



S. DANIEL ABRAHAM  
CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

## Israel and the Middle East News Update

*Wednesday, September 18*

### Headlines:

- **With 92% of Votes Counted, Netanyahu's Fails to Secure Majority**
- **Cautiously Optimistic After Early Returns, Gantz Reaches out**
- **Liberman: Unity Govt' with Likud, Blue and White is 'Only Option'**
- **Rivlin Pushes for Speedy Coalition, Aims to Avoid Third Election**
- **New Exit Poll Shows 15 Seats for the Joint Arab List**
- **Vowing to 'Keep Going', Netanyahu Says Arabs Can't Be in Govt'**
- **Shaked's Yamina Faction Dissolves an Hour After Polls Close**

### Commentary:

- **Yedioth Ahronoth: "No Choice But Unity"**
  - By Nahum Barnea, columnist at Yedioth Ahronoth
- **Ha'aretz: "Bibi the Magician Has Run Out of Rabbits"**
  - By Aluf Benn, chief editor of Ha'aretz

# News Excerpts

September 18, 2019

## Ha'aretz

### **With 92% of Votes Counted, Netanyahu's Fails to Secure Majority**

PM Netanyahu's Likud party and Gantz's Kahol Lavan are tied but neither can secure a ruling majority, with 92 percent of the votes in Israel's Tuesday election counted, according to a source in Israel's Central Elections Committee. According to the partial results, Likud and K&L won each 32 out of 120 Knesset seats. Netanyahu's bloc, comprised of right-wing and ultra-Orthodox parties, currently stands at 56 seats. The center-left bloc, excluding Arab parties, has 43 seats. Avigdor Liberman, whose Yisrael Beiteinu party is projected nine seats, is expected to be the election's kingmaker. On Wednesday morning, he reiterated his support for a "broad liberal unity government," which would include Yisrael Beiteinu, Likud and K&L. See also, ["After Polls Close, Netanyahu and Gantz Appear Locked in Tight Race" \(NYT\)](#)

## Times of Israel

### **Cautiously Optimistic After Early Returns, Gantz Reaches out**

Five months ago, the leaders of the centrist Blue and White party stood on stage and prematurely declared victory, based on exit poll results. On Wednesday morning, with polling results showing even more optimistic numbers for their bid to take the reins of the country, the party's quartet of leaders laid out a path toward building a coalition while cautiously urging supporters to patiently wait for the final election outcome. "Of course we will wait for the real results. But as it looks now, we fulfilled the mission. And more importantly, we did it according to our way," party leader and former army general Benny Gantz told some 200 party faithful in Tel Aviv. See also, ["Gantz: I intend to 'talk to everyone' about forming coalition" \(Ynet News\)](#)

## Ynet News

### **Liberman: Unity Govt' with Likud, Blue and White is 'Only Option'**

Yisrael Beytenu leader Avigdor Lieberman, who has emerged as the kingmaker after exit polls from Tuesday's elections, said he wants to form a unity government with Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud and Benny Gantz's Blue and White party. The surveys by Israel's three main television channels gave the right-wing Likud 31-33 of the Knesset's 120 seats compared with 32-34 for the centrist Blue and White, indicating there is no clear winner in Tuesday's election race. "I hope both parties publicly announce their plans to form a broad liberal government and, of course, I would highly recommend it," Liberman said. See also, ["Warning of national crisis, kingmaker Liberman appeals for speedy unity" \(TOI\)](#)

## Ynet News

### **Rivlin Pushes for Speedy Coalition, Aims to Avoid Third Election**

President Reuven Rivlin said Tuesday night that he will press party leaders to quickly form a new government after exit polls showed no clear winner in parliamentary elections. Rivlin's office said that his nomination of a candidate to form the next government would be guided in part by the need to avoid a third election, after two votes in five months. It said he would meet with party leaders "after he receives a clear picture of the results, "and as soon as possible." The president's statement said that he would act "in full coordination with the chairman of the Central Elections Committee, and once he has heard the position of all the factions he will take all considerations into account. See also, ["Rivlin: I will do everything I can to avoid another election" \(Israel Hayom\)](#)

