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## Israel and Middle East News Update

*Wednesday, April 21*

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# News Excerpts

April 21, 2021

## Times of Israel

### **Likud Lashes Out at Bennett, Smotrich After Shock Defeat**

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud publicly lashed out at Yamina and its leader Naftali Bennett, while the premier was reported to have privately blasted Religious Zionism and its head Bezalel Smotrich after suffering a stinging defeat in the Knesset. Amid the ongoing deadlock following the election, a Likud proposal regarding party representation on the key transitional Arrangements Committee was voted down by the Knesset, despite having the support of both Yamina and Religious Zionism. The proposal was defeated when the Islamist Ra'am party, which Netanyahu is hoping will prop up his government, voted with the opposition. The defeat led one leading associate of the premier to publicly reflect that it appeared Likud would not continue to lead the country. [Dig Deeper "Netanyahu Admits Ra'Am-Backed Government Not an Option, Urges Direct Vote for PM" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

## Associated Press

### **Israeli Police Scuffle with Protesters in Arab Neighborhood**

Israeli police scuffled with protesters in an Arab neighborhood in Tel Aviv. The protesters, including Arabs and Jews, say Jewish nationalist religious groups are buying up property in the traditionally Arab district of Jaffa, which has rapidly gentrified in recent years as luxury housing has gone up. Video taken by AP showed protesters and plainclothes police pushing and shoving as the police appeared to take a young Arab boy away in an unmarked squad car with flashing lights. The latest tensions began Sunday when two Arab men punched and kicked Rabbi Eliyahu Mali, the head of a local yeshiva, while he was out looking at properties, according to local media. Police arrested the men, and right-wing politicians condemned the attack as a hate crime. [Dig Deeper "Ultra-Orthodox Mob Locks Cops in Building; Then Suspect Flees Dressed as Woman" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

## Jerusalem Post

### **Israel's Government Debt at \$300B - Up 20% In 2020**

Total government debt rose by 20% in 2020 to \$300b, according to a report published by the accountant-general of the Finance Ministry. That will likely require Israel to take measures to increase tax revenues in the near future, including the possibility of raising tax rates. Covering the coronavirus crisis required raising approximately \$81b. in 2020, compared to \$42b. in 2019, the report said. Further bond issues will be required in 2021. Israel's economic position declined less than other countries during the pandemic, and its credit ratings are considered excellent. S&P Global Ratings recently affirmed Israel's AA- rating, with a "stable" outlook, and Fitch Ratings recently affirmed Israel's A+ rating and "stable" outlook. In April 2020, Moody's Investors Service affirmed Israel's A1 rating and updated its outlook to "stable". [Dig Deeper "In Another Sign of Economic Recovery, Deficit Drops to 12% Of GDP" \(Israel Hayom\)](#)

## **Abbas Adviser: Elections ‘Very Likely’ to Be Postponed**

A senior adviser to Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmoud Abbas said that the upcoming **elections** are “very likely” to be postponed if Israel does not allow voting in East Jerusalem. Nabil Shaath told the An-Nahar newspaper that if Israel continues to ignore the PA’s request to hold the elections in East Jerusalem, “the electoral process will be postponed.” He noted the PA’s Foreign Minister has been dispatched to Europe to push for international pressure on Israel. The Palestinians view East Jerusalem as the capital of their future state, while Israel considers the entire city its undivided capital and bars any PA activity from taking place in the city. Israel has yet to say whether it will permit voting in East Jerusalem. Shaath’s comments came a day after the Palestinian Elections Commission said most Palestinians in East Jerusalem will be able to vote in the elections, regardless of Israel’s decision. [Dig Deeper “Abbas Faces Tough Decision on Palestinian Elections” \(Al-Monitor\)](#)

