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Israel and Middle East News Update

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March 26, 2021

Associated Press

Final Vote Shows Major Setback for Israel's Netanyahu

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his right-wing allies fell short of winning a Knesset majority in Israel's latest election, according to a final vote count, leaving a political deadlock that put the long-time leader's future in question. The fourth election in just two years brought a stinging rebuke for Netanyahu, the most dominant figure in Israeli politics in a generation. Adding to the pain, he lost ground to former partners who vowed never to sit in a government with him again. Under Israel's fragmented political system, Netanyahu could still try to reach across the aisle and cobble together a governing coalition. But the makeup of the new Knesset will make that extremely difficult, giving his opponents the upper hand in coalition talks. It's also quite possible Israel will go into a fifth election later this year. [Dig Deeper "Without Election Knockout, Netanyahu Facing Moves To Keep Him Out of Office"](#) (Ynet News)

Times of Israel

Likud Said Forming Team Seeking To Disqualify Arab Votes

Netanyahu has reportedly formed a team that will search for potential mistakes and problems with votes for the Joint List, seeking to annul some 2,600 votes to win a seat for the Likud party at the Arab party's expense and shift the Knesset balance slightly in his favor. Currently, the Joint List has a buffer of 2,521 votes, below which it loses its 6th seat. Under Israel's complex seat distribution system, Likud, currently closest to an additional seat by number of votes, would gain from the Joint List's loss. This would shift Netanyahu's bloc of potential supporters from 59 to 60 of the Knesset's 120 total. Not yet a majority, but at least not a minority. But to do so, Likud would need to discredit 2,521 votes cast by the Arab public, an unlikely scenario, and one that is sure to elicit intense criticism for the attempt to disenfranchise members of Israel's Arab minority. [Dig Deeper "Smotrich Rejects Working with Islamist Ra'Am Party To Prop up Netanyahu Government"](#) (124 News)

Jerusalem Post

Netanyahu Banned From Law Enforcement Appointments

Attorney-General Avichai Mandelblit has the authority to bind Netanyahu with a conflict-of-interest arrangement given his status as an indicted defendant, the High Court of Justice ruled. Netanyahu has been on trial for three public corruption affairs since last May. Witnesses will be called against him starting on April 5. There has been concern that he might try to appoint law-enforcement officials or judges, or pass legislation impacting the legal establishment, to interfere with the course of his trial. One of the basic assumptions that led to the High Court green-lighting Netanyahu last May to form a government, despite his indictment, was his explicit commitment to accept a conflict-of-interest arrangement set for him by Mandelblit, the court said.

Biden Admin Restores US Humanitarian Aid To Palestinians

President Joe Biden's administration will restore aid to the Palestinians that was cut by his predecessor Donald Trump, the US Ambassador to the UN Linda Thomas-Greenfield said. "President Biden is restoring [US assistance](#) programs that support economic development and humanitarian aid for the Palestinian people," the official said. "Specifically, the United States is pleased to announce \$15 million in humanitarian assistance to support the most vulnerable communities in the West Bank and Gaza." None of the aid, however, is earmarked for the Palestinian Authority; rather, it is to be channeled through a private charity. "With this assistance, the U.S. Agency for International Development is supporting Catholic Relief Services' COVID-19 response efforts in health care facilities and for vulnerable families in the West Bank and Gaza," Thomas-Greenfield specified. The Ambassador has also reiterated Biden's commitment to the two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Jerusalem Post

Ze'evi Assassin SA'Adat To Head PFLP List in PA Election

Ahmad Sa'adat, secretary-general of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), who was tried and convicted of masterminding the assassination of Tourism Minister Rehavam Ze'evi in 2001, will run at the head of the group's list in the upcoming Palestinian parliamentary election. Sa'adat was sentenced in 2006 to 30 years in prison for heading an illegal terrorist organization and for his leading role in Ze'evi's assassination. In addition to Sa'adat, the PFLP list will include a number of Palestinian security prisoners held in Israeli prison, as well as personalities from the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The PFLP, which rejects the Oslo Accords signed in 1993 between Israel and the PLO. The PFLP does not recognize Israel and favors a one-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Founded in 1967 by George Habash, the PFLP is the second-largest group in the PLO after Fatah. The terrorist group was famous for pioneering aircraft hijackings in the late 1960s and early 1970s. [Dig Deeper "Palestinian Prisoner Honored by PA Media for Smuggling Sperm Out of Jail"](#) (Jerusalem Post)