## **New Exit Poll Shows 15 Seats for the Joint Arab List**

According to an updated exit poll on Channel 13, the Joint List won 15 seats. Moreover, Blue and White leader Benny Gantz won 32 seats and Netanyahu's Likud party won 30 seats. The Center-Right bloc had a total of 53 seats and the Center-Left bloc a total of 59. The poll also predicted 9 seats for Shas, 8 for both Yisrael Beytenu and UTJ, and 6 for Yamina, Labor-Gesher and the Democratic Union, while all other parties failed to pass the electoral threshold. Joint List candidate and MK Ahmed Tibi said that he hoped the exit poll findings would be confirmed in the final results. If this proved to be true "Arabs did flock to the polls, bringing the historic victory," he added. Channel 13 pollster Camil Fuchs had the most accurate exit poll in the April election. See also, ["Odeh: Arab parties' gains are 'historic' moment" \(Ynet News\)](#)

## **Vowing to 'Keep Going', Netanyahu Says Arabs Can't Be in Govt'**

PM Netanyahu promised early Wednesday morning that despite exit polls showing him unable to form a majority coalition for the second time in a year and his chief rival Blue and White scoring more Knesset seats than his Likud party, he would "go on serving the State of Israel and the people of Israel." As Likud party activists and supporters who remained until the early hours of the morning chanted "We don't want unity," the prime minister delivered a short speech to an almost empty hall at the Tel Aviv Expo Center at 3.30 a.m., saying Israel needs "a strong government, a stable government, a Zionist government, a government that is committed to Israel as the nation state of the Jewish people." Rejecting the idea of any coalition that counts the Joint List, an alliance of Arab-led parties, as a partner, Netanyahu said there cannot be a government that relies on "parties that praise and glorify blood-thirsty terrorists who kill our soldiers, our citizens, our children." See also, ["Netanyahu's election bid and the shadow of apartheid" \(Washington Post\)](#)

## **Shaked's Yamina Faction Dissolves an Hour After Polls Close**

The right-wing Yamina alliance announced it would break into three factions Tuesday night, minutes after exit polls showed the party comfortably sliding into the Knesset. Faction leader Ayelet Shaked informed Knesset speaker Yuli Edelstein in a letter that the right-wing party was splitting back into New Right and Jewish Home as originally planned before the joint Knesset run. Shaked and Naftali Bennett will remain together as leaders of New Right party, while Bezalel Smotrich will stick to his National Union, and Rafi Peretz will lead the Jewish Home party. Speaking to reporters at Yamina headquarters in Ramat Gan, Shaked said even though the parties were splitting up, they would negotiate a coalition agreement as a single bloc.

## **No Choice But Unity**

By Nahum Barnea columnist at Yedioth Ahronoth

- On the assumption that the Israeli politicians haven't completely lost their minds, we are on our way to a national unity government. This column is being written immediately after the three television stations published their exit polls. There is a discrepancy in terms of the division into blocs between Kan Television News and Hahadashot's exit polls, which gave the right-wing bloc the advantage, and Channel Thirteen News' exit poll, which gave the advantage to the center-left bloc. But that isn't what matters. What matters is that all three exit polls fail to grant Netanyahu the 61 MKs he needed to form an immunity coalition. If that doesn't change, Netanyahu is going to have to recalculate his route.
- Naturally, President Rivlin is going to wait for the final official results, as he is required to do by duty. But if the final results aren't substantively different from the exit poll results, the president is going to have to display leadership, call the leaders of Blue and White and the Likud and make clear to them what he expects them to do. I believe that the overwhelming majority of the public will support him.
- The question is who will blink first. Blue and White wants a government with the Likud, but without Netanyahu; as long as Netanyahu has indictments hanging over his head, he can't be a partner. Netanyahu, however, isn't going to consider giving up on Balfour Street. He has an additional condition: he is going to want to bring the Haredim on board as well. Those are the opening terms of the negotiations. Essentially, we are facing the same wall that prevented a government from being formed in April—with one key difference: the Israelis won't tolerate a third election. They have no intention of becoming an Italian-style joke.
- Blue and White officials have said that Netanyahu put an offer to Blue and White to join his government just before the extension he was given by the president was about to expire after the previous elections. The conditions he posed were convenient. Netanyahu was prepared to forgo his demand for immunity. He told Blue and White's leaders that the Haredim would be prepared to sit in a coalition along with Lapid. He would see to that.
- Blue and White officials say that Lapid vetoed that proposal. Gantz realized that the price he would pay for joining would be the dissolution of Blue and White. He decided to stand by his agreement with Lapid and not to join a Netanyahu-led government. In other words, he prioritized maintaining Blue and White over serving a term as defense minister under Netanyahu, with the indictments hovering in the background. Again, on the assumption that the final results aren't going to change anything, Blue and White is facing the same dilemma: either work with Netanyahu, contrary to their campaign promises and the risk of having the party crumble, or return to the impasse. The dilemma is also—and perhaps primarily—Netanyahu's as well. One of the things that distinguishes him from all of his predecessors in the Prime Minister's Office is his firm grasp on the horns of the altar. None of his predecessors, including Netanyahu in his first term in office, have clung to that job the way Netanyahu has. There were some premiers who stepped down of their own volition; there were others who were forced to step down. But none of them put the entire country in a tailspin just because he didn't want to have to step down. The top Likud leadership is facing the same question. Outwardly, the Likud ministers

