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## Israel and the Middle East News Update

*Friday, September 6*

### Headlines:

- **PM Expects Tough Stance from Trump in Any Meeting with Rouhani**
- **Iran to Violate Nuke Deal Again, Sets Fourth Deadline for November**
- **United States Blocks UN Statement on Israel-Hezbollah Fire: Report**
- **Trump's Mideast Peace Envoy Set to Leave the White House**
- **Canceling Gantz-Lapid Rotation Won't Help Center-Left Bloc: Poll**
- **Ultra-Orthodox Lawmaker: Lapid Is Contagious Disease**
- **'Miriam Adelson: Sara Netanyahu Said It Would Be My Fault if Iran Nuked Israel**
- **Elections Committee Chair: 'Cameras in Polls will Cause Chaos'**

### Commentary:

- **AI Monitor: "Blue and White Dumps Ultra-Orthodox; Tries to Make Up with Secularists"**
  - By Mazal Mualem columnist at AI Monitor
- **Yedioth Ahronoth: "A Lesson in Photography"**
  - By Nahum Barnea, Columnist at Yedioth Ahronoth

# News Excerpts

September 6, 2019

## Reuters

### **PM Expects Tough Stance from Trump in Any Meeting with Rouhani**

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu appeared resigned on Thursday to a possible meeting between U.S. President Donald Trump and Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, after voicing opposition to world powers opening a dialogue with Iran. The Israeli leader, who earlier in the day asserted that this was not the time to hold talks with Iran, said he recognized the possibility of a Trump-Rouhani meeting, and that it was not up to him to tell Trump with whom he could meet. "I'm sure Trump will take a much tougher position," Netanyahu told reporters, an official in the prime minister's office later said. See also, ["Netanyahu on possibility of Trump-Rouhani talks: 'I don't tell him who to meet'" \(TOI\)](#)

## Times of Israel

### **Iran to Violate Nuke Deal Again, Sets Fourth Deadline for November**

Iran said on Thursday it would violate the 2015 nuclear deal for the third time in four months, and set a new November deadline for additional potential violations if a French compromise does not materialize. There were unclear messages about whether the confirmation of the specific violations would be made public Friday or Saturday, but they are expected in the coming days. On Wednesday, statements by both Iranian President Rouhani and Foreign Minister Zarif indicated that Tehran would start using more of its advanced centrifuges in violation of the deal. To date, the International Atomic Energy Agency had already reported that the Islamic republic was using 33 advanced centrifuges, which violates the deal's limit. See also, ["Iran poised for faster centrifuges as nuclear deal collapses" \(AP\)](#)

## Ha'aretz

### **United States Blocks UN Statement on Israel-Hezbollah Fire: Report**

The United States has blocked the U.N. Security Council from issuing a statement following the recent exchange of cross-border fire between the militant group Hezbollah in southern Lebanon and Israeli forces in Israel, diplomats said Thursday. The initial draft of the French-proposed council statement, obtained by The Associated Press, would have condemned "all violations of the Blue Line," which is the U.N.-drawn dividing line between the two countries. Hezbollah militants on Sunday fired a barrage of anti-tank missiles into Israel, prompting a reprisal of heavy Israeli artillery fire in a rare burst of fighting between the bitter enemies who fought a monthlong war in 2006. The shooting quickly subsided without casualties on either side, but the situation remains volatile. See also, ["US blocks UN Security Council statement on Israel-Hezbollah violence" \(TOI\)](#)

## Ynet News

### **Trump's Mideast Peace Envoy Set to Leave the White House**

The Trump administration official tasked with developing a plan to bring peace between Israel and the Palestinians is leaving the White House. Jason Greenblatt, Trump's special representative for international negotiations, will depart the administration in the coming weeks, the White House said Thursday. The former Trump Organization lawyer had been leading the effort to devise the oft-delayed peace plan, and his departure casts further doubt on the proposal's future. The White House says the peace plan is complete but will not be released until at least after this month's Israeli elections. See also, ["Iran Overture and Greenblatt Departure Cloud Trump-Netanyahu Paradise" \(Ha'aretz\)](#)

## **Canceling Gantz-Lapid Rotation Won't Help Center-Left Bloc: Poll**

If Blue and White canceled the rotation between Benny Gantz and Yair Lapid for the party's leadership, it would not grow the Center-Left bloc, a Ma'ariv-Radio 103 poll found Thursday. In a poll with the parties as they are today, meaning with the Gantz-Lapid rotation, Likud and Blue and White are tied at 32 seats. Next is Yisrael Beytenu with 10 seats, Yamina and Joint List tied with nine, Shas with eight, UTJ and Democratic Union with seven and Labor-Gesher with six. Without a rotation in Blue and White, the party would receive 33 seats, and Labor-Gesher would lose one. In both versions, the Right bloc received 56 seats and the Center-Left 45. Other polls released Thursday night, on Channels 12 and 13 and the Knesset Channel, put the right-left divide at 56-45, 56-43, and 60-41, respectively. The remaining seats go to Yisrael Beytenu, which has not committed to a candidate to recommend, and Joint List, which is unlikely to recommend anyone. See also, ["Latest Polls: Israel Election 2019" \(Ha'aretz\)](#)

