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Israel and Middle East News Update

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Headlines:

- SA'AR Could Enter Gov't if PM Steps Down for 18 Months
- Mansour Abbas Helps Likud Score Victory in Knesset
- Ministers Authorize IDF to Respond to Gaza Rockets
- Abbas Expected to Delay Election, Could Pay Heavy Price
- Palestinians Reject Offer to Hold Jerusalem Election Online
- Human Rights Watch Accuses Israel of 'Apartheid' Crimes
- UAE Firm to Buy 22% Stake In Tamar Natural Gas Field
- Leaked Recording of Iran's Foreign Minister Stirs Debate

Commentary:

- **Yedioth Ahronoth: "From One Round to the Next"**
 - By Giora Eiland
- **Ma'ariv: "First on the Guillotine"**
 - By Ben Caspit

News Excerpts

April 27, 2021

Israel Hayom

SA'AR Could Enter Gov't if PM Steps Down for 18 Months

Talks between Prime Minister Benjamin [Netanyahu](#) and New Hope leader Gideon Sa'ar could ultimately boil down to how long the incumbent prime minister would step down right after swearing in a government. Sa'ar, a former Likud challenger to Netanyahu who ran against him in the election and vowed not to sit in his government, has so far ruled out any coalition with Netanyahu owing to his corruption trial. That intransigence has made Netanyahu's chances of swearing-in government on time slim. But a compromise of sorts that would allow him to keep his promise is now being discussed, Israel Hayom has learned. Sa'ar has so apparently made it clear that any such deal would have to see [Netanyahu](#) step down for 18 months but be allowed to serve as deputy to the prime minister and second in line. But Netanyahu has reportedly insisted that such a period be capped at one year. [Dig Deeper "Netanyahu Set to Offer Bennett, SA'AR PM Rotation" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

Mansour Abbas Helps Likud Score Victory in Knesset

The Likud made a deal with political kingmaker [Mansour Abbas](#) (Ra'am Party) that helped the party take control of the Knesset presidium in a vote in the Knesset Arrangements Committee. The presidium is made up of the Knesset speaker and its deputies. Together, they decide what bills to bring to a vote and other items on the Knesset agenda. Abbas made a deal with the anti-Netanyahu bloc last week that helped the bloc win a majority on the committee. MKs in the anti-Netanyahu camp expressed outrage at the new committee for Abbas, calling it political bribery. Meretz MK Esawi Frej warned that the Likud was "putting Arabs in a ghetto" by creating the committee. But when it came time to vote, the [anti-Netanyahu camp](#) did not vote against the formation of the committee, because they did not want to upset Abbas. [Dig Deeper "Bennett, SA'AR Stress Gaps in Unity Talks; Lapid Insists They're Bridgeable" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Ynet News

Ministers Authorize IDF to Respond to Gaza Rockets

The Security Cabinet decided to approve a substantial air force attack on the Gaza Strip if the launch rocket fire into Israeli territory persists. The IDF presented various operational scenarios targeting Gaza's ruling Hamas terror group which Israel holds responsible for any cross-border aggression. Military officials told Cabinet ministers that the Islamic Jihad was apparently behind recent attacks and Hamas relayed messages to Israel through the UN and Egyptian mediators that it was trying to get the rogue faction under control. The Cabinet authorized Netanyahu and Defense Minister Benny Gantz to decide whether and when should Israel respond. Officials added that Israel was relaying messages to that effect to Hamas through diplomatic channels but added that they could not say what Hamas' next move would be. [Dig Deeper "Explosive Balloons Launched From Gaza Amid Riots Along Border" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