**maintained a united front: either Netanyahu or nothing. In private conversations, however, some of them have sung a different tune. I don't think that anyone is prepared to risk a third election, not even for Netanyahu. Maybe the time has come to say goodbye.**

- Ostensibly, the person who has the ability to advance a solution is Avigdor Lieberman. If the exit polls were accurate, he achieved his goal: he's the linchpin. Lieberman doesn't owe anything to anyone, including to his party's institutions. He can go on a brief vacation and announce upon his return: I actually do want to join a right-wing government with the Haredim; he can recommend that the president task Gantz with forming the next government or not recommend anyone. As in every election up until now—Lieberman can serve as a catalyst, expediting processes. He can force a solution on the others.**
- The two larger parties aren't the only ones that have to do soul-searching. Amir Peretz made a serious mistake when he refused to unite ranks with Meretz. His vision of forming a social party proved to be an illusion: the voters didn't want it. Meretz was forced to unite with Barak, who wasn't a suitable match for its DNA. If those two parties don't want to disappear from the Israeli political map they are going to have to unite. They have no reason to position themselves on the cusp of the electoral threshold, in the kingdom of Gevalt.**
- The most interesting phenomenon was the Arab vote. Something that began as a bold and possibly desperate attempt by Ayman Odeh to tear down the Arab sector's alienation has proven to be a relative success story. His achievement shouldn't be measured in the number of seats the Joint List won but in his and his colleagues' ability to build bridges to the mainstream of Israeli politics and society. It is unthinkable to continue to exclude and to humiliate forever 20% of the electorate. Their expectations in all that pertains to integration, influence and respect all emanate from the ground up. Those expectations have to be met somehow.**
- These last elections were held while Israel's democratic infrastructure was under a real threat. Smotrich. Ben Gvir, some of the Likud's MKs and Netanyahu personally acted to weaken and possibly to bring about the collapse of values and institutions that are vital for the country's wellbeing and its regime. That threat hasn't disappeared, but it seems that the results of the elections have pushed it further into the distance. If that is what happened here yesterday, that's good enough.**

**Summary: Blue and White officials have said that Netanyahu put an offer to Blue and White to join his government just before the extension he was given by the president was about to expire after the previous elections. The conditions he posed were convenient. Netanyahu was prepared to forgo his demand for immunity. He told Blue and White's leaders that the Haredim would be prepared to sit in a coalition along with Lapid. He would see to that. Blue and White officials say that Lapid vetoed that proposal. Gantz realized that the price he would pay for joining would be the dissolution of Blue and White. He decided to stand by his agreement with Lapid and not to join a Netanyahu-led government. In other words, he prioritized maintaining Blue and White over serving a term as defense minister under Netanyahu, with the indictments hovering in the background. Again, on the assumption that the final results aren't going to change anything, Blue and White is facing the same dilemma: either work with Netanyahu, contrary to their campaign promises and the risk of having the party crumble, or return to the impasse.**

