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Israel and Middle East News Update

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News Excerpts

April 26, 2021

Times of Israel

'Change Bloc' Said to Reach Agreement on Religious Issues

Factions that back a prospective unity government led by Yamina head Naftali Bennett and Yesh Atid chief Yair Lapid, have reached understandings on numerous issues, including on religion and state, but the sides remain at odds over the allocation of ministerial posts, Channel 12 reported. Bennett and Lapid, along with Avigdor Liberman's right-wing secularist Yisrael Beytenu, agreed that a government they form should adopt the position of the liberal Orthodox Tzohar rabbinic group on religious matters, such as allowing municipal rabbis to perform conversions and ending the state rabbinate's monopoly on kosher certification. The unsourced report noted the effort to reach agreement on religious issues could diffuse divides between the disparate factions that would make up the coalition, ranging from the right-wing Yamina to the left-wing Meretz. [Dig Deeper "Likud Mulls a 'Putin Plan' to Keep Netanyahu in Charge" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

A-G: Gov't Must Appoint Justice Minister Within Days

Attorney-General Avichai Mandelblit updated the High Court of Justice that the government must appoint a new permanent justice minister within days. Mandelblit appeared to waver between whether this meant the government needed to make the appointment or the High Court would if the government failed to act. One scenario which the attorney-general ruled out entirely was appointing a temporary justice minister. Another issue which Mandelblit clarified was that attempts by the government to reduce the health risk of bringing unvaccinated prisoners to court were positive, but insufficient. The position has been empty since the start of April when [Benny Gantz's](#) three-month term as acting justice minister expired. Since then Netanyahu has prevented the appointment of a replacement. [Dig Deeper "Netanyahu Offers Gantz Premiership as Bennett Keeps Working to Form Gov't" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

I24 News

Smotrich: 'Time to Replace PM' Amid Riots, Gaza Strikes

Amid a string of violent riots in Jerusalem and a volley of rocket fire emanating from the Gaza Strip, a key ally of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu suggested that the time may have come for the Jewish state to pick a new leader. "Maybe it's time to replace Netanyahu," leader of the far-right Religious Zionist Party, Bezalel Smotrich, wrote on Twitter. Fresh clashes broke out between Palestinians and police after Netanyahu called for "calm on all sides" after several nights of unrest in east Jerusalem. But the premier also warned that Israel remains "prepared for all scenarios" after dozens of rockets were fired from the Gaza Strip toward Israel, prompting Israeli retaliatory airstrikes. Thirty-six rockets were launched overnight Friday, the Israeli army said, the most in a single night this year, after Hamas voiced support for the east Jerusalem riots. [Dig Deeper "The Jerusalem Butterfly Effect: What Hamas Stands to Gain From Gaza Rocket Fire" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Rockets Fired From Gaza for 3rd Night in a Row

Terrorists in Gaza fired rockets into Israel for the third night in a row. Two Gaza factions, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and a branch of Fatah's Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades, claimed responsibility for the rocket fire. But Israel holds Hamas directly responsible for all fire from the enclave into Israeli territory, charging that it takes place with Hamas's consent. The widening circle of clashes has sparked concerns in Israel that the situation could escalate across the West Bank and Gaza. Netanyahu called on the IDF to "prepare for any scenario" with Gaza. The Israeli military notably refrained from conducting retaliatory strikes in the Gaza Strip in an apparent bid to ease tensions. Israel normally adopts a tit-for-tat strategy, responding to Gazan rocket fire by shelling Hamas observation posts or imposing restrictions on the Gaza Strip. [Dig Deeper "Gaza Escalation Shows Hamas Improved Rocket Precision" \(Ynet News\)](#)

Palestinians Cheer as Israeli Barriers Come Down

Palestinians gathered in celebration outside Jerusalem's Damascus Gate on after barriers put up by Israeli police were removed, allowing them access to a square that became the focus of nightly Ramadan clashes. Thousands filled the East Jerusalem plaza, some waving Palestinian flags, after police permitted them access to the tiered entrance to Jerusalem's Old City that is a popular night-time meeting place during the Muslim holy month. Scuffles broke out, however, as Israeli police waded into the crowd to confiscate the flags. The clashes followed the start of Ramadan and laid bare simmering tensions in the holy city. There were confrontations between stone-throwing youths and police in riot gear trying to disperse them, using horses and vehicles spraying foul-smelling skunk water. The anger spilled over into the occupied West Bank, which saw protests in solidarity with East Jerusalemites, and dozens of rockets fired by Palestinian militant groups from Gaza into Israel. [Dig Deeper "Pro-Peace Protest in Jerusalem Voices Opposition to Violence, Incitement" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

