



S. DANIEL ABRAHAM
CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Israel and the Middle East News Update

Thursday, September 5

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News Excerpts

September 5, 2019

Reuters

Iran to Develop Centrifuges for Faster Uranium Enrichment

Iran on Wednesday said it would take another step away from a 2015 nuclear deal by starting to develop centrifuges to speed up its uranium enrichment but it also gave European powers two more months to try to save the multilateral pact. Separately, the United States refused to ease its economic sanctions on Iran, imposed fresh ones designed to choke off the smuggling of Iranian oil and rebuffed, but did not rule out, a French plan to give Tehran a \$15 billion credit line. The moves suggested Iran, the United States and the major European powers may be leaving the door open for diplomacy to try resolve a dispute over Iran's nuclear program even as they largely stuck to entrenched positions. See also, ["The Secret History of the Push to Strike Iran" \(NYT Magazine\)](#)

Times of Israel

Erdogan Says Turkey Should Have Nuclear Weapons Like Israel

Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan said Wednesday that it was unacceptable that Turkey was barred from having nuclear weapons while other nations in the region had them. "Some countries have missiles with nuclear warheads, not one or two. But (they tell us) we can't have them. This, I cannot accept," the Reuters news agency quoted him as telling his ruling AK Party members in the eastern city of Sivas. "There is no developed nation in the world that doesn't have them," Erdogan said even though most developed nations do not have nuclear weapons. Under international treaties only the US, Russia, the UK, France and China could have nuclear weapons. See also, ["Turkey's Erdogan Complains of Not Having Nuclear Warheads" \(Bloomberg\)](#)

Ha'aretz

PM on Snap Visit to Meet Boris Johnson Two Weeks Before Election

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu will set out on Thursday morning for a snap visit to London, where he will meet with British Prime Minister Boris Johnson and with U.S. Secretary of Defense Mark Esper. This will be Netanyahu's first meeting with the two since they manned their new positions respectively, as well as a first meeting with a leader from the Middle East for Johnson and Esper in their new roles. Netanyahu is expected to discuss with Johnson tensions in the region as well as the ongoing threat posed by Iran. See also, ["VISIT TO RUSSIA, BRITAIN HAS MORE ELECTORAL BENEFITS FOR PM THAN INDIA" JPost](#)

Jerusalem Post

AOC: Don't Conflate Criticism of Netanyahu and Israel

Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez said her criticisms of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu should not be seen as shots at the Jewish state. "The Netanyahu administration has been pursuing a lot of extraordinarily concerning policies," Ocasio Cortez, D-N.Y., told Israel's Channel 12 News in a recent media opportunity in New York. The freshman lawmaker likened Netanyahu to US President Donald Trump, who has repeatedly attacked her. "To conflate an individual leader or ego with being against the entire country I think is hallmark behavior of folks like our president," she said. "Just like we have the ability to criticize our president without being anti-American, I think we can criticize the policies" of Netanyahu without being anti-Israel. See also, ["Ocasio-Cortez pans Israel's 'inhumane policies,' insists she isn't anti-Semitic" \(TOI\)](#)

Israeli Diplomats Worldwide Kick Off September Elections

Israel's Ambassador to New Zealand was the first Israeli to vote in the September elections, casting his ballot at the embassy in Wellington. While the vast majority of Israel's 6.3 million eligible voters will have to wait until September 17 before they can cast their ballot in the second election of the year, some 5,100 Israelis stationed in 96 embassies and consulates were able to vote from 8 a.m to 9 p.m., their local time, on Thursday. The vote started in New Zealand and will slowly roll westward, ending in San Francisco some 30 hours later. According to Israeli law, private citizens living abroad cannot vote unless they come to Israel. But the exception made for diplomats also applies to emissaries sent abroad by the Jewish Agency, KKL-JNF, Keren Hayesod and the World Zionist Organization. In addition, their spouses and children (aged 18-20) can also cast a ballot abroad.

