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Israel and the Middle East News Update

Tuesday, June 4

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News Excerpts

June 4, 2019

Fox News

Israel's Knesset taps Netanyahu's Pick for State Comptroller

Israel's parliament has voted in favor of appointing Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's candidate for state comptroller, representing a minor political victory for the embattled leader. The Knesset voted 67-48 on Monday in favor of Matanyahu Engelman, who currently heads Israel's Council of Higher Education. The vote to select a new state comptroller was one of the final acts by the current Knesset, which was elected in April but voted to dissolve itself last week after Netanyahu failed to form a government. The comptroller is tasked with supervising government policies and operations and reporting on mismanagement. The post is typically filled with former judges; Engelman is the first non-judge to fill the post in decades. See also, ["Knesset elects Matanyahu Engelman as State Comptroller" \(Globes\)](#)

Times of Israel

Lapid: PM Turning Israel into Iran by Agreeing to Gender Segregation

MK Yair Lapid on Tuesday slammed Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu after it was revealed that he had agreed during failed coalition talks last month to an ultra-Orthodox demand to allow for gender segregation in public spaces, saying he was turning Israel into Iran. A draft of the Likud's agreement with the Haredi United Torah Judaism party, which was leaked Monday to the Kan public broadcaster, stated that "within 90 days the government will amend the law in such a way that it will be permissible to provide public services, public study sessions and public events in which men and women are separated. This separation will not constitute discrimination according to the law." See also, ["In coalition talks, PM accepted Haredi demand for gender segregated public areas" \(TOI\)](#)

I24 News

Netanyahu: Israel Will Not be a State Run by Jewish Law

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu ruled out the possibility of Israel being ruled by Jewish law in response to a far-right lawmaker's statement on Monday, calling for a revival of Torah laws. "Israel will not become a Halacha (Jewish law) state," Netanyahu said. Smotrich, who has demanded to be given the justice ministry post, said on Monday that "the Jewish people will want (it). They'll see how the law of the Torah is correct and just and moral and humane. Israel will return to be run as it had been during the days of King David and King Solomon -- according to the law of the Torah". See also, ["Right-wing Israeli lawmaker: Return nation's justice system to days of king David" \(JTA\)](#)

TOI

Ehud Barak Said Weighing a Return to Politics, Again

Former prime minister Ehud Barak, a strident critic of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, is considering tossing his hat into the ring in the upcoming September elections, Channel 12 news reported Monday. Barak, who was the last leader of Israel's Labor Party to hold the country's top office, reportedly sent out feelers to Labor Knesset members seeking their support for him to temporarily run the party for a year. With other Labor members jostling to replace current party chairman Avi Gabbay, Barak is commissioning his own public opinion polls and will make a final decision based on the results, the report said. The embattled Labor party is set to hold a leadership primary in the coming months, ahead of the national vote. See also, ["Will Ehud Barak form a new party?" \(Arutz 7\)](#)

Palestinian Officials in Hot Water over Ramadan Meal with Israelis

The PLO's Committee for Interaction with Israeli Society on Monday defended its decision to send Palestinian officials to Jaffa to attend a Ramadan iftar meal last Friday with Israelis. The committee, which is responsible for holding contacts with Israelis and organizing visits by Israelis to Ramallah, denied charges that it was engaging in promoting "normalization with the occupation." Many Palestinians have taken to social media to condemn the PLO committee for attending the iftar meal in "occupied Jaffa." In a statement, the committee said: "We need to distinguish between normalization with the occupation and its tools – which is unacceptable and condemned by Palestinians – and working on the internal Israeli front for dialogue and debate with Israeli society."

Survey: Growing Number of US Jews Support Settlement Evacuation

Fewer American Jews consider "caring about Israel" an important part of being Jewish, a survey published on Sunday by the American Jewish Committee finds. Those questioned also indicated that they do not believe a thriving state of Israel is "vital" to the long-term future of the Jewish people. A growing number of American Jews, the survey shows, are also unhappy with Israel's policies toward the Palestinians and support a full evacuation of West Bank settlements. This was first ever survey conducted by the veteran Jewish organization to examine attitudes concurrently in the three largest Jewish communities in the world: The United States, Israel and France. The questions asked of members of the three communities were not identical, however. See also, ["5 Major Takeaways from AJC's Surveys of American, Israeli, and French Jews" \(AJC\)](#)

