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Israel and Middle East News Update

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News Excerpts

March 31, 2021

Jerusalem Post

Bennett To Decide Coalition After Meetings

Yamina leader Naftali Bennett will make a fateful decision over the weekend regarding the next government, following meetings with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and opposition leader Yair Lapid, sources close to Bennett said. His choices include joining a government led by either of them, insisting on a rotation in the Prime Minister's Office with one of them or telling President Reuven Rivlin in Monday's presidential consultations that he recommends himself for the premiership alone. The value of Yamina's seven MKs increased after reports indicated that United Arab List (Ra'am) chairman Mansour Abbas has already decided to back Netanyahu and support his government from outside the coalition. Abbas will deliver an address in Hebrew explaining the move on Thursday. [Dig Deeper "SA'AR Tells Lapid To 'Step Aside' To Let Bennett Be PM, Before It's 'Too Late'" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Israel Hayom

Religious Zionist Party Officially Endorses Netanyahu for PM

Religious Zionist Party leader Bezalel Smotrich announced that his party plans to recommend President Rivlin task Netanyahu with forming the next government. Shas leader Aryeh Deri also endorsed Netanyahu as the next PM, saying the Sephardi ultra-Orthodox party will ask Rivlin to task Likud's leader with putting together a coalition. If Yamina leader Naftali Bennett decides to join Netanyahu's coalition, he will be able to establish a right-wing government in the current Knesset, Netanyahu said. Channel 13 reported that Bennett is so far refusing to commit to ousting Netanyahu unless he is named the next prime minister, despite the fact he only won seven Knesset seats in the elections, compared to Lapid's 17. The latter so far will not cede the premiership. [Dig Deeper "Prominent Religious-Zionist Rabbi Backs Right-Wing Deal with Ra'Am" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

Times of Israel

S&P: Israeli Political Instability Not Affecting Rating...Yet

Though Israel's state of political instability seems poised to continue, the country's fiscal situation is unlikely to be impacted in the immediate term, the S&P credit rating agency said in a memo, indicating it will not downgrade the Jewish state's rating. S&P warned, however, that if the political uncertainty persists, the deadlock in the Knesset could make it more difficult for policymakers to reach consensus on economic issues. The agency also said it expects growth to recover soon and lauded Israel for having sound debt policy, which it said continues to justify its rating of AA-/Stable/A-1+. But it warned a future government will need to put a greater focus on "budgetary consolidation" beyond this year to prevent a further rise in the debt load. [Dig Deeper "Netanyahu Blames Gantz for Potential Vaccine Shortage in Latest Political Spat" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Bahrain Appoints First-Ever Head of Mission in Israel

Bahrain has appointed Khaled Yousif Al-Jalahma as head of its diplomatic mission to Israel, state news agency BNA reported following a deal to establish relations last year. Al-Jalahma was previously director of the operations directorate at Bahrain's foreign ministry since 2017 and had also served as deputy chief of mission at the kingdom's embassy in the United States. The Foreign Ministry said that a team from Bahrain would arrive in Israel in the coming weeks to make the necessary arrangements for the Bahraini embassy, set to be located in Tel Aviv. Al-Jalahma was approved after a conversation between Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi and his Bahraini counterpart Abdullatif Al Zayani, where all the "relevant checks were made." During that call, Ashkenazi also thanked Bahraini King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa for his courage and leadership in establishing full diplomatic relations with Israel, according to a foreign ministry statement. [Dig Deeper "Turkey Tells Israel It Is Ready To Exchange Ambassadors Again" \(Israel Hayom\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

In Blow To Abbas, Barghouti To Form Own List for Elections

Jailed Fatah leader Marwan Barghouti has decided to run in the upcoming Palestinian parliamentary election on a separate list, a move that is seen as a major challenge to Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmoud Abbas and the Fatah leadership, Palestinian sources said. Palestinians predicted that the crisis in Fatah could prompt Abbas to delay or cancel the parliamentary and presidential elections, slated for May 22 and July 31, respectively. Sources close to Barghouti, who, in 2004 was sentenced to five consecutive life terms and 40 years for his involvement in three terrorist attacks in Israel that killed five people, is expected to present his electoral list to the Palestinian Central Elections Commission (CEC) in the coming hours. Other sources, however, said that Barghouti has not yet made a final decision regarding his participation in the elections. [Dig Deeper "EU Accuses Israel of Ignoring Request To Observe Palestinian Elections" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