Ynet News

Pal' Government to Invest Millions for Agricultural Independence

As part of the Palestinian Authority's efforts to disengage from the Israeli economy, the Palestinian Prime Minister's Office launched in Qalqilya on Tuesday the \$23 million Agricultural Cluster Program, a comprehensive development project to "independently produce Palestinian fruits and vegetables." "Qalqilya, Tulkarem and Jenin as well as Tubas (northeast of Nablus) must be the Palestinian basket of fruits and vegetables," PA Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh said at the launch ceremony in the presence of his team of ministers, as well as local and foreign officials and diplomats. He added that \$2.2 million had been earmarked for the restoration of artesian wells in Qalqilya, which currently has 76 wells but could only exploit 30 percent of their capacity. "We will increase this ratio from 30 to 80 percent," he said. See also, ["Why Palestinians invest in zaatar and honey" \(Al Monitor\)](#)

Ynet News

Netanyahu: 'We Will Remain in Hebron Forever'

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Wednesday during a memorial service to the 1929 Arab riots in Hebron that "we are not strangers in Hebron and will remain in the city forever." "We are not here to disinherit anyone, but no one will disinherit us (from here)," he said. "We have come here to unite in memory, to express victory over bloodthirsty rioters who committed this horrific massacre 90 years ago," the prime minister said. "They were sure that they uprooted us for good, but they made a huge mistake," he added. Earlier in the ceremony, Knesset speaker Yuli Edelstein said that "it is time to impose sovereignty" on the city. "We did not return in all out might to this place, a place where our legacy lies and where Jews have dreamed about for generations," he said. "It is time that the Jewish settlement in Hebron grows by the thousands." See also, ["Palestinians Rage Over Netanyahu's Visit to Hebron, Warn of 'Dangerous Escalation' \(Ha'aretz\)](#)

The 9 Factors That Will Decide the Israeli Election

By Anshel Pfeffer, columnist at Ha'aretz

- Three months of election campaigning have passed and, like soldiers stuck in the mud of the trenches in the Great War, the front lines have barely moved. The polls are static and no major issue seems to be motivating voters. It's a phony election, devoid of nearly all passion. As Israelis emerge from their summer stupor and enter the last two weeks before Election Day, it remains to be seen whether something or someone can invigorate the battle for the 22nd Knesset.
- In the polls so far, very little has moved since the April 9 election. The bloc of right-wing and religious parties won 65 seats then and are now polling on an average of 64. Like before, the two major parties — Likud and Kahol Lavan — are neck-and-neck with perhaps the slightest of advantages to Likud. There is only one major change: Netanyahu can no longer rely on the support of one of the right-wing parties, Yisrael Beiteinu. And to make matters worse for him, Avigdor Lieberman's party has more than doubled its tally in the polls — from five seats in April to about 10 now.
- If Netanyahu's potential ruling coalition without Lieberman lacked only one seat for a Knesset majority, now it lacks five or six. Before all the horse trading and coalition calculations that will start the day after September 17, that is the one bar Netanyahu has to pass: To somehow win, together with his remaining allies, 61 seats. But a shift away from the center-left-plus-Lieberman bloc simply doesn't seem to be happening.
- Netanyahu isn't giving up, of course. He still has every intention of both securing a Lieberman-free majority and ensuring that Likud emerges once again as the largest party, even if by just a few thousand votes. (The gap between Likud and Kahol Lavan was fewer than 25,000 in April.) To close the gap multiple factors have to be in Netanyahu's favor, and he's pushing on all fronts. These are the main factors:
- Turnout mystery.

Since there's no precedent for a do-over election, pollsters and political scientists have no clue whether the turnout this time around will be significantly lower. Conventional wisdom and what little evidence there is from countries that have had two elections in a year suggest the turnout will be lower. In Israel, though, turnout differs widely between the various communities. This usually works to Netanyahu's advantage, as his ultra-Orthodox allies invariably flock to vote on their rabbis' orders — and can almost certainly be relied upon to do so this time around as well. On the other hand, turnout among Arab voters is usually much lower than the national average. But since the Arab turnout plunged to about 49 percent in April (down from 64 percent in 2015), due to what many believe was anger at the failure of the four Arab party leaders to run together, the resurrection of the Joint List could now lead to a resurgence in turnout.

