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Israel and Middle East News Update

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News Excerpts

April 7, 2021

Ynet News

Netanyahu Says Viable Coalition 'Within Reach'

After receiving the mandate to form the next government from President Reuven Rivlin, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called on fellow lawmakers to end their boycotts of him and join his coalition in an effort to avoid unprecedented fifth elections in two years. Israel's longest-serving prime minister said he considers himself "the prime minister of everyone" and vowed that a government under his leadership would continue investing large sums in Israel's Arab sector which suffers from crumbling infrastructure and high crime and poverty rates.

Netanyahu also mentioned the Iranian threat and reiterated his commitment to prevent Tehran from acquiring nuclear capabilities. He also promised to fight the International Criminal Court's "absurd decision to accuse our soldiers, commanders of war crimes" against the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip. [Dig Deeper "As Coalition Talks Take Shape, Netanyahu Preps Plan B" \(Al-Monitor\)](#)

I24 News

Yamina May Forge Partnership with Lapid if Netanyahu Fails

If Netanyahu fails to form Israel's next government, Yamina leader Naftali Bennett may turn to Yesh Atid chairman Yair Lapid to cobble together a new center-right coalition, Israeli media reported. According to Channel 13, citing sources close to the Yamina, Bennett is demanding that whatever the final terms of their arrangement, he serve first as prime minister in a rotation deal with Lapid and disproportionate influence in key legislative decisions. Lapid has reportedly offered to go second the rotation deal, despite the fact that his party won 17 seats in the election, while Yamina only earned 7. But Lapid is holding firm against one of Bennett's key demands that he be given veto powers over legislation that counters his right-wing views. Bennett has also threatened to negotiate a deal with Netanyahu, whose path to the premiership is still unclear and is set to [meet](#) the interim premiere later this week for further negotiations.

Associated Press

Israel, Palestinians at Odds Over Deadly West Bank Shooting

Israel and the Palestinians put forth competing claims after Israeli troops shot and killed a Palestinian man at a temporary vehicle checkpoint in the West Bank near Jerusalem. The military said the soldiers thwarted an attempted car-ramming attack in the village of Bir Nabala. But the man's wife, who was in the car with him and was wounded by the gunfire, said the couple followed the soldiers' instructions and posed no threat. Palestinian attackers have carried out a series of car-ramming attacks in recent years, often targeting soldiers in the occupied West Bank. But rights groups say Israeli troops often use excessive force, or in some cases kill innocent people wrongly identified as attackers. The army did not respond to a request for comment, saying only that the incident was being investigated.

US Lawmakers Introduce Bill To Review PA Textbooks

A bipartisan group of lawmakers reintroduced [the Peace and Tolerance in Palestinian Education Act](#). The bill requires the Secretary of State to submit a report to Congress reviewing textbooks produced by the Palestinian Authority (PA). The report from the State Department will require the following determination of “whether content and passages encouraging violence or intolerance toward other nations or ethnic groups have been removed from such curriculum,” and an “assessment of the steps the PA is taking to reform such curriculum at schools to conform with standards of peace and tolerance.” The report will also require determining whether US foreign assistance is used, directly or indirectly, to fund the dissemination of such curriculum by the PA, and a detailed report on how US assistance is being used to address curriculum that encourages violence or intolerance toward other nations. [Dig Deeper “US Ducks Question on Whether East Jerusalem Is Palestinian Capital”](#) (Jerusalem Post)

Sudanese Cabinet Votes To Repeal Israel Boycott Law

Sudan’s Cabinet voted to repeal a 1958 law that forbade diplomatic and business relations with Israel, it said in a statement, the latest development in relations between the two countries. The move needs the approval of a joint meeting of Sudan’s sovereign council and Cabinet, which serves as Sudan’s interim legislative body, to come into effect, the Cabinet said. While Sudan’s civilian authorities have maintained that the decision to initiate relations with Israel would be left to the yet-to-be-formed transitional parliament, the vote is seen as a step that could pave the way for official visits and further diplomatic ties. Normalization with Israel is seen in Sudan as an initiative led by the military, which has welcomed visits by Israeli officials in recent months. One of those officials, Intelligence Minister Eli Cohen, welcomed Khartoum’s move. [Dig Deeper “Palestinian, International Observers Weigh Biden Approach To Palestinian Conflict”](#) (Al-Monitor)

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin To Visit Israel Next Week

Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin is expected to travel to Israel next week, according to Israeli officials. This will be the first Cabinet-level visit to the Middle East from the Biden administration, which has been shifting attention away from the region and toward China and Russia. Austin is expected to arrive on Sunday and meet with Netanyahu, Defense Minister Benny Gantz and Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi. The agenda will include Iran and other regional issues like Syria and Lebanon. Israeli officials also intend to raise US-Israel security understandings, reached in the final weeks of the Trump administration, on maintaining Israel's qualitative military edge in the region. Israel wants to ensure the Biden administration is committed to those understandings. It's not yet clear whether Austin will make other stops in the Middle East. In recent weeks, there has been an escalation of tensions between Israel and Iran in the Red Sea and the Gulf. [Dig Deeper “Israel-Iran Sea Skirmishes Escalate as Mine Damages Iranian Military Ship”](#) (NY Times)

Russian Diplomat: Round of Iran Nuclear Talks 'Successful'

A Russian diplomat participating in talks to save the Iran nuclear deal said Tuesday's meeting had been "successful," though their salvage efforts will take time. In the lead-up to the meeting, the US signaled it was ready to review key sanctions on Iran if it comes into compliance with a nuclear deal ahead of European-led indirect talks aimed at salvaging the accord. The State Department confirmed that Rob Malley, the new point man on Iran named by the Biden administration, was traveling to Vienna to lead the US delegation but that he did not expect to meet with his Iranian counterpart. The meetings are aimed at breaking a logjam as Biden supports a return to the 2015 nuclear deal but has insisted that Iran first reverse nuclear steps it took after former President Trump walked out of the accord in 2018. [Dig Deeper "State Department Says Willing to Review Key Sanctions on Iran" \(I24 News\)](#)

AI-Monitor

US Aircraft Carrier Returns To ME as Suez Canal Opens

The USS Dwight D. Eisenhower aircraft carrier and accompanying destroyers passed through the Suez Canal on Saturday following a weeklong stoppage of traffic through the vital thoroughfare caused by a stuck container ship. The Eisenhower approached Port Said following Egypt's announcement that the stuck ship, the [MV Ever Given](#), had been dislodged from its location near the canal's southern mouth on the Red Sea. The US carrier is likely to take command of the US Navy-led Task Force 50 in the Gulf region. The French carrier Charles de Gaulle took command of the task force at Washington's request late last month, according to Naval News. Its entry into Middle Eastern waters marks the first US carrier strike group presence in the region since January when Secretary of Defense Austin sent the USS Nimitz home after an extended deployment to the region amid threats from Iranian leaders. In recent months, ballistic missiles and explosive drone attacks on Saudi Arabia by Yemen's Iran-backed Houthi rebels have ticked up as the Biden administration has diplomatically pushed to end Yemen's civil war. [Dig Deeper "Egypt Plans 'New Delta' To Boost Food Security" \(AI-Monitor\)](#)

Rivlin Made Every Effort not to Have His Picture Taken with Netanyahu

By Itamar Eichner

- **President Reuven Rivlin appeared to do everything in his power to avoid having a joint picture taken with Netanyahu. It began in the morning, when Rivlin chose not to invite Netanyahu to the President's Residence. It was unusual, but not unprecedented, not to have Netanyahu present by his side when he announced his decision to assign the mandate to form the next government to him. That decision averted a joint photograph of the two men shaking hands, with Rivlin wishing Netanyahu good luck—as was the case when Rivlin gave Netanyahu the mandate to form a government in April and September 2019. "I am aware of the position held by many people that the president should refrain from assigning the task to a candidate who is under indictment.**
- **However, according to law and the court's ruling, a prime minister can continue to serve in his capacity even under indictment," said Rivlin in a brief statement, clearly uncomfortable with the situation. "The president is no substitute for either the legislator or the court. It is the Knesset's job to decide on the substantive and ethical issue of the fitness of a candidate who is under indictment to serve as prime minister," said Rivlin, who added: "This decision is not an easy decision, in my opinion, on the moral-ethical plane."**
- **Instead of inviting Netanyahu to the President's Residence, Rivlin asked President's Residence Director General Harel Tubi to deliver the mandate to Netanyahu's chief of staff at the Prime Minister's Residence. The disconnect between Rivlin and Netanyahu continued later in the day at the Knesset. The president did not pose for the traditional photograph with Knesset Speaker Yariv Levin, Supreme Court President Esther Hayut and Prime Minister Netanyahu. A spokesperson at the President's Residence said that Rivlin has routinely chosen not to attend events with spouses ever since his wife, Nechama, passed away. Levin and Hayut's spouses were present for the photograph but Sara Netanyahu, who initially had planned to attend the event at the Knesset, canceled her appearance.**
- **Rivlin also skipped the traditional photograph with Knesset faction leaders. An official with the Knesset's Spokespersons Office said that Rivlin had been scheduled to take part in the photograph with the prime minister, the president of the Supreme Court and the Knesset speaker, but that officials in the President's Residence said that Rivlin had not been scheduled to do so. Minister Miri Regev attacked Rivlin, saying: "The president hosts [guests] at his residence not as a persona [sic] but as an institution. And as an institution he should have invited the prime minister, because that is the custom every year [sic]. By not doing that he made a mistake, erred, that isn't part of the protocol and, as president, he needs to act in keeping with protocol." President's Residence officials rejected the allegations and said that last year, too, the president sent the mandate via courier rather than granting it at the President's Residence.**