Abbas Expected to Delay Election, Could Pay Heavy Price

Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas will likely [postpone the upcoming Palestinian elections](#), according to a diplomatic source. “Our expectation is the elections are going to be postponed, but it will come at a very heavy price for Abbas,” said the source, who spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to publicly discuss the matter. Should Abbas decide to delay the elections, the aging Palestinian president will likely cite as justification Israel’s silence on whether East Jerusalem Palestinians can participate — but no one was likely to believe it, the source added. The Palestinian leadership — including leaders of Hamas and Islamic Jihad — is scheduled to meet on Thursday to decide whether the elections can go forward without Israel officially permitting East Jerusalem Palestinians to participate. [Dig Deeper “Palestinian Election Infighting Will End in Rockets on Israel” \(Ynet News\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

Palestinians Reject Offer to Hold Jerusalem Election Online

The Palestinian Authority cares about the principle of physically opening polls in east Jerusalem rather than ensuring people’s ability to vote in the legislative election next month, PA Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh told the European Parliament Foreign Affairs Committee. “Some European diplomats proposed to have online elections in east Jerusalem,” he said. “The issue is not numbers; it is political. It has to do with Israeli recognition that Palestinians in east Jerusalem have the right to vote and stand for elections.” Israel has declined to do anything to support the election, but it is also has not taken steps to prevent it. Israel has not been allowing voter registration drives or polling places in east Jerusalem and did not give visas to EU election observers, Shtayyeh said, adding that the behavior goes against agreements between Israel and the Palestinians. Israel has vaccinated more than 100,000 Palestinians, even though the Oslo Accords stipulate that healthcare is the PA’s responsibility. [Dig Deeper “Virus Surge in Crowded Gaza Threatens to Overwhelm Hospitals” \(Associated Press\)](#)

Reuters

Human Rights Watch Accuses Israel of ‘Apartheid’ Crimes

New York-based Human Rights Watch accused Israel of pursuing policies of apartheid and persecution against Palestinians - and against its own Arab minority - that amount to crimes against humanity. HRW published a [213-page report](#) which, it said, was not aimed at comparing Israel with apartheid-era South Africa but rather at assessing "whether specific acts and policies" constitute apartheid as defined under international law. Israel's foreign ministry rejected the claims as "both preposterous and false" and accused HRW of harboring an "anti-Israeli agenda," saying the group had sought "for years to promote boycotts against Israel". Palestinian President Abbas welcomed the report. In its report, HRW pointed to Israeli restrictions on Palestinian movement and seizure of Palestinian-owned land for Jewish settlement in territory occupied in the 1967 Middle East war as examples of policies it said were crimes of apartheid and persecution. [Dig Deeper “Human Rights Watch Demonizes Israel Through the Propaganda of Apartheid” \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

UAE Firm to Buy 22% Stake In Tamar Natural Gas Field

Israeli energy company Delek Drilling announced that a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) has been signed with Abu Dhabi's Mubadala Petroleum to sell its 22 percent stake in the eastern Mediterranean natural gas field Tamar for \$1.1B. If finalized, it would mark the biggest deal between Israel and the UAE since the Abraham Accords normalized relations between the two countries in September. The Tamar field, discovered in 2009, is located approximately 56 miles off the coast of Haifa. Production began in 2013 with the natural gas extracted through five production wells. Chevron, which operates the field, holds a 25% stake in it. Chevron took over operations of both Tamar and the nearby Leviathan gas field in July 2020 from Noble Energy in a deal valued at \$5B. Delek is required by the Israeli government to sell its Tamar holdings by the end of the year as part of a natural gas framework to make the market more competitive.

AI-Monitor

Leaked Recording of Iran's Foreign Minister Stirs Debate

Ever since a recording of Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif was leaked yesterday, Iranians have been discussing not only the contents but also the possible motivations behind releasing the audio. The audio itself does not reveal anything scandalous or unknown. Zarif, however, does offer his own interpretation of specific events. Zarif accused the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) of running their own regional foreign policy and ignoring the advice of the Foreign Ministry. In the recording, Zarif also said that former Quds Force commander Qasem Soleimani had traveled to Moscow in 2015 to undermine the nuclear negotiations. Zarif also expressed frustration with certain IRGC decisions, such as sending ground forces to Syria and using Iranian airlines without the knowledge or consent of the Foreign Ministry. It is not yet clear if the audio will hurt Zarif's standing in Iran. If Khamenei or President Hassan Rouhani were truly displeased with his statements or the release of the recording, they could have already demoted him. [Dig Deeper "John Kerry Denies Giving Iran Info on Israeli Attacks in Syria" \(Ynet News\)](#)

