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Israel and Middle East News Update

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News Excerpts

April 28, 2021

Times of Israel

Judges Nix Netanyahu's Illegal Vote on Justice Minister

The High Court of Justice temporarily froze the appointment of Likud MK Ofir Akunis as justice minister, after the cabinet, led by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, openly defied the Attorney General's Avichai Mandelblit warnings that the move was illegal and pushed through the appointment. The court issued the ruling less than two hours after a hearing on Akunis's appointment, which was approved over the strident objections of Mandelblit in a cabinet meeting that quickly descended into a shouting match between Likud and Blue & White ministers. By holding the vote, Mandelblit told Netanyahu, the caretaker government flouted a quasi-constitutional Basic Law, amended last year by Netanyahu and Benny Gantz, that reserved the position for a candidate backed by Gantz's Blue & White-led bloc. [Dig Deeper "Brink of Anarchy": Netanyahu Ignores Law to Appoint Loyalist Justice Minister" \(Axios\)](#)

Hamodia

Calm Returns to Gaza Front After Several Tense Nights

The border between Israel and Gaza saw a return to calm after several nights of tension, during which dozens of rockets were fired from Gaza into southern Israel. The Security Cabinet met authorized a plan for a large-scale airstrike against Hamas targets in the event that more rockets were fired. The increase of tensions in the south comes amid unrest in Jerusalem, with near-daily clashes between Israeli Police and Palestinians from East Jerusalem. Hamas called on the "Palestinian resistance in the Gaza Strip to equip itself with missiles to target the Israeli occupation," and encouraged clashes to continue in Jerusalem. "We call on our courageous resistance in the Gaza Strip to prepare rockets to target the strongholds of the occupation and its military and vital installations," Hamas said in a statement. [Dig Deeper "After a Day of Quiet, Gaza Terrorists Fire 2 Rockets Toward Israel" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

I24 News

Palestinian Cars Set on Fire in Apparent Jewish Attack

An apparent Jewish attack left three Palestinian vehicles ablaze in the West Bank village of Beit Iksa, northwest of Jerusalem, with "Jews, let's win" and "TikTok" spray-painted on the site, alongside a Star of David. Police opened an investigation into the incident, apparently revenge for TikTok posts circulated on the platform showing Arab youth attacking ultra-Orthodox Jews since around the start of Ramadan earlier in April. News site Walla! said the graffiti was connected to the "price tag" attacks, perpetrated by Jewish settlers against Palestinians. The attack on the village, located near the Ramot neighborhood of Jerusalem. Militants from the Gaza Strip began firing rockets in response to the violence last weekend. [Dig Deeper "Odeh: Intifada Will End the Occupation and Hoist Palestinian Flag in Jerusalem" \(I24 News\)](#)

Israel Not Seeking to Thwart Palestinian Election

Israel is not blocking or otherwise involving itself in the planned Palestinian election, Foreign Ministry political director Alon Bar told European Envoys. Envoys from the EU, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Sweden, Ireland and elsewhere met with Bar to stress “the importance of democratic elections in the Palestinian Territories to strengthen political participation and accountability as well as democratic checks and balances,” according to a tweet published by several of their embassies. “Israel will not prevent the election in the Palestinian Authority from happening,” Bar said. The Palestinians have said they requested that Israel allow voting to take place in east Jerusalem but have yet to receive a response. Jerusalem, including majority-Arab neighborhoods, is part of sovereign Israel and is under Israeli law. Most Jerusalem Arabs are permanent residents and not Israeli citizens, though a path to citizenship for them exists. [Dig Deeper “Palestinian Elections Appear Headed for Delay Amid Jerusalem Dispute, Fatah Infighting” \(Reuters\)](#)