- Netanyahu has another turnout worry: his own party's voters. Since 2014, focus groups conducted by Likud have been detecting a growing "Bibi fatigue" among the party's traditional supporters. Many of them won't consider voting for a different party but are tired of Netanyahu's predictability. This is one of the reasons the prime minister embarked on "gevalt" campaigns in

the last days of the previous two campaigns, stoking up hatred of Arabs and the left. He'll no doubt try to do so this time as well, but it may be less effective. Voters are more tired than ever.

- **Leftist dropouts**

Of the nine parties currently predicted to cross the electoral threshold, the two that are still at risk of falling below the 3.25 percent line are both on the center-left. Labor and Meretz together won a dismal total of only 10 seats in April. In the polls, the Labor-Gesher alliance and the Democratic Union (a merger between Meretz and Ehud Barak's Democratic Israel party) are doing slightly better — but they have a bigger problem than last time around. Under centrist Avi Gabbay, it was much easier to differentiate between Labor and leftist Meretz, enabling them both to hold onto a tiny core of voters, just enough to cross the threshold. This time, Labor has a more staunchly left-wing leader in Amir Peretz, while some believe Meretz has diluted its identity by joining forces with Barak and former Labor Party lawmaker Stav Shaffir.

- Voters are moving both ways between the two parties, making it impossible to predict whether they will compensate for each other and keep both above water. Kahol Lavan is also irresponsibly playing for center-left votes. If either party drops below the threshold it will mean that, under the proportional representation system, the redistributed votes will shift at least two seats to the Likud coalition, perhaps allowing Netanyahu to close the gap.

- **The Russian enigma**

Netanyahu's blatant play for Lieberman's core Russian-speaking vote is probably too transparent to work very well. Likud has left that base to Yisrael Beiteinu for too long, and the way Netanyahu has suddenly pretended to care about Soviet pensions is just risible. Also, the attempt to hold the stick at both ends — with the massive billboards of him shaking hands with Russian President Vladimir Putin, followed by the visit to Kyiv, where he was greeted by the anti-Putin Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky — was unlikely to have impressed many. More than anything, it was a demonstration of how Netanyahu is leaving no stone unturned. He is leveraging anything he can, and ultimately every vote counts.

- **Haters gonna vote**

Netanyahu's greatest vulnerability in this election is his alliance with the ultra-Orthodox (or Haredi) parties, and Lieberman is exploiting that for all it's worth. Netanyahu isn't responding. He is not trying to justify the partnership with Shas and United Torah Judaism, or to portray Lieberman as a secularist devoid of Jewish roots. Likud's campaign has rightly concluded that there are too many voters who dislike the way he is beholden to the ultra-Orthodox rabbis to put up any credible defense. But there is also a silver lining. About 10 percent of Israeli voters are Haredi-hating secularists who care about this issue more than the right-left divide. They voted in previous elections for Yair Lapid's Yesh Atid (now part of Kahol Lavan). If some of them now move to Yisrael Beiteinu, it won't cause any damage to the Netanyahu coalition and will improve Likud's chances of emerging as the largest party, his second objective.

- **Cannibalizing like crazy**

The leader of the largest party does not necessarily form the government. In 2009, Netanyahu's Likud had one seat less than Kadima, but its leader, Tzipi Livni, simply didn't have enough endorsements. The size of your bloc is more important than the size of your party. But it's undeniable that with the title of largest party comes a psychological and tactical advantage. If

Netanyahu loses that title on September 17, the move to replace him will gather momentum. If he beats Kahol Lavan by two or three seats, his position will be much more secure.