UAE Condemns Jewish Extremists Violence in Jerusalem

The UAE called on Israel to reduce tensions in Jerusalem and condemned a recent march by an extremist Jewish group in the city. The statement was a rare criticism of Israel from the Arab nation since the two countries signed a normalization agreement last year and have been pushing ahead with increasingly warm ties. "The United Arab Emirates has expressed concern over the acts of violence committed by right-wing extremist groups in the occupied East Jerusalem, which have resulted in injuries among civilians," the statement said. It also underlined "the necessity of preserving the historical identity of the occupied city of Jerusalem." The UAE statement did not mention the escalation in violence from Hamas, which has been firing rockets into Israel for the past three days from Gaza, also in response to the Jerusalem clashes. [Dig Deeper "Riots in Jerusalem Become Diplomatic Crisis" \(Al-Monitor\)](#)

Hamas Rejects Ceasefire Offers, Threatens 'Major Conflict'

Palestinian Authority President [Mahmoud Abbas](#) said that he would not agree to hold Palestinian legislative elections, scheduled to take place on May 22, if Israel will not allow east Jerusalem residents to participate. Meanwhile, mediated attempt to deescalate violence from the Gaza Strip, led by a senior official in Egypt's security apparatus and diplomatic officials in the US, continued over the weekend. The Lebanese newspaper Al-Akhbar, identified with Hezbollah, said Hamas officials had told it that there had been contact between Hamas and Israel in the past two days, via a third party, and that Hamas had rejected any proposal to reinstate calm as long as Israel continued its "current policy" in Jerusalem. According to the sources quoted, Hamas issued a warning to Egypt that if Israel continued its current policies, it would "lead to an explosion in various areas, especially Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Gaza, even if that drags down the situation in Gaza and things develop into a major conflict." Egypt and Jordan also warned that their attempts to broker a ceasefire might fail. A high-ranking Egyptian official involved in the attempts to mediate between Israel and Hamas told Israel Hayom that "Hamas is convinced that Israel and Abbas are working together to cancel the elections in the West Bank because Hamas is growing stronger and Fatah has split." [Dig Deeper "After 3rd Straight Night of Rocket Attacks, Israel Closes Gaza Fishing Zone" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

White House: Israel Won't Change Position on Iran Deal

The Israeli delegation to the US is unlikely to change the American position on a return to the 2015 Iran deal, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said. Mossad Chief Yossi Cohen and National Security Adviser Meir Ben-Shabbat are expected to go to Washington this week to meet their counterparts to discuss the Iranian nuclear threat, as indirect negotiations between the US and Iran continue in Vienna. Officials in Jerusalem have lamented in recent months that Washington was not updating them on their plans moving forward, sharing only intelligence on the situation in Iran. More recently, Israeli officials have said the Biden administration is not sharing what they plan to offer in the negotiations in Vienna. Still, a senior official in Jerusalem said that Israel is hopeful its voice will be heard. IDF Chief of Staff Lt.-Gen. Aviv Kohavi postponed his trip to Washington, due to the escalation of rocket-fire from Gaza over the weekend. Kohavi was supposed to meet top US defense officials such as National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Mark Milley. Cohen and Ben-Shabbat are expected to continue as planned. [Dig Deeper "Zarif Criticized Soleimani's Power, Said Russia Tried to Sabotage Iran Nuke Deal" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

The Storm After Quiet

By Nadav Eyal

- Israel and the Palestinians quietly marked recently one of the quietest years of the history of the conflict. That was due to the coronavirus, to quiet agreements that were reached with Hamas in the Gaza Strip and the Palestinian Authority's need for industrial quiet. It seems fairly clear, based on the developments of the last 12 days, that this year is now over. Israel woke up too late. It always seems, on the day after a night of rioting, that maybe it was the last. The decision to cordon off the steps outside Damascus Gate, which is important to the Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem, was never presented to the decision-makers. The police said that that gets done every year (which isn't true), and the politicians probably didn't ask. The dying coalition—in the midst of a major political crisis, a moment before either another election or Netanyahu's ouster—reacted to the escalation in Jerusalem lackadaisically.
- The security officials reminded them that the political tension has only been exacerbated by the fact that it is now Ramadan in what has been a tough economic year for the Palestinians. But the most recent security cabinet meeting that was held on Sunday did not touch on any of those developments and the ensuing risks. Publicly, Netanyahu (and Defense Minister Gantz) preferred to say nothing. Public Security Minister Amir Ohana issued a statement on Friday that only mentioned attacks on Jews; he made no mention of the extreme right-wing thugs who roamed the streets of Jerusalem and attacked Arabs. The question lurking in the background is to what extent has Netanyahu's failure to form a coalition shaped the clashes and the government's reaction. The security establishment's recommendation, succinctly, is to retaliate powerfully against Hamas in order to deter Hamas from continuing to convey its messages about Jerusalem by means of rocket fire on the south but, at the same time, to try to quiet the riots in Jerusalem and to act with moderation to restore calm. The goal at present, they told the decision-makers, is to reduce tensions. There are simply too many matches that might get lit.
- People in the pro-change bloc suspect that Netanyahu may try to find a way to ignore those recommendations, and that he has something to gain from an escalation in violence. That seems to be the conventional wisdom in the center-left, but it is probably not applicable in the current situation. Netanyahu will certainly get a lot of face time on television if the situation continues to deteriorate, but in the ten days he has left, that is unlikely to produce any change that works to his benefit. At most, it will create renewed pressure on Yamina and New Hope. No one will be surprised if the Likud tries to seize on any empathetic statements issued by United Arab List or Joint List officials regarding the Palestinians in Jerusalem, and will use them against Bennett and Saar's willingness to form a coalition that is reliant on their abstaining in votes. Notably, Netanyahu and Gantz have been working in close cooperation this past week relative to recent months, and their cooperation is important during times of escalating violence. Coincidentally or not, Gantz's people said once again that he wants to be defense minister in the pro-change government as well, if one is formed.

