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Israel and Middle East News Update

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April 6, 2021

Ynet News

Netanyahu Musters Most PM Endorsements

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu won a plurality of nominations by his fellow lawmakers to form the next government and potentially keep his position. The Likud chairman became the likely forerunner after ally-turned-foe Gideon Saar's New Hope decided to abstain and not recommend any candidate for prime minister to President Reuven Rivlin, thus ensuring Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu will have to most endorsements. Netanyahu received 52 votes, while Yesh Atid leader Yair Lapid had 45 and Yamina chief Naftali Bennett had seven.

Netanyahu has been backed by his own Likud Party and his right-wing electoral bloc. Lapid was backed by his own party, Blue & White, Yisrael Beitenu, Labor and Meretz. Bennett was backed by his own party. The Arab Ra'am and Joint List parties joined New Hope in refusing to endorse a candidate. [Dig Deeper "Do Not Write off Netanyahu Just Yet" \(Ynet News\)](#)

I24 News

Netanyahu: 'This is What an Attempted Coup Looks Like'

After Netanyahu appeared in court for his corruption trial, the Prime Minister lambasted on the state prosecution, Israel Police and the media, alleging an attempted political coup against him. "The prosecution is on a witch-hunt. They were looking for me. Whitewashed investigations conducted illegal searches and erased recordings. And the worst of all: It blackmailed witnesses with severe threats to the point of breaking up families," Netanyahu said at a press conference. "This is what an attempted coup looks like." the evidentiary stage of Netanyahu's graft trial began at the Jerusalem District Court, where the state's lead prosecutor, Liat Ben-Ari, told the judges that the incumbent prime minister was involved in "a serious case of government corruption." [Dig Deeper "Israel's Netanyahu in Court as Parties Weigh in on His Fate" \(Associated Press\)](#)

Israel Hayom

Rivlin: Israelis Should Be 'Very Worried' About 5th Elections

[President Rivlin](#) kicked off consultations with party leaders, on who they want to see tasked with forming Israel's next government. In an address ahead of the consultations, Rivlin said, "The main consideration that will guide me is to give the task of forming the government to the Knesset member with the highest chance of succeeding in forming a government that will be backed by the new Knesset. The Office of the President broadcasted the meetings live on social media. According to Channel 12, the president plans to ask party chiefs for their second-best pick options and scenarios that they reject, to get a better understanding of the fault lines on the political scene. Rivlin is expected to task one of the lawmakers with forming a government, giving the person 28 days to do so.

Associated Press

Palestinian Leader Heads To Germany for Medical Checkup

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas flew to Jordan by helicopter ahead of an official visit to Germany on which he will undergo a health exam, officials said. His office did not provide any further details on the trip, which was not announced in advance. A Palestinian official said Abbas would undergo a “routine health check” in Germany. The 85-year-old Abbas, a heavy smoker with a history of heart problems, has attended public events in recent days and there was no indication he was ill. He received the first dose of a coronavirus vaccine last month. Abbas has never chosen a successor and a number of senior members of his Fatah party are believed to be eyeing the position. The Palestinian leader’s popularity has plummeted in recent years as he has failed to make progress in achieving an independent state or mending ties with Hamas, and as he has presided over an increasingly authoritarian Palestinian Authority.

Jerusalem Post

Israel Challenges Biden, Plans To Advance Har Homa Project

Israel plans to advance a 540-unit extension to the contentious east Jerusalem Jewish neighborhood of Har Homa in its first direct challenge to the Biden administration on Jerusalem. The Local Planning Committee is set to discuss the Har Homa project, along with 26 other projects located on both sides of the Green Line. It includes building projects for Arab neighborhoods. “The planned discussions on objections to the Har Homa plan is the second-to-last stage in the plan’s approval process,” the left-wing group Ir Amim said. Israel has supported Jewish building throughout Jerusalem, which it considers to be its united and undivided capital. The international community has opposed such building in east Jerusalem, which it maintains is the future capital of a Palestinian state. The Biden administration’s position on Jerusalem has been less clear than its stance on West Bank settlements. It has upheld the declaration by the Trump administration that Jerusalem is Israel’s capital, and it also has not rescinded the decision to allow Americans born anywhere in the city to register their place of birth as Israel, something that had previously been forbidden.

