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## Israel and Middle East News Update

*Friday, April 23*

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# News Excerpts

April 23, 2021

## Jerusalem Post

### **President Reuven Rivlin Set to Give Yair Lapid Next Mandate**

President Reuven Rivlin will give Yesh Atid leader Yair Lapid the mandate to form a government the day after [Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's](#) mandate ends on May 4, sources close to Rivlin said. Netanyahu's associates have admitted that he has given up on forming a government but said he does not intend to return the mandate early and take the advice of advisers who told him it would catch Lapid and Yamina leader Naftali Bennett unprepared. Technically, Rivlin has the right to extend Netanyahu's mandate by two weeks, but Rivlin's associates said that would not happen, because the extension is only intended to give time for coalition negotiations, and there are no such talks taking place. In an effort to build a coalition as soon as possible, Lapid has been meeting with the heads of the parties that would join. [Dig Deeper "United Torah Judaism Deliberating on Whether to Enable Bennett-Lapid Gov't" \(Ynet News\)](#)

## Times of Israel

### **Likud Pressing Shaked to Ensure Netanyahu Stays PM**

In a new ploy to prevent Naftali Bennett from potentially forming a government with the so-called "change bloc," [Netanyahu](#) is seeking to sow division in his right-wing rival's party, according to Channel 12. Yamina No. 2 Ayelet Shaked has been reported to be far more cool than Bennett about the prospect of forming a government that would include center-left parties. Netanyahu's Likud is now focusing its pressure campaign on her. While peeling off Shaked from Bennett could potentially deal a fatal blow to the prospects of the Yamina leader and the "change bloc" opposed to Netanyahu assembling a coalition if Netanyahu fails to do so, it is unlikely to put the Likud leader any closer to a majority. [Dig Deeper "Why Did Ayelet Shaked Meet Mossad Chief Cohen Week Before Election?" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

## Associated Press

### **Police Clash with Palestinians, Far-Right March in Jerusalem**

Israeli police clashed with Palestinians outside Jerusalem's Old City and manned barricades to prevent hundreds of Jewish extremists from marching to the area. Tensions are even higher than normal in the city, which is home to holy sites sacred to Jews, Christians and Muslims and has long been a flashpoint for Israeli-Palestinian violence. The police have clashed with Palestinians on a nightly basis since the start of the holy month of Ramadan, when authorities set up barricades at Damascus Gate, a traditional outdoor gathering spot. Police said the protesters threw stones and bottles. A far-right Jewish group known as Lahava led a march of hundreds of protesters chanting "Arabs get out!". The show of force came in response to videos circulated on TikTok showing Palestinians slapping religious Jews at random. Other videos made in response to them appear to show Jews assaulting Arabs. [Dig Deeper "Dozens Hurt in Old City Clash as Extremist Jews March Chanting 'Death to Arabs'" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

## **Hamas Warns Against Delaying Palestinian Elections**

Any change to the timetable for the first Palestinian elections in 15 years would deal a heavy blow to efforts to reconcile the rival administrations in Gaza and the West Bank, the head of the Hamas list warned. On May 22, Palestinians in the West Bank, Gaza Strip and east Jerusalem are readying to head to the polls for the first time since 2006, a vote to be followed by a presidential election. But many Palestinians and observers assess that the legislative elections will once again be postponed or even canceled. Opinion polls suggest there is unlikely to be a repetition of the upset landslide Hamas won over Fatah in the last elections, pushing the Palestinians to the brink of civil war the following year. Abbas's party is expected to win the largest number of the 132 seats in parliament, although well short of a majority. [Dig Deeper “EU Nations at UNSC: Israel Must Allow East Jerusalem Palestinians Vote” \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

### Times of Israel

## **AIPAC Pans Bill to Block US Aid From Israeli Activities**

The American Israel Public Affairs Committee has forcefully castigated legislation recently introduced by Democratic lawmaker Betty McCollum seeking to prevent [US security assistance](#) to Israel from being used in certain operations in the West Bank. [The “Defending the human rights of Palestinian children and families living under Israeli military occupation act,”](#) introduced by McCollum aims to prohibit US aid from being used in the Israeli detention of Palestinian minors, the demolition of Palestinian homes and the furthering of [annexation](#) of West Bank land. The legislation does not threaten consequences for such actions or provide an enforcement mechanism. However, the bill does require the State Department to file an annual report to Congress detailing the extent to which US aid from the previous fiscal year was used to bankroll any of the aforementioned activities. That report could well be used in subsequent legislative efforts to officially restrict or condition security aid to Israel. [Dig Deeper “Bipartisan Support Grows for US Congressional Bill Expanding Arab-Israeli Ties” \(Times of Israel\)](#)

