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Israel and Middle East News Update

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April 22, 2021

Ynet News

Bennett: If Netanyahu Fails, He'll Work to Form 'Unity Gov't'

Yamina's Naftali Bennett said if Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu fails to form a coalition, he will work to form a "unity government". Bennett has emerged as a kingmaker following the elections. Netanyahu is the candidate currently tasked with forming a coalition but appears to lack enough partners. During a televised press conference, Bennett told reporters that Netanyahu is dragging Israel into its fifth elections. "My first priority is to establish a right-wing government," Bennett said. "If, however, Likud fails in its mission, I will work to form a national unity government. My condition is that there will be a good, stable and functioning government that can uphold my values, my principles and my national worldview," Netanyahu responded by issuing a statement where he claimed Bennett has made a deal with Yesh Atid chair Yair Lapid. [Dig Deeper "Netanyahu Is Losing His Magic Touch" \(Ynet News\)](#)

Al-Monitor

Jerusalem Seethes with Clashes Between Jews, Arabs

Several violent incidents between [Jews and Arabs](#) have rocked Jaffa and [Jerusalem](#) over the past week. Seven brawls between Jews and [Arabs](#) were reported on Jerusalem's central Jaffa Street, near the Nablus Gate in east Jerusalem and in the Jewish Kiryat Yovel neighborhood. In another incident, a video recorded showed several Israeli Jews, some of them ultra-Orthodox, surrounding and cursing two Arabs in a car in the center of the city. At some point, one of the Arabs was sprayed with pepper spray while passers-by chanted, "death to the Arabs." A 17-year-old Palestinian from was arrested on suspicion of attacking two ultra-Orthodox boys. A video of the incident posted on social media showed a man knocking the glasses off one of the teenagers and slapping the other in an apparently unprovoked assault. [Dig Deeper "Rivlin Condemns Arab Attacks on Jews in Jerusalem and Jaffa" \(Ynet News\)](#)

Times of Israel

Unemployment Falls Below 10%, Katz Opposes Benefit Cuts

Israel's unemployment rate fell to 9.5 percent in March from 14% in February, the Central Bureau of Statistics announced, as the country continues to emerge from the coronavirus pandemic following widespread vaccination. Based on the government's 2020 economic relief package passed last July, once Israel's unemployment rate falls below 10%, unemployment benefits are to be cut to 90%. The cut should come into effect in a month, on May 21. However, Finance Minister Israel Katz said he had instructed the Director-General of the National Insurance Institute, not to reduce unemployment benefits until June 12. This request technically asks to violate the law. Netanyahu said in a statement: "From 25% unemployment at the peak of the crisis, we have succeeded in reaching the goal of less than 10%, and it will continue to decline.

Jordan Gives PA Docs to Prevent Evictions in Jerusalem

Jordanian foreign minister Ayman Safadi handed the Palestinian Authority (PA) in Ramallah documents intended to help prevent Israel from evicting Palestinian families from part of East Jerusalem, he said. Safadi made the trip to Ramallah after an Israeli court gave the families until May 2 to leave their homes in the predominantly Palestinian neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah or be evicted. Jordan administered the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, until the 1967 Six Day War and remains the custodian of Muslim holy sites in Jerusalem. The kingdom says it built homes for Palestinian refugees in East Jerusalem after the creation of Israel in 1948. It said the contracts between the Jordanian government, which owned the houses, and Palestinian tenants, were certified by UNRWA. [Dig Deeper "UK Affirms ICC Support After Opposing War Crimes Suits Against Israel" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

Associated Press

Facebook Says It Halts Hackers Tied to Palestinian Security

Facebook said it has broken up a hacker network used by PA President Mahmoud Abbas' intelligence service in an attempt to keep tabs on journalists, human rights activists and government critics. The report by the social networking giant threatened to deal another embarrassing blow to Abbas' Fatah party weeks ahead of parliamentary [elections](#). Fatah, plagued by infighting and public malaise, already appears poised to lose power and influence if the vote takes place next month. In its report, Facebook said that elements linked to the Preventive Security Service "used fake and compromised accounts to create fictitious personas." Posing as young women, journalists, and political activists, they then sought "to build trust with people they targeted and trick them into installing malicious software." The malware, disguised as chat applications, would give the security agency access to targets' phones, including contacts, text messages, locations and even keystrokes, Facebook said. [Dig Deeper "As Palestinian Vote Looms, Israeli Attention Is Elsewhere. That Could Backfire" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

