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CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Israel and the Middle East News Update

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News Excerpts

September 4, 2019

Ma'ariv

IDF Reveals New Plant for Precision-Guided Missiles in Lebanon

A mere two days after the launch of the Kornet missile in the north and the peak state of tension in the region, yesterday the IDF revealed new information regarding Hizbullah's and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard's precision-guided missile project on Lebanese soil. The IDF claimed, in a document supported by maps and aerial photographs, that Hizbullah had constructed a site dedicated to the production and upgrading of precision-guided missiles in the Bekaa Valley in eastern Lebanon, near the town of Nabi Sheet. The IDF claims that the site was established in recent years in order to manufacture weapons, but over the past few months vigorous activity has been detected in the plant with the goal of transforming it into a site for the production and upgrading of precision-guided missiles.

See also, ["IDF chief to UNIFIL: Stop Hezbollah's missile program, or we will"](#) (Times of Israel)

Times of Israel

Gantz Puts Kibosh On Coalition with Ultra-Orthodox Parties

Blue and White party leader Benny Gantz on Tuesday appeared to rule out forming a coalition with ultra-Orthodox political parties, as his campaign sought to sharpen the contours of a possible government he may look to form after elections on September 17. The announcement signaled a shift for Gantz, who has been making efforts to keep in good terms with potential future political partners from the Haredi parties. The new strategy aligned Gantz with Blue and White No. 2 Yair Lapid, who has been pushing a tougher stance against the ultra-Orthodox parties, accusing them of "extorting" money out of the government and refusing to have members of their community serve in the military. In an interview with the Ynet news site Tuesday, Gantz indicated that he would not contact the United Torah Judaism (UTJ) or Shas parties for coalition talks after the election: "We are against blackmail, we will contact Likud to form a government that is based on the secular majority in Israel."

Times of Israel

Liberman Urges Cameras in Arab, Haredi Polling Stations

MK Avigdor Liberman said Wednesday that he wants surveillance cameras installed in all Arab and ultra-Orthodox polling stations in the coming elections because he doesn't trust either minority group to count the votes honestly. The Yisrael Beytenu leader's remarks follow the Likud party's use of cameras in the last elections at Arab polling stations and its plans to expand the controversial program, which critics say chilled Arab participation in the vote. The Central Elections Committee last week banned party representatives on polling station committees from being equipped with cameras at ballot booths, instead tasking a new independent body of poll watchers with preventing voter fraud. Likud, which is still pushing for its party representatives to be allowed to take cameras into Arab polling stations, claimed Tuesday that without fraudulent votes in the April election, one of the country's Arab parties, Ra'am-Balad, would not have passed the minimum threshold of 3.25 percent of the vote for entry into the Knesset.

See also, ["Fact Check: Netanyahu's Fake News on Arab Party Voter Fraud"](#)

Under Pressure from Right, PM to Make History in Hebron Today

Expectations are high for a dramatic announcement on Wednesday, when Benjamin Netanyahu will make Israeli history by becoming the first prime minister to deliver a public address in Hebron. The event is a state ceremony at the Tomb of the Patriarchs marking 90 years since Arab rioters killed 67 Jews in the biblical city, thereby decimating the ancient Jewish community. No Israeli prime minister has ever attended or spoken at such a ceremony in Hebron, and few have ever visited the city. Netanyahu has a checkered history with regard to Hebron. During his first term in the late 1990s, he was responsible for the 1997 agreement that divided the city, leaving only 20% under the control of the IDF. The rest of the city is under the auspices of the Palestinian Authority. The small Jewish community of some 1,000 people is allowed to access only 3% of the city, and live in less than a dozen apartment complexes close to the area of the Tomb of the Patriarchs. In advance of the visit, the Jewish community and right-wing politicians have called on Netanyahu to make a dramatic gesture while in Hebron.

