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Israel and Middle East News Update

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News Excerpts

March 30, 2021

Associated Press

Israel's Political Stalemate To Land at Rivlin's Doorstep

President Reuven Rivlin announced he will begin consultations with Israel's political rivals in hopes of unraveling the post-election deadlock. Israel's presidency is largely a figurehead office. But after national elections, the president is responsible for choosing the leader of the party with the best chance of forming a government to put together a majority coalition in the Knesset. Rivlin's office said he would hold two days of consultations with each party, starting next Monday. Two days later, he hopes to announce his choice for forming a new coalition. His designated prime minister would then have up to six weeks to work out a coalition deal. It's not an easy task given Israel's kaleidoscope of changing alliances and rivalries. The factions who oppose Prime Minister Netanyahu have less in common than the right-leaning factions that could join up with him. [Dig Deeper "Bennett Demands PM Role, as Majority of Joint List Expected To Recommend Lapid" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Times of Israel

Lieberman Indicates He'll Recommend Lapid Form Gov't

Yisrael Beytenu chief Avigdor Lieberman indicated he will support Yesh Atid leader Yair Lapid to form a new government. Lieberman did not explicitly say he will recommend Lapid get first crack at assembling a governing coalition but pledged to back the leader of the largest party in the "change bloc" of factions opposed to Netanyahu. Yesh Atid, is the largest party in the bloc. If Lapid receives the backing of Blue & White, New Hope and the Joint List, he'll have 57 mandates — five more than Netanyahu if the premier receives the support of Shas, United Torah Judaism, and Religious Zionism. According to Channel 12, one proposal on the table was for Lapid and Bennett to lead a "national government of healing" for a limited period of time, with a deal to rotate the premierships. [Dig Deeper "Kingmaker Ra'Am Party Won't Sit in Coalition with Far-Right, Warns Arab Broker" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Ynet News

No Nation-State Law, No Pro-LGBT Bills: Ra'Am's Asks Lapid

The head of the Arab party that holds key to forming government met with Opposition Leader Lapid and allegedly presented him with a long list of demands, which include scrapping [Nation-State Law](#) and having freedom to vote on pro-LGBT bills. The Ra'am party, headed by Mansour Abbas, has emerged as unlikely kingmaker following the elections, with both Netanyahu and Lapid lacking a handful of Knesset seats to form a coalition government. Abbas met with Lapid after multiple postponements and the two apparently agreed to hold another meeting in the coming days. A political source told Ynet that Abbas put forward a list of demands as his condition for joining the Lapid-led centrist coalition, having met with Likud officials a day earlier and realizing that being part of a right-wing government may not be a viable option.

Hamas Presents List of Candidates for Elections

Hamas formally submitted its list of candidates for the parliamentary election to the Palestinian Central Elections Commission (CEC). Deposed Fatah operative Mohammed Dahlan's group also presented its own list, called al-Mustaqbal (The Future) to the commission. Dahlan, a former Palestinian Authority (PA) security commander, is based in the UAE. The Hamas list is headed by Khalil al-Hayya, a member of the group's political bureau. The list was submitted to the offices of the CEC in the [Gaza Strip](#) and the West Bank. The CEC announced that 15 lists have registered so far for the parliamentary election, scheduled to take place on May 22. The deadline for submitting lists is Wednesday. The Palestinian ruling Fatah faction is expected to present its list to the CEC in the next 48 hours. The election for the PA presidency is scheduled to take place on July 31. [Dig Deeper " Hamas: Arab Countries Asked Abbas To Scrap Elections" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

PA Receives 100,000 Doses of China's Sinopharm Vaccine

Ramallah received 100,000 Sinopharm coronavirus vaccines from the Chinese government, as the PA struggled to quicken the pace of its immunization campaign. Ramallah has received some 153,000 doses from various sources, far fewer than it needs to vaccinate the nearly 3 million Palestinians who live in the West Bank. The vaccines' early distribution was also dogged by accusations of nepotism and corruption, which forced the PA to acknowledge that some doses went to government officials and the Palestinian national soccer team rather than healthcare workers. The Palestinians anticipate receiving another shipment of around 400,000 AstraZeneca doses in the coming months through the UN-backed COVAX program, which seeks to provide enough free vaccines to provide for 20% of the Palestinian population. Palestinian officials have also signed a contract with the British AstraZeneca company for an additional two million doses, but it is unclear when they will arrive. [Dig Deeper " Hamas, Israel Cooperate on Plan To Vaccinate 7,000 Gaza Traders" \(Ynet News\)](#)