Syrian Missile Lands Near Dimona, Interception Fails

Alarms sounded in Abu Qrenat near Dimona in southern Israel, the IDF's Spokesperson's Unit reported. Residents in central Israel and Jerusalem, reported hearing "loud explosions" that "shook the houses." Early reports indicated the explosion being the result of a patriot battery responding to a missile launched toward Israel. The [IDF](#) later confirmed the reports. The patriot was reportedly launched from near the city of Dimona. Brig.Gen. Hidai Zilberman told reporters that the explosion was due to the firing of an SA-5 surface to air missile that was fired towards Israel and that it exploded in the southern Negev. The firing of the missile came during Israeli air strikes in the south of Syria. The missile was not directed towards any target, Zilberman said. According to the spokesman, Israel responded to the firing of the SA-5 towards IAF jets by striking several anti-aircraft batteries in Syria, including the one which fired the missile that exploded in southern Israel. [Dig Deeper "Israel Retaliates After Syrian Missile Lands Near Nuclear Reactor" \(Reuters\)](#)

Israel, UAE Sign Multi-Faceted Healthcare Accord

Israel and the UAE signed a multi-faceted healthcare cooperation deal, Israel's Health Ministry announced. The accord, which is the result of a joint effort by Israel's Health and Foreign ministries, was signed by Health Minister Yuli Edelstein and was attended by his Emirati counterpart Abdul Rahman Bin Mohammed Al Owais. As part of the agreement, Israel and the UAE will cooperate in a wide variety of fields and projects within the healthcare sphere. These will include joint efforts against pandemics, cybersecurity and data protection in healthcare, medical training, innovation, artificial intelligence, and other high-tech endeavors. "In addition, there will be an exchange of expert visits between the countries, and large-scale economic and health projects," the press release adds. The two nations will also seek to promote and foster cooperation between individual medical institutions. The agreement is set to "bolster Israel's healthcare system," Edelstein said, adding that Israel had things to contribute and to learn as well. Israel and the UAE agreed to normalize their ties last September and since then, have moved ahead with several bilateral agreements and joint ventures, including visa-free travel. [Dig Deeper "Israeli, UAE Pilots Take Part In Multinational Military Exercises in Greece" \(I24 News\)](#)

Reuters

US Sees Major Differences with Iran in Nuclear Talks

Serious differences persist between the United States and Iran over how they might resume compliance with the 2015 Iran nuclear deal despite making some progress in their latest indirect talks in Vienna, a senior US official said. The talks were likely to require several rounds, their outcome remained uncertain, and they were not near conclusion, the senior State Department official told reporters in a conference call. The main differences are over what sanctions the US will need to remove and what steps Iran will need to take to resume its obligations to curb its nuclear program, said the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity. [The Wall Street Journal](#) cited two people familiar with the matter as saying Washington was open to easing terrorism sanctions against Iran's central bank, its national oil and tanker companies and key sectors including steel and aluminum. Analysts have said it is inevitable the United States would have to ease some of its terrorism-related sanctions if there is to be a revival of the deal because without this, Iran would be unable to resume exporting oil. [Dig Deeper "Growing Suspicions, Frustration Between US and Israel Over Iran Deal" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