See also, ["Rivlin: Jewish Hebron Not Stumbling Bloc to Peace" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

PA Prepares Action Plan to Extend Authority to Area C

The Palestinian Authority plans to promote and authorize Palestinian building in Area C of the West Bank, which is under the Israeli military and civilian control. All Palestinian building in Area C is regulated by Israel's Civil Administration. The 1993 Oslo Accords divided the West Bank into three geographical regions, placing Areas A and B under the auspices of the Palestinian Authority. "We will set free the hands of people in Area C and see how many housing units will be built. We will not stand by watching while the occupation robs us of our land, builds settlements, and redefines land concepts sometimes as disputed, other times as under Israeli law, and then annexed," the Minister of Local Government, Ahmad Ghoneim told Wafa, the news agency of the PA. He said his ministry was coming up with an action plan to implement a government decision on the matter.

Israel and Switzerland to Act to Find UNRWA Alternative

Israel and Switzerland intend to cooperate in order to find an adequate alternative to UNRWA. The joint plan was discussed in the course of Foreign Minister Yisrael Katz's visit to Switzerland. Katz instructed Foreign Ministry officials to begin to draft a document that would outline an alternative to the services provided by UNRWA, and to do so in cooperation with representatives of other countries as well. Katz met in Switzerland yesterday with Swiss Foreign Minister Ignazio Cassis and Swiss President Ueli Maurer. In the course of his meetings, Katz discussed the need to find an alternative to UNRWA, which he said has perpetuated the Palestinians' refugee status, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Palestinian demand for a "right of return." Swiss Foreign Minister Cassis has already spoken out against UNRWA, which he described as being the "problem" and not the "solution." Switzerland is one of the UNRWA donor countries, and it recently suspended the transfer of additional funds due to several corruption cases that have implicated UNRWA.

Netanyahu's Obsession with the Media

Netanyahu shouted at Kara for working together with then-justice minister Ayelet Shaked, whom the prime minister famously despises, to save that same right-wing Channel 20.

JPOST EDITORIAL

- Former communications minister Ayoub Kara. (photo credit: AVSHALOM SASSONI/MAARIV)
- On Monday night, Channel 13 aired the latest chapter in the endless saga of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's war against the media. This time, it was recordings of his conversations with former communications minister Ayoub Kara, in which Netanyahu repeatedly inserted himself into the ministry's dealings even though his actions while holding the communications portfolio were under investigation at the time.
- Netanyahu instructed Kara to try to shutter the Cable and Satellite Council, a regulatory body, at a time when it was moving toward closing the right-wing Channel 20, on which Netanyahu enjoys highly favorable coverage. The apparent reasoning for the move was that Channel 20 was meant to be a "heritage channel" that would deal with Jewish matters, but was dedicating too many hours to current events, with a nightly news broadcast and political talk shows.
- In another recording, Netanyahu shouted at Kara for working together with then-justice minister Ayelet Shaked, whom the prime minister famously despises, to save that same right-wing Channel 20.
- The Kara-Netanyahu calls have brought up a tool constantly used in the news, but rarely discussed: Secret recordings.
- It is legal in Israel for a party to a conversation to record it without notifying the other side or sides – with some exceptions. And there are many cases in which the recording can be made public, including if there is a public interest in knowing about it, such as if it exposes corruption. This situation is, of course, favorable for journalists, though it has contributed to cyberbullying and other negative phenomena.
- In 2016, Netanyahu unsuccessfully attempted to pass a law that would make it illegal to record phone calls without permission from both sides. Now he's fallen victim to the legal situation, and probably regretting not following through with his proposal. If his political situation becomes more precarious, it won't come as a surprise if additional embarrassing recordings of his conversations with senior members of the Likud become public.
- This recording has particular significance because of Netanyahu's legal woes. Kara said in an interview that accompanied the report that he stopped Netanyahu from intervening in the merger between Channel 10 and Reshet – now known as Channel 13 – because it would have been illegal, and was subjected to the prime minister's wrath.
- As Channel 13 reporter Sefi Ovadia pointed out, these phone calls took place during the then-ongoing probe of Netanyahu's policies as communications minister benefiting Bezeq major shareholder Shaul Elovich, allegedly in exchange for positive news coverage on the Bezeq-owned Walla! News website. Next month, Netanyahu is expected to have a hearing before

Attorney-General Avichai Mandelblit, who recommended indicting him for bribery, breach of trust and fraud regarding this matter.