### Associated Press

## **Israel Says Syrian Missile Was Not Aimed at Nuclear Reactor**

The Israeli military said that a Syrian missile that reached deep into Israeli territory and set off air raid sirens near Israel's top-secret nuclear reactor was the result of a misfire and not a deliberate attack. The missile landed in the Negev prompting Israel to respond with airstrikes on the missile launcher and other targets in Syria. The army's chief spokesman, Brig. Gen. Hidai Zilberman, was quoted as telling military correspondents that the Israeli air force was already operating in Syrian airspace when the anti-aircraft missile was fired. He said the projectile, identified as a Russian-made SA-5 missile, missed its target and exploded. An Israeli missile-defense system tried but failed to intercept the incoming missile. Defense Minister [Benny Gantz](#) said the incident was under investigation. In Washington, Gen. Frank McKenzie, head of US Central Command, gave a similar assessment to the Senate Armed Services Committee. The exchange between Israel and Syria comes against the backdrop of growing tensions between Israel and Iran, which maintains troops and proxies in Syria.

## Israeli Officials Will Object to Restoration of Iran Deal in DC

**Netanyahu** has instructed the delegation traveling to Washington, DC next week for strategic talks on Iran to stress their **objection** to a US return to the 2015 nuclear deal and to refuse to discuss its contents, Israeli officials say. That position is similar to the one Israel took in the year before the 2015 nuclear deal was announced, which led to a rift between the Israeli government and the Obama administration. Netanyahu's stance was criticized at the time by many in the Israeli defense establishment as being counterproductive. The Israeli delegation will include national security adviser Meir Ben-Shabbat, IDF Chief of Staff Gen. **Aviv Kochavi**, military intelligence chief Tamir Hayman and Mossad director Yossi Cohen. Netanyahu stressed that Israel is not a party to the nuclear deal and is therefore not bound by it in any way. Netanyahu said Israel will act only according to its national security interests but will maintain its freedom of operation against Iran in the region. Netanyahu, Gantz and Ashkenazi decided that Israel would be willing to discuss the parameters of a "longer and stronger" nuclear deal in the future, if the US and other world powers decide to go in that direction, per Israeli officials. [Dig Deeper "Vienna Nuclear Talks: US Outlines Which Iran Sanctions It Is Willing to Lift" \(I24 News\)](#)

## Jordan Releases 16 People Tied to Royal Feud

Jordan released 16 people linked to a rift in the royal family that rattled the country, but a member of the royal family and a former adviser to the king remained in detention. Security sources said those released were mostly personal aides to former heir Prince Hamza, King Abdullah's half-brother, who had said in an April video he was banned from leaving his home and accused Jordan's rulers of corruption. The two royals last week made their first joint appearance since the feud earlier this month. With mediation by the royal family, Hamza had pledged allegiance to the king, days after the military ordered him to stop actions that it said undermined Jordan's security. The move came after calls from tribal families for the release of detainees, the sources said. Royal family member Sharif Hassan Ben Zaid remained in detention, as did Bassem Awadallah, a confidant of the king who was finance minister and advisor to Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. State news agency Petra, citing the public prosecutor in the state security court, said they were not freed because "their roles...and level of agitation differed" from the others.