Israeli Military Says It Downed Hezbollah Drone

Israeli forces brought down a drone belonging to the Lebanese Hezbollah group that crossed into northern Israel from Lebanon, the Israeli military said. In a statement, the military said that earlier in the day troops had located another Hezbollah drone that also had been downed along the border with Lebanon several weeks ago. The statement did not say what means were used to bring the two drones down. “We will continue to operate in order to prevent any attempt to violate Israeli sovereignty,” the statement said. Israel has acknowledged several incidents in recent years in which its own drones have been lost during missions along the Lebanese frontier, with Iranian-backed Hezbollah claiming to have shot them down. Hezbollah, which fought a war with Israel in 2006, is the dominant presence in Lebanon’s south near the border with Israel. The militant group has vowed to bring down Israeli drones breaching Lebanese airspace. [Dig Deeper “Israeli Military Says It Downed Hezbollah Drone” \(Associated Press\)](#)

US Updates Israel on Nuclear Talks as Officials Meet In DC

The Israeli and American national security advisers met in Washington to discuss concerns over Iran’s nuclear ambitions and US efforts to reenter the deal between Tehran and world powers. The meeting between National Security Council chairman Meir Ben-Shabbat and his US counterpart Jake Sullivan marked the first in-person meeting of high-level officials from the two countries since President Joe Biden entered the White House. “The US and Israeli officials discussed their serious concerns about advancements in Iran’s nuclear program in recent years. The US updated Israel on the talks in [Vienna](#) and emphasized strong US interest in consulting closely with Israel on the nuclear issue going forward,” a readout from the White House said. Following the meeting between Sullivan and the Israeli officials, the White House also condemned rocket fire from Gaza on Israel and clashes in Jerusalem between Jews and Arabs. [Dig Deeper “In DC, Israel’s Top Spy and Security Wonk Face a Mission Impossible on Iran” \(Times of Israel\)](#)

US Navy Fires Warning Shots in Tense Encounter with Iran

The US Navy said the USS Firebolt fired the warning shots after three fast-attack Guard vessels came within 68 yards of it and the US Coast Guard patrol boat USCGC Baranoff. Iran did not immediately acknowledge the incident. The incidents at sea almost always involve the Revolutionary Guard, which reports only to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Typically, they involve Iranian speedboats armed with deck-mounted machine guns and rocket launchers test-firing weapons or shadowing American aircraft carriers passing through the Strait of Hormuz, the narrow mouth of the Persian Gulf through which 20% of all oil passes. Some analysts believe the incidents are meant in part to squeeze President Hassan Rouhani's administration after the 2015 nuclear deal. They include a 2016 incident in which Iranian forces captured and held overnight 10 US sailors who strayed into the Islamic Republic's territorial waters. [Dig Deeper "IRGC Boats Harassed Us Coast Guard in Persian Gulf" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

Likely Candidate for New US Ambassador to Israel Emerges

President Biden will start to roll out his nominees for ambassadorship positions as early as this week, and former State Department official Thomas R. Nides "has emerged as the likely candidate for ambassador to Israel," the Washington Post has reported. Nides is currently the Managing Director and Vice Chairman of Morgan Stanley, working with global clients and external and governmental affairs issues. He previously served as Deputy Secretary of State for Management and Resources under Hillary Clinton from 2011 to 2013. He was also awarded the Secretary of State's Distinguished Service Award in January 2013. Nides was born to a Jewish family in Duluth, Minnesota. He started his career on Capitol Hill in various positions, including an assistant to the House Majority Whip and executive assistant to the Speaker of the House. He later spent a decade as Chief of Staff for several members of congress before pivoting to the banking sector in 1996. According to the Washington Post's report, other nominees that are being considered are Cindy McCain, the widow of Senator John McCain for envoy to the World Food Program, and former Chicago mayor Rahm Emmanuel for ambassador to Japan. [Dig Deeper "Biden Donors, Friends and Former Aides Expected on First Slate of High-Profile Ambassadors" \(Washington Post\)](#)

