed by Police

A 50-year-old man was critically wounded on Friday in a suspected stabbing attack in Jerusalem's Old City, and another lightly wounded, emergency services said. Israeli police said officers at the scene shot and killed the suspect, who is a Palestinian from the West Bank. The attack occurred in the early morning, around 6.20 A.M., police said. The first stabbing occurred near Damascus Gate, and the victim was evacuated to Shaare Zedek Medical Center. The 50-year-old was stabbed and his condition is described as life-threatening. The second attack happened near Hurva Synagogue, in the Old City's Jewish Quarter. A 18-year-old was stabbed in the back, suffering moderate wounds. The attacker carried out the first stabbing and then started running away, stabbing a second person, and was eventually shot by security forces. See also, ["Two hurt, one seriously, in stabbing attack in Jerusalem's Old City" \(TOI\)](#)

Ynet News

Sinwar Threatens Tel Aviv, Urges Bahranis to Strike Over US Summit

Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar on Thursday threatened to "pulverize" Tel Aviv in the next military confrontation with Israel and urged the people of Bahrain to demand a cancellation of next month's economic "workshop" where the first part of the U.S. peace plan is due to be unveiled. Speaking at a conference calling for an intifada in honor of Al-Quds Day, which marks the day the Palestinians lost control of the holy city, Sinwar said: "In the next confrontation with Israel, we will pulverize Tel Aviv with double the force than during Operation Protective Edge." Al-Quds Day is celebrated annually with a march in Tehran, characterized by "Death to Israel" chants and burning of Israeli flags. See also, ["Hamas leader Sinwar threatens to attack Tel Aviv with double force" \(JPost\)](#)

Ynet News

Netanyahu Shows Off Trump's Map of Israel with Golan Heights

Prime Minister Netanyahu says U.S. President Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner has gifted him an official State Department map, updated to incorporate the long-disputed Golan Heights as part of Israel. Speaking at a news conference in Jerusalem on Thursday, Netanyahu addressed a nation rattled by the prospect of an unprecedented second election campaign in the same year, after the newly re-elected Netanyahu failed to form a governing coalition. "This map had not been updated since the Six Day War," said Netanyahu, referring to the 1967 Middle East war, after which Israel captured the Golan Heights from Syria. "Well, it has been updated, it just got an update. ... That is to say, there are very important developments here." See also, ["Trump signs 'nice' on map showing Golan as part of Israel" \(CNN\)](#)

Ha'aretz

Israeli Army Seals Hezbollah's Latest Cross Border Tunnel

The Israeli army has sealed the latest Hezbollah attack tunnel that crosses from Lebanon into Israel and effectively concludes its efforts to foil the group's tunnel program. The tunnel that was sealed Wednesday is the largest one discovered and the last to be destroyed. Defense officials believe that no more tunnels cross under the northern border. The latest tunnel is 80 meters (262 feet) deep, equivalent to the height of a 20-story building. In Israel, the tunnel stopped seven meters belowground and was to be finished in the event of war. It ended 77 meters into Israel below an area thick with vegetation. Israel has submitted information to international agencies about several tunnels that were started in Lebanon and are still a few hundred meters from Israeli territory. The Israeli army is constantly monitoring them to make sure Hezbollah does not extend them.