### Jerusalem Post

## **COVAX Supplies 72,000 AstraZeneca Vaccine Doses to PA**

The PA received a shipment of 72,000 doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine through the World Health Organization’s COVAX program, enabling 20% of Palestinians in the West Bank and **Gaza Strip** to be vaccinated. To date, 121,866 Palestinians in the West Bank and 34,580 in Gaza have been vaccinated, or 3% out of a population of 5.2m, according to the World Health Organization. The WHO did not clarify if that number included the Israeli vaccination program for 105,000 Palestinian workers. **Israel** has vaccinated 81% of its population over the age of 16. The PA, which lacks funding, has barely begun a vaccination program and has relied heavily on donations, including from Israel. In addition, it has not successfully inoculated its population with the vaccines it does have, according to WHO. The latest shipment for the West Bank and Gaza was the second such shipment and brings the total of vaccines the PA has received to 383,440. [Dig Deeper “Rivlin, Abbas Share Ramadan Phone Call, Discuss ‘Regional Issues’” \(Times of Israel\)](#)

### Associated Press

## **Negotiators See Signs of Progress in Iran Nuclear Talks**

Diplomats working in Vienna on a solution to bringing the United States back into the nuclear deal with Iran and world powers are taking a break from talks to consult with their leaders amid continued signs of progress, Russia’s delegate said. Mikhail Ulyanov said after a meeting of the deal’s so-called Joint Commission of senior officials with representatives from France, Germany, Britain, China and Iran that they had noted “with satisfaction of the progress in negotiations to restore the nuclear deal.” Iran’s delegate, Deputy Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi, sounded a positive note, telling Iran’s official IRNA news agency that the talks were “moving forward despite difficulties and challenges.” The two major issues being negotiated are the rollback of American sanctions imposed by Trump’s administration after the withdrawal from the deal, and the return of Iran to compliance with the restrictions imposed by the JCPOA on its nuclear program. [Dig Deeper “As Iran and the US Move Cautiously Toward a Deal, Israel Needs a New Approach” \(Times of Israel\)](#)

## **Israeli Officials Push for More IAEA Oversight in Iran Deal**

Top Israeli officials are set to travel to the United States next week to push for more international oversight in the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, Kan reported. According to the report, the officials tasked with the mission are Mossad head Yossi Cohan, National Security Adviser Meir Ben-Shabbat and IDF Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Aviv Kohavi. All three will head to Washington to seek a bolstered mandate for the inspectors with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Under the original deal, the IAEA was to inspect Iran's nuclear installations as well as suspected nuclear sites; however, recently Iran moved to slash their capabilities. Now, Israel wants more powers to the IAEA as it comes to the conclusion that the deal that the US could soon re-join will hardly include some of its other complaints, the report said. The concerns voiced by Israel, as well as by other regional states, are also aimed at Iran's missile program and support for terrorist groups. In the meantime, the Vienna talks on the US rejoining the accord it pulled out of in 2018 continue, with reports suggesting progress is being made. Iran's President Hassan Rouhani said on that about 60 to 70% of the issues in the talks have been resolved. [Dig Deeper "Top Iran Official: Power Fully Restored at Natanz, Enrichment Renewed" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

### Reuters

## **Greece Signs Deal to Provide Saudi with Air Defense System**

Greece and Saudi Arabia have signed a deal to lend a Patriot air defense system to the Arab country to protect critical energy facilities, Greek Foreign Minister Nikos Dendias said. Dendias and Greek Defense Minister Nikos Panagiotopoulos met with Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhain in Riyadh. "We signed an agreement to move a Patriot battery here in Saudi Arabia," Dendias said in a press release, adding that he also signed a cooperation agreement with the Gulf Cooperation Council. "This is a big step forward for our country regarding the cooperation with the Gulf countries and also a contribution to the wider security of the energy sources for the West," he added. The US-made Patriot system will be used to protect critical energy facilities in the kingdom, a Greek diplomat said. Yemen's Iran-aligned Houthi movement, which is battling a Saudi-led coalition that intervened in the country's war in 2015, has stepped up drone and missile attacks on Saudi targets in recent weeks. The Patriot system is designed mainly to counter high-altitude ballistic missile attacks, which the kingdom has often had to deal with since intervening in Yemen. [Dig Deeper "In Race to Rearm, Greece Seeks Partnerships, More Hardware" \(Associated Press\)](#)

