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## Israel and Middle East News Update

*Thursday, April 29*

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# News Excerpts

April 29, 2021

## Al-Monitor

### **Netanyahu Caves, Nominates Gantz for Justice Minister**

After long months of opposition and dramatic moves at yesterday's cabinet meeting, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu nominated Blue & White leader Benny Gantz for justice minister in the transitional government. Netanyahu also pledged to nominate permanent communication, science, water resources, higher education and social equality ministers for government approval. In a statement published by his office, Netanyahu said that he had legal arguments against the High Court and against Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit's treatment of his previous moves on the issue. The justice portfolio became an issue of dispute between Netanyahu and Gantz last December, when Blue & White senior Avi Nissenkorn resigned from the position of justice minister. The unity agreement signed last May between Netanyahu's Likud and Gantz' Blue & White stipulated the establishment of a joint cabinet, with the same number of ministerial portfolios for each bloc, at the discretion of both leaders.

## Jerusalem Post

### **Bennett Ready to Rely on Abbas to Form Government**

Yamina leader Naftali Bennett and Ra'am leader Mansour Abbas, held a fateful meeting at the Knesset that both sides said broke the ice between the two. During the election, Bennett firmly ruled out a coalition formed with the support of Abbas's party. But his associates said for the first time after the Bennett-Abbas meeting that a minority coalition relying on Abbas would no longer be vetoed. The first meeting ever between the two kingmakers was requested by Abbas, who impressed Bennett by focusing only on civil issues helping the Arab minority and not security, diplomacy or changing the controversial Nation-State Law. They dealt with their parties' views on the current political situation and the meeting went exceptionally well, the two sides said afterward. [Dig Deeper "Bennett, SA'AR Meet to Talk Unity Gov't, As Shaked Said Hoping to Thwart Efforts" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

## Ynet News

### **Hamas: If Elections Are Canceled, Israel Will Be Responsible**

In an official statement, [Hamas](#) announced that "no Palestinian can accept holding elections without Jerusalem." Hamas said that Election Day will be designated as a "national day" in which the Palestinians will confront Israel to force it to hold the vote. The group said it "will not agree to be part in the election's delay or cancelation," and called on other Palestinian factions to do the same. According to a report Tuesday, Abbas has notified the EU, Jordan, and Egypt of his decision to postpone elections. Abbas' decision to delay the elections is due to Israel's refusal to allow Palestinians living in East Jerusalem to cast a ballot in the first Palestinian legislative elections in 15 years, Lebanese newspaper Al-Akhbar said. [Dig Deeper "Israel Braces for Fallout as Abbas Expected to Delay Palestinian Elections" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

## **EU Condemns UNRWA for 'Hate Speech' in PA Schools**

The European Parliament adopted a resolution condemning the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) for teaching hate and violence in Palestinian Authority (PA) schools. The resolution expresses concern "about the hate speech and violence taught in Palestinian school textbooks and used in schools by UNRWA" and insists that financial aid be conditioned on the removal of educational materials that promote hatred and incitement to violence. The legislation passed despite lobbying efforts against it by UNRWA and the PA, including Palestinian Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh appearing in front of the parliament's Committee of Foreign Affairs a week before the vote. Last year, the EU passed three similar resolutions calling out the PA for not removing hateful materials from its textbooks used by UNRWA in the Palestinian education system. [Dig Deeper "US Rejects Human Rights Watch's Accusation of Israeli 'Apartheid'" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

### Jerusalem Post

## **IDF Halts Attempt to Rebuild Homesh Settlement**

The IDF earlier this week halted an attempt to rebuild the Homesh settlement, one of four Jewish northern Samaria communities destroyed during the 2005 Disengagement. The Civil Administration destroyed the Homesh Yeshiva. It also took down three modular structures that housed the students and four modular plywood homes for families associated with the yeshiva. When the community was destroyed, the yeshiva's rabbis and students continued to return to the site to study, even though the area of the razed settlement is a closed military zone. The yeshiva, often housed in large tents, has been destroyed multiple times. But it is only in the past few years that modular homes connected to the yeshiva were also built at the site. Last year the IDF also demolished modular living quarters connected to the yeshiva. Right-wing politicians and settlers have long called on the government to rebuild the four West Bank settlements – Homesh, Sa-Nur, Ganim and Kadim – that were destroyed in 2005.