A Warning Shot

By Shimrit Meir

- The IDF does not want to see tensions escalate. Underpinning the accommodation that has been reached with Hamas is the strategic logic that stipulates that very little can be gained from another round of fighting, and we will ultimately find ourselves back in the same spot once it is over. Netanyahu does not want to see tensions escalate either. Quiet on the security front in the Palestinian context is one of the achievements he is most proud of; that quiet makes his relationships with Arab countries easier and allows everyone to focus on Iran. Furthermore, Netanyahu hasn't yet given up on securing the Islamic Movement's support for his political efforts, and tensions on the Temple Mount do nothing to contribute to the atmosphere of tolerance and fraternity. Hamas does not want to see tensions escalate either—at least according to the IDF's reading of the situation. Sinwar is happy to have the Qatari funds and he is also "deterred," as we know. And yet, despite all of the above, tensions have escalated, nevertheless.
- The reality in which we all waited last night for the folks in Gaza to end their fast, finish their iftar meal and decide whether they intend to fire rockets at the Gaza periphery communities to express their solidarity with Jerusalem is outrageous, obviously. But let me try to explain the way the situation is viewed by the other side. The Palestinians claim that Israel has changed the status quo in Jerusalem in general and on the Temple Mount in particular. That isn't a new allegation, except this time they are talking about restricting worshipers' access to Damascus Gate, and doing so during the month of Ramadan to boot—when thousands of people come to the area. The Palestinian allegations also talk about restricting the volume of the muezzins' calls to prayer and, of course the violent clashes between young Jewish and Arab men that have flooded TikTok and have poisoned hearts. In recent years, el-Aqsa Mosque has been the only issue that has been able to successfully generate popular Palestinian protests—from Umm el-Fahm in Israel to Sajaiya in Gaza. All the above might explain the recent turn of events in Jerusalem and possibly in the West Bank as well, but it still doesn't explain Hamas's decision to fire rockets.
- Hamas was known in the past to refrain from reacting to incidents that were even worse than the incidents of the past few days in Jerusalem, even when those incidents resulted in fatalities. The decision to fire rockets this weekend, and to do so in large numbers, is also related to the Palestinian political calendar. Parliamentary elections are scheduled to be held in the PA in less than a month. Abu Mazen, who is expected to be trounced in the elections, intends to cancel them. Hamas isn't willing to accept that. Hamas's message to Israel is: if you prevent voting from being held in East Jerusalem and by so doing save Abu Mazen—you're going to pay. The rocket fire was a warning shot that also served as a fairly good campaign gambit, since it allowed Hamas to be publicly perceived as standing with the Jerusalemites. Abu Mazen doesn't really care. The tension in Jerusalem provides him with a good excuse for canceling the elections.

- **Clashes, if they spill over into the West Bank, tend to erupt mainly in territory that is controlled by Israel and Hamas. Under those circumstances he will wish both sides success. But this escalation in tensions, regardless of whether it is ultimately contained or whether it erupts into something similar to the Facebook and knifing Intifada of 2015, is a sign that we are at the end of an era. Up until now Israel viewed the division between Fatah and Hamas as something that worked to its strategic advantage—and justly so. Crises came and went over the years, but every time a life preserver of one kind or another was found for Abu Mazen. This time he has maneuvered himself into a very dangerous crossroads through a combination of stubbornness and a lack of self-awareness. We are reaching a point at which the Israeli desire to maintain the current situation is beginning to cost us. The Palestinian political map is primed to be shaken. If that doesn't happen peacefully, it will happen violently.**