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Israel and the Middle East News Update

Monday, September 9

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News Excerpts

September 9, 2019

Ynet News

MKs Reject Bill for Cameras at Polling Stations

The bill, which aims to place video cameras in polling stations on Election Day failed to pass in the Knesset after a heated debate on Monday afternoon. The contentious bill has been heavily promoted by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who made voter fraud a key election issue ahead of the September 17 ballot, and had been approved by the cabinet on Sunday. The bill's opponents said it meant to intimidate Arab voters. The head of the Joint Arab List, MK Ahmed Tibi, slammed Netanyahu and the ruling Likud party at the onset of the debate. "The prime minister said that the Arabs are flocking to the polls and today he's translated it into an anti-Semitic statement, claiming the Arabs are involved in election fraud," he said.

See also, ["Netanyahu: Those who oppose cameras 'want to steal elections'" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

See also, ["Likud MK to Arab lawmaker: The Jews are a 'special race'" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Ha'aretz

Benny Begin Blasts Netanyahu, 'Won't Vote Likud' in Election

Benny Begin, a former lawmaker and the son of legendary Likud leader Menachem Begin, said on Monday that he will not vote for the party in next week's election. "In recent years, the Likud leadership seems to have put considerable effort into making it harder for me to support Likud and in the past months it's even preventing me from supporting Likud in the election," Begin told Army Radio. Begin, who served as minister during his tenure in the party, criticized a draft legislation backed by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to place cameras at polling stations. He said that he knows others who are considering not voting Likud, saying that "there's a price and there should be a price for such arrogant, crude and blunt behavior."

See also, ["In rare criticism, Rivlin implies PM took advantage of country to call new vote" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Yedioth Ahronoth

Lieberman: Likud Planning on Using Violence at Polling Stations

Yisrael Beiteinu Chairman Avigdor Lieberman said yesterday that he has received information from sources in the Likud's Russian campaign team that the Likud intends to use violence and to disrupt public order at polling stations in which Yisrael Beiteinu has received strong support in the past. "The Likud intends to use thugs, and there are instructions to stoke violence and deliberate mayhem," said Lieberman last night in an interview on Channel 12. "Those instructions are designed to disqualify polling stations where we're strong. These are instructions that come from the top and which have made their way downward to the activists on the ground."

Poll: Likud retakes lead, Right nears 60 seats without Lieberman

Heading into the last stretch of the 2019 do-over election, the polls are more confusing and less stable. After the center-left party Blue and White pulled ahead of the Likud last week for the first time in the current campaign, the party appears to be losing steam, while the Likud is gaining. This week's i24NEWS-Israel Hayom poll predicted 31 seats for the Likud, while Blue and White was projected to drop to 30 seats. While the poll showed that the far-right Otzma Yehudit would pass the minimum electoral threshold of 3.25%, the party would not win enough seats to lock in a right-wing coalition of 61 MKs or more. As of this week, the Right is projected to win 58 seats.

See also, ["Poll: Blue and White leading Likud" \(Israel National News\)](#)

Drone From Gaza Drops Explosives, Troops on Patrol Uninjured

The south began to heat up again after approximately a week-and-a-half of quiet. Turbulent demonstrations were held on the border fence and two Palestinians were killed, rockets were fired at the Gaza periphery communities, and the high point came when a drone dropped explosives on an IDF Hummer. The bomb exploded a very short distance from the vehicle, and fortunately no one was injured. The drone's operators flew it back to the Gaza Strip. Afterwards the IDF attacked a post where the cell that had flown the drone was standing nearby.

