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Israel and Middle East News Update

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News Excerpts

April 5, 2021

Times of Israel

Lapid, Bennett To Reach Breakthrough on Rotation Deal

Yesh Atid leader Yair Lapid and Yamina chairman Naftali Bennett have reportedly reached a “breakthrough” in their discussions on forming a joint government to remove Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu from power. According to multiple unsourced Hebrew media reports, Lapid agreed to allow Bennett to serve as prime minister first, in a potential power-sharing agreement between them. According to Kan, Lapid told close associates following that meeting that “there are significant developments in the talks with Bennett and I assess that we will be able to form a coalition with him.” Lapid reportedly said that Bennett does not trust Netanyahu’s promises, and that “the ultra-Orthodox will join [our coalition] immediately after it’s formed.” The ultra-Orthodox United Torah Judaism and Shas parties are loyal allies of Netanyahu and have clashed with Lapid over his position on the military draft. [Dig Deeper “Ultra-Orthodox UTJ Split Over Potential Coalition with Ra’Am Support” \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

Netanyahu as President Supported by Knesset Majority

A majority of the MKs who will be sworn into the Knesset on Tuesday would vote for Netanyahu to be Israel’s next president, a senior Likud source close to Netanyahu told The Jerusalem Post. The source revealed that there is also a majority in the new Knesset to change the law and switch the vote from a secret ballot to an open one, which could significantly increase the chances of Netanyahu’s election. It would also help Netanyahu’s election chances because leaving the Prime Minister’s Residence on Balfour Street for the President’s Residence three blocks away could help end the two-and-a-half-year political stalemate. [Dig Deeper “Less Than Half of Israelis Support Government Enabled by Arab Parties” \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

Ynet News

Palestinians Approve 36 Groups To Run in May Election

Palestinian election officials announced that 36 candidate lists had been approved to run in legislative elections set for next month, the first in 15 years. The vote, which precedes a presidential election called for July 31, is part of an effort by the dominant Palestinian movements — Fatah secularists and Hamas Islamists — to boost international support for Palestinian governance. While Fatah and Hamas have reached an agreement for voting to take place in the West Bank and Gaza, the ability of Palestinians in East Jerusalem to vote remains uncertain. Israel bans all Palestinian political activity in Jerusalem, but Palestinian leaders insist voting be held in the city’s east, which they claim as the capital of a future Palestinian state. [Dig Deeper “Israel Adopting Hands-off Approach To Palestinian Elections” \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

Jordan: Prince Hamzah Plotted To 'Undermine Security'

Prince Hamzah bin Hussein, the half-brother of Jordan's King Abdullah II, conspired with others to "undermine the security" of the kingdom, deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Ayman Safadi said in a statement on Sunday. A foreign intelligence agency had contacted the former crown prince's wife "in order to obtain a plane that would smuggle them out of the country," the statement added, cited by [Haaretz](#). In addition, people in close circles to Prince Hamzah had contacts with "foreign groups" to carry out the scheme, Safadi stipulated. He further stated that 14 to 16 people were arrested, on top of two senior officials. Efforts were being made to "settle things within the royal family, subject to the law," Safadi added. Prince Hamza, who's currently under house arrest, on Saturday denied any role in the alleged plot to overthrow the monarch. [Dig Deeper "Jordan Claims Businessman Who Offered To Help Arrested Prince Is Former Mossad Agent" \(Axios\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

Israeli Intelligence Met with General Haftar's Son in Libya

Intelligence Ministry officials secretly met with Saddam Haftar, the son of the de-facto leader of Libya General Khalifa Haftar, a report by the Washington [Free Beacon](#) claims. Haftar, the son, is currently eyeing Libya's presidential seat, which will be decided in December of this year. Haftar, who many see as a proxy for his father, according to the report, has been seeking Western backing for his bid to run the country. The report claims that Israeli officials traveled to the country as a "signal" of support for Haftar's bid. It could be seen as per-emptive negotiations to normalizing relations between Libya and Israel, if the report stands to be true. While the Israeli embassy refused to comment to the report, the Free Beacon quoted a source familiar with the meeting saying that Haftar discussed "the situation in the region" and "his aspiration for stability of his country," claiming that the "Israelis are supporting him. Haftar would be running against Saif al-Islam Qaddafi, who is the son of the violently deposed Muammar Qaddafi.