## **The Test of Time**

By Sima Kadmon

- When Naftali Bennett was in the high-tech industry and pitching to investors, he would present his company in the best possible light. He tried to cover up the dirty laundry, but then he discovered that he had to disclose it anyway, and when he did—they would leave. When he became more mature, he made a practice of relating all the flaws and problems up front. If the other side still wanted it, then progress was possible. It seems to me that this is the way that Bennett has been negotiating with Lapid: putting all the problems and the gaps on the table and expediting the talks. Yes, yes, no, no. But as in life, in order to be capable of getting started and revealing gaps, first it takes trust, and it turns out that Lapid and Bennett do have this. They have differences of opinion, gaps, disagreements—but their relationship has been good even during these times of tough negotiations. Bennett thinks that Lapid is nothing less than a *mentsch* [Yiddish for a person of admirable character], while Lapid calls Bennett his friend.
- Naftali and I have been going together since 2012, he told MK Meir Cohen this week. We were together in the opposition, and when he was in the coalition and I was in the opposition, we argued a lot, but there's one thing we both know—I never lied to him and he never lied to me. It would be imprudent to dismiss this avowed fondness. One of the things, if not the thing, that got Netanyahu where he is now is the total lack of trust in him. The mistrust between Bennett and Netanyahu could be seen in their speeches—the speech and the response—on Wednesday night. It's inconceivable how both of these men, whose mistrust of each other goes back many years, still think there's a possibility that they will serve in the same government, and how Bennett—whose conduct and motivations Netanyahu attempted to besmirch—has continued to say that a Netanyahu-led right-wing government is his first option.
- Bennett's priorities are clear: a right-wing government first. But Netanyahu announced that he wants to lead the political establishment into a direct election, and Bennett isn't there. He's busy at work forming a “national unity government.” Lapid, incidentally, knew about the speech and its content. That was noticeable from Bennett's use of the expression “unity government,” which is how Lapid framed the government of change in the press conference that he had called two days earlier. In his speech, Lapid wanted to create a narrative in which the alternative to Netanyahu was not a left-wing government, but an “Israeli unity government.” He thought that if he were to keep leaving the field to Netanyahu, the impression that a government with three right-wing parties (Yamina, New Hope and Yisrael Beiteinu), two centrist parties (Yesh Atid and Blue & White), and only two left-wing parties (Labor and Meretz) was a “radical left-wing” government, as Netanyahu put it in his speech this week, would take root in public opinion.
- The bloc's success in the vote on the composition of the Arrangements Committee was primarily a PR victory. How interesting that Gideon Saar, of all people, was not involved. That wink of his, which dramatically bolstered his image, was such strong visual imagery, to the point that everyone was convinced that he had been part of it.

- But Lapid and Abbas had sewn up this trick an hour earlier. The negotiations between Lapid and Bennett are moving forward. The communication is good, but the gaps are still big. It looks like the Likud's campaign regarding Ayelet Shaked is also superfluous. Bennett and Shaked are totally coordinated. Bennett envisioned his government being like the Netanyahu-Gantz government: a parity government with an alternating premiership agreement. Even the balance of power is similar. Saar and Bennett have 13 seats compared with the 45 held by Lapid, Liberman (who has an alliance with Lapid), Blue & White, the Labor Party and Meretz. The balance of power between Netanyahu and Gantz was 17:59. Bennett wants equality.
- Not necessarily in the number of ministers—but in voting power in the cabinet and equality in the security cabinet. Lapid is insisting on a “principled and efficient” cabinet, meaning 18 ministers, but Bennett is making the case that the sky won't fall if the cabinet has 25 ministers. It would still be a smaller cabinet than its predecessor. They haven't dived into all kinds of issues yet, but there's consensus on the topic of religion and state, of all things, whereby the government's line will be that of the Tzohar rabbis, a liberal Orthodox organization. The one who came up with that idea was—brace yourselves—Liberman.
- But the big gap between them is the timetable. Lapid isn't rushing. Bennett feels that he has already crossed the Rubicon and dived into the water, but he wants to strike [a deal] quickly. It's now or never. He does not intend to stall for time and lose leverage over the other side. Even the pessimistic agree that both sides have goodwill. What could derail this is if Lapid plays hardball in order to get better results, making Bennett grow despondent and driving him over to Netanyahu. A direct election? Lapid's not worried. He doesn't think it's legally feasible, and he doesn't think Abbas will back a direct election that would weaken his bargaining power either. The way he sees it, this is another attempt by Netanyahu to go over Bennett's head in the hope that he'll panic.