Israel Urges Citizens To Avoid UAE, Citing Iranian Threat

As coronavirus infections continue to decline and tourism expected to pick up steam in the coming months, the National Security Council advised tourists against travel to the UAE and other countries across the region, citing the threat of attack by Iran. In the advisory, the council said that Iranian officials had threatened to attack Israeli targets over the last few months, adding that the Islamic Republic had already conducted a bombing attack near the Israeli embassy in India in January. It identified Georgia, Azerbaijan, Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Bahrain, the Kurdish region of Iraq, as well as Turkey, Jordan and Egypt as areas to avoid. The council also issued travel warnings to several Asian countries, including Malaysia, Indonesia, the Kashmir region in India and the southern Philippines. [Dig Deeper " Following Abraham Accords, Israel Prepares for Muslim Tourists" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

US To Offer Iran New Nuclear Deal, Sanctions Relief

The United States is trying to break the nuclear deadlock with Iran and are planning a new proposal that would include some sanctions relief for Iran, according to a report from Politico. Biden administration officials plan to put forth a new proposal to restart the talks between Washington and Tehran about the Iran nuclear deal as soon as this week, two people familiar with the situation told [Politico](#). According to the report, the American proposal would ask Iran to stop some of its nuclear activities, such as work on advanced centrifuges and the enrichment of uranium to 20 percent purity, in exchange for some relief from US economic sanctions, said one of Politico's two sources. However, the details of this potential deal are still being worked out by the US and it's not at all certain that Iran will accept the terms. Indeed, Tehran rejected a US proposal earlier this year, saying it was "unacceptable", countering with their own idea, which the Biden team declared a non-starter. [Dig Deeper "Iran, China Sign Long-Term Economic Deal" \(Al-Monitor\)](#)

Houthis Expel Nearly All Remaining Jews in Yemen

The last remaining three Jewish families in Yemen were deported by Iranian-backed Houthi rebels, leaving only a few Jewish seniors in the country, London-based Saudi newspaper [Asharq Al-Awsat](#). A total of 13 people from three different Jewish families were expelled from Yemen after years of pressure from the Houthis and as part of a deal to release Levi Salem Marhabi, a Jew whom the Houthis captured nearly six years ago. "They gave us a choice between staying in the midst of harassment and keeping Salem a prisoner or leaving and having him released," one of them told [Asharq Al-Awsat](#). "History will remember us as the last of Yemeni Jews who were still clinging to their homeland until the last moment," they added. "We had rejected many temptations time and time again, and refused to leave our homeland, but today we are forced." Marhabi was arrested for helping a Yemeni Jewish family move a rare Torah scroll, claimed by some to be 800 years old, out of the war-torn country. He languished in his Sanaa prison cell and reportedly suffered different kinds of torture; eventually leaving him partially paralyzed after a stroke. The Houthi rebels are currently conducting an offensive in the oil- and gas-rich Marib region, as the country teeters on the brink of famine. [Dig Deeper "UAE's Ambassador To Israel Extends Warm Passover Wishes To Jewish Community" \(I24 News\)](#)

The Likud's Reckoning

By Gilad Sharon

- The election is over, and it's time for some soul-searching. What's happened to us Likudniks? How is it that more than 70 MKs hail from right-wing parties and the Likud is leading the second-largest party by 13 seats, yet its odds of forming a government are extremely slim and depend on the consent of Hamas supporters? How is it that the pinnacle of its aspirations is to form a measly 61-MK coalition dependent on the likes of Ben Gvir on the one hand, and on the record-holder for visiting imprisoned murderers and terrorists on the other hand? Is this what we in the Likud want? Is this what we have become? The party has vanished. We have devolved from a democratic and living body into a North Korean-style party. In private conversations, our ministers and MKs dish out criticism and describe problematic and intolerable behavior. Nothing is left of a movement with principles and a path but a cult of personality.
- However, they would rather keep silent. They're waiting for scraps from a meal that is getting farther away. These cowards who consider themselves worthy heirs to Netanyahu are just waiting for him to fall, and when he does, the ones who ingratiated themselves with him the most will be the first to sink their teeth into him. Well, whoever lacked the courage to say "that's it, no further" and demand change does not deserve the inheritance. If memory serves Netanyahu, the historian's son, he ought to remember what happened when he fell in 1999. The only one who stayed and gave him a hand was the one who did not hesitate to criticize him, who told him the truth to his face. All the sycophants disappeared back then the way they'll disappear this time. Such is their nature.
- How do we fix the Likud? Netanyahu has to realize that it is not his private property, and the party must stop acting like it is. He has to understand that listening to criticism is allowed, and even desirable—it's the only way to improve oneself. He's got to break free of his paranoia: not everyone who thinks differently than he does is a traitor who's plotting to oust him. He must end his habit of portraying every achievement as his own and every failure as someone else's—he never takes responsibility for anything. Netanyahu must do some soul-searching: how is it that with all his talents, so many people don't believe a word he says and won't join him? How have three of his closest associates turned state's evidence against him? He isn't loyal to his people, and they aren't loyal to him. If Netanyahu's conduct were different, the Likud would have had a government—after all, nearly three of our seats switched to Saar.
- Senior Likud officials must do some soul-searching too. None of this could have happened if they weren't so weak and craven. Life is easier without a backbone: there's no limit to how far you can bend [the word in Hebrew also means "capitulate"]. They know that the party isn't being managed properly, but they've said nary a word, either hoping to receive a position or afraid of losing one. They're keeping their pound of flesh, and from their standpoint, the party can go to hell. The Likud court must also get to work and issue rulings based on the party charter and not according to directives from above.