Trump-Rohani Summit Is a Done Deal, Israeli Officials Believe

A meeting between the U.S. and Iranian presidents is just about a done deal. That is the growing conclusion in Israel's security establishment after Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's meeting with U.S. Defense Secretary Mark Asper in London Thursday. As always, one caveat must be added: This summit will happen unless the less predictable member of the pair, Donald Trump, changes his mind at the last minute. The American willingness to hold direct negotiations with Iran could lead later on to an expectation for Israel to turn down the heat on Hezbollah and Iran's Revolutionary Guards. The Israel Defense Forces has not received any directives toward that end, and it continues to take a proactive, assertive line against Tehran, as seen in the incidents of the past few weeks.

See also, ["Pompeo warns Lebanon - Israel could strike Hezbollah missile factory" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Adelsons Told Police Sara Netanyahu Is 'Crazy'

Multi-billionaire Sheldon Adelson, once Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's key supporter, and his wife Miriam testified to police that Sara Netanyahu was "crazy" and that "she decides everything," including key appointments and even some political matters, in the Netanyahu household, Channel 13 reported Sunday. "She's completely crazy," said Sheldon Adelson, publisher of the Israel Hayom daily. "She was compulsive about photos of herself and how she looked. She would tell my wife that if Iran attacked it would be her fault ... because we didn't publish good pictures of her," said Adelson. The Adelsons made their statements in the police investigation into Case 2000, involving a deal Benjamin Netanyahu allegedly negotiated with Yedioth Ahronoth publisher Arnon Mozes for favorable coverage in return for undermining Israel Hayom, its main rival.

Is Israel Lost Without Netanyahu, Or Are We Losing Israel with Him?

In April, his opponents proved unable to persuade a majority of the electorate that PM was toxic. A week ahead of the election rerun, he's again running the more resonant campaign

By DAVID HOROVITZ

- He's the prime minister, overseeing our entire government.
- He's our defense minister — supervising the struggle to prevent Iran from attaining nuclear weapons, the battle against Hezbollah in south Lebanon, the face-off with Hamas in Gaza and innumerable other challenges to our national security.
- He recently gave up the job as foreign minister, but he continues to run Israel's foreign policy — jetting off to meet the likes of UK's Prime Minister Boris Johnson (last week), and Russia's President Vladimir Putin (probably this week); closely coordinating relations with the Trump administration directly and via his trusted Ambassador to the United States Ron Dermer; flying to the Far East and Africa and hitherto unvisitable destinations in our own region.
- He presides over Israel's economic policy, dominating his neutered finance minister, highlighting the transition from Israel the land of Jaffa oranges to Israel the land of tech, innovation, cyber-skill.
- He's also, incidentally, our minister of Diaspora affairs, and, as of last week, our minister of welfare. He's also formally our minister of health, since the United Torah Judaism party's allegiance to Zionism extends only to allowing its leader to function as deputy health minister, and to attend cabinet meetings, but not to serve as a full-fledged minister in the government of the Jewish state.
- How does Netanyahu do it? Where does he find the time, the required expertise, and, turning 70 next month, the energy?
- Except that's not all.
- For the better part of the last year, he's also been directing his Likud party's efforts to retain power... in two elections — the April one in which he thought he'd won but merely turned out not to have lost, and the rerun that he, Avigdor Liberman and the two ultra-Orthodox parties imposed upon us.
- It's Netanyahu who oversees campaign strategy. It's Netanyahu who brokers pre-election deals with allies and rivals. It's Netanyahu who determines quite how withering to be in pre-election delegitimization of Arab voters; Netanyahu who decides whether and how strongly to champion the deployment of party observers with cameras in polling stations — even when the judge overseeing the elections and his own government legal adviser counsel against it.
- It's Netanyahu who campaigns more vigorously nationwide than any of his Likud colleagues, or most of his political rivals for that matter. It's Netanyahu who stars in the Likud videos. It's Netanyahu who blitzes the media with nonstop interviews in the final days of the campaign.