A Third Election Called in 2019? It can Certainly Happen

By Gill Hoffman, political commentator at Jerusalem Post

- The Jerusalem Post headline from March 4 looks prophetic now. “An election do-over in 2019? It can certainly happen” ran the headline at the top of the page, five weeks before the April 9 election. The premise was that polls at the time were predicting 61 MKs for the Center-Left bloc, which included Arab parties unwilling to enter any coalition.
- Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s Center-Right bloc was polling at 59, and he was ruling out a coalition with any of the parties outside his bloc. The polls were incorrect. The Center-Right won 65 seats, which ended up still not enough, because Avigdor Liberman’s Yisrael Beytenu Party refused to enter Netanyahu’s coalition.
- The article suggested that President Reuven Rivlin could give both Netanyahu and Blue and White leader Benny Gantz a chance to form a governing coalition, and they could both fail, which would force an election. Channel 13 political analyst Raviv Drucker reported then that Rivlin could compel Netanyahu and Gantz to form a government together, and then let them fight over who would come first in a rotation in the Prime Minister’s Office.
- But Netanyahu preempted Rivlin from letting anyone else run the country by coercing the Knesset on Wednesday night to disperse itself, initiating that very do-over election on September 17. The move upset backbenchers in his party, one of whom was overheard in a private conversation with another Likud MK calling it “suicide.”
- MKs were not the only ones upset about another election being held; people across the country have expressed outrage over the news. But for those who found a do-over election to be bad news, there could be even worse news yet to come. What is even worse than a repeat election? A three-peat election (borrowing the word – a registered trademark owned by former Los Angeles Lakers coach Pat Riley – made up by Byron Scott during his team’s attempt to win a third straight NBA championship in 1989).
- Yes, that can certainly happen. It is even more likely now that Netanyahu and Liberman have indicated that they do not want to sit with each other in a government ever again. That could leave Netanyahu short of coalition partners when he attempts to form the next government. If the Center-Right minus Yisrael Beytenu fails to win 61 seats on September 17, it is very possible that no one will be able to form a government.
- Perhaps Rivlin would be able to intervene then. Perhaps he won’t. Another election called in 2019 is still possible. Clip and save this article, just in case.

Likud Blindly Obeys Netanyahu

By Mazal Muallem, political commentator at AI Monitor

- **Some 30 minutes prior to the final May 29 Knesset vote to dissolve itself, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s spokesperson sent around a photo showing members of Likud members waiting for him to enter the party’s meeting room. “The Likud faction is convening in full,” said the caption. The photo of the Likud’s 33 Knesset members and government ministers (not including Netanyahu) lining up as one before voting themselves out of office, less than two months after being elected, is a faithful portrayal of the Netanyahu era. It also reflects the Likud movement’s organizational ethics — the party does not depose its leaders even when they appear to act contrary to the collective interest.**
- **Netanyahu convened his colleagues only to fully ensure that they were marching in lockstep, that no one was planning to spring any surprises on him during the vote. After all, he had already endured several exhausting and tense days when he realized that Yisrael Beitenu party Chair Avigdor Liberman had probably made a strategic decision to prevent him from forming his fifth government. Without Liberman, Netanyahu could not assemble a majority coalition; thus President Reuven Rivlin could have proceeded by tasking another Knesset member with forming the new government. At that moment, Netanyahu, the arch-politician, lost control over the developments and could not afford to back an alternative government that he himself would not lead. Given the circumstances and despite the deadlines looming of his possible indictments, opting for new elections was the littlest of all evils as far as he was concerned**
- **Everyone showed up in the meeting room, including Knesset member Gideon Saar, the only Likud lawmaker to challenge Netanyahu’s conduct in recent weeks, whom Netanyahu repeatedly humiliated and persecuted. Saar might have felt justified in trying to push Netanyahu aside or to seek revenge. In recent times, all eyes have been on Saar. Netanyahu and his people thoroughly examined every step he took, every incidental meeting. However, despite the intense bitterness he felt toward the prime minister for seeking his political demise, Saar lined up with his colleagues and did Netanyahu’s bidding. Saar did so because he, of all people, knows that any attempt to hit back at Netanyahu now could result in political disaster, condemn him to ostracism by the Likud and destroy any prospects he may have of leading the party and the political right in the post-Netanyahu era, which may be just around the corner.**
- **The right wing and Likud would not have forgiven Saar had he tried behind the scenes to tailor an alternative government, headed by the Likud and in partnership with the Blue and White party, while Netanyahu continued his efforts to establish a (right-wing) national government. Such attempts by Saar would have also created a rift between him and the ultra-Orthodox parties, with which he has nurtured close ties for years. Therefore, Saar made the right political decision for himself.**
- **The Netanyahu era in the Likud, as clearly portrayed since Netanyahu’s major victory in 2015 and until its peak when his colleagues voted themselves out of office at his bidding — is a strongman’s era. It is an era of one powerful leader who eviscerated top members of his party, avoided grooming a successor or lining up an alternative leadership tier. Netanyahu, who derives his political power from his public popularity and from being the unchallenged leader of**

the political right, has turned the Likud from a party known for its vibrant democracy and shifting political alliances into the Netanyahu party.