Last Survivor of Sobibor Death Camp Dies Aged 96

The last living survivor of the Sobibor death camp, died Monday at the age of 96 at a hospital in central Israel. Semyon Rosenfeld is survived by his two sons and five grandchildren. In recent years Rosenfeld lived in a retirement home in the community settlement of Yad Binyamin in central Israel. He was pronounced dead at the Kaplan Medical Center in the city of Rehovot. Rosenfeld was born in Ukraine in 1922 in the town of Ternovka, and in 1940 - with the breakout of World War II - was drafted into the Red Army. A year later he was captured by the Germans and sent to set up a labor camp in the capital of Belarus, Minsk, along with 230 other Jewish prisoners. He was later transferred to an extermination camp near the railway station of Sobibór near Włodawa in Poland, where some 250,000 Jews were murdered between 1942 and 1943. See also, ["Last living survivor of Sobibor uprising dies at 96" \(JPost\)](#)

Ex-Shin Bet Head Yaakov Peri Joins Cannabis Company CANN-IL

Yaakov Peri, previously the head of Israeli security agency Shin Bet and a former Israeli minister of science, technology, and space, is yet another public figure joining the Israeli medical cannabis industry. Peri will be joining CANN-IL, a newly formed medical cannabis research company, as president and partner. Real estate entrepreneur family Weizman holds 75% of CANN-IL, while the rest is owned by BIRAD, the knowledge transfer company of Bar Ilan University. The company, which develops a disease and insect-resistant cannabis strain, raised \$250,000 to date and is currently in the process of raising \$1 million out of a final target of \$1.5 million. In a recent interview with Calcalist, Peri said that his decision to join CANN-IL stems from the company's research-oriented objectives.

Netanyahu's Coalition Failure was Really a Secret Success

By Sever Plocker, economic commentator at Yedioth Ahronoth

- Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu showed indifference and disregard when coming empty handed to ask President Reuven Rivlin for an extension the period allocated to form a coalition - not to continue negotiations with his likely partners but start them. A few more precious days passed, and he awoke as if from a slumber to discover a great treasure in his hands. The treasure was a gift from Avigdor Liberman, whose condition for joining the coalition was that legislation to draft ultra-Orthodox men into the army must be untouched, not weakened as the religious parties demanded. The spiritual leaders of the ultra-Orthodox parties refused.
- Under normal circumstances, Netanyahu would have banged his fist on the table and explained the political reality to his ultra-Orthodox coalition partners: the alternative to a Netanyahu government was a Yair Lapid government. And that was the very last thing that their constituents would ever want. Netanyahu also promised, off the record, that even if the draft law were - God forbid - approved by the Knesset, he would find a way around it for them. After all such things had already occurred in the past.
- The legislation for recruiting yeshiva students into the IDF has been debated and discussed by a myriad of public committees, courts and the Knesset itself for decades. And even so, in all that time, the number of detainees for dodging the draft can be counted on the fingers of two hands. For even without a draft law, the number of Haredi men enlisting in the IDF has tripled from 1,000 in 2010 to 3,200 this year, and the proposed law would not have improved on that, not even on a purely declarative level. Netanyahu knew it, the spiritual leaders of the ultra-Orthodox parties knew it and so did Avigdor Liberman. Which surely brings us to the conclusion that if Netanyahu really wanted to, he could have formed a coalition government.
- Netanyahu is no political rookie, and the reason for him not forming a government after the April 9 elections was that he simply did not want to. Some will insist that the prime minister in fact went out of his way to build a coalition. He even went so far as to offer Labor leader Avi Gabby the world in return for his party joining the coalition.
- Is not the fact that he couldn't muster 61 MKs to support a government he headed conclusive evidence of his distress? Actually, I believe that this is in fact evidence of the contrary. Netanyahu, a political fox and master of disguise, put on an act for Gabbay secure in the knowledge there was no chance of the Labor MKs sacrificing themselves to save his skin. The prime minister dissembled, feigned and fooled Gabbay, just so that he could give the impression of a genuine attempt to form a government riught down to the wire. But this was a government he never had any intention of forming.
- Netanyahu's gamble was based on cold and calculated personal analysis. When the current Knesset was sworn in, he realized that his coalition partners were not exactly clamoring to pass legislation to ensure his immunity from prosecution. And even if they did agree, he could not afford the heavy diplomatic-economic-political price they would demand. So, in order to pave the way for his immunity, Netanyahu and his inner circle

calculated that he needed a larger Likud party, with at least 40 seats in the Knesset. And given the massive number of votes lost to right-wing parties that did not pass the threshold, a target of 43-42 seats in the next Knesset does not seem fantastical. It is even less fantastical when one considers that the narrative of the September elections - unlike the April ones - will not be combatting corruption, but rather a personal dispute between two politicians with the same political agenda and who have both experienced years of police investigations. By refusing to join his coalition, Liberman threw Netanyahu a lifeline.