Ha'aretz

## **Ultra-Orthodox Lawmaker: Lapid Is Contagious Disease**

Deputy Health Minister Yaakov Litzman on Thursday attacked the leaders of Kahol Lavan, Benny Gantz and Yair Lapid, calling Lapid a "contagious disease," after Gantz said he would prefer to form a secular government. "We think he made a tragic mistake when [Benny Gantz] took Lapid into his list," Litzman, who heads the United Torah Judaism party, told Israel Radio. "We said that we would not join Gantz with Lapid... I don't go with someone who joined Lapid." Litzman said that, until Wednesday, he never attacked Gantz, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's rival in the premiership race, but that Gantz had "changed the game."

Times of Israel

## **'Miriam Adelson: S. Netanyahu Said It Would Be My Fault if Iran Nuked IL**

The publisher of the Israel Hayom tabloid, a key backer of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, reportedly told police that her relationship with the premier and his wife Sara deteriorated over incessant complaints about how the couple were being covered in the free daily. In leaked transcripts published by Channel 12 news, Miriam Adelson, Israel's richest woman, describes a relationship that devolved from friendly into "constant complaints" and even "screams on the phone" on the part of the Netanyahus, mostly Sara, to the point where Miriam Adelson would set the receiver down so she wouldn't have to hear the shouting. See also, ["Miriam Adelson: 'Sara Netanyahu Told Me if Iran Wipes Out Israel, It Would Be My Fault' \(Ha'aretz\)](#)

Ynet News

## **Elections Committee Chair: 'Cameras in Polls will Cause Chaos'**

Head of the Central Election Committee Justice Hanan Melcer said Thursday in a radio interview that he strongly opposes the Likud Party's bill to allow cameras in polls during the upcoming elections. On Wednesday, Attorney General Mandelblit informed Netanyahu and the Likud Party that their bill to legislate the installing of cameras in polls around the country is legally problematic and cited Melcer's earlier words on the matter, saying it would cause chaos and prevent some people from turning up at the polls. The Likud Party said in response that it rejects Mandelblit's position and will continue pushing for legislation on the matter. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Thursday morning as he left for a visit to London that "the position that the Attorney General presented is beyond explaining." See also, ["AG opposes bill to place cameras at polls; PM vows to advance it anyway" \(TOI\)](#)

## **Blue and White Dumps Ultra-Orthodox; Tries to Make Up with Secularists**

By Mazal Mualem columnist at AI Monitor

- When a major party changes strategy two weeks before an election like Blue and White has done, drama must be lurking in the background. And so it was among the closest advisers of Blue and White leader Benny Gantz and the decision to make a 180-degree course correction and cease courting the ultra-Orthodox parties. In doing so, Gantz adopted the same position as the effective campaign being run by Yisrael Beitenu Chairman Avigdor Liberman — opposing religious coercion and ultra-Orthodox extortion. Gantz hopes it will prevent voters from abandoning his party for Yisrael Beitenu.
- In the language of election campaigns, Blue and White has found itself “hemorrhaging votes.” In fact, the party has been losing them for weeks, mostly to Liberman, though it has also lost a few to the Democratic Camp, Labor-Gesher and even the Arab Joint List. Unlike the Likud, which polls indicate has a very loyal base — there are very few undecided voters among the Likud — Blue and White’s electorate tends to be more hesitant and subject to outside influences. The assessment within Blue and White is that if Gantz had not changed direction, the party would continue to lose votes.
- Regaining the votes it lost to Liberman is critical in the Blue and White’s strategy. Without those votes, the chances of it emerging as the largest party in the Knesset are meager at best. Thus Gantz stopped courting the ultra-Orthodox right and declared that he will put together a government based on the “secular majority in Israel.” What makes this all the more dramatic is that just a few months ago, he had been willing to promise the ultra-Orthodox all the stars in heaven.
- Gantz did the right thing, tactically at least, but he is also taking an enormous risk. There is no example in the last few decades of a major Israeli party declaring of its own accord that it will exclude the ultra-Orthodox parties in the equation for forming a government. Such behavior is much more characteristic of a small to midsize centrist party, like Tommy Lapid’s Shinui or his son Yair Lapid’s Yesh Atid. Gantz’s advisers surely explained to him that there is no way to become the prime minister of Israel without the ultra-Orthodox parties, but Gantz also faced the possibility of losing everything. Under the circumstances, he needed to do something dramatic.
- Gantz likely took into account that he would be attacked by the ultra-Orthodox, as in fact he has been. Knesset members Moshe Gafni and Yaakov Litzman, leaders of Yahadut HaTorah, issued a joint statement asserting, “Gantz made it quite clear that he is a man without values and without a spine.” Even if the ultra-Orthodox once believed the problem with the Blue and White lay in the person occupying its number two slot, Yair Lapid — to them, a red cape at a bull fight — they thought of Gantz as a potential partner. Now, however, the Blue and White’s strategic shift will serve to reinforce and strengthen the alliance between the ultra-Orthodox and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s Likud.
- The leaders of the ultra-Orthodox parties weren’t the only ones to attack Gantz. Liberman immediately realized that he himself stands to pay a price for Blue and White’s “divorce” from