- **The Likud charter cannot be ignored and trampled. Canceling the party primary time after time out of fear that someone with an independent mind will get elected; reserving a spot for someone from another party; placing people who no one knows on the party slate and who have nothing to contribute aside from being total yes-men—all this has caused the Likud tremendous damage. Netanyahu was elected to lead the Likud by a large majority, that's a fact. But he did not receive authorization to liquidate the party—it existed before him, and it will be here after him. If he and we want to remain a ruling party, for the country's benefit, we need to conduct a real investigation and urgently fix the corruption.**

A Confluence Made in Heaven

By Chen Artzi-Sror

- The courtship of Mansour Abbas is intense and clumsy, by people trapped in a political imbroglio who are willing to pay any price to escape. Netanyahu and his party, who attacked the Arabs and its parliamentarians savagely are now groveling to the person who holds their life preserver in his hands. Their retroactive seal of approval has earned them mockery and contempt, justifiably, since their interest is so utterly transparent. But despite the cynicism, the political acrobatics, and the conflicting intentions—thanks to the division over yes-Bibi—no-Bibi, we are seeing a shift of tectonic plates that is rearranging the political map and enabling the Arab public to play on the democratic game field in a manner that is both relevant and smart.
- Setting aside for a moment the tainted political considerations and observing the United Arab List, we can learn a great deal about our common story in this country. The late Rabbi Menachem Froman insisted, his entire life, on talking to the Muslim clerics, even those who supported terrorists, in the firm belief that peace would only come from the religious sphere. He believed that in a land so immersed in God and divinity, for good and for bad, a solution could only arise from a language of faith and belief. Froman was considered crazy in the past, but today it seems that he was a visionary.
- For years, Rabbi Froman was closely in touch with Sheikh Abdullah Nimr Darwish, the founder of the Islamic Movement in Israel and Abbas's mentor and teacher. Darwish is a fascinating figure. He formed a terrorist organization in 1979 with the goal of establishing an Islamic sharia state in Palestine, served time in Israeli prison, later served as chairman of the Adam Centers for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue and spoke out resolutely against violence by Israeli Arabs against Jewish citizens. Just recently his book, *Islam is the Solution*, was published in Hebrew, with legends in which he writes in the spirit of the moderate Islamist stream about the Islamic Movement's commitment to a democratic regime, to non-violent actions that comply with the law, as well as dialogue with the Jewish majority for the sake of reaching a sustainable peace. Just two days ago, the Islamic Movement's Shura Council declared that MK Iman Khatib Yasin would be appointed Abbas's deputy, which is without precedent for a woman.
- Is the United Arab List a liberal party? Not at all. It is a religious party. Exactly like Shas and UTJ. From many aspects, it is more progressive than them (could a woman imagine running in either of those parties?). Are there deep disagreements among the Jewish majority with its representatives? Absolutely. The natural suspicion is many times greater when the alliance with the UAL is based on the prime minister's need for survival. But we must not miss the point: it is, in fact, religious partnership that provides the opportunity for change, the possibility of playing a new, relevant game for all of Israel's citizens. Perhaps Abbas reached this critical juncture roundaboutly not just for his own sake and for the sake of his party, but for the sake of all of Israel's Arab citizens, and through him, the door will open to a partnership with the diverse representatives of Arab society—in the other Arab parties and by means of Arab citizens running in Jewish

parties. This will not be a perfect partnership, but rather just the opposite. It will probably unravel and reassemble endless times. But it was in fact Abbas himself who declared that he was not playing the binary game of coalition and opposition.

- Is the State of Israel mature enough to seriously converse with the Arab representatives, even if there is no agreement on most issues? Has the time not come to give freedom to vote on a diverse array of social issues (as Abbas demanded regarding LGBTQ rights, for example), and thus reflect, more accurately the will of the people? The benefits of a political crisis, from this aspect, are huge, and if handled wisely, we will be able to see its fruits in the next few years. The Zionist Jewish majority should be the first to spot which way the wind is blowing and to recalculate its course, to create relevant and practical cooperation without giving up on its vision and path. This is entirely possible.