From One Round to the Next

By Giora Eiland

- To understand of the events of the last few days in Jerusalem and in Gaza we have to adopt a view that does not begin with what is happening right here and now. We could focus on analyzing the rival side's motives, but it is more important to examine critically how Israel's real interests square with what we are doing in practice. The greater the disparity between Israel's interests and actions are, the greater the mistake that we are making is. Let's start with Jerusalem. It was clearly in Israel's interest to build Jewish neighborhoods beyond the Green Line in Jerusalem. Neighborhoods like Ramot, Givat Zeev, Pisgat Zeev, Gilo and others are an expression of a municipal and national need. In contrast, there is no national interest in encouraging Jews to settle in the heart of crowded Arab neighborhoods. When dozens of nationalist Jews insist on living in the heart of Silwan, a neighborhood that is home to tens of thousands of Palestinians a few hundred meters from the Temple Mount, we create unnecessary friction ex nihilo. This was not a solitary event, this is deliberate Israeli activity that happens in almost every Arab neighborhood in East Jerusalem, activity that is perceived by the Palestinians, quite rightly, as poking them in their eye.
- When the police permit a racist organization like Lehava to start a fire in the area of Damascus Gate at the beginning of the month of Ramadan, we shouldn't be surprised when that leads to violent riots. The position of the Israeli government in the last few years has been—quite logically—that at the current stage of things the Israeli-Palestinian conflict ought to be managed, without trying to resolve it. Based on this approach, it is in Israel's direct interest to avoid unnecessary friction. In practice, we have been producing, through our own action and inaction, unnecessary friction, starting with the price tag operations that are not stopped to creating tension in Jerusalem. Israel annexed East Jerusalem in 1967 but did not give the Palestinian residents citizenship, but only residency status. The question therefore comes up, to which parliament are they allowed to vote? Israel says no to both—you will not vote for our Knesset, but neither will you vote for the Palestinian parliament. This also causes unnecessary tension, not just with the Palestinians, but also with the international community.
- Moving on to Gaza. First and foremost, it is important to understand that de facto, Gaza became a state back in 2006, and every state, first and foremost, is motivated by its self-interests. When it comes to Gaza, Israel has two interests, the first is security and the second is ecological (that Gaza's sewage does not flow into our common sea). The Gaza government's supreme interest is economic, since unless the infrastructure and employment situation improves, Hamas is liable to lose its hold on power. In this situation, the interests of the states of Israel and Gaza overlap and are based, on the one hand, on there being long-term quiet, and on building infrastructure, including a seaport, on the other. The more infrastructure that is built, the more the State of Gaza will have something to lose if it initiates a military clash, exactly the same way that this consideration is what has motivated Hizbullah to maintain the quiet for 15 years.

- **Hamas, like Hizbullah, is not just a terrorist organization, firstly it is a political entity that acts cautiously and judiciously. The conclusion is simple. Israel can reach a de facto agreement with the State of Gaza but has chosen not to do so, not because this conflicts with Israel's national interests, but for other, unjustified reasons. Furthermore, the apparent preference of Israeli governments since 2006 has been to stick with the existing situation, meaning sporadic fire every few weeks, salvos of rocket fire every few months and a broad military clash every few years. This policy is not declared openly, of course, since no politician will explain to the worried mothers in the Gaza periphery communities that this is the path that was chosen, which is why we roll from one round to the next. The concrete reasons change, but the big picture remains the same.**

