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Israel and Middle East News Update

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News Excerpts

April 30, 2021

Jerusalem Post

Bennett, Lapid, SA'AR Hold Marathon Talks to Build Gov't

Negotiating teams from Yamina, Yesh Atid and New Hope met in an effort to build a coalition by the time Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's mandate to form a government from President Reuven Rivlin ends next week. If a deal is not reached, Yair Lapid (Yesh Atid) and Naftali Bennett (Yamina) could end up fighting over who receives the second mandate from Rivlin. Bennett wants it because he would go first in a rotation with Lapid, but Lapid is worried that Bennett could take the mandate and form a government with Netanyahu. Currently, Lapid has more recommendations than any candidate, so he would get the mandate. But if the parties that recommended Netanyahu last time shift to Bennett, he could have a majority. In an apparent effort to prepare for when he would no longer be prime minister, Netanyahu is seeking to double the period of Shin Bet protection of former prime ministers from 10 to 20 years, Channel 12 reported. [Dig Deeper "Gantz to Hold Coalition Talks With Netanyahu" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Israel Hayom

Bennett's New Hope: A Merger With Gideon SA'AR

Naftali Bennett and New Hope leader head Gideon Sa'ar plan to merge their parties, Israel Hayom has learned, in a move that will see Bennet tasked with the premiership as the head of a party that garnered a combined 13 Knesset seats instead of the 7 Yamina earned. All sides are looking to divide the portfolios in such a way that is acceptable to all sides and avoids a repeat of the kind of disputes witnessed in the current Likud-Blue & White government on an array of issues. Concerned the government will find it hard to make decisions on various issues, Bennett has asked to be granted veto power within the role of prime minister, a move the other parties have opposed. [Dig Deeper "What Will the Cabinet of an Anti-Netanyahu Government Look Like?" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

Associated Press

Abbas Delays Palestinian Elections; Hamas Slams 'Coup'

Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmoud Abbas said that the main factions have agreed to delay the first elections planned in 15 years, citing a dispute with Israel over voting in east Jerusalem. The decision spares Abbas's Fatah party from what was widely expected to be another embarrassing defeat to the Islamic militant group Hamas. It will be quietly welcomed by Israel and Western countries, which view Hamas as a terrorist group and are concerned about its growing strength. But it leaves a political leadership in place that has failed to advance Palestinian hopes for statehood and is seen as increasingly corrupt and authoritarian. Speaking at the start of the meeting, Abbas focused his remarks on east Jerusalem, where Israel has yet to say whether it would allow voting by mail as in past elections and has enforced a ban on PA activities, including campaign events. [Dig Deeper "Abbas Officially Delays Palestinian Elections, Blaming Israel" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

IDF: Detention of 5 Palestinian Children Was a Mistake

The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) has said that the detention of five Palestinian children in the South Hebron Hills last month was a mistake. Israeli soldiers detained 5 children between the ages of 8 and 13 after settlers in an illegal outpost reported that they had trespassed. They were reportedly held for three hours at the Kiryat Arba police station before being released. An IDF investigation found that there was no reason to detain the children due to their young age. The children, three of whom are under the age of 12, said they came to the area of the Havat Maon outpost to pick edible wild plants. Hillel Garmi, an Israeli activist who was present at the scene, told The Times of Israel at the time that he had seen the children picking the plants close to the outpost, without apparently breaking into the area. The IDF searched for the children, detained them, and summoned the Israel Police to the scene, after settlers claimed the children trespassed on their property. [Dig Deeper “Palestinians Suspected of Firebombing Cabin at Illegal Outpost; Man Lightly Hurt” \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Our Warplanes Can Reach Iran, Israeli Minister Warns

Intelligence Minister Eli Cohen sharpened Israel's warnings against what it would deem a bad new nuclear deal between Iran and world powers. As President Joe Biden explores a possible return to the 2015 deal to contain Iran's nuclear program, Israel has stepped up calls for more sweeping curbs to be imposed on sensitive Iranian technologies and projects. Iran has ruled out any further limitations on Iranian actions. Reiterating Israel's position that it does not consider itself bound by the diplomacy, Cohen said: "A bad deal will send the region spiraling into war." "Anyone seeking short-term benefits should be mindful of the longer-term," he said. "Israel will not allow Iran to attain nuclear arms. Iran has no immunity anywhere. Our planes can reach everywhere in the Middle East - and certainly Iran." Iran says its nuclear ambitions are peaceful. [Dig Deeper “Blinken Meets Israel's Mossad Chief to Talk Iran” \(AI-Monitor\)](#)