- Except that's also not all.
- For almost three years, Netanyahu has been under investigation in three criminal cases, culminating in February's decision by Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit to charge him with fraud and breach of trust in all three cases, and bribery in one of them, pending a hearing.
- In addition to his national and party political responsibilities, then, Netanyahu has been overseeing his own defense as he battles to stay out of jail — answering investigators' questions, marshaling his legal team, doing his best to control the narrative of these graft investigations as consumed by the public.
- According to the draft indictment, furthermore, Netanyahu has over the years allocated sizable quantities of time to corraling as much of Israel's media as possible to his own advantage — supplementing the support he gets from his own house newspaper Israel Hayom with, for example, favorable coverage from the Walla website, allegedly achieved via illegal quid pro quo deals with Walla's owners, while also advancing an alleged, abrogated attempt at a quid pro quo deal with the country's biggest media empire Yedioth Ahronoth.
- And even that's not all.
- He also goes home every night to a wife, Sara, who has intermittent brushes with the law with which the prime minister must also grapple, and who champions her own political agenda — with reported blacklists of men and women whom the prime minister may and may not hire, fire, promote, and/or invite to join the Likud party.
- He also has some parental responsibility for a son, Yair, who has become a major media presence in his own right, relentlessly stirring up political ferment on social media in a kind of online thuggery.
- Being prime minister of Israel has to be one of the most challenging jobs on the planet. Even entirely reasonable decisions and policies can have catastrophic consequences. The margin of error is terrifyingly narrow. And Benjamin Netanyahu has held that post, and various others, while dealing with all manner of other distractions and drains on his time and his energy and his wisdom, for longer than any other Israeli ever, and without a break for the past decade.
- He has no intention of stopping now.
- Nobody knows how next week's elections are going to play out. Israeli elections are impossible to predict at any time, with so many parties running and such small shifts potentially remaking the coalition arithmetic. But these elections are unprecedented — a second vote five months after the last, with all manner of unknowable consequences.
- Any estimation of turnout, for instance, is pure guesswork. I've had countless people tell me in recent days they're so sick of the whole business that they won't be voting; I have no way of knowing which party they won't be voting for. How will the Arab vote be affected by the rumpus over cameras in polling stations? Will the ultra-Orthodox share of the vote swell because the rabbis will ensure nobody stays home? How credible is Blue and White's assertion that 170,000 of its potential voters will be overseas on election day?

- And as the April fiasco showed, we may not even know who has won after the elections are over, when all the votes are in. Oh, how we laughed at Blue and White leader Benny Gantz for delivering a victory speech a couple of hours after the polls closed, when it was clear that the only exit poll giving him an ostensible path to a coalition was off mark. But oh, how the laugh was on all of us, and on Netanyahu, seven weeks later, when it turned out that the prime minister's victory speech later that night was also unjustified, because that "leftist" troublemaker Liberman really had meant it when he promised not to join the coalition.
- Yet it would be a fool who would bet against Netanyahu.
- Half a generation has grown up knowing nobody but him as their prime minister. When there are no term limits; when the Israeli psyche is not hardwired to know that, every now and again, the country changes its leadership; when the threats from without are so grave, complex and relentless, it becomes hard to give up on the devil you know. Unless the devil you don't know is highly persuasive.
- Many Israelis are deeply worried by Netanyahu's demonstrable readiness to go low in order to stay in power. They're troubled by his attacks on the Arab electorate, on the media, on ostensible enemies and coup plotters in his own party, on the cops, the state prosecutors, the courts and, now, on the electoral process.
- There has been no credible evidence of widespread fraud on past election days, and barely any credible evidence of minor infractions. Ensuring the integrity of the voting process, as the Supreme Court justice overseeing our elections has made clear, is in any case the task of the Central Elections Committee, not the competing political parties themselves, who are manifestly the least independent and the least reliable observers. Yet Netanyahu is disingenuously insisting that party officials brandishing cameras and smartphones to film at polling stations would bolster our democracy.
- Some Israelis are troubled by the graft cases. Some are concerned that he may be skewing his handling of defense policy for political benefit, including by taking responsibility for Israeli military strikes overseas — and thus all but inviting an enemy response — where previously a policy of ambivalence had prevailed. Some worry that Israel, under Netanyahu and Donald Trump, has become a one-party cause in the US, and that our most vital alliance will start to fray come the day when there's a Democrat in the White House. Some lament the fracturing of relations with a large part of Diaspora Jewry, amid Netanyahu's refusal to curb the ultra-Orthodox monopoly over religious practice here and the governmental cold shoulder to non-Orthodox streams of Judaism.
- Some Israelis are concerned at the growing centralization of power in Netanyahu's hands.
- But for many Israelis, too, that centralization of power, for so many years, renders the proposition of an Israel without Netanyahu at the helm, an Israel without its King Bibi, little short of terrifying.
- In the April campaign, a party led by three former IDF chiefs of staff persuaded a chunk of the electorate that Israel would not be cut adrift without Netanyahu, would not be vulnerable without its longtime political king. A chunk of the electorate, but not a large enough chunk to dethrone him.