Times of Israeli

Iran Claims To Arrest ‘Israeli Spy’

Iran claimed through state media to have arrested an Israeli spy in the country, as well as other people who were in contact with other international intelligence agencies. “An Israeli spy has been arrested in Iran’s East Azerbaijan province... also other spies who were in contact with several countries’ intelligence services have been arrested as well,” Iranian media quoted an Intelligence Ministry official as saying. Iran occasionally announces the detention of people it claims are foreign spies, including for the US and Israel, without any further report on their fates. Israel and Iran are thought to be in a wide-ranging espionage battle that has been going on for decades. The rivalry escalated in recent years, after Iran began accelerating its nuclear program. It was given another boost after the administration of former president Trump in 2018 withdrew from the nuclear deal Iran had reached with world powers. [Dig Deeper “Iran Talks Tough Ahead of Indirect Nuclear Negotiations with US” \(AI-Monitor\)](#)

Reuters

Prince Hamza Pledges Allegiance To King After Mediation

Jordan's Prince Hamza pledged allegiance to King Abdullah after mediation by the royal family, two days after he was placed under house arrest and accused of trying to destabilize the country. Prince Hamza signed a letter in which he placed himself at the monarch's disposal after a meeting on Monday with Prince Hassan, the king's uncle, and other princes, the royal court said. The half-brother of King Abdullah and former heir to the throne said in a voice recording released by Jordan's opposition on that he would not comply after being barred from any activity and told to keep quiet. While Prince Hamza is not seen as a direct threat to the king, his actions suggested he wanted to shore up his position with the Jordanian public after being removed from the royal succession. It is unclear why the kingdom decided to crack down on Prince Hamza now, but he put himself at growing risk by stepping up visits in recent weeks to tribal gatherings where the king and his government have been criticized more openly. [Dig Deeper "Jordan Rocked by Allegations Against Former Crown Prince" \(Al-Monitor\)](#)

Reuters

US, UAE Pledge Joint Effort To Finance Decarbonization

The United States and the UAE will work together on coordinating finance to decarbonize the economy, focusing on areas including hydrogen, renewable energy and low carbon urban design, a joint statement said. Climate envoy John Kerry, who is leading efforts to get countries to step up commitments to cutting emissions, during a visit to UAE took part in a Middle East and North Africa (MENA) climate dialogue in Abu Dhabi. The climate dialogue concluded with another statement that was signed by Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Kuwait, Qatar, Sudan, the UAE and the US pledging to accelerate climate action, mobilize investment in a new energy economy and help the world's most vulnerable cope with climate change. Kerry is also due to visit India, the world's third biggest carbon emitter, to try to narrow differences on climate goals. His efforts are ahead of a summit of 40 leaders on April 22-23 called by President Joe Biden and, later this year, world leaders gather for the United Nations climate summit to build on a 2015 Paris accord to limit global warming.

Out of His Hands

By Nadav Eyal

- It Binyamin Netanyahu became prime minister more than a decade ago. His rule was undisputed and all but without competition during most of those years. Last night, as this newspaper was being put to print, he was the closest he has ever been to losing his grip on power. This morning, when he walks into the courthouse, he will do so as a man whose political fate is in the hands of others. Might he still be saved, might make his way to another election and win? Of course. But the magician is beginning to run out of tricks, and his enchantments are weaker than ever before. The increased talk about the presidency is a sign of weakness; that foolish and dangerous solution is unviable in any event because Gideon Saar and Naftali Bennett are not going to lend a hand to a constitutional change of government in Israel in order to enable a legally-immune President Netanyahu to run state affairs instead of the prime minister. Not only have his tricks run dry, but so have his shticks.
- However, it would be a mistake to write off Netanyahu, who is one of the longest-surviving leaders in the West, but he is in a tough situation. Not only does the entire right-wing bloc, including Bennett, not have a parliamentary majority, but his last and flimsiest hope to get the southern chapter of the Islamic Movement to sit in the same government alongside Ben Gvir, Smotrich and the party of hate, Noam, has also evaporated. As of last night, Yair Lapid was playing against an unmanned goal and only two options remained: either the pro- change bloc will successfully form a government headed by Bennett, or new elections will be called. “And elections aren’t going to be called,” said a high-ranking Yamina member.
- Bennett drew nearer to achieving the option that appeared and still appears to be a difficult acrobatic feat of science fiction: a government with Nitzan Horowitz and Ayelet Shaked, Merav Michaeli and Matan Kahane. The more realistic that option becomes—and representatives on behalf of Lapid and Bennett sat down last night to begin to hammer out the details—the closer Binyamin Netanyahu comes to having to make some truly difficult decisions. For example, wouldn’t he be better off dropping his status as a candidate for prime minister and giving that status to someone else in the Likud, such as Yisrael Katz, for example, and serving—under a law that would allow this despite the fact that he is on trial—as a senior minister in a fully right-wing government, where he could wait for a new chance?
- We’re working with delicate machinery right now, Lapid said to Bennett. You almost certainly won’t be able to get the mandate from the pro-change bloc to form the government without saying publicly that you want to be its prime minister and without our knowing with certainty that you aren’t going to take that mandate and go with it to Netanyahu. Presumably, Bennett replied by saying something along the lines of: If I do that, I’ll burn all my bridges to the right. Let’s assume that I’m willing to do that, how can we be sure that a government is actually going to be formed out of this mess? I might end up holding the short end of both sticks.