- **It is nevertheless hard to ignore the bad blood between the president and the prime minister, and the enmity between the two men that has only worsened in the past few weeks as a result of personal attacks by Netanyahu's mouthpieces against Rivlin.**

Netanyahu's Got the Mandate, Bennett is Holding the Ball

By Anna Barsky

- Following President Reuven (Ruvy) Rivlin's decision to task Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu with forming a government, Netanyahu will begin to hold coalition negotiations. He has already scheduled a meeting with the heads of the Knesset factions that comprise his bloc. At the same time, however, the spotlight is on Yamina Party Chairman Naftali Bennett, who said, "The government that emerges from all this has to more-or-less represent the differences in opinion amongst the people, the national consensus—that is to say, it has to lean to the right, towards the national camp. "I didn't say 'towards extremism,' but overall the Jewish people are patriotic, it's what the people want: A stable, right-wing, patriotic coalition... Some people expect me to sell-out my nationalist principles in order to establish a left-wing government that I might head, at least in theory, all in the name of our good will to act responsibly, to produce stability.
- But they are mistaken: I don't know too many politicians who had a realistic chance to become prime minister in the immediate future and didn't jump at the opportunity. I had no such dilemma: I'll never sell-out my principles, the principles of Zionism and national unity, for any job in the world." At the same time Bennett also sent a message to Netanyahu, congratulating him on receiving the mandate and stressing that "everything is open. We'll approach all coalition negotiations in order to create a stable, right-wing government. I promise that [in] any government I join, regardless of who forms it, we will make sure that it will take pains to represent all the citizens of Israel while also doing absolutely everything we can to prevent a fifth election. [But] we will not sell-out our values or our political path."
- Beginning this week Likud MKs are forbidden to give interviews. Sources inside the party say privately that "Bennett's speech gave reason for the most guarded optimism, but it appears that the price he's going to demand for joining a Netanyahu-led coalition is going to be too high, and there won't be [enough] progress made before the Yamina chairman [closes an agreement with Yair Lapid]. To date, all our talks with Yamina representatives haven't progressed one millimeter." The source added that the prevailing opinion inside the Likud is that "Bennett is inclined to cut a deal with Lapid, and that all his nice statements about preferring a right-wing [government] are for show, nothing more, in order to prepare his voters." In internal conversations, Likud activists are already talking about exerting public and political pressure on Bennett and other Yamina officials. Bennett's phone number was published in the group and activists called for "bombarding him with text messages."
- At the same time, members of other Knesset factions say there have been efforts by members of the Netanyahu bloc to hold talks about drawing defectors [to support Netanyahu] in order to get to the requisite majority. That's what happened two days ago at a Yisrael Beiteinu conference in Shefaram, when the deputy mayor said he had received a call from a senior Likud minister asking him to get him a meeting with a Yisrael Beiteinu MK, Hamad Amar [who lives in Shefaram].

- **The meeting was held, and the Likud representative offered Amar a reserved slot on the Likud election list for the next two rounds of elections, as well as a senior ministerial portfolio in the government that emerges [from this round of negotiations], if he were to join the Likud. Amar refused the offer and told Yisrael Beiteinu Party Chairman Avigdor Liberman about it. Members of the Blue and White Party also say there have been efforts to get one-third of their Knesset faction to split off to join the Netanyahu bloc. As of this writing the efforts to attract defectors from the pro-change camp have not borne any fruit. New Hope Party Chairman Gideon Saar said there are two realistic possibilities for forming a government: “A patriotic government headed by somebody else [other than Netanyahu]. I know this is a radical idea, but we would do well to start getting used to it. The other option is a government of change with special conditions that would allow New Hope to uphold its principles, it’s values and it’s world outlook.” Saar repeated that in the weeks since the election he and his party officials have worked hard to form a government. He promised that his party would continue its efforts to form a government and to prevent a fifth election.**