## **Bibi the Magician Has Run Out of Rabbits**

By Aluf Benn, chief editor of Ha'aretz

- Benjamin Netanyahu has suffered a blow at the hands of everyday Israelis. The political wizard, the master of campaigns, Mr. Television and the Facebook fiend didn't win a solid majority for maintaining his rule and evading the indictments that face him pending a hearing. Netanyahu took a gamble when he had the Knesset dissolved in late May. From the moment Avigdor Lieberman ditched Netanyahu, the prime minister's base shrank, and it has shrunk further this election.
- Now a caveat. Netanyahu is still in power and the state's resources are at his command. The final results could lean his way more than the exit polls have shown. He has something to offer potential defectors from the rival camp. Still, Netanyahu sought a clear mandate from the voters and didn't get it. Politicians understand this, and so do the leaders of the world powers, the attorney general and Israel's defense chiefs. Everyone has noted his weakness and will respond accordingly.
- The first signs of weakness were evident in the cold shoulder he received from both Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin, who, unlike the enthusiastic support they gave him for the April election, were stingy in their gestures. A defense pact? Phone me after the election, Trump told him as he warmed up his relations with Iran. Annex the Jordan Valley? A breach of international law, Putin reminded him after letting Netanyahu cool his heels for three hours before meeting with him.
- How can this compare to the hugs and smiles from last time? Netanyahu got the message and, in a flash, turned Trump from a close friend into an enemy of Israel who wants to impose his "deal of the century" and talk with the leaders in Tehran. Only I can stand up to him, Netanyahu said. But wait a second, didn't you just say that Trump would do anything for you?
- The most important incident this election campaign was exposed by my Haaretz colleagues Amos Harel and Chaim Levinson. Last Tuesday, Netanyahu wanted to embark on a military operation in Gaza, one that was fraught with danger and would have gotten the election postponed.
- The leader who has stood out all these years for his caution when it came to aggressive and flashy military operations – and the attendant military funerals – changed his tune and considered launching a war to avoid an election. He was blocked by the military chief of staff, Aviv Kochavi, who had reservations, and the attorney general, Avichai Mendelblit, who demanded that legal procedures be followed before such an operation was approved. It turned out that all the political power of the prime minister, who's also defense minister, including all his yes-men in the cabinet, wasn't enough against the opposition of professionals at the top.
- In other times, more convenient ones for the ruler, an incident like this would have roused the right-wing chorus, which would have called it a coup or the work of the deep state headed by Mendelblit, the man "persecuting" Netanyahu as attorney general. This time Netanyahu held his fire. He may have realized that his force was spent, as Kochavi and Mendelblit realized. They weren't afraid to stand up to him.

- **The crisis isn't over yet. Netanyahu may again play the military card, perhaps in an attempt to postpone the hearing or accompany the political crisis with the sound of war drums. He'll have to work now to forestall a rebellion in Likud that could get him deposed amid the formation of a unity government. In two weeks is his pretrial hearing with Mendelblit. He arrives at all these stations from a position of weakness following his failure at the polls. On Tuesday the magician ran out of rabbits. To be saved he'll have to find new ones – or send his lawyers to Mendelblit looking for a plea deal.**

**Summary: Benjamin Netanyahu has suffered a blow at the hands of everyday Israelis. The political wizard, the master of campaigns, Mr. Television and the Facebook fiend didn't win a solid majority for maintaining his rule and evading the indictments that face him pending a hearing. Netanyahu took a gamble when he had the Knesset dissolved in late May. From the moment Avigdor Lieberman ditched Netanyahu, the prime minister's base shrank, and it has shrunk further this election. Now a caveat. Netanyahu is still in power and the state's resources are at his command. The final results could lean his way more than the exit polls have shown. He has something to offer potential defectors from the rival camp. Still, Netanyahu sought a clear mandate from the voters and didn't get it. Politicians understand this, and so do the leaders of the world powers, the attorney general and Israel's defense chiefs. Everyone has noted his weakness and will respond accordingly.**