- Apropos Saar, he was one of those who refused to be tempted into leaving the Likud and joining the Kadima party formed in late 2005 by then Likud leader and Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. Sharon liked Saar, but Saar did not give in to temptation to be named a minister. He stayed with Netanyahu and a handful of loyalist lawmakers and together, in the 2006 elections, suffered the biggest loss the Likud had ever known, plunging from 38 to 12 Knesset seats. After the elections, a minor attempt was mounted to replace Netanyahu as party leader, only to be quickly doused.
- The 2005 Likud split is a traumatic event in the party's annals. Party supporters and activists still bear its scars. Minister Tzachi Hanegbi can attest to them. On the eve of that split, the Likud Central Committee placed him first among the candidates it picked for its Knesset list. He nonetheless went with Sharon and since returning to the party fold in 2012 has been unable to climb back to the top, Ahead of the April 9 elections this year, he placed 14th on the Likud candidates list in party primaries.
- One can obviously criticize the current Likud leadership for its weakness and helplessness vis-a-vis its leader who is up to his neck in suspicions of corruption, and to claim that this was the reason he failed to put together a government because only the right and the ultra-Orthodox parties would join him under such circumstances. However, no one familiar with Likud history sees anything strange in this behavior.
- Three days prior to the dissolution of the Knesset, Netanyahu finally understood the bind he was in, launching a series of tactical and strategic moves to contain the damage and, above all, thwart any possibility of someone else forming Israel's next government. Although prospects of such a scenario were dim, he nonetheless did not go back to Rivlin and ask him to entrust the task to someone else, a move that would have robbed him of control of the process.
- Netanyahu's decision to unite with Finance Minister Moshe Kahlon — a former Likud stalwart — and his center-right Kulanu party was a strategic move, enabling him to ensure that Kahlon and his three Kulanu lawmakers would support his move to dissolve the Knesset. Also, in the Sept. 17 elections, a joint run with Kahlon will surely bring some of his supporters over to the Likud. Netanyahu promised Kahlon he could keep his job as finance minister and appoint another of his Kulanu colleagues as a minister in Netanyahu's next government. The prime minister also promised that all four of the elected Kulanu representatives would be included in the Likud's list of candidates for the next elections. In order to reassure Likud backbenchers who fear being pushed out of the next Knesset by the merger with Kulanu, Netanyahu promised them a deal known popularly as "the Norwegian Law." The Norwegian Law prevents ministers from serving as parliament members at the same time. Netanyahu's proposal was to appoint four elected lawmakers as government ministers. These ministers would then resign from their position as Knesset members, vacating four spots; Netanyahu could then give their Knesset seats to the four candidates next in line. This commitment is not anchored in any written document and has no validity, but the condemned had no choice but to accept it. Netanyahu also named one of the party's most popular lawmakers, acting Foreign Minister Yisrael Katz, as full-time foreign minister (a job Netanyahu has held in recent years), thereby ensuring his loyalty and precluding a revolt at the top.
- Netanyahu also began gearing up for his re-election campaign in other ways. He invited Supreme Court Chief Justice Esther Hayut and her deputy, Justice Hanan Melcer, to his office

in order to convey a sense of normalcy in his relationship with the judiciary despite a stormy relationship over his allies' attempts to rein in the country's top court. The photo of the meeting issued by his office, showing the three smiling participants, was designed to convey a message to the public ahead of the September elections, which Netanyahu knew already, would be inevitable even as he met with the justices.

- Several minutes after the Knesset voted with a clear majority to disperse, Netanyahu was already deep into his new election campaign. At an impromptu news conference in the Knesset, he minted one of his election slogans: Liberman had proven his leftist political leanings. The Likud leadership parroted "Liberman is left" in unison.

Summary: Everyone showed up in the meeting room, including Knesset member Gideon Saar, the only Likud lawmaker to challenge Netanyahu's conduct in recent weeks, whom Netanyahu repeatedly humiliated and persecuted. Saar might have felt justified in trying to push Netanyahu aside or to seek revenge. In recent times, all eyes have been on Saar. Netanyahu and his people thoroughly examined every step he took, every incidental meeting. However, despite the intense bitterness he felt toward the prime minister for seeking his political demise, Saar lined up with his colleagues and did Netanyahu's bidding. Saar did so because he, of all people, knows that any attempt to hit back at Netanyahu now could result in political disaster, condemn him to ostracism by the Likud and destroy any prospects he may have of leading the party and the political right in the post-Netanyahu era, which may be just around the corner.