the ultra-Orthodox, so to try and limit his losses he accused Gantz of having made a secret deal with the ultra-Orthodox and coordinating the move with them well in advance. As “evidence” of this, he noted that as soon as Gantz announced he would form a liberal unity government, the ultra-Orthodox released what seemed to be preprepared responses.

- From the moment Blue and White was founded in the lead-up to the April election, it’s meta-strategy was to become the largest party in the Knesset so the president would ask Gantz to form a government. It almost came to pass. Blue and White won 35 seats, which was an excellent outcome, especially for a new party, but it wasn’t enough. The Likud under Netanyahu also won 35 seats, but more Knesset members recommended that he form the next government.
- For 2019's round 2 election, Blue and White has not changed its strategy of emerging as the biggest party. The thing is that this campaign season, which seemed at first like it would be a long, drawn-out slog, hasn’t stopped offering up surprises.
- Liberman was the one who blocked Netanyahu from forming a right-wing and ultra-Orthodox coalition after the April election, dragging him into another round of voting. Then, Liberman announced that he had no problem recommending Gantz to form the next government. All in all, Liberman has been gaining power and momentum. To many he is seen as the savior of the center-left. The Blue and White had long been touting Liberman as their partner in bringing down Netanyahu, but as time passed, Liberman became Gantz’s biggest problem.
- Liberman's campaign against ultra-Orthodox coercion proved to be both convincing and effective. He hit the nail on the head by appealing to a powerful sentiment among a public fed up with how the ultra-Orthodox parties have extorted the government. True, Lapid has been vocal on the issue as well, but the message seemed to get smothered in the Blue and White under Gantz’s leadership. Thus, Liberman turned out to be the big winner, at least doubling his strength, from 5 Knesset seats to 10, according to the polls.
- The political considerations of the people abandoning Blue and White make perfect sense. If Liberman is no longer an assured ally of Netanyahu, and he is the person who can put a stop to ultra-Orthodox extortion, then why not help strengthen him? All this led the people around Gantz to start devising a new approach. It was obvious to them that they had to do something to stop the hemorrhaging. If Blue and White voters saw their party losing strength, they would continue to abandon it, perhaps at an even greater rate as election day approached.
- Gantz’s advisers settled on a “soft launch” for the party's dramatic shift. In an interview with Ynet on the morning of Sept. 3, Gantz mentioned as an aside that he would work to form a broad national government with a civil agenda. The goal was to gradually shift public opinion to accept this sharp turn in the campaign, while leaving room for regrets on the margins. Internal research by Blue and White found this to be the right move, and it has since become the party’s official strategy. All of the party’s spokespeople have aligned themselves with Gantz.
- Blue and White's electoral base is for the most part secular. It has deep reservations about the alliance between Netanyahu and the ultra-Orthodox because it means diverting billions of shekels to the ultra-Orthodox. Gantz now realizes that his pilgrimage to the courts of the various rabbis not only failed to help him electorally, it actually hurt him, particularly with Liberman’s campaign appealing to the secular community striking a chord with voters. Seeing the goal of heading the largest party in the Knesset moving farther and farther away, Gantz has now decided

to do what it takes to bring those voters back home to Blue and White. Otherwise, he would be handing Netanyahu the next government on a silver platter.

**Summary: Regaining the votes it lost to Liberman is critical in the Blue and White's strategy. Without those votes, the chances of it emerging as the largest party in the Knesset are meager at best. Thus Gantz stopped courting the ultra-Orthodox right and declared that he will put together a government based on the "secular majority in Israel." What makes this all the more dramatic is that just a few months ago, he had been willing to promise the ultra-Orthodox all the stars in heaven. Gantz did the right thing, tactically at least, but he is also taking an enormous risk. There is no example in the last few decades of a major Israeli party declaring of its own accord that it will exclude the ultra-Orthodox parties in the equation for forming a government. Such behavior is much more characteristic of a small to midsize centrist party, like Tommy Lapid's Shinui or his son Yair Lapid's Yesh Atid. Gantz's advisers surely explained to him that there is no way to become the prime minister of Israel without the ultra-Orthodox parties, but Gantz also faced the possibility of losing everything. Under the circumstances, he needed to do something dramatic.**