Iran Seeks Tech in Sweden for Nuclear Weapons

Sweden's Security Service disclosed in its 2020 intelligence report that the Iran seeks Swedish technology for its nuclear weapons program, The Jerusalem Post can reveal. Iran, China and Russia are Sweden's biggest security threats, according to the report. The 88-page document said Tehran mainly conducts observation of Iranian refugees and dissidents who are viewed as a threat to the clerical regime and wages industrial espionage against Sweden. A damning section states that "Iran also conducts industrial espionage, which is mainly targeted against Swedish hi-tech industry and Swedish products, which can be used in nuclear weapons programs. Iran is investing heavy resources in this area and some of the resources are used in Sweden." The revelations about Iran's illicit nuclear weapons procurement activities in Sweden comes on the heels of a German intelligence document, which declared last week that Iran's regime has not ceased its drive to obtain weapons of mass destruction during 2020. [Dig Deeper “Iran Welcomes Saudi Arabia's ‘Change of Tone’” \(Reuters\)](#)

44 Dead, 150 Injured in Stampede on Mount Meron

At least 44 people, including children, were crushed to death at the conclusion of a [Lag B'Omer](#) celebration on Mount Meron, according to Magen David Adom (MDA). Medical emergency units also said that 150 were injured, including many in critical condition, during the incident. The Israeli army said a roof had collapsed in a "mass-casualty event," while rescue operations are currently underway to evacuate thousands who are still at the scene. There are however a number of conflicting accounts as to how the tragic incident began to unfold and police have opened an investigation. Some 300 buses sent by the Transportation Ministry are currently on their way to the scene but are stuck in traffic due to lack of police management, according to Channel 12. Tens of thousands of ultra-Orthodox Jews had gathered at Mount Maron for the annual Lag Baomer commemorations of 2nd-century sage [Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai](#) when at some point a massive stampede broke out, crushing dozens in the aftermath. The mountain is a pilgrimage site during Lag B'Omer, a Jewish celebration centered around bonfires. Thousands traditionally camp out before visiting the grave of Rabbi Yochai, one of the Tannaim from the Mishnaic period, on top of the mountain. "We are all praying for the recovery of the injured," [Netanyahu](#) said, calling the incident a "heavy disaster." [Dig Deeper "World Leaders Flood Israel With Condolences and Support Following Mount Meron Disaster" \(I24 News\)](#)

Israelis and Palestinians Transcend Hate While Mourning

The first time Yifat Mohar spoke to a group of teens about her brother's death as an Israeli soldier in Lebanon, she braced herself for a hostile response. Mohar was speaking together with a Palestinian man, Ahmad Al Jafari, who had also lost loved ones in the conflict. They were members of [the Parents Circle Families Forum](#), which brings together bereaved people across Israeli and Palestinian society. The Forum, which has 600 Israeli and Palestinian members, rests on the conviction that grief transcends political identity. The bereaved parents, children and siblings who participate hope that their shared mourning may even help end the conflict that took the lives of their loved ones. In Israeli society, where grief is often communal and political, the group has been subject to ongoing debate. Its joint memorial service, held on the night of Israel's Memorial Day for fallen soldiers and victims of terror, is an annual lightning rod for harsh criticism, and Israel's right-wing gov't has sought to prevent Palestinians from participating by trying to deny them entry permits into Israel. Critics of the group say it falsely equates the two sides, and a crowd of Israelis has protested the group's annual memorial service. But the event, which is co-hosted by a group called Combatants for Peace, has continued to grow since its inception 16 years ago. Earlier this month the ceremony, held virtually, drew more than 200,000 viewers worldwide.

The Plan for Change

By Ben Caspit

- On Wednesday, Yair Lapid held a long meeting with Zeev Elkin (New Hope), during which they both realized that this was their first personal meeting ever. The chemistry was excellent. They talked a lot about chess. The ice was broken. Lapid understood the importance of Elkin's experience and the need to ensure that he be in the loop, so that he not cause damage from the outside. It's too bad that no such meeting can be held with Ayelet Shaked, who is trying, with all her might, to hook up with Netanyahu and the Likud. She is addicted to Mrs. Netanyahu's humiliations, it seems. Shaked is pushing Bennett into Netanyahu's arms while his close advisers, Shalom Shlomo and Tal Gan Zvi, are torn. "Bennett is surrounded by Bibi-ists," says someone in the pro-change bloc, "and he is trying to remove himself from their bear hug."
- Lapid continues to demonstrate calmness. He has matured in the past few years. He is the responsible adult, but he should beware lest he end up in assisted living, rather than on Balfour Street. As Lapid sees it, it should be relatively simple to form a government. It all depends on Bennett. The moment that he decides that he is fully in, none of the other partners will dare to let the venture fail. That would mean a fifth election. The party perceived as responsible will be wiped out. That is why Lapid continues to wait for Bennett's final decision, who is playing on two courts simultaneously.
- Bennett proposed to Lapid that if Netanyahu's mandate expires without his having formed a government, they should go together to the president. Instead of one of them telling Rivlin, "I can form a government," they will say, "we can form a government." Lapid is on board, although he believes that Rivlin will assign the task to him. He has 45 endorsements, and he may have more from the Arab MKs. Lapid regards having the mandate to be the key. That will be the final demise of the possibility that Netanyahu will form the government as well as the possibility of direct elections (because Lapid will control the Arrangements Committee).
- Lapid has a clear advantage over Netanyahu when it comes to Bennett and Saar. "Naftali knows," Lapid says in closed-door meetings, "that I won't renege on agreements, no matter what. He will be first in an alternating premiership, that is what we agreed and that is what will be after Bibi returns the mandate. The threat of a fifth election also greatly weakens Bennett." Lapid is right. This is a competition between someone who has never kept a promise and someone whose word is ironclad and who upholds agreements. Bennett also realizes this. With Lapid, he will be prime minister, with Netanyahu, he will be Ofir Akunis' successor.