- To guarantee the title, Netanyahu has embarked on his ritual cannibalizing of right-wing allies even earlier than usual, parking his tanks on Yamina's lawn. He is relentlessly campaigning in religious Zionist strongholds, spinning stories of how he studies Torah every Shabbat with his youngest son Avner, and peppering his speeches with "With God's help." He has the added incentive of a deep suspicion of two of Yamina's leaders, Ayelet Shaked and Naftali Bennett, who he is convinced are plotting with Lieberman to replace him. The cannibalization worked in the past: Religious Zionists have always been susceptible to Bibi's charm.

- Disappearing Kulanu voters

Moshe Kahlon's Kulanu party just managed to cross the electoral threshold in April, winning the minimum four seats. But Kahlon decided he couldn't go through it again and accepted Netanyahu's offer of safe spots on Likud's slate and staying on as finance minister in the next government.

- What did Netanyahu get out of it? If the polls are anything to go by, Kulanu's voters haven't returned home with Kahlon. They are soft-core right-wingers and centrists who have fallen out with Netanyahu and won't go back to voting Likud while he remains leader. It's not a large group, but at least four parties feel they can win them over — and only one of those parties, Yamina, is in the Netanyahu coalition. If they move to Yisrael Beiteinu, Kahol Lavan or Labor-Gesher, all of which are angling for them, Netanyahu's chances diminish.

- Hidden power of Otzma Yehudit

Could the unthinkable happen? The far-right, neo-Kahanist Otzma Yehudit is still under the electoral threshold in all of the polls. However, in the most recent it is on 2.8 and 2.9 percent — less than half a percentage point from making it into the next Knesset. Netanyahu has already made clear he would include the party in a future coalition: after all, his political survival is worth detoxifying Jewish supremacists. But this is a dangerous gambit for him. Otzma Yehudit is still most likely not to cross the threshold. But the closer the party gets to 3.25 percent, the more that racists will be inclined to vote for it, thereby jeopardizing votes that otherwise would have likely gone to Yamina or Likud.

- Black swans

At this point it's hard to imagine an unforeseen event that could cause a major shift in either direction. Netanyahu had a major scare last week when it seemed President Donald Trump was about to meet Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif at the G-7 summit in Biarritz. A Trump-Iran rapprochement could have been highly damaging to Netanyahu, who has spent the last two and a half years basing his entire foreign policy on Trump. But Iran's supreme religious leader vetoed any such meeting and the panic passed.

Now Netanyahu's people are trying to prevail on the Trump administration for another grand gesture on the eve of the election. But what could Trump still give Netanyahu after withdrawing from the Iran nuclear deal, moving the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem and recognizing Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights? An Israeli voter would have needed to be comatose for the past two years not to know that Trump has Netanyahu's back. And even Netanyahu understood that the planned visit to his old friend Indian PM Narendra Modi, eight days before the election, would draw more ridicule than praise and canceled it on Tuesday.

- On the plus side for Netanyahu, there probably isn't anything that could still emerge that will be more damaging than what has already been published. We know just about every minute detail about his alleged corruption and his wife's greed. And despite it all, he is still by far the most popular candidate for prime minister. A majority of Israelis would prefer that he left, but can't coalesce around an alternative. The popularity of Kahol Lavan's leader Benny Gantz has actually gone down since April. Netanyahu could well lose, but it won't be thanks to Gantz.
- The Gantz nonfactor
Gantz merits a mention here because he is the leader of the largest opposition party but he is not a factor in the election. The early excitement at his candidacy has petered out and Kahol Lavan's lackluster campaign has failed to land any blows on Netanyahu. Gantz's image is no longer that of the responsible and brave general. His muddled interviews and bland manner have caused him more damage than any Likud smear campaign could.
- He has one advantage: he is inoffensive. Colorless and flat, voters desperate to get rid of Netanyahu can project their aspirations onto him. But he has no agency. The real battle of this election is between Netanyahu and Lieberman. If the factors don't work in Netanyahu's favor, Gantz will end up as Israel's next prime minister by default.