## **TikTok Terrorism**

By Gilad Cohen

- **Violent demonstrations have been held nearly every evening in East Jerusalem since the beginning of Ramadan over the decision to close the [area of the] stairs leading to Damascus Gate in the Old City. Repeated instances of stone-throwing, bottle-throwing and burning firecrackers at security forces have been perpetrated by groups of demonstrators, many of whom are minors, protesting the closure of the area of the stairs. There has also been a spike in the past week in the number of incidents in which individual passers-by, mostly Haredim, have been targeted for harassment. Fifty suspects have been either detained or arrested in connection to both incidents—forty in connection to the demonstrations near Damascus Gate and the other 10 for alleged harassment of passes-by, which were then posted on TikTok.**
- **The violence, which began as one-sided, became reciprocal after Jewish assailants sprayed a young Arab man with tear gas while chanting, “Death to Arabs,” and then posted a video of the incident on social media. Earlier this week a video was posted on TikTok of a group of young Arab men who knocked a 17-year-old Haredi boy off his bicycle and proceeded to kick and punch him. The same group of Arabs continued that evening to harass other Haredim in the area of IDF Square [between City Hall and the Old City]. More videos were subsequently posted of Haredim being pelted with stones and sprayed with tear gas, and otherwise harassing Haredi Jews.**
- **The first TikTok video to raise a public outcry was posted last week. That video documented a young Arab man slapping a Haredi yeshiva student in the face while on the light rail in Jerusalem. Three people were arrested in connection to that incident, including the prime suspect, a 17-year-old resident of Shuafat. Activists from the Lehava organization, including the group’s leader, Benzi Gopstein, intend to hold a demonstration tomorrow outside Damascus Gate. According to a statement issued by Lehava, “Jerusalem has become the Wild West.**
- **Arab terrorists have been terrorizing and assaulting Jews on a daily basis. The Israel Police is silent.” “We’ll know how to defend ourselves if there’s any rioting on the scene,” said Gopstein. “The days in which Jews would suffer beatings in silence are over. We don’t want to get slapped on the train. Anyone considering hitting a Jew ought to think twice.” A spokesperson for the Israel Police said; “We are acting resolutely to prevent acts of violence and disturbances, to find the people involved in incidents of that kind that have occurred and to bring them in for questioning with the goal of prosecuting them.”**

## **They Fixed Him**

By Sima Kadmon

- There are no words left to describe the magnitude of the absurdity: the prime minister, who is the single reason that we have been rolling from one election to the next, and who if he would move aside, a large and stable government could be formed quickly—is pushing for legislation to hold direct elections for the prime minister. As if he were not the reason that everything here is paralyzed. As if he were not the problem, but were the solution. Instead of moving the stuck car off the road and releasing the bottleneck—all the traffic is being diverted to side roads that only make the way longer and more complicated. It's not enough that he was unable to form a government after four elections, now Netanyahu wants to run under the most convenient conditions.
- And who is it who immediately enlists to help him, if not for the well-known mediator, Aryeh Deri, who, when necessary, is always willing to be the guarantor for any dubious agreement and then also renounce it afterwards? And the Likud, like a herd of bleating sheep, lines up behind. The Knesset is paralyzed, the government is not functioning, and the state is in waiting mode (waiting for what? A fifth election?) and there is nobody in the Likud who will wake up and put an end to the craziness. Where are you, Nir Barkat? Where are you, Yisrael Katz? Where is Yuli Edelstein? Where is Yoav Galant? Where are all the people who view themselves as Netanyahu's successor? Do you truly believe that at the end of this madness anyone will take you seriously? That anyone will be grateful to you for bringing the country to a nadir in which it is only because you were cowardly, and that the Likud members will appreciate this?
- Instead, the Likud always finds some gopher to come up with a bill that will arrange the next election for Netanyahu. Yes, a fifth election, and don't let anyone tell you otherwise: direct elections are elections, only under better conditions for just one person—and you know who. As if this were obvious, when Netanyahu has no other way to save himself from the pickle he is in—they change the rules in the middle of the game, amend basic laws, all with the goal of saving the house on Balfour Street, where somebody there has decided that it is registered in their name. Some people are saying that this idea is a spin, and that Netanyahu also knows that it won't work and that he is only playing for time. It is not in Bennett's interest to vote in favor of a bill that will perpetuate Netanyahu's rule, and the prime minister now knows that he can also no longer rely on Abbas. If he did not have 61 votes to win the vote on the composition of the Arrangements Committee, he isn't going to have the votes to hold a direct election. In the Likud too, even in the Likud, other voices could be heard.
- Miki Zohar's conclusion that they are headed into the opposition and the recommendations by top Likud figures that Netanyahu return the mandate to the president—none of this bodes well for the prime minister. And yet, this is the big battle ahead of us. Will Netanyahu be able to pass a bill to hold a direct election? Because if he does—he will also be elected prime minister, since many voters, the Arabs for example, will not show up to vote.