Governmental Anarchy

By Yuval Karni

- Prime Minister Netanyahu has just another six days to form a right-wing-Haredi government, and his political situation is currently the worst it has been after any of the last four elections in the past two years. He is far closer to losing his grip on power than he is to forming a new government. Nevertheless, Netanyahu fought yesterday over the appointment of the justice minister as if that were the most important political battle of his life. And it turns out that anything and everything goes in that battle. Netanyahu is prepared to break agreements, to bend laws, to ignore the attorney general defiantly and to turn Cabinet Secretary Tzahi Braverman into a marionette. Loss of control? Anarchy? Destabilizing the rule of law? Anything goes. Sometimes the impression one receives is that Netanyahu enjoys the chaos that he creates all around him. That chaos might be good for him, but it is bad for the country.
- The political-legal chaos at the cabinet meeting yesterday produced one of the lowest points in the history of Netanyahu governments: the gambit to appoint a justice minister. We are facing more than just a political crisis. This is a severe constitutional crisis as well. The State of Israel does not have a constitution. The tensions between the different branches of government have always existed, at one level of intensity or another. But we have never had anything like the clash we saw yesterday between the Supreme Court, the attorney general and the prime minister, who is under indictment. Yamina Chairman Naftali Bennett said that “the State of Israel is nearing the abyss of anarchy.” Governmental anarchy. One question continues to hover in the air about Netanyahu’s conduct: what does he hope to gain from it? How does it serve him?
- And, most importantly, how does it help Netanyahu form a new government? Netanyahu is a leader with exceptional political skills. For years people described him as a conniver, a political trickster and as someone who doesn’t keep agreements—but he always knew how to remain within the realm of legitimate behavior. He currently has one overriding political interest: to see a fifth election called. That is the impression that top Likud officials have gotten. Netanyahu can’t form a government; he doesn’t really intend to let any other candidate serve first in an alternating premiership arrangement, and being in the opposition is a nightmare scenario for him. Not to mention the thought of having to move the family out of the Prime Minister’s Residence on Balfour Street.
- Netanyahu wants to force a new election at any cost, and the cabinet meeting yesterday was merely a sneak preview of his next election campaign. Because he hopes that the solution that he was unable to achieve by force in the last four elections can be achieved with even greater force in a fifth election. The question is what are the red lines and what is the cost. Benny Gantz was right when he spoke about Netanyahu’s “April conspiracy,” which most people dismissed as an overblown Blue & White campaign slogan. How ironic: the cabinet meeting yesterday appeared to have been taken straight out of a Blue & White campaign video warning about the “April conspiracy.”

Burning Down the Clubhouse

By Ben Caspit

- The voice that we heard in the leaked recordings from the cabinet meeting was Binyamin Netanyahu's voice. The hands were Yair Netanyahu's hands. The conversion therapy was a success. The father has become his son, the same son who gave us a sneak preview of what lay in store in the courtroom [this week] in which the judge didn't have the courage to call him to order. As we all recall, Netanyahu Junior called the former prime minister, Ehud Barak, a "pedophile" [in court]. I suspect that his father, Netanyahu Senior, will only begin to call Mandelblit a "pedophile" a bit further down the line. Sons have eaten sour grapes and the attorney general's teeth have been put on edge [a play on Jeremiah 31:28 about inherited ancestral sin]. That is nothing short of shocking. The leader who used to be pragmatic, stately, cautious, respectful of the separation of powers; the leader who used to understand the importance of the High Court of Justice and who would defend it bodily—has become an unbridled anarchist. The gambit to "appoint" Ofir Akunis as justice minister, in explicit violation of the law that he personally passed into legislation (and a basic law, to boot!!) just a year ago, demonstrates to us that all the checks have melted and the balances have been burned. That man is capable of anything.
- It was a carefully orchestrated and premeditated performance. There were no slips of the tongue, with the amusing exception of Eli Cohen, who didn't realize that he wasn't on mute when he said, "in another moment Netanyahu is going to toss out some name as justice minister." Netanyahu knew that the process by means of which he appointed Akunis was illegal. He is intimately familiar with the law that he passed. He also was fully aware of the fact that justice portfolio belongs to Blue & White and is reserved in its name by the same basic law. He knows that he is prohibited from involving himself in the appointment of a new justice minister because he is on trial for bribery, fraud and breach of trust. He knows that he failed to sign the conflicts of interest arrangement that prohibits him from doing so. So why did he do all that? Because he wants war. That is the last option left to him. The darkest predictions (that even I didn't believe when I wrote them in recent years) have all begun to come true, one after the other. Yes, he really is burning down the clubhouse with everyone still inside. Yes, he truly is unwilling to let go and to leave peacefully. Yes, he does want to see an Israeli version of the Capitol [insurrection].
- A few weeks ago, I reported what Netanyahu said to one of his colleagues in a private conversation when he was asked what his contingency plan was for his trial. "After all, the trial is going to begin," the man said to Netanyahu. "The charges are serious, there are witnesses and there is evidence. What do you intend to do? Do you really want to spend the next few years in court?" Netanyahu gave the following blood-chilling answer: "The public won't let the trial proceed." For the time being, however, the public has let the trial proceed. Ilan Yeshua gave his testimony, in which he sketched the picture of bribery at Walla. He is going to be followed by Shlomo Filber and Nir Hefetz, who will establish the link to Netanyahu (at least from the prosecution's perspective).