- **Not long before the conversations with Kara, Mandelblit told Netanyahu that he is not allowed to involve himself with Channels 12 and 13, then Channels 2 and 10, or the YES satellite TV company.**
- **Netanyahu's suggestion to cancel the Cable and Satellite Council would have a direct impact on YES, and Channel 10/13 had petitioned the High Court of Justice to shut Channel 20 down.**
- **Therefore, it seems that Netanyahu defied the attorney-general's instructions.**
- **This is further proof of Netanyahu's obsession with the media. It seems that nothing can stand in the way of his crusade for better press. Not the law and not common sense, which would dictate that he should take it down a notch while he's being investigated. Netanyahu complains that the media is biased against him, and the lament has some justification, though in recent years there is a much greater variety of opinion within the major outlets, and the availability of niche outlets catering to different political views has only grown.**
- **The bitter irony is that while Netanyahu repeats over and over that the supposedly leftist media is trying to bring him down, it seems more and more like his own relationship with the media is what might end up causing his downfall. A news report like this, only a month before Netanyahu's pre-indictment hearing, cannot help his chances of avoiding charges.**

Scandals, Rivals and U.S. Tarnish Netanyahu's Aura of Invincibility

By David M. Halbfinger

- Younger rivals in his Likud Party are circling overhead. Bombshell exposés on the nightly news have returned his looming indictment on corruption charges to the forefront.
- Even Benjamin Netanyahu's undisputed advantage over every challenger, his primacy on the international stage as Israel's longest-serving prime minister, has lately been a source of as much embarrassment as luster.
- With two weeks until a do-over election that was forced on the country by his inability to form a government after coming out on top in the April ballot, Mr. Netanyahu's larger-than-life persona has lost something that made his re-elections once seem inevitable.
- The aura of indispensability has faded.
- Evidence keeps piling up: Last month, Gilad Erdan, the 48-year-old minister of strategic affairs, turned down an appointment as ambassador to the United Nations. Publicly, he said he wanted to stay in Israel to help Likud prevail in the Sept. 17 election. Privately, he made it known he did not want to be stuck in New York during a possible battle to succeed Mr. Netanyahu as party leader.
- That was after Mr. Netanyahu felt compelled to require Likud lawmakers to sign a loyalty oath vowing that Mr. Netanyahu was and would remain the party's only candidate, "regardless of the election results."
- Last week, Avigdor Lieberman — who forced the repeat election by refusing to join the ultrareligious parties in Mr. Netanyahu's coalition — disclosed that he had met with senior Likud officials about dumping Mr. Netanyahu as the party's standard-bearer if he failed to emerge from the election with a viable governing coalition of 61 seats in the 120-seat Parliament.
- "At least two-thirds of the party is praying that Netanyahu does not get 61 seats," Mr. Lieberman told the Ynet news site.
- Mr. Lieberman's claim may be overblown but Likud did not dispute it. And analysts said it had the ring of truth.
- "Everybody knows, including people in Likud, that there's more chance than ever that this is the end of the Bibi era," said Gadi Wolfsfeld, a veteran political scientist and professor of communication at the Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya. "He's more vulnerable now than ever before."
- Nor is Mr. Netanyahu gaining much relief in the diplomatic realm, long his most comfortable terrain. While in April he could point to important achievements, like the shift of the American embassy to Jerusalem and President Trump's recognition of Israeli sovereignty in the Golan

Heights, Mr. Netanyahu is licking his wounds now from back-to-back humiliations thanks to the White House.