- **Gantz was slumped exhausted in the back of his car by the end of the campaign on election day; Netanyahu, sweating in his suit on the sands at Netanya beach, calling voters out of the water, was channeling the Duracell bunny. In April, Netanyahu looked like he wanted it more; nothing has changed on that front in the five months since.**
- **Netanyahu would have us believe that Israel would be lost without him. His opponents argue that, with him, we are losing Israel. That is what next week's elections are all about. At time of writing, Netanyahu, by fair means and foul, is making his case more energetically than his rivals. More effectively? We shall see.**

Netanyahu's Operation to Dominate the Discourse

The truth is that the very discussion of the issue is a victory for Netanyahu. Because they are so busy with the cameras, the press is not dealing with his criminal investigations.

BY GIL HOFFMAN

- Reporters accompanying Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on his way home from London last Friday were surprised to see that all he wanted to talk about was cameras at polling stations.
- Normally, it's the reporters who want to talk politics and the politicians who say they prefer to stick to substance. This time, it was the other way around, with Netanyahu
- The reporters acquiesced, and the camera issue has dominated the discourse for an entire week, as the most crucial time in a political campaign approaches, considering the election is next week.
- Even the most anti-Netanyahu pundits have written that the camera issue is a win-win situation for Netanyahu, because if the bill is passed, it could serve his cause of keeping down Arab turnout at the polls. If he doesn't succeed, he can blame Blue and White, Avigdor Liberman, the legal establishment and other various other enemies.
- The truth is that the very discussion of the issue is a victory for Netanyahu. Because they are so busy with the cameras, the press is not dealing with his criminal investigations, the national debt, matters of religion and state, or any other issue that hurts him and his Likud party.
- Then again, it also does not appear to be as positive an issue for the prime minister as his bread-and-butter of war and peace. So why does Netanyahu want the cameras focused on cameras?
- First of all, it makes him look transparent and clean, and his rivals look the opposite. That is a wonderful message for a prime minister with three criminal investigations hanging over his head.
- Secondly, it allows him to fight against Arab voters and appeal to his right-wing base without doing or saying anything overtly racist. After all, he says he wants cameras everywhere, not just in Umm el-Fahm, and he calls his opponents "they."
- Thirdly, if Netanyahu would lose the election, he can now legitimately call the results into question. He might even get the announcement of the final results delayed in court.
- Lastly, there are no casualties involved. For weeks, there were those who were openly speculating that if Netanyahu fared poorly in the polls, he would escalate a war on multiple fronts. That would have made sense, because Netanyahu tends to go up in the polls whenever there is a security situation, whether it is going well or not.
- They cited the 1997 movie Wag the Dog, in which an incumbent candidate fabricated a war to distract from a sex scandal. One of the benefits of a fabricated war was that no one was hurt.

- **It turns out Netanyahu did not need a war. The press allowed him to dominate the discourse without anyone losing an eye.**