- **As of last night, the mechanics for forming a government of that kind still hadn't been worked out, and they probably won't be worked out today either. Agreements need to be reached about the different scopes of responsibility, legislation and a status quo on foreign policy issues, religion and state and several other volatile issues. Most important of all, that government is going to have to get things done. It won't be able to rely on slogans, such as "we'll fix the economy." Unless the two sides can reach an agreement about having the entire bloc endorse either Lapid or Bennett, the pro-change bloc (without the Joint List and the United Arab List, which are currently not inclined to endorse anyone) will have fewer endorsements than Netanyahu. And no one ought to write off Netanyahu prematurely. I wrote that above, but it can't hurt to write it again.**

In a Tailspin

By Ben Caspit

- If it looks like a tailspin, sounds like a tailspin and is out of control like a tailspin, then it's a tailspin. In the course of his "j'accuse" speech yesterday, it seemed that Binyamin Netanyahu had lost it. What was he trying to achieve, aside from demonstrating on live television the collapse of a leader trying to dismantle the institutions of state from the inside? If it has any impact on the judges, that impact will only be detrimental to his own interests. Public opinion—to put it delicately—isn't going to be shocked either by the litany of lies that the defendant spread yesterday with uncharacteristic munificence.
- At the time that he was preparing his denunciation, Netanyahu was confident that Gideon Saar would endorse Yair Lapid and that two or three Joint List MKs would follow suit. Lapid would receive the mandate, would form a government, and someone would have to go up the stairs to the living quarters [of the Prime Minister's Residence] and inform her that they have to start packing. Netanyahu realized that they were closing in on him, that the "big plot," which he has been talking about since the paratroopers dropped onto the Mitle pass [1956 Sinai Campaign], had finally arrived. So, he rushed to do the single thing he knows how to do out of habit, which is to talk on television.
- It turned out that for Saar, Bennett and Lapid, the work is laborious. So what did Netanyahu nevertheless achieve with his surreal performance? If he was trying to say something to the political players, then in this case too, he failed to achieve his goal. Netanyahu made his situation worse, instead of improving it. He looked like Galit Distal Atbaryan on steroids. In the morning, she made her incoherent "assassins" speech. In the evening, Netanyahu came along and did her one better. If we ignore for a moment the 52 MKs who support him, does Netanyahu actually believe that a speech of that kind, which was entirely an irresponsible and a blatant attack by a leader against his own country, might persuade Naftali Bennett to prefer him over the alternative?
- After all, Netanyahu knows what Bennett really thinks about him. He came by this honestly. So now he is proving to Bennett that he is no longer fit to run the country. It's hard to digest the fact, which keeps being proven, that the man who is ostensibly the leader of the country continues to attack it in order to dismantle it from the inside. He never misses a beat, never blushes, never falters while accusing this country's most important institutions of a "coup" and other delusions. Pay attention to his arguments: calls on Ilan Yeshua's cellphone were deleted! Yeshua deleted calls from Iris Elovitch!! What a plot! Woe to such an attempted coup!
- He even read a quote from one of these calls, in which Ms. Elovitch said that she wanted the Walla website to be "balanced." That's it, Netanyahu found the smoking gun. He only wanted to balance Walla. His intentions were good. It's the detestable leftists in the State Attorney's Office, in the police, in the media and in the New Israel Fund who framed him. The truth is: not a single call was deleted. An expert for the defense, who examined Yeshua's cellphone, found an app on it that the prosecution did not know about.