First on the Guillotine

By Ben Caspit

- **What we're seeing being played out in front of us is a game of poker. The pot is full—not with money, but with the fate of Israel. The players are shrewd and sophisticated; they're trying to read one another, to pressure one another; to bluff and to exude self-confidence, while creating all sorts of second options for themselves from every direction. The move of the day yesterday was played by Benny Gantz. His representative to the talks, Ronen Aviani, who is one of the sharpest players, orchestrated a performance. Gantz knows that Netanyahu would be prepared to give even Yahya Sinwar (head of Hamas in Gaza) the title of “first in an alternating premiership arrangement” as long as the Missus and her son are able to continue to govern the compound on Balfour Street. The meeting between Gantz and Yanki Kanievsky, the “deputy Torah minister” who is the most powerful man on the Haredi street, was designed to signal to Lapid, Bennett and Saar: guys you're making a mistake. If you're taking Benny Gantz for granted, then you're making a mistake. Not only is Blue & White going to retain its hold on the defense portfolio, it is going to get another five ministerial portfolios. Why? Because if Saar is getting four portfolios with six MKs, we deserve five with our eight MKs.**
- **But that's even more amusing since Netanyahu has promised a range of people that they could be “first in an alternating premiership arrangement,” even though everyone (including Netanyahu) knows that he doesn't mean it. That man will only vacate the prime minister's seat with the help of a D9 bulldozer. Netanyahu's only goal, after he said before the elections that the public is “sick of rotation [alternating premiership arrangements], there won't be any rotation with me,” is to divide and conquer the pro-change bloc. As soon as they all know that they have the option of being “first in an alternating premiership arrangement,” none of them will be prepared to compromise. Then, once they discover that they're actually first in line to the guillotine, it will too late. Based on information that has been gleaned from Blue & White, the Labor Party and Meretz, the plan by the four principal pro-change forces (Lapid, Bennett, Sa'ar and Liberman) is simple: to reach a four-way agreement among themselves by Thursday, to bring Merav Michaeli and Nitzan Horowitz on board over the weekend, and then to go to Gantz on Sunday, after everything has already been sewn up. Gantz has no intention of letting that happen.**
- **At the current stage of things, Lapid and Bennett aren't paying attention to the other parties. Even Gideon Saar's New Hope has been set aside. Up until not long ago, the meetings were three-way meetings among a representative for Lapid, a representative for Bennett and a representative for Saar (usually Zeev Elkin). Recently, the meetings have been between just Lapid and Bennett's representatives, without Elkin. People in Saar's camp say they aren't worried. Saar and Bennett are in perfect coordination with one another; they're on the same page, the same line and the same word. But the more junior partners to that coalition are worried, first and foremost Benny Gantz. Currently, they're all putting on airs, flexing their muscles in front of the mirror and making threats.**

- **The question is what will really happen if the “gang of four” does come to an agreement this weekend. Will Michaeli and/or Horowitz go along? If they do, what will Gantz’s play be? Is he capable of being the person who once again and for the second time prevents Netanyahu’s fall from power? There is no way of knowing how this stormy game of poker is going to end. In the meantime, the overall picture has changed a bit. Netanyahu is fighting with everything he’s got, making as many fictitious promises and generating as many vapid spins as he can in an attempt to stop the pro-change bloc. Not a soul in the pro- change bloc believes a single one of his promises. Everything now depends on the ability of the leaders of seven parties, who do not see eye-to-eye with one another on substantive issues and none of whom wants to be “played for a sucker,” to muster the necessary creativity and to recognize the sheer enormity of the moment so as to free the country from its captors at the very last moment that this is still possible.**
- **On the tactical battlefield, Miki Zohar yesterday managed to restore some of his wounded pride when he avenged his defeat on the Arrangements Committee vote last week with a victory of his own. Zohar got the United Arab List to vote along with the Likud in exchange for the chair of the “Arab affairs committee.” The UAL repaid the Likud by allowing Zohar to build the “Knesset presidency” (the speaker and his deputy) in Netanyahu’s image. Nothing is over until everything is over, and that is still a long way away.**