- If it's true that the bill will include a clause saying that only people who voted in the last (the fourth) election will be able to vote—we don't have to go to the trouble of holding the election and can crown Netanyahu even now. And if he is elected—he will be here forever. He will be a prime minister whom nothing can stop. The first thing he will do will be to cancel the agreement on an alternate prime minister. He will seize control of the Justice Ministry, he will appoint an attorney general and a state attorney and get his cases closed. In other words: the bill to hold direct elections is a strategic event. It is the most significant thing that the coalition for change—or the “unity government” as Lapid calls it—faces today. The only way to block it is to crumble the majority that will enable this bill to pass. The only way that can happen depends on Lapid and Saar's ability to reach agreements with Bennett this coming week. If Lapid carries, or if he moves too slowly—Bennett might reach agreement with Netanyahu on direct elections.
- Anyone who was not certain about which way Yamina is leaning, should have seen Ayelet Shaked after the Knesset vote on Yesh Atid's motion for the composition of the Arrangements Committee. She quickly approached Coalition Chairman Miki Zohar and angrily expressed her amazement about what had just happened. They're giving us a schooling, she told Zohar with irritation. They—meaning the coalition for change. Us—meaning the Netanyahu coalition. If anyone is counting on Bennett or on Abbas in the vote on the bill to hold direct election—they should think again. The critical time is now, while Netanyahu still holds the mandate. Lapid thinks that he has time until Netanyahu's mandate expires, and the negotiations are going slowly. But Bennett has to decide soon. It would be premature to eulogize the phoenix known as Netanyahu, but what we are seeing now is utter insanity. One by one, he is losing all his cards. He has 14 days left until he must return the mandate to the president and Netanyahu has been unable to meet the goals that he set himself. He was unable to enlist either Smotrich or Saar or any of the defectors that he promised that he was in touch with. He shouldn't count on Bennett's votes either.
- He was dealt a mortal blow in the vote on the composition of the Arrangements Committee, and the Knesset passed Yesh Atid's motion on the ratio of the representatives that will be on it. The importance of the vote cannot be overstated: the composition of the committee, in keeping with Yesh Atid's formula, will improve the positions of the coalition for change. The UAL and Yamina have become the tiebreakers in any vote, and Netanyahu will not be able to pass any bill without them. The accompanying drama only highlighted Netanyahu's unstable situation.
- After he succeeded in persuading Bennett to vote with the Likud, promising him equal representation to what he would get in Yesh Atid's bill, the UAL representatives—who were supposed to be Netanyahu's partners—entered the plenum at the last moment and to everyone's complete surprise, voted against the Likud's motion. In the vote immediately afterwards, on Meir Cohen of Yesh Atid's motion, Yamina was absent from the plenum, and the United Arab List voted in favor. There appears to be no other explanation except that Abbas probably was fed up with being taken for granted.

- He also wants Netanyahu to invite him to his office, just like he does with Bennett, and hold a long meeting with him and persuade him to vote with the Likud and make him tempting offers. He was certain that he was the linchpin and that as far as he was concerned, he had been very forthcoming, including giving a speech with the state flag and state symbol in the backdrop, and now suddenly, he learned that it was Bennett who was the favorite son. But it's not just that. Political figures say that Miki Zohar promised Abbas that he would be the deciding vote on the committee and that Yamina would not be stronger than the UAL. At the last moment, when it became evident that Yamina did not intend to vote with the Likud, Netanyahu promised Bennett more power, but as usual, Abbas was not apprised and the agreement with him was broken. Zohar, as always, defeated himself.