### Associated Press

## **US Eyes Rollback in Iran Sanctions to Revive Nuke Deal**

The Biden administration is considering a near wholesale rollback of some of the most stringent Trump-era sanctions imposed on Iran in a bid to get Iran to return to compliance with the 2015 nuclear accord, according to current and former US officials. American officials have become increasingly expansive about what they might be prepared to offer Iran, which has been driving a hard line on sanctions relief, demanding that all US penalties be removed. American officials have refused to discuss which sanctions are being considered for removal. But they have said they are open to lifting any sanctions that are inconsistent with the nuclear deal or that deny Iran the relief it would be entitled to should it return to compliance with the accord. Because of the complex nature of the sanctions architecture, that could include non-nuclear sanctions, such as those tied to terrorism, missile development and human rights. [Dig Deeper "US and Israel Seek to 'Fence off' Iran Deal Dispute From Other Issues" \(Axios\)](#)

## **Saudi Crown Prince: 'We Want Good Relations with Iran'**

Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman laid out a vigorous defense of his domestic policies and the thinking behind his push to transform Saudi Arabia economically and socially during a wide-ranging interview broadcast across Saudi television channels. In the lengthy interview, the crown prince also expressed hopes for good relations with rival Iran and said that Saudi Arabia and the Biden administration in Washington were in agreement on most issues of mutual concern. The bulk of the interview, though, was spent laying out a dizzying array of economic figures and milestones to explain why the government has raised taxes, cut subsidies, and embarked on unpopular austerity measures to hit targets in the so-called Vision 2030 plan. On relations with Washington, the prince said Saudi Arabia and the Biden administration agree on 90% of issues of mutual concern, but are in disagreement on the rest, though he did not elaborate. He said the world is "a wide place" with many nations to build strategic ties with. [Dig Deeper "Senior US Delegation Headed to Middle East Amid Concerns About Iran Deal" \(Reuters\)](#)

Reuters

## **Israel, Lebanon Aim to Restart Maritime Border Talks**

Lebanon and Israel are expected to resume US-mediated talks on a dispute about their Mediterranean Sea border, two Lebanese official sources said. Negotiations between old foes Lebanon and Israel were launched in October to try to resolve the dispute, which has held up hydrocarbon exploration in the potentially gas-rich area, yet the talks have since stalled. One Lebanese official said that the US side had informed Lebanon that talks would resume on Monday. The second Lebanese official said the resumption would coincide with a visit by US mediator John Desrocher, who is due in Lebanon on an unspecified day next week. The longtime foes held several rounds of talks in October, a culmination of three years of diplomacy by the US, hosted by the UN at a peacekeeper base in southern Lebanon. But gaps between the two sides remained large after each presented contrasting [maps](#) outlining proposed borders that actually increased the size of the disputed area. Since the talks stalled, Lebanon's caretaker prime minister and ministers of defense and public works approved a draft decree which would expand Lebanon's claim, adding around 1,400 square km to its exclusive economic zone. The draft decree has yet to be approved.

## **The Glass Wall Has Shattered**

By Merav Batito

- **They are members of the same club, they eat in the same cafeteria, they vote on the same bills, they play by the same parliamentary rules. One is a 49-year-old kippa-wearing high-tech entrepreneur from Raanana, the other is a 47-year-old dentist from Maghar who is the deputy chairman of the southern chapter of the Islamic Movement—both are MKs who lead parties that are explicitly identified with one of the margins on the political map. Up until their meeting yesterday, it seemed that they had done everything possible to never sit in the same room, God forbid. For the first time in their political lives, the two chairpersons, Naftali Bennett and Mansour Abbas, descended from the holy throne of ideology and shattered the armored glass wall that Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu had built in the last ten years between Jews and Arabs.**
- **It's too early to say what the fate of these two people will be, who in their coalition-related despair are trying to walk together, but it can still be said with confidence that something dramatic has taken place in Israel. It doesn't matter what the results of this first and hesitant meeting between a representative of the right-wing and a member of the Arab left wing will be; it does matter that they talked. At this time, with his personal and public preoccupations filling his day, Netanyahu is not free to protect the transparent wall of alienation that he built between the Jewish and Arab publics. Crooked actions, like his attempt to appoint Ofir Akunis justice minister, have ripped a huge hole in the coalition blanket that he is trying to knit, and in the next six days he will spend most of his time in a frantic race against the hourglass, whose sand is running out.**
- **Skeptics will say, justifiably, that the only thing that Bennett and Abbas have in common is their concern for their seats, which is the only thing that can connect a Jewish and Arab politician. We can also doubt the significance of the joint statement that Bennett and Abbas issued afterwards, or view it as being devoid of any indication of some achievement. Everyone knows that you can't take a "positive atmosphere" or "both sides are interested in this government" to the bank. When we add the strong wind from the Religious Zionist Party, the rhyming campaign "Abbas and Hamas" that will go up today on billboards and in social media to instill the sense of danger to the public from this union, the two sides can expect a rough and bumpy road.**
- **Statements made by Abbas, who supported state-sponsored conversion therapy and legalizing polygamy, will also be brought up. The importance of the journey that was begun yesterday, whatever its goals were, is not the establishment of a government or even the end of Netanyahu's reign—but rather that it was begun, and the sides' willingness to face its challenges.**