Neighbor Protocol

By Alon Ben-David

- After more than a year of staying away from the brink of the abyss, both Israel and Hamas received a reminder this week of how deep it is, and how easy it is to devolve into another futile confrontation. Both sides were equally taken aback, hit the brakes and pulled on the reins, and stopped before slipping down the slope. Another small round [of violence] is over but not done with. Ahead of us lie two weeks filled with intersecting volatile dates: **Laylat al-Qadr** (Night of Power), **Jerusalem Day**, **Eid al-Fitr**, **Nakba Day** and the Shavuot holiday. In the backdrop are the political mess on our side and the postponement of elections on theirs. Over a year of dealing with face masks and clashes with the demonstrators on Balfour Street have dulled the police's sensitivity to the flammable potential of Jerusalem, which does not need much to be set afire. Gratuitous friction with the Palestinians at Damascus Gate and gratuitous marches by the Israeli fascist organization were enough to fan the ever-smoldering coals.
- In the panicked situation assessment meetings that were convened last Saturday at the Kirya, the new police commissioner was still saying heatedly that there had been no change in the status quo in Jerusalem. In the evening, his aides already explained to him that the iron fences at Damascus Gate had indeed been set up a few years ago, but had not been enforced as firmly as this Ramadan. The GSS and the IDF urged the police to dismantle them—and they did so, wisely. The events in Jerusalem were a windfall for Hamas, which had been waiting for an opportunity to highlight itself as the resistance movement on the eve of the elections (which will not take place). For a moment, it dared to let go of the reins—and in one fell swoop, 36 rockets were fired from Gaza in one night. Hamas was alarmed and started to search for a way to stop, and quickly. IDF officials understood this, and chose a measured response in order to enable Hamas to impose restraint, but on the night after that rockets were fired at southern Israel again.
- This time the chief of staff demanded a harsher response. The prime minister and the defense minister preferred to give Hamas some more time to instill calm, and to give themselves some more time to squabble over the appointment of a justice minister. In retrospect, they were right: Hamas went out of its way to impose restraint on all the factions, and to put out the fire before it began to consume the edge of their cloak. The residents of the Gaza periphery communities had several difficult nights, and the media hurried once again to cultivate their narrative of misery. “How is it possible that the IDF is not responding with force?” the reporters cried out, as if a few more tons of explosives dropped on Gaza would have altered the equation in any way. How many more rounds we will have to undergo with Gaza before we understand that the answers to the fundamental problems of the Gaza Strip do not hang off the wings of fighter planes? In the constant media search for the victim of the day, there were reporters who went so far as to define the residents of the Gaza periphery communities as “second class,” as if the government and the IDF were making light of their security and were indifferent to their suffering.

- **Without understating the difficulty and the cumulative harm suffered by the residents of the Gaza periphery communities—they are not second class; they are absolutely first class. Israel’s finest people live in these communities, and it is no accident that every expansion of such a community is immediately sold out and it is impossible to find an available apartment there.**
- **The Gaza periphery communities are among the most successful and resilient communities that I know in Israel. Yes, they are frontier communities living next to unappealing neighbors, and as such, they are forced to meet a constant security challenge. But the strong social fabric that exists there, the good education system and the quality of life cause many Israelis to stand in line in order to live in the Gaza perimeter. Instead of giving them a sense of misery and victimhood, we should strengthen and praise them for their staying power and not sell them the illusion that another strike or another operation will change their situation.**
- **In the absence of any strategy, Israel insists on continuing to seal off Gaza from the air, sea and land, and takes care to keep it in an ongoing state of wretchedness. If anyone thinks that living next door to an unemployed neighbor, who has no water or electricity in their apartment, is a formula for good neighborly relations—they are invited to try. And no, even if we slap the neighbor in the face once in a while, it will not solve the problem. The IDF assesses that the events of this Ramadan are not yet over, and it is maintaining a high state of readiness around Gaza and in Judea and Samaria for the coming two weeks, also against the backdrop of the cancellation of the Palestinian Authority elections. Logic indicates that Hamas would not want to risk setting the Gaza Strip aflame, and it would prefer to stir up the situation in Jerusalem, but it is not certain that it has the ability. On the other hand, logic seems to have long since checked out of here, and it is doubtful whether of all places, it will choose to take up residence in the Gaza Strip.**