US Reaffirms JRS as Israel's Capital, Speaks of Occupation

The annual US report on global human rights practices affirmed that Jerusalem was the capital of Israel, but reintroduced language that spoke of Israeli occupation of territory, two-states and gave a nod in the direction of Palestinian Authority rights to sections of Jerusalem. [The annual Country Reports on Human Rights Practices](#), the first one authored by the Biden administration, looked at human rights issues in Israel, the West Bank and Gaza, as part of its global analysis on almost 200 nations. With respect to Israel and the Palestinians the new report followed for the most part language used by the former Trump administration. Both the Biden and Trump administrations clarified that the US has recognized that Jerusalem is Israel capital since 2017 and neither report clarifies the boundaries of Israeli sovereignty in Jerusalem. Both reports explain that such boundaries are subject to negotiations. [Dig Deeper "Biden Sticks To Trump's Language on Israel, Scraps 'Occupied Territories' From Report" \(I24 News\)](#)

US, Qatar Heed To UN's Call To Raise \$10b for Syria

The US and Qatar announced they will send aid for humanitarian purposes in Syria after the **UN** called on the international community to pledge up to \$10b to the war-torn country. Syrians have suffered from a decade-long civil war that has resulted in millions of refugees, hundreds of thousands of deaths and a ravaged economy. Washington pledged to provide a relief package of more than \$596m and Qatar some \$100m, according to the Doha-based Al Jazeera network. Other countries and international bodies followed suit, including Britain (\$281.16m), Germany (\$2.04b) and the EU (\$656m). Secretary of State Antony Blinken said that the assistance would go to an estimated 13.4m Syrians inside Syria and some 5.6m refugees in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt. [Dig Deeper “Turning Page on Trump, Us Vows To Defend Human Rights Everywhere” \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Reuters

EU To Sanction Iranians for Rights Abuses, First Since 2013

The European Union is set to agree to sanction several Iranian individuals for human rights abuses, the first such measures since 2013, three EU diplomats said. EU envoys are expected to agree to impose travel bans and asset freezes on the individuals, the diplomats said, and their names would be published next week, when the sanctions take effect. They gave no further details. The EU declined to comment. Like the **US**, the EU has an array of sanctions over human rights since 2011 on more than 80 Iranian individuals which has been renewed annually every April. Asked why the latest measures were being taken now, one of the diplomats said the EU was seeking to take a tougher stance to uphold human rights. This month, the EU sanctioned 11 people from countries including China, North Korea, Libya and Russia. Iran has repeatedly rejected accusations by the West of human rights abuses. Iranian officials were not immediately available for comment. [Dig Deeper “Iran Rejects Ending 20% Enrichment Before US Lifts Sanctions” \(Reuters\)](#)

A Twist of Fate

By Afif Abu Much

- **Last week Israel’s citizens went to the polls for the fourth time in two years; once again, the election ended without Prime Minister Netanyahu winning the 61 seats he so desperately wanted. If that weren’t enough, that fourth election ended with one particularly hot name: Mansour Abbas, who appears to be the biggest winner of the election even though his party won only four seats. Abbas is the person who will be able to decide who will be Israel’s next prime minister. Ostensibly, the fate of Netanyahu’s continued tenure is entirely dependent on him.**
- **In a twist of fate, Binyamin Netanyahu—the man who in 2021 decided to adopt the moniker “Abu Yair”; the same man who never stopped inciting against the Arab public and their political parties in the past—now desperately needs the United Arab List’s support to continue to reside on Balfour Street. The man who in the 2020 election invoked the slogan, “Gantz can’t form a government without the Joint List”; the same man who drew up a pie chart of seats in the 23rd Knesset on a whiteboard without the 15 seats that were won by the Arab parties and said explicitly that “the Arabs aren’t part of this equation”—appears to be someone who cannot form a government of his own without Mansour Abbas and his party.**
- **Without a doubt, Mansour Abbas has enjoyed every minute since becoming the trump card of the election, a position that has resulted in him being courted vigorously by both sides of the Israeli political map. But in the past few days, despite his meeting with Yair Lapid earlier this week, it has become increasingly evident that he would prefer to form an alliance with Netanyahu’s bloc, despite the bad blood between Netanyahu and the Arab citizens of Israel and despite the fact that Smotrich and Ben Gvir are part of Netanyahu’s bloc. Mansour Abbas thinks that if he is going to support a government and play an influential role in the Israeli political arena, he would be better off doing so with a Netanyahu-led government.**
- **He and his fellow party members believe that the right wing in Israel is stronger than the left, and its chances of being in power in the next few years are therefore much higher. Furthermore, UAL officials believe that they will be able to get much more out of Netanyahu than out of the other side, especially when their goal is to get as many tangible achievements under their belts in the foreseeable future, such as budgeting for a program to combat crime in Arab society, repealing the Kamenitz law and more. The United Arab List wants to be able to present those palpable achievements to the Arab electorate in order to prove that the party’s stance delivered real results, as opposed to the Joint List, which chose once again not to play the game. The question is whether supporting a government that includes Smotrich and Ben Gvir will go over well with Arab society. UAL officials have begun to lay the groundwork ahead of the speech that Mansour Abbas is scheduled to give in the near future in hope of persuading the Arab and Jewish public that a decision in that vein is sound.**