- **Netanyahu is now trying to rouse his base and to get them to head out into the streets. When he said at the end of the cabinet meeting, “I know that the High Court of Justice will disqualify the appointment, but the public won’t accept that,” he meant what he said. He wants those remarks to reverberate. He is going to play his violin on Balfour Street while everything all around him burns. The indictment against him begins with the words, “The State of Israel versus Binyamin Netanyahu.” The prime minister’s response has been simple, clear and chilling: “Binyamin Netanyahu versus the State of Israel.”**
- **The man’s actions have been simply unbelievable. When he was told that his motion to appoint Akunis was in violation of a basic law that he personally had passed into legislation (which stipulates that the justice portfolio belongs to Blue & White and that Avi Nissenkorn’s replacement has to be selected by Blue & White), he said that he wouldn’t accept “morality being preached” after Blue & White’s ministers prevented him in the last few weeks from getting millions of vaccines to Israel. What is the truth? The truth is that they did prevent him from reserving NIS 3.5 billion for 36 million unnecessary vaccine doses and, thanks to their action, it became evident that there was a coronavirus budget surplus that allowed for 18 million vaccine doses (which are more than enough, according to health professionals) to be purchased without tapping into a new budget. Then, once he began to realize that the perfect storm that he created was mainly sinking him (apparently, he read Bennett and Saar’s tweets), the man sat down in front of the cameras and made the following astonishing assertion: “Our candidate won by a large majority. I am still asking for another 48 hours to try to reach an agreement between the sides about an agreed-upon candidate.” One really ought to listen to that statement several times. And one also ought to look at Netanyahu’s face while making it.**
- **Let’s analyze that. A moment after his illegal gambit to install Ofir Akunis as justice minister, he said “our candidate won by a large majority.” So why is he now trying to find an “agreed-upon candidate?” Is it common practice (in Netanyahu’s opinion) to appoint a justice minister and then to begin to negotiate over finding an “agreed-upon candidate?” What is it exactly that you’re trying to make a mockery of? Common sense? The truth? Yourself? All of us? Let’s move on. Why is there any need to reach an “agreed-upon candidate?” The basic law that Netanyahu personally drafted in order to lure Gantz into trusting him and joining his government explicitly stipulates that if a minister resigns, the minister who is appointed to replace the former minister will come from the same bloc that the resigning minister came from.**
- **In other words, the justice minister who replaces Nissenkorn needs to be selected by Blue & White. Netanyahu knows that. So why is he lying? Why is he cheating? Why did he look straight into the camera and lie? The answer is simple: because he wants to, because he can, because he hopes that that will set the house on fire with everyone inside. He has been taken captive by the members of his own household and now he has taken the rest of us captive. As I’ve written in this column more than once before: We need to announce the Hannibal Protocol [the IDF protocol following a soldier falling captive] for the State of Israel.**