Ynet News

Iran Missile Hit Israeli-Owned Ship in Arabian Sea

Iran fired a missile at an Israeli-owned ship in the Arabian Sea, Channel 12 reported. The container ship, which was said to be on its way from Tanzania to India, was hit by a small projectile and sustained minimal damage, Channel 12 said. The ship was identified as the LORI, which is owned by Israeli businessman Udi Angel and registered in Liberia. Israeli security sources believe the launch was a deliberate Iranian attack, the report said. The incident was reported to Israel's security establishment and to the owners of the Haifa-based ship company, XT Management. The ship will continue to India and will undergo damage assessment. Officials believe the suspected attack was in retaliation for an attack on an Iranian-owned ship near the coast of Syria, which Tehran attributed to Israel. [Dig Deeper "US Senators Urge Broader Iran Deal Addressing 'Wide Range' of Aggressive Behavior"](#) (I24 News)

EU Offers Turkey Aid, Trade Help Despite Rights Concerns

EU leaders offered new incentives to Turkey to improve cooperation on migration and trade despite democratic backsliding in the country and lingering concerns about its energy ambitions in the Mediterranean Sea. Seizing on the recent conciliatory tone from Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the leaders said, should the relative calm continue, “the European Union is ready to engage with Turkey in a phased, proportionate and reversible manner to enhance cooperation in a number of areas of common interest.” This includes “a mandate for the modernization” of customs arrangements, the future launch of “high level dialogues” on issues like the pandemic, climate change, counter-terrorism and regional issues, and strengthened cooperation “on people-to-people contacts and mobility.” The leaders also ordered the EU’s executive body, the European Commission, to build on the EU-Turkey migrant agreement from 2016 and explore ways to continue to help finance the estimated 4 million Syrian refugees in Turkey, as well as those in Jordan and Lebanon. [Dig Deeper “Turkey Asks Kosovo To Reconsider Embassy in Jerusalem” \(Ynet News\)](#)

Suez Canal Could Be Blocked for Weeks by Ship

A huge container ship blocking the Suez Canal like a “beached whale” may take weeks to free, the salvage company said, as officials stopped all ships entering the channel in a new setback for global trade. The Ever Given, almost as long as the Empire State Building is high, is blocking transit in both directions through one of the world’s busiest shipping channels for oil and refined fuels, grain and other trade linking Asia and Europe. The Suez Canal Authority (SCA) said earlier that nine tugs were working to move the vessel, which got stuck diagonally across the single-lane southern stretch of the canal on Tuesday morning amid high winds and a dust storm. The blockage comes on top of the disruption to world trade already caused in the past year by COVID-19, with trade volumes hit by high rates of ship cancellations, shortages of containers and slower handling speeds at ports. [Dig Deeper “What Does the Suez Canal Blockage Mean for Oil Shipments?” \(Reuters\)](#)

Political Options

By Alon Ben David

- **Naftali Bennett could not have imagined that for his 49th birthday, he would receive the opportunity of his life. Bennett always thought that his road to the summit would be by returning to where he was forged, the Likud, but this week, heading a small party, he has been given the keys to the Prime Minister's Bureau. He, not Abbas, can remove us from the endless cycle of elections and keep his election promise: the establishment of a government that looks out for its citizens. One basic model in game theory is chicken: two drivers speed toward each other on a narrow road. If one of the drivers does not swerve, both will collide head-on and both of them lose.**
- **A simple strategy for winning is to stick to one's lane, despite the risk, and hope the other driver blinks first. A more sophisticated strategy says that the driver will win who rips out his steering wheel, throws it out the window in front of the eyes of the other driver, showing him that he has no possibility of swerving. That is exactly what Bennett did this week. Many view Bennett's signing of his document as capitulation to Netanyahu. In fact, it was a well calculated message to the leaders of the two largest parties, Binyamin Netanyahu and Yair Lapid. Bennett told Netanyahu: I won't be able to be in your government if it relies on the Islamic Movement. He told Lapid: the only way I can go with you is if I am full time prime minister, nothing less. I've ripped out the steering wheel, now it's up to you.**
- **The establishment of a minority government spanning the gamut from Meretz to Yamina is not easy and is unnatural, and yet, the majority of the party leaders in the bloc for change realize that it is the only way out of the political impasse. A coalition of 57 versus 52 does not require the support of the Arab parties. It will be enough for them to abstain so that it can be formed and start working. Lapid, who heads the camp for change, has proven more than once in the past that he has been gifted with altruism and an ability to put Israel before all else. He passed before on an alternating premiership, on ministerial seats and on his ego for the sake of the goal in which he believes. Now too, we can assume that together with Gantz, Saar and Liberman, he will place before Bennett an offer that is hard to refuse: full time prime minister, no alternating premiership, with the alternative for Bennett to again become a doormat in a Netanyahu government—or risk a fifth election.**
- **The Likud is even now preparing its attack on the idea: it is unethical to give the premiership to a leader of party that has seven seats. But it is even more unethical to enslave the fate of an entire country and put it in the hands of someone charged with criminal offenses, whose only objective is to evade justice. Bennett promised to do everything to avert a fifth election—now he has the opportunity and the moral justification to do so. The Likud threatens that if he does this, this will “finish him” in the right-wing. But Bennett's voters, who are out and out right-wingers, knew that when they voted for him, this was not a vote for Netanyahu, and voted for him anyway.**