Time to Make Concessions

By Sima Kadmon

- **Last night, without any prior warning, Saar wrote on Twitter that the window of opportunity for building a government of change was liable to close because Lapid was too busy collecting endorsements for prime minister—endorsements that won't result in a new government being formed. Saar wrote that Lapid was doing that instead of urgently reaching agreements about the composition of a government of change and forming a viable bloc to replace Netanyahu, and added that in order to achieve that, Lapid would have to set aside his own ego. In other words, Saar was saying: if you want to get Bennett to break away from Netanyahu you're going to have to offer him to go first in an alternating premiership arrangement. Lapid quickly responded to Saar. First let me receive the mandate to form the next government from the president; then I'll be prepared to discuss concessions. Saar's response was immediate: you've got it backwards. The time for making concessions is now. It may be too late if you wait.**
- **The importance of that dialogue, which was conducted embarrassingly enough on Twitter, cannot be overstated. Everyone knows that Lapid and Saar have engaged in quiet talks, both before and after the election. If Saar decided to bring that issue out into the public on Twitter—that is nothing short of a bombshell. Saar probably dropped it because he believes we are in the eleventh hour, and that everyone involved needs a wakeup call to warn them that we are on the cusp of seeing Netanyahu get sworn in once again as prime minister. Saar's tweet was motivated by his sinking suspicion that Lapid intends to demand being first in an alternating premiership arrangement at any cost and, if not, to force a fifth election.**
- **Saar is afraid that that stance is what is stopping Bennett from disengaging from Netanyahu and joining the government of change. Saar, who has assembled a good few coalitions in his life and is intimately familiar with Netanyahu, knows based both on past experience and on his intelligence that Netanyahu is working overtime to get Bennett to join a government under his leadership. Netanyahu's envoys have been courting Bennett even while Saar has been engaged in talk of his own with Bennett. Lapid's insistence is liable to result in Bennett giving in and reaching an agreement with Netanyahu.**
- **Saar's read of the situation is as follows: even if Lapid gets the mandate to form the next government, he has no chance of forming one without Bennett, unless he has the support of the Joint List—which is something Saar is not willing to accept. Furthermore, Lapid currently does not have Mansour Abbas on his side, which means he can't form a government without Bennett's support. Saar is worried that there is almost no chance that Bennett will be able to withstand the pressure he is certain to face from Netanyahu's direction during the month that Lapid has the mandate to form the government. Neither he nor Lapid have any confidence in Bennett's fortitude and his ability to withstand the pressure he will face from Netanyahu and the right.**

- With that being the case, the only chance of forming a government of change is to reach an agreement in the next few days about the major issues, including an alternating premiership arrangement between Lapid and Bennett in which Bennett is prime minister first. Doing so will let Bennett disengage from Netanyahu. If Bennett, rather than Lapid, gets the president's recommendation to form the next government, that would allow for a government to be formed quickly by all the forces in the pro-change bloc. Any further delay in doing that may bury that option for good and pave Netanyahu's way to forming a coalition with Bennett and Mansour Abbas.
- Saar's concerns are justified. No one in Lapid's party is forming a government yet; they are focused at present on securing endorsements so that that president gives Lapid the task of forming the next government. Only after Lapid is tasked with that job will the real negotiations begin. Notably, Lapid yesterday explicitly said that he was prepared to make painful concessions. There is only one painful concession that a person who heads a party with 17 seats can make: letting a person who heads a party with seven seats go first in an alternating premiership arrangement. But if that negotiation is held the way things were held yesterday—publicly and in the lowest possible arena, Twitter—no one should expect any change here.