## **One Bullet to the Chamber**

By Nahum Barnea

- I do not know if the explosion in the Iranian facility in Natanz was carried out by Israel, but if what the Iranians attribute to Israel is true, then this was a patently illegal decision. According to law, this is a decision that requires an orderly discussion in the security cabinet. The prime minister and the alternate prime minister cannot finalize such a decision between them, even if their ability to finalize a decision is a rare matter, almost a miracle. In this case, it is not just about a formality, a legal issue. At least one high-ranking minister believed that if such a decision was made, it was a mistake. Two points troubled him. The first is that Israel had, according to the reports from Iran, a strategic weapon, a ticking bomb, which sat in the heart of the Iranian project for 18 months.
- Such a weapon can only be used once. When you have one bullet in the chamber, you have to think very carefully about when and how it will cause the most damage. The second point is the timing. If Netanyahu and Gantz intended to block the emerging trend in the talks in Vienna, they achieved the opposite: Iran announced that it was raising the enrichment level to 60 percent, bordering on military-grade enrichment. It intended to do this in any case, but Israel supplied it with a convenient excuse. The military operations attributed to Israel, at the facility in Natanz and sabotaging Iranian ships at sea, only stimulated the Americans to hurry to reach an agreement, no matter what. US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin demanded a commitment from Israel that the attacks at sea would stop. Netanyahu was compelled to obey.
- He was also compelled to reconvene the security cabinet, as required by law. Miri Regev and Yoav Galant will alternate between them, two weeks each. Netanyahu is incapable of saying no to them, in his current situation. The Israeli policy toward Iran ranges from impressive operational successes, by the Mossad and the IDF, to a complete failure on the strategic side. Netanyahu pushed Trump to withdraw from the nuclear agreement and intensify the sanctions. Either the Iranians would back down and reach an improved agreement; or they would deteriorate into a military confrontation; or the regime would be replaced. None of the goals were achieved. The Iranians withstood the siege, succeeded in smuggling out oil, and today are enjoying the fact that oil prices have doubled. They have entered the talks holding an advantage.
- They know that they are facing an American team that is eager—overly eager—to reach an agreement. Trump deterred them. The assassination of Soleimani caused them to be careful. Biden is less of a deterrent to them. There is no reason to hurry, the Israelis said to their counterparts in the State Department. The bomb is still not imminent. The Americans did not heed the advice. Next week, the chief of staff and the Mossad director will lead a delegation to talks in Washington. The goal will be to coordinate positions for the day after the agreement. The decision to send the delegation was preceded by a drama. Netanyahu convened a large meeting on the Biden administration and the Iranian issue. National Security Council Director Meir Ben-Shabbat presented a firm position in the meeting: There is no point in talking to the Americans.

- They are determined to reach an agreement. Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi presented the opposite position: Instead of clashing with the administration, talk to it. It is possible to create understandings, to reach guarantees. If we cannot influence the agreement with Iran, perhaps we can reach a side agreement with the US administration. It was clear to the participants that Ben-Shabbat represented the prime minister's position. Nevertheless, most of them adopted the Foreign Ministry's approach. That is how the delegation came into being.
- The expectations are not high. The Israeli assessment, as of now, is that an agreement will be reached. All in all, it will turn back the wheel. The demands will not be made stricter, and the timespan will not be extended. It is highly doubtful whether the monitoring of the agreement's implementation will be improved; the Israelis hoped that it would be agreed to have monitoring everywhere and all the time. That will not happen. The sides will commit themselves to compliance with the agreement in exchange for compliance. There are three sets of sanctions that the Americans imposed: Those linked directly to the agreement, those that are not linked, and those that are subject to interpretation. The debate is being waged on the sanctions that lie in between. The only party who might fulfill the Israeli wish and lead to a postponement of the agreement, at least temporarily, is Ayatollah Khamenei. It is doubtful whether the supreme leader of Iran will want to give President Rouhani, who is perceived as a pragmatist, a gift in the form of a cancellation of the sanctions prior to the Iranian elections.
- The instructions from the White House to the negotiating team say, in essence: The president wishes to focus on other issues on the agenda, mainly domestic issues. Make an agreement and relieve him of the Iranian headache. Biden is supposed to speak with Netanyahu today by Zoom, as part of an international conference on the climate problem. This will be a warm, friendly, non-committal conversation. Biden is neither Obama nor Trump. He doesn't have time at the moment to fight with us, and he has no time to embrace. He is very busy.