Reuters

US, Iran Head To Vienna for Indirect Nuclear Deal Talks

Iran and the United States said they would hold indirect talks in Vienna as part of broader negotiations to revive the 2015 nuclear deal between Tehran and global powers. Tehran has ruled out face-to-face bilateral discussions, but the presence of both Iran and the US in the Austrian capital - welcomed by Washington as a "healthy step forward" - will help to focus efforts to bring all sides back into compliance with the accord. The aim is to reach an agreement within two months, said a senior official with the EU, the coordinator of the deal. Iran holds elections in June. A Western diplomat said a shuttle diplomacy approach would be adopted. White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki said the US saw the indirect talks as potentially constructive but was clear-eyed about the diplomacy. She said the US did not currently expect direct talks to take place, but remained open to them. [Dig Deeper "Israel, in First Comment, Says Troubled by US Position Ahead of Iran Talks" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

IAF Receives the 'Oron' Advanced Intelligence Jet

The Israel Air Force received the Oron advanced intelligence jet at the Nevatim Air Base in Southern Israel. The IDF said in a statement that the jet was developed by the Defense Ministry's Directorate of Research and Development, the IAF, the IDF Intelligence Directorate, the Navy and Israel Aerospace Industries. It said that it was designed and planned as part of lessons learned in Israel's past wars and operations. The statement said that it will be equipped with an automatic learning system that is based on an advanced algorithm and AI and will allow the different branches of the IDF to persevere and deepen its intelligence superiority. The Oron is based on the platform of the Gulfstream G550 business jet aircraft, which has outstanding flight performance and low maintenance costs, the statement said. The plane will also be equipped with advanced IAI radar and intelligence systems. These will provide the IDF with advanced intelligence abilities in the areas of visual coverage in real-time and in any weather and visibility conditions. The plane will allow creating a real-time comprehensive intelligence image, which includes the deployment of enemy ground forces – in closer and further circles – both in day-to-day routine and in wartime. [Dig Deeper "IDF Receives New Spy Plane It Says Will Help Gather Intel in Iran, Yemen, Iraq" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Netanyahu Accused of 'Severe Governmental Corruption'

Netanyahu appeared before the Jerusalem District Court on Monday at the start of the evidentiary stage of his corruption trial, with the lead prosecutor in the case accusing him of "a severe case of governmental corruption." With his legal future up in the air, the Israeli leader's political future was uncertain as well, as party representatives lined up at the President's Residence across town throughout Monday to give their recommendations for the country's next prime minister amid ongoing deadlock. As the court hearing was held, hundreds of protesters supporting and opposing Netanyahu gathered outside the building, singing and chanting. Police kept the two camps separate. Netanyahu denies wrongdoing in the cases, in which he has been charged with accepting improper gifts and seeking to trade regulatory favors with media moguls in exchange for positive coverage. [Dig Deeper "Q&A: What Are Netanyahu's Legal and Political Woes?" \(Ynet News\)](#)