- There were ten other recorded calls on the app, which had not been known until now. Of them, seven were relevant to Case 4,000. They were transcribed and their contents were given to the defense. As far as I know, they worsen Iris Elovitch's situation rather than improve it, and are completely irrelevant to defendant number one, amounting to "more of the same." Another argument that he made was the fact that the prosecutor, Liat Ben Ari, was not present at the [pre-trial] hearing! She was supposed to be there, he cried, and to listen to my defense lawyers with a willing and open heart! But she chose not to be. This proves, in his thinking, that it's "all fixed from the outset."
- Shifting from delusions to reality: the hearing was scheduled for half a year ago to take place over the course of two days. Then another day was added. Ben Ari had made holiday reservations for an important family event. But then Netanyahu's lawyers asked to extend the hearing by another two days. Ben Ari made a bad decision (in my opinion): she left for her vacation as scheduled. She attended the first two days of the hearing in full and missed the second two days. The point is: the first two days of the hearing were devoted to Case 4,000. Those are the two days that she was there. And yesterday, the court discussed Case 4,000. In other words, her absence in the second two days is irrelevant for now. But that's not the real issue.
- After all, Ben Ari's absence from the two days of the hearing is immaterial. Netanyahu knows that. There were 25 attorneys from the prosecution at the hearing, headed by Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit. It was Mandelblit who made the decision in the end, not Ben Ari or anyone else. Precise minutes were taken of the hearing, not a word is missing, and Ben Ari made up for what she missed immediately upon her return. Not only that, but Netanyahu's lawyers also later sent hundreds more pages of material. The entire prosecution team went over them and read them as well. I very much hope, for Netanyahu's sake, that he has better arguments later.
- In a normal situation, Netanyahu should have long since declared himself incapacitated. He is unfit. He proves this almost every day. On the one hand, he declared, with trumpets blazing, that he can run a country with one hand and run a criminal trial with the other hand. In reality, he is doing neither. Instead of functioning as a defendant, he is trying to seize the role of accuser. He truly believes that he is Alfred Dreyfus. But that French-Jewish officer truly was persecuted. In this case, he is the one doing the persecuting. Israel is still a state of law. The walls that separate the branches must not be touched. Every citizen is equal before the law. Binyamin Netanyahu appears to have forgotten that. The political scene became very complicated yesterday: Yair Lapid and Naftali Bennett were unable to reach agreement in the short time they had at their disposal. Gideon Saar and Zeev Elkin had proposed that they hold negotiations two weeks ago, but it was more urgent for Bennett to go to the desert [on a family vacation] and Lapid was in no rush; their meetings were good, but were not enough. There are still quite a few matters to work out. Bennett wants to ensure that the government that he heads will not be a parity government. He wants a mechanism in place that will enable him to dictate the pace. Lapid is pulling in the other direction. The prevailing assessment is that the gaps between them are bridgeable. There are plenty of professional "gap closers" around. The problem is time.

- **At one stage, Saar proposed to the sides that the entire pro-change bloc endorse both Bennett and Lapid. Both rejected the proposal. Lapid has good reasons of his own. So does Bennett. Bennett does not want to be identified with the pro-change bloc until the last moment. He will jump into the Rubicon only after he makes sure that there is water in it. In this situation, and after deliberation, Saar was forced yesterday to decide not to endorse anyone. The reason is simple: had he endorsed Bennett, that would not have made any difference. Had he endorsed Lapid, it would have pushed Bennett back into Netanyahu's arms. As this column is being written, both can still ask the president for an extension, and receive it too.**
- **And if not? The contingency plan is simple: everyone knows that Netanyahu has no government. Smotrich and Ben Gvir and their crowd won't join in any government that is formed with help of any kind from the United Arab List, whose top members yesterday joined the festivities over the release of the murderer of the soldier, the late Moshe Tamam. If Netanyahu indeed fails to form a government, it will be easier for Bennett to form a government of change that he heads. The moment the Netanyahu option evaporates, the Rubicon waters will be far less choppy. In any event, until whatever is going to happen does happen, we can look forward to several weeks of craziness, taut nerves and reversals. Better keep the pregnant women and children far from the screens.**