He's Lost Control

By Sima Kadmon

- **One only needed to see Netanyahu at his press conference yesterday to understand everything. Just watching him, even with the volume completely muted, was enough. The rest was just a bonus. The prime minister is desperate and helpless, his face ashen. His speech last night brought to mind a drowning man flailing violently in an attempt to keep his head above water, but whose actions only make his situation worse. The compulsion he felt to go on live television immediately after Bennett's statement to the public only served to reinforce that impression of his desperation. He knows that all of the doors have been slammed in his face. Smotrich, Abbas and now Bennett too have all left him with the mandate for just under another two weeks, but without any ability to form a government. The man who draws his strength from his control realized that that he has been stripped of that control, and he lost his cool. The only thing he has left is Deri's proposal for direct election of the prime minister, when everyone knows that the voice may have been Deri's, but the hands were Netanyahu's.**
- **And those hands shook last night for a very simple reason: not enough MKs are prepared to support that proposal either. While Bennett did promise him Yamina's fingers [i.e. votes], he didn't promise him his whole hand. And direct elections aren't something that Bennett, who has the option of becoming prime minister within a short amount of time, is going to vote for. Not now, at least. In a concise and focused speech, Bennett told the public what—or rather who—had foiled the negotiations. It was Netanyahu, said Bennett, who is afraid of pressuring Smotrich and isn't willing to offer Saar anything real. Bennett laid out for the public his plans for the coming two weeks: he will join a right-wing government if Netanyahu is able to form one; if, not he will join a national unity government—a turn of phrase that Lapid used at his press conference earlier this week that has become a euphemism for a Bennett-Lapid-Saar government; and only if neither of those options are viable might the direct election of the prime minister become a viable option. But only an option.**
- **Netanyahu's speech apparently was supposed to persuade the public that it wasn't him, but Bennett. It wasn't he who did nothing to form a government, but Bennett, who did everything he could to prevent a right-wing government from being formed. Netanyahu said that the only thing that Bennett wants is an alternating premierships arrangement because Bennett is obsessed with becoming prime minister. Unbelievable. Just look who's talking. Bennett is the one who is obsessed, and not Netanyahu—who wants to drag us into a fifth election because he has been unable to form a government. And in order to try to make Bennett and his obsession look even more ludicrous, Netanyahu offered him the residence on Balfour Street for a weekend. It was so transparent that any dime-store psychologist could have seen that Netanyahu was projecting—as if it were the residence on Balfour Street that was the most important thing from Bennett's perspective. Not, heaven forbid, for Netanyahu himself and his family.**

- **Who wouldn't like to take Netanyahu at his word and to see his family handing over the keys to the house on Balfour Street (the house, incidentally, is ours, not theirs) to Naftali and Gilat? Not for an entire weekend. Just an hour. Once again we were forced to hear the lie about how Bennett would only be a "chupchik" [Hebrew/Yiddish slang for a tiny thing] in a left-wing government, a government that Netanyahu says would be comprised of the Labor Party and Meretz, while failing to mention Saar and Liberman's right-wing parties and the center parties—Yesh Atid and Blue and White—which aren't left-wing parties by a long stretch.**
- **That government will have more MKs from the right than from the extreme left-wing, which is how Netanyahu likes to describe it. The man who is now trying to change the rules of the game in the middle of the game; the man who routinely fails to honor agreements; the man whose obsession with remaining in the residence on Balfour Street has paralyzed the entire country; the man who is prepared to do everything just so as not to step aside and let someone else from the Likud form a fully right-wing government; the man who has refused to appoint a justice minister in his efforts to save his own skin in his trial—that is the man who gave Bennett (and us) a lesson in democracy yesterday. It isn't democratic to be a prime minister with seven seats, said Netanyahu. What can we say? There's nothing to be said.**