Abdullah Doesn't Trust Anyone

By Smadar Peri

- It is important to note that notwithstanding the breakdown in political relations and the suspension of all personal relations between King Abdullah of Jordan and Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu that began two years ago, the king made sure to have his military officials along the border between the two countries pass on the message that “everything is under control” to their Israeli counterparts. Simply put: even if Mossad and the IDF Military Intelligence Directorate officials had quickly reported to Netanyahu in real time what was happening behind the scenes in Jordan, King Abdullah no longer trusts anyone—not the Israeli prime minister, not his Arab neighbors and—as has now been made patently evident—not his brothers in the royal family either. Some of them were arrested and others were placed under secure house arrest. There is still another group that he has yet to settle his score with.
- It has now become clear beyond any doubt that Netanyahu (and not just Netanyahu) knew quite a lot about what had been troubling King Abdullah in the past few weeks. Why, for example, was it so important for Abdullah to prevent the Israeli prime minister from flying to the Persian Gulf? The king wasn't just settling a score with Netanyahu. Rather, as has now become evident, [he did so in reaction to] the leader from Abu Dhabi, who had cooperated with the people who tried to subvert his rule. Amman, in the clearest words possible, suspects that Netanyahu would be very pleased to be rid of Abdullah, the “last king,” and to see a different leader installed in Jordan. Nor are they sure that Netanyahu's plans [to have Abdullah's successor come from] are limited to the royal family. The candidate could very well be a senior military official. The palace also suspects that Netanyahu made no effort to keep his preferences a secret and shared them with his new friends in the Persian Gulf.
- It is important to note that the reports about the scope of the arrests and the identity of the people who were taken into custody were deliberately inaccurate. The palace in Amman feels better served by reporting half-truths so as to leave the people following the turn of events in Iraq, Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf states half in the dark. But there is no doubt that every one of the parties, including Israel, has a special envoy who is very close to developments and is reporting back home. Suddenly, no one is asking whether the angry king is good for Israel or whether it would be better swerved having both banks of the Jordan come under Palestinian rule. Now they are also asking who among the people who wish to take power within the royal family would be the most convenient and useful for Israel; who would work with the Persian Gulf states, Iraq and would train his attention on Iran. Abdullah made it clear yesterday that he was staying in power and would cope with the burden of the refugees in Jordan, the burden of security and that he was no focusing on economic cooperation with Syria. Jordan, our small and rickety sister, hasn't found any partner to help put it back on its feet. Now we have added a new threat to that from within the royal family, and the story isn't over yet.

Time for Real Parity Plea

By Ben Caspit

- The cliffhanger we're living in isn't going to end even a single second before injury time is over. We are barely at the stage in which feelers are being put out. Nearly everything that currently is being reported ("Bennett has closed a deal with the Likud") are rumors and spins that are designed to sow panic and chaos in the rival camp. Nothing has been sewn up yet, but the situation is gradually becoming clearer and is positioning the different actors for their moment of truth—namely, for the moment in which they have to make decisions. That applies not only to the person who is currently described as the official key-holder, Naftali Bennett, but the other partners as well: Gideon Saar, Yair Lapid, the leaders of the "pro- change bloc" (Gantz, Michaeli, Horowitz and Liberman) as well as other actors.
- These are the facts at the current stage of things: Naftali Bennett doesn't have a real option with Netanyahu. As soon as the last ideologue on the right, Bezalel Smotrich, said clearly that he would not cooperate in any way with a government that was formed with any help by the United Arab List, that was the end of the story. Bennett has a fairly good option on the other side, with Yair Lapid and Gideon Saar, but it is still abstract, controversial and it needs to be honed, refined and improved. That is what they were supposed to begin to work on last night, in the Lapid-Bennett meeting (that was set, to the best of my understanding, for 11:00 PM).
- Saar and Bennett's problem is that if a "government of change" is formed, they will be in a minority in it against a majority of left-leaning MKs. Bennett and Saar have 13 seats between them. If they get Gantz to join them, they have 20. Lapid, Meretz and the Labor Party have 30 seats between them. Saar is eager to see Netanyahu ousted from power, but he won't do so if that propels what immediately will be defined as a "left- wing government" into power. Naftali Bennett is even more averse to doing that. The solution: a parity arrangement, just like in the outgoing government, but with one difference. This time the two partners to the parity arrangement will honor the agreement and will act in cooperation, as opposed to the situation in which Netanyahu violated the agreement as soon as it was signed and paralyzed the activity of state institutions by refusing to confirm any new appointments in the civil service.
- If Saar and Bennett are able to persuade Lapid and the other leaders of the "pro-change bloc" to agree to a parity government, and a balanced decision-making mechanism is formed, the option of a government of change will begin to take on real shape and form. One likely scenario is that ahead of the establishment of a government of that kind, several parties will join forces to create technical blocs: Saar, Bennett, Gantz and Liberman, for example. Together, they have 28 seats, which has parity with the number of seats that Lapid, Michaeli and Horowitz have combined. Fortunately for the pro-change bloc, the differences of opinion on foreign policy issues [primarily in all that pertains to dealing with the Palestinians] are all but nonexistent in the current era.