The War has Moved to Above the Water

By Alex Fishman

- **Officials who are closely involved with the world oil trade say that there has been a substantial decrease in the volume of oil that is shipped by sea from Iran to the port of Latakia in Syria in the last few months. This is not a coincidence. This is probably one of the results of the naval war between Israel and Iran whose goal is to block the passage of Iranian oil earmarked to fund the military activity of the Iranian Quds Force and of Hizbullah in Syria and in Lebanon. The Syrians recently asked Russia to increase the supply of oil that it sells to Syria in place of the Iranian oil whose flow someone has been interrupting. This war went up a rung this week.**
- **An Iranian missile hit the Lori container ship in the Arabian Sea flying under a foreign flag. It has no Israeli crew, but it belongs to the Israeli Zim company. This is in contrast to the Helios Ray cargo ship, which was hit on February 26 by a bomb that was affixed to its side in the Gulf of Oman, which is a foreign ship operated by a foreign company that is owned by an Israeli businessman. In both instances, nobody was hurt and the ships continued to sail on their own steam. Foreign reports say that this naval war has been going on for over two years and that it is focusing on oil tankers that belong to Iranian companies that are connected to the Revolutionary Guard. It recently made headlines only when ships that have an Israeli connection began to be hit, because they are insured by international companies.**
- **As long as only Iranian ships were hit—mainly oil tankers—this did not make headlines, since these vessels are insured by Iranian companies. The Iranian regime covered up the enormous losses that were incurred by the damage to the ships and to the cargo and it has no interest in reporting to its public the damages in the millions because of its insistence on sending oil to Syria, in violation of the sanctions against it. The naval war that is attributed to Israel is part of the many-tentacled war that Israel is waging against the funding sources for the terrorist organizations that operate against it. It was reported in the past that almost half of the IDF's activity in what is known as the "war between the wars" (which also includes a financial chapter) is undertaken by the Israel Navy's long-range strategic branch. Presumably, a hefty part of the burden falls on the shoulders of the special forces, the Naval Commando fighters, who have abilities to operate independently and over the course of long periods of time, even at distances of hundreds of kilometers from Israel's shores.**
- **The Wall Street Journal reported two weeks ago that as part of this naval war, Israel had struck 12 Iranian oil tankers. International figures involved in naval security contend that the number of Iranian ships that were hit is double that number. Some of the tankers that were hit returned to Iran, others reached port and were put out of commission as a result of irreversible damage. Each such tanker that does not reach its destination means a loss of income of 60-80 million dollars. As of now, there are rules in this war, and both sides are keeping to them.**

- **It emerges from the reports that there has been no takeover of ships, none of the operations resulted in casualties and fatalities and they did not pollute the sea. Until recently, the Iranians did not respond to the attacks on the oil tankers that were attributed to Israel. The Iranians now appear to have reached the conclusion that Israel can be deterred from interrupting the oil supply to Syria by attacking ships that ply the commercial route between Israel and the Far East. If these attacks continue,**
- **Both sides are approaching the point of explosion. Israel is attributed with responding to the attack on the Helios Ray with an air strike on the outskirts of Damascus and most likely with attacking an Iranian cargo ship off the Syrian shore (and these are only the actions that were reported). We can assume that there will also be a response to the attack on the Lori, either secret or overt. A clash is taking place that is liable to devolve into unexpected directions.**