Not Final

By Ben Caspit

- The way Netanyahu looked yesterday was fairly reflective of his situation. That said, it would be premature for the other side to celebrate. The story now is the race against time. The top story this morning in Mishpacha [a Haredi weekly] is about “the Yariv Levin option.” When that headline appears in Moshe Gafni’s publication, the man on Balfour Street needs to start sweating—and he did indeed sweat yesterday. His lies became entangled in each other, his words choked each other. Binyamin Netanyahu, the rhetorical wizard, the prince of charisma and the ruler of television, appeared morose yesterday. He probably didn’t even convince himself. As usual, this latest appearance also set a new world record. This time, it was a 10,000-meter race with hurdles: the man who has served for 15 years, who is all over the state coffers demanding that it cover his expenses down to the last penny, who has never in his life honored any agreement, who was unwilling to accept the voters’ verdict four consecutive times, who has taken the country hostage, claims that Naftali Bennett has an uncontrollable obsession for power.
- As a kind of compensation, he offered him a free weekend on Balfour Street. He did not say whether that would be full board or breakfast-only, or what the other denizens there would do. It’s too bad we can’t attach a lie detector test to Netanyahu during his public appearances and speeches. If we could, I find it hard to believe that anyone would volunteer to administer it. If it were possible, the needle would certainly have broken when Netanyahu talked about holding a direct election. First, in contrast to what he said yesterday, the new bill does not stipulate that the prime minister will not need to win a vote of confidence in the Knesset. Quite the opposite. What he said yesterday was a lie of his own invention. But the substance is even more grave: He, who in a heartrending speech that he gave years ago said, “the election system is not a pair of socks, you can’t change it every day,” is preaching to Naftali Bennett for refusing to go along with the sham proposal to change the rules of the game in the middle of the game. No, this man has not a single gram of shame in his entire body.
- Instead of unraveling the latest ridiculous pack of lies, a task that I’m fairly fed up with, let’s focus on the real story: the race against time. There are quite a few people in the pro-change bloc who think that Yair Lapid is playing with fire. Yair Lapid left Israel immediately after the election. There was no rush. Lapid is dragging his feet and hasn’t closed a deal with Bennett (contrary to what Netanyahu said yesterday, there is no deal between them). That is dangerous. This could end up costing Lapid dearly. Even the Haredi Mishpacha newspaper this morning, which is affiliated with Moshe Gafni, is now pumping on its front-page headline the idea that Netanyahu should appoint Yariv Levin prime minister “on his behalf.” If we had the time and the energy, we would pause here to discuss the perverse idea that someone might appoint someone else to serve as prime minister “on their behalf.” The story is simple: Netanyahu isn’t ready to go there yet. One or two days before his mandate expires, he may be willing to go there, since he will have no other choice. His condition will be clear: the Netanyahu family will remain, in some constellation or another, on Balfour Street. He will be the alternate prime minister.

- **After all, there is no force in the world, human or natural, that is capable of moving the Missus out of Balfour Street. Yamina would be obligated to agree to such a deal, and Gideon Saar will find it hard to refuse. Bibi would be leaving, so what's the problem? Therefore, what Lapid must do now, in keeping with the Saar-Elkin approach (and they aren't alone), is to sew up matters with Bennett. What is delaying this? Mainly petty issues. Lapid is insisting on an 18-minister government. You can't form such a complicated government with only 18 ministers. Ultimately, Lapid may end up like Tzipi Livni, who haggled with the Haredim over one billion or two billion, while they signed a deal with Netanyahu (Gideon Saar did the work). Shimon Peres told Livni back then: "What's the problem, the Haredim want a billion? Give them four billion." We know how that ended. If Lapid and Bennett work out the framework of a deal now (they don't have to assign portfolios and resolve everything, just decide the framework), if they sign it, nobody will be able to dismantle it.**
- **The two of them trust and respect one another. They are much closer than it seems. Saar and Liberman are on board. They are four tough politicians who know how to steal horses, but they can also be trusted. Lapid is tarrying, perhaps because he believes that time is on his side. He might be right. The problem is that if he is wrong, there will be no way back. It's true, as Lapid has said in intimate conversations, that he is making a huge concession: he is letting Bennett be prime minister first. On the other hand, it's not as if Lapid could be prime minister first in some other constellation. The chances of his breaking through the glass ceiling and reaching Balfour Street depend on Bennett. The two of them are dependent on each other, and if this fails—they will hang next to each other. Their fate, and our fates, will be decided in the next few days. The alliance of brothers, which landed on Netanyahu out of nowhere in 2013, is back in 2021, on steroids this time. For Netanyahu, this is a red wedding. Yair and Naftali are under the wedding canopy, but the (political) blood being spilled is his.**