- No peace plan is on the table; no demands to remove settlements or to freeze construction are being made; there aren't any major "land mines" that are liable to tear apart the government that Saar, Liberman, Bennett and Lapid are supposed to form. They are all united in their opposition to the Iranian nuclear program; they all support regional peace; there is even a nearly complete consensus about the International Criminal Court in The Hague (if we ignore Nitzan Horowitz's unsuccessful remark during the campaign). On the face of things, that appears to be doable. Netanyahu is keenly aware of his situation, more than anyone else on the political map. Barring a miracle, he has no good options. The best option from his standpoint at present is a fifth election; but even if that happens, the outlook is grim. "Netanyahu has become a lot weaker within the Likud as well," one high-ranking figure in the governing party told me. "The penny is starting to drop for people. He's here because he's able to deliver the government [to the Likud]. But he hasn't delivered a real government for a long time now. Mainly he's delivered chaos. People are pretty fed up."
- Naftali Bennett and Gideon Saar both see just how desperate Netanyahu's situation is. Saar has been "sitting" on Bennett 24/7, everywhere and all the time. Bennett knows that Netanyahu's offer of 20,000 registered party members in the Likud and countless reserved slots on the party's slate is a fiction in the best-case scenario, and a characteristic sting operation in the more likely less-best-case scenario. A quick review of all of the people who struck a deal with Netanyahu in the past three decades will show Bennett that not a single one of them ever emerged alive from their deal. He doesn't want to end up being another charred political cadaver in a mass grave alongside the others who had believed Netanyahu. A fifth election is also a terrible option for Bennett. The last drops of fuel from the coronavirus will run dry by that point and Smotrich has presented a firm ideological alternative to the public.
- That spells trouble for Bennett. If he accepts the Lapid-Saar offer, he'll become prime minister in the fullest sense possible. Bennett will know how to behave as prime minister. He is creative, stately, is a fairly good manager and he is very hard-working. He'll be Israel's first religious prime minister in history. He'll break that glass ceiling. Is he there yet? No, not yet. The conditions haven't ripened and the decision hasn't been made yet. But he isn't really all that far off. What else might Netanyahu be able to do? First on the list is to win over defectors. But his chances of success are nil. No, Elkin and Shasha-Biton haven't "closed a deal" with Netanyahu. That too is a mendacious spin. Neither have other MKs in other factions. Everyone can see how desperate Netanyahu's situation is and no one is going to volunteer to swim over to climb on board his sinking ship.
- The other thing that Bibi can do is to apply tremendous pressure on Smotrich to persuade him to change his mind. If Smotrich changes his mind, then Bennett might change his mind, too. The two of them are interdependent. The chances of that happening are low. Ultimately, the effort to legitimize the Islamic Movement as a partner to a right-wing government is mainly ludicrous. The day will come when even the most miserable mouthpieces that serve Balfour Street will wake up and ask themselves: "what were we thinking when we lent our support to that abomination?"

- **The same people who scoured 15 years' worth of Facebook posts by Ibtisam Mara'ana's, are now presenting the Israeli chapter of the Muslim Brotherhood as the path to redemption. People who cursed and badmouthed a candidate who chose to join a Zionist party, who is committed to the state's institutions, who apologized for remarks (which truly were quite stupid) that she made in her youth, are now praising and vaunting Mansour Abbas, who views all of Israel to be occupied Palestine and considers Independence Day to be Nakba Day, only because he didn't use the word "occupation" in his speech (which was excellent). The same people who cast Gantz, Ashkenazi, Yaalon and Lapid as traitors for merely entertaining the thought of forming a government that had the external support of any Arab MK, are now sanctifying a government that is reliant on the support of the Islamic Movement. Do you recall their warnings about how "we won't be able to attack in Gaza" without prior authorization from Odeh and Tibi? But you'll be able to attack in Gaza without authorization from Abbas, whose party is formally a sister party to Hamas?**