## **A Lesson in Photography**

By Nahum Barnea, Columnist at Yedioth Ahronoth

- Prior to the US presidential elections in 2016, Donald Trump declared that his rival, Hillary Clinton, was going to steal the elections. The Democratic Party responded dismissively to his statements: he knows that he's going to lose the election, so he is preparing an alibi in advance. They underestimated their rival, and mainly underestimated his advisers and the billions that were financing him. The goal was to create chaos at the polling stations, to sow mistrust of the system and to lay the groundwork for an appeal of the results if necessary. [...]
- Netanyahu is a diligent disciple of all of Trump's whims. In his case, the student has outdone the teacher. This week he announced that he would pass in the Knesset, a week before the elections, a bill that would enable parties to place cameras in the polling stations. His contention is that in the elections in April, Balad crossed the electoral threshold only due to election fraud. Because of Balad he did not obtain the 61 seats that would have enabled him to form an immunity coalition.
- Three and a half months before the elections, a bill was being examined by the Constitution, Law and Justice Committee that applies the election laws to social media. Central Elections Committee Chairman Justice Hanan Melcer said that if there were a consensus among the parties, it would be possible to implement the bill.
- Attorney Avi Halevi, the Likud's legal adviser and its representative on the committee, got up and said, no, you don't change the rules of the game in an election period. Even if there's a consensus, you don't change. The bill went back to the drawer. Now Netanyahu wants to change the law. He is doing it not three and a half months before the elections, but a week before. The rumors are that an American adviser to the Likud campaign brought him the idea, "made in America."
- The story of the cameras is interesting. It first arose in the previous elections, when a contractor working on behalf of the Likud hired workers, equipped them with cameras and sent them to polling stations solely in the Arab sector. Many of the workers were settlers. The cameras were displayed openly; the goal was to deter voters. That was a pilot project; now the Likud wants to place cameras in every polling station in the Arab sector. The proposed law will permit placing 30 cameras in every polling station.
- Ostensibly, the Haredim are the first who should have objected: If not because of the voting manipulations that are carried out in Haredi neighborhoods, then because of the women's modesty. As of now, the Haredi parties are silent: They know that the camera project is expensive. The parties that should be placing cameras in their polling stations, Meretz and Lieberman, are not over-endowed with money. Blue and White will not want to clash with them. They are immune.
- In terms of the electoral process, the Likud cameras are a disaster. In the April election they caused riots that triggered police intervention. If the bill passes, the publication of the final results will be delayed by weeks or perhaps months. There is no guarantee that the footage that is taken will not be manipulated. That is what happens in the digital era: every image can be the product of 1,000 falsifications.

- **Between the election in April and the current election, Melcer has strengthened the security arrangements. A patrol force was formed consisting of 3,000 people who are not identified with any party—many of whom are lawyers—who will pass from one polling station to another on Election Day. The powers of the police officers stationed at the polling stations have been expanded: not only keeping the peace, but also enforcing the law. Polling stations in the Arab, Druze and Haredi sectors will be filmed on a random basis. MK David Bitan, the deputy committee chairman from the Likud, said that this was the optimal solution. This was also the opinion of MK Moshe Arbel, the representative of Shas in the committee.**
- **The person who is advancing the legislation on behalf of Netanyahu is Minister Yariv Levin. Bitan is the good cop; Levin is the bad cop. Melcer and Mandelblit are the enemy. For Levin, this conforms with his general agenda, which is mainly about destroying the State Attorney's Office and the Supreme Court. Never mind that the two often issue decisions that benefit the Likud. Justice Melcer, for example, decided to prevent Darkenu, an anti-Likud movement, from contributing to the elections. But as soon as he opposed the cameras, his fate was sealed.**

**Summary: In terms of the electoral process, the Likud cameras are a disaster. In the April election they caused riots that triggered police intervention. If the bill passes, the publication of the final results will be delayed by weeks or perhaps months. There is no guarantee that the footage that is taken will not be manipulated. That is what happens in the digital era: every image can be the product of 1,000 falsifications. Between the election in April and the current election, Melcer has strengthened the security arrangements. A patrol force was formed consisting of 3,000 people who are not identified with any party—many of whom are lawyers—who will pass from one polling station to another on Election Day. The powers of the police officers stationed at the polling stations have been expanded: not only keeping the peace, but also enforcing the law. Polling stations in the Arab, Druze and Haredi sectors will be filmed on a random basis. MK David Bitan, the deputy committee chairman from the Likud, said that this was the optimal solution. This was also the opinion of MK Moshe Arbel, the representative of Shas in the committee.**