- Do not let his downcast grimaces fool you; do not be tempted to feel his pain. Netanyahu is playing his own game - his inability to form a new coalition was not failure, but success. And we may soon be very sorry that he succeeded.

Summary: Netanyahu's gamble was based on cold and calculated personal analysis. When the current Knesset was sworn in, he realized that his coalition partners were not exactly clamoring to pass legislation to ensure his immunity from prosecution. And even if they did agree, he could not afford the heavy diplomatic-economic-political price they would demand. So, in order to pave the way for his immunity, Netanyahu and his inner circle calculated that he needed a larger Likud party, with at least 40 seats in the Knesset. And given the massive number of votes lost to right-wing parties that did not pass the threshold, a target of 43-42 seats in the next Knesset does not seem fantastical. It is even less fantastical when one considers that the narrative of the September elections - unlike the April ones - will not be combatting corruption, but rather a personal dispute between two politicians with the same political agenda and who have both experienced years of

Not the Palestinians, the Economy or Even Netanyahu: Election Will Test Israel's Jewish Character

By Ravit Hecht, contributor to Ha'aretz

- The character of the strange upcoming election on September 17 is getting clearer, and, it turns out, it isn't really strange at all. The election – as Avigdor Lieberman announced with his amazing and cruel move that forced the election for personal motives – will be about religion and state. Or more precisely, whether Israel will be a state governed by Jewish religious law, as Knesset member Bezalel Smotrich of the Union of Right-Wing Parties would like, or a Western, democratic and liberal country, as Kahol Lavan chairman Benny Gantz wants (as do Tzachi Hanegbi and Amir Ohana of Likud).
- With his sharp political instincts, Lieberman, the leader of Yisrael Beiteinu, understood that incitement against leftists and Arabs has run its course. It was like a miser's used lemon. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has squeezed all the juice out of it, and there is nothing left. When Netanyahu called Lieberman a leftist, it turned into a wild parody. And Lieberman, in his political wisdom, has found an old-new target that's somewhat fresher – the Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox.
- The dream-like years of the outgoing government and Netanyahu's relative success in last April's election are aggravating and frightening to many people – those who are indifferent to racism and who couldn't care less about the High Court override bill; people for whom the Israeli-Palestinian conflict isn't even worth thinking about; people who also don't concern themselves with the cost of living after it piqued their interest for a quarter of a second. These people are simply afraid of the ultra-Orthodox and the Smotriches and of the lifestyle they believe the ultra-Orthodox and the Smotriches would try to impose on them. That's not an unjustified fear.
- If Kahol Lavan wants to achieve something significant this time around, this will have to be the main thrust of its campaign: Frightening members of the public about the fate that awaits them in the clerical right-wing state being planned by the alliance of the ultra-Orthodox and Orthodox who tend towards ultra-Orthodoxy. Buses on which women are forced to sit in the back, school ceremonies where girls will not be permitted to sing, entertainment and leisure venues that are shuttered on the Sabbath, while all the liberal progress that has been made here is shoved deep into the closet.
- Aside from the substance of the matter, the significance of such discourse would be dramatic. This election would not be just another referendum on Netanyahu's leadership, a critical question that has preoccupied the political system for years. That question is still very important of course, but in this round, it has become just one of many.
- What does that mean, exactly? One must never write off Benjamin Netanyahu, the most talented, cruel and cunning player still on the playing field. But anyone with eyes in his head can see that the prime minister is nearing, a sorry and not slow end. The drive for an immunity law protecting him from prosecution was the last straw. Whether at the ballot box or in court, now that Lieberman has truncated the possible time frame for passing legislation that would help the prime minister evade justice, Netanyahu is more vulnerable.

- It's no coincidence that fervent supporters have begun to come out against him. His family, which has been behind all of the latest moves, including the dismissal of Naftali Bennett and Ayelet Shaked from the cabinet, has gotten on their nerves. Netanyahu has never really fought these supporters' battles, against the left, the elites, the progressives or any other straw man that Netanyahu has invoked.
- The supporters were nothing more than pawns in a battle to maintain the empire. Yes, even conservatives and right-wingers want authentic representation. And they too are starting to sense the weakness.

Summary: If Kahol Lavan wants to achieve something significant this time around, this will have to be the main thrust of its campaign: Frightening members of the public about the fate that awaits them in the clerical right-wing state being planned by the alliance of the ultra-Orthodox and Orthodox who tend towards ultra-Orthodoxy. Buses on which women are forced to sit in the back, school ceremonies where girls will not be permitted to sing, entertainment and leisure venues that are shuttered on the Sabbath, while all the liberal progress that has been made here is shoved deep into the closet.