## **Ideological Portfolios**

By Orit Lavi-Nesiel

- The phrase “ideological portfolios” is a new term that has entered the political lexicon in the context of dividing the governmental spoils. As if the battle for the premiership and the political imbroglio that is still far from converging into a coalition were not enough, the Yamina party is in a rush to mark territory even before reaching agreement with its partners in the pro-change bloc on the government guidelines. This not new. There has always been horse-trading over the government ministries with their abundance of jobs and political influence. Some parties have claimed the best jobs for themselves—UTJ always has the chair of the Finance Committee, and Shas has set up home in the Interior Ministry. The old National Religious Party settled in the Education Ministry, and its successors [Yamina] wish to retake it and to conquer other bastions, such as the Justice Ministry, which Ayelet Shaked very much wants.
- It isn't clear what coalition will be formed, if one is formed, but we can assume with a great deal of certainty that the next government will also number more than the 19 ministers stated in the basic law until the alternative government was born. In order to appease all its members, the parity mutation created unnecessary ministries out of thin air. That is how the Ministry for Social Promotion and Strengthening was created, along with the Ministry for Water Resources, the Ministry for Higher and Supplementary Education, the National Digital Ministry and even a minister in the Defense Ministry for civilian and social affairs.
- Incidentally, this did not benefit Israel's citizens in any way, nor did the new ministries ensure the government a long life, but rather just the opposite. Now a new demand has been added, a demand for “ideological” ministries, referring to the justice, education and interior ministries, at the very least. The term was coined by Shaked. In addition to maneuvering so that Naftali Bennett will be prime minister, she wants Yamina to hold onto the high-profile budget-rich and powerful ministries. What about the health, economics, and welfare ministries and the immediate need to address violence in Arab society? What about the importance of the Transport Ministry and the Energy Ministry? Are they not ideological ministries? In any case, the slogan, “if it's not the coronavirus, it's not interesting,” has been tossed into the dustbin of empty election promises.
- What do these ideological portfolios contain? The appointment of the justice minister is at the core of an impassioned political battle that reached the doorstep of the High Court of Justice on Tuesday, and there is no need to elaborate on the reasons for that. The Interior Ministry controls the local authorities, the Population and Immigration Authority and the planning committees that decide construction and development policy. The Education Ministry controls curricula and oversees millions of school pupils, university students and teachers, fertile ground for ideological influence. The question is whether this is appropriate. For the first time in Israel, a small party may run the country. This is not the worst alternative under today's circumstances, but the manner in which this duo is negotiating reeks of opportunism.

- Yamina, headed by Bennett and Shaked, is gripped with political bulimia. Their shopping between Netanyahu and Lapid, their inordinate demands, and their exploitation of their linchpin status could be viewed as political shrewdness, as maximally leveraging their electoral power. On the other hand, their insistence on holding on to large slices of the political pie is liable to be considered political swinishness. The Haredim were accused in the past of political extortion for a lot less than this.
- There is no debate that the Israeli right wing won a majority in the Knesset, but in the political reality in which it cannot form a fully right-wing government, Bennett and Shaked must conduct themselves more modestly and show respect for their partners to the left, who represent a public equal in size or larger than Yamina's voters. They have been given an extraordinary, perhaps a one-time opportunity. Instead of coveting ideological ministries, better they remember the famous comment about the theater, which also applies to politics: "There are no small roles, there are only small actors."