Summary: Three months of election campaigning have passed and, like soldiers stuck in the mud of the trenches in the Great War, the front lines have barely moved. The polls are static and no major issue seems to be motivating voters. It's a phony election, devoid of nearly all passion. As Israelis emerge from their summer stupor and enter the last two weeks before Election Day, it remains to be seen whether something or someone can invigorate the battle for the 22nd Knesset. In the polls so far, very little has moved since the April 9 election. The bloc of right-wing and religious parties won 65 seats then and are now polling on an average of 64. Like before, the two major parties — Likud and Kahol Lavan — are neck-and-neck with perhaps the slightest of advantages to Likud. There is only one major change: Netanyahu can no longer rely on the support of one of the right-wing parties, Yisrael Beiteinu. And to make matters worse for him, Avigdor Lieberman's party has more than doubled its tally in the polls — from five seats in April to about 10 now.

In an Israeli Election Season Every Day is April 1st

By Zalman Shoval, former Israeli Ambassador to USA

- In an Israeli election season every day is April 1st, and the current version entails the absurd idea of bringing the Joint List into the next government. It is clear why there are those on the Left who were excited by the idea that in the current situation they would not have a chance of establishing a government without the Arabs, not even with Lieberman. When the one and only goal is to oust Netanyahu, there are some who are apparently even willing to sell their soul to an explicit anti-Zionist list (Ehud Barak is even prepared to let Ahmad Tibi serve as a member in the Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee). The motives of MK Ayman Odeh are not hidden—to dismantle the Jewish hegemony and establish a fact on the ground with a long term political significance: it is not possible to govern without the Arabs. The Joint List is not unfit for membership in the government by virtue of being Arab, but because its ideological and programmatic goals are intended to put an end to the existence of Israel as the state of the Jews in accordance with Herzl's vision and with those who made that vision a reality. To the contrary, if a different Arab party, which viewed its mission as a true representation of the Arab sector and its problems, were to be established, its membership in the government could have been a blessing to both Arabs and Jews.
- In the WW2, in wake of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, President Roosevelt's administration did a horrible thing when they imprisoned in concentration camps behind wire fences all American citizens of Japanese origin—including the majority who had been born in America. He acted as he did contrary to the US Constitution, and despite the fact that none of them had called American Independence Day a day of mourning, none had organized violent demonstrations against the government or had waved Japanese flags. None of them, including their leaders, had ever participated in terrorist organizations whose goals were to exterminate the United States nor had they spied against it. They did not block main roads or throw stones on passing vehicles that could kill. They viewed themselves as faithful American citizens. When released from the camps before the end of the war, many of them volunteered in combat units and participated in the war against enemies of the United States despite the injustice done to them. One of them was the senior Democratic senator Daniel Inouye who was decorated with the Medal of Honor and the Presidential Medal for his actions during the war. All of this is mentioned here only for the sake of comparison.
- After the establishment of the state, and due to the non-stop threats on its existence, the government established martial law in the areas where most of the Arab population was concentrated, despite multiple protests by various elements in the public. Following its final cancellation in 1966, Israel gradually bestowed full civil rights on its Arab citizens, and it regards them as full participants in the state. The election of Dr. Samer Haj Yehi as the chairman of Bank Leumi, the Zionist enterprise's flagship bank, is clear proof of that.
- But this is not the path or the ambition of the Arab parties—Hadash, Raam-Taal and Balad who merged to create the Joint List, a party that views itself primarily as the representative of the Palestinian national struggle. Although there are some differences in the platforms of the different parties, their basic common ground is a militant anti-Zionism. They refer to Israeli Arabs as “a Palestinian Arab population” and demand to give it recognition as a “national

minority,” a definition whose meaning is the right to withdraw from the country and establish a separate state in a part of it. They also demand the cancellation of the symbols of the state and oppose national civilian service, not even to mention service in the security forces (except for the police.) One of the components of the Joint List, Balad, is characterized by an even more extreme anti-Israeli attitude: it identified in the past with Palestinian terrorism and supported the right of return of the Arab refugees into Israeli territory. One of its candidates for the Knesset even identified with Samir Kuntar, the murderer of the Haran family and the two policemen in Nahariya. Is this what the Left wishes to see as a part of the Israeli government?