- He bowed to Mr. Trump's pressure last month in barring two Democratic members of Congress from visiting Israel, reversing his own decision and inflaming politics in both countries. Then Mr. Trump raised the idea of opening talks with Iran, blindsiding Mr. Netanyahu, for whom the president's abandonment of the Iran nuclear deal was his proudest moment. And when Mr. Netanyahu reportedly tried frantically to urge the president against a meeting with Iran, he could not get Mr. Trump on the phone.
- A quick trip to Ukraine, seen as potentially aiding Mr. Netanyahu with Russian-speaking voters, accomplished little except a minor flap when the prime minister's wife tossed a traditional bread offering onto the tarmac in Kiev, offending their hosts.
- Domestically, the news has been particularly unkind to Mr. Netanyahu over the past week, just as Israelis were sending their children back to school and reluctantly focusing on another election campaign.
- Last week, Israel's Channel 12 divulged that the prime minister had personally instructed a loyal confidant — now a star witness against him — to reward a friendly telecommunications tycoon with favors worth hundreds of millions of dollars. He is accused of doing so in exchange for fawning coverage in the telecom's news subsidiary. Mr. Netanyahu had previously insisted that he had only approved the recommendations of civil servants in the communications ministry.
- Then on Monday, Channel 13 aired a recording of Mr. Netanyahu berating Ayoub Kara, then his communications minister, and interfering in regulatory policy in 2017, months after Mr. Netanyahu had been forced by the Supreme Court to resign as communications minister himself because of the pending investigations.
- "Are you crazy?" he is heard yelling at Mr. Kara for having made the mistake of publicly sharing credit for saving a right-wing TV channel with Ayelet Shaked, a rival minister who is persona non grata to the Netanyahus. The recording drew instant comparisons to a similarly unflattering recording of his wife that surfaced last year.
- It was perhaps more telling that the recording surfaced at all, suggesting that people presumed to be loyal to Mr. Netanyahu were not only taping their calls with him, but leaking those recordings when it could do him the most damage.
- "That's another sign that there are people in the party that believe it's time for him to go," said Mr. Wolfsfeld, the political scientist.
- Rivals have pounced on both reports, and seized on the prime minister's push to get his would-be coalition partners to agree to grant him immunity from prosecution. Mr. Netanyahu scored an important victory on that front over the weekend when leaders of Ms. Shaked's party signaled they would go along with such a move.
- But center-left parties have been pounding away, suggesting in ads that Mr. Netanyahu's desperation to avoid prison was driving him to hand over key ministries, including education and transportation, to ultrareligious leaders seen as extremists by many secular Israelis.

- **Mr. Netanyahu may also be pushing uphill. By doubling down with his ultrareligious allies, Netanyahu has confronted voters with a stark choice for their next government. They can go with him, and expect an even more religiously conservative and nationalist coalition, if he can eke one out. Or they can opt for the national unity government that Mr. Lieberman is calling for and that leaders of the Blue and White Party, which is neck and neck with Likud, have said they would embrace, provided Likud first throws Mr. Netanyahu overboard.**
- **A poll released by the Israel Democracy Institute on Tuesday showed only 27 percent of Israelis want a right-wing government led by Mr. Netanyahu. Nearly twice as many preferred either a unity government led by Mr. Netanyahu or Benny Gantz of Blue and White, or a center-left coalition led by Mr. Gantz.**
- **For all the trouble he faces, Mr. Netanyahu still remains neck and neck with Mr. Gantz, and holds a slim edge in assembling a coalition, though polls show him several seats shy of 61, potentially leaving him at Mr. Lieberman’s mercy.**
- **Damaging stories about Mr. Netanyahu like the leaked recording that surfaced Monday do not necessarily harm him with his supporters, who see the Israeli news media as synonymous with the leftist “elite” and out to get him, said Yossi Verter, a political columnist at Haaretz.**
- **“It won’t harm him with the base, and when he’s attacked by the left and the press, with demands for an investigation, it only helps,” Mr. Verter said. “There are even claims that he himself leaked it.”**
- **Mr. Netanyahu also has tools at his disposal that his challengers do not. He squeezed ample advantage from Israel’s confrontation with Hezbollah and other Iran-backed militias in Syria, Iraq and Lebanon over the past week, for example.**
- **And there is still the possibility that Mr. Trump will try to put his thumb on the scale with another political gift. Mr. Netanyahu said Tuesday that he hoped to arrange a trilateral meeting with the United States and Russia to discuss Iran and Syria, giving rise to speculation that the American participant could be Mr. Trump himself.**
- **Mr. Verter sounded an alternative theory: that Mr. Trump would grant a Netanyahu request to put Jonathan Pollard, the convicted Israeli spy who has been seeking to move to Israel, on a plane to Tel Aviv.**
- **Those too certain of a Netanyahu defeat, Mr. Verter said, should keep in mind the old joke about his Houdini-like ability to evade disaster: “He gets hit and hit and hit, and finally he wins.”**