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Israel and Middle East News Update

Thursday, April 8

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News Excerpts

April 8, 2021

Times of Israel

Ultra-Orthodox Won't Stick with Netanyahu in 5th Election

After sticking with Likud leader Benjamin [Netanyahu](#) through four inconclusive elections, ultra-Orthodox allies of the incumbent prime minister have told him that they will not follow him to another round of voting, Kan reported. Despite Shas and UTJ's public expressions of support, reports said they told Netanyahu that they will not go with him to fifth elections. The Haredi parties noted Yamina chief Naftali Bennett's potential options for forming a government and predicted he would not forgo the opportunity to be prime minister. Netanyahu is scheduled to meet with Bennett, who has said he is open to talks with Likud and called for a [right-wing](#) government but hasn't committed to backing Netanyahu. Even with Yamina's support, Netanyahu's bloc would be two seats short of a majority, with limited options for putting together a government. [Dig Deeper "Ideological Foes Weigh Pact to Oust Netanyahu" \(Axios\)](#)

AI-Monitor

Netanyahu Slams Iran Nuclear Deal on Holocaust Day

Netanyahu heavily criticized the Iran nuclear deal during a speech on the Holocaust. His remarks could be a [message](#) to the United States as it attempts to reenter the agreement. Netanyahu spoke at an event for Yom HaShoah, Israel's Holocaust Remembrance Day. Netanyahu characterized an Iranian acquisition of nuclear weapons as an "existential threat" to Israel that his country would fight. "I say to our closest friends, too: 'A deal with Iran that paves Iran's path to a nuclear weapon, a weapon that threatens us with annihilation, will not obligate us,'" he said. "Only one thing will obligate us: to prevent those who wish to destroy us from carrying out their plans." "The nuclear deal with Iran is once again on the table. Such deals with extreme regimes are worthless," he said. His reference to Israel's "closest friends" could be a reference to the Biden administration, since the US is Israel's largest political and military ally.

Times of Israel

Gantz Says Israel Acts 'Wherever There's a Need'

Defense Minister Benny Gantz said Israel would take military action anywhere there was a threat against it, after an American official attributed a mine attack on an Iranian ship in the Red Sea the previous day to Israeli naval commandos. Limpet mines were reportedly detonated on the [MV Saviz](#), a cargo ship off the coast of Yemen that has been allegedly used for years by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps as a command-and-control center for its operations in the region. Israeli officials have refused to comment on the matter, in line with a longstanding policy of ambiguity regarding its military actions against Iran in the region, save for those that are direct, immediate retaliations for attacks on Israel. [Dig Deeper "Mossad Chief to Travel to Washington to Present Evidence Against Iran" \(I24 News\)](#)

Palestinian Leader 'in Good Health' Ahead of Election

The Palestinian president has received a clean bill of health ahead of the anticipated Palestinian elections next month, his office said. The 85-year-old Mahmoud Abbas flew to Germany earlier this week for medical examinations and will return to the West Bank today, according to the official Palestinian news agency Wafa. Abbas's office said he was "in good health." Abbas was elected to a four-year term as president in 2005 but has remained in office ever since. The Palestinians have not held elections since 2006, when the Islamic militant group Hamas won a landslide victory in parliamentary elections. A year later Hamas ousted Abbas's Fatah party's forces from the Gaza Strip, leaving Abbas in control of Palestinian areas in the West Bank. Abbas has called for parliamentary elections on May 22 and a presidential election on July 31, but it remains unclear whether the votes will take place. [Dig Deeper "US & Israel Wary of Potential Hamas Win in Palestinian Elections"](#) (Axios)

US To Restore More Than \$200 Million in Aid To Palestinians

The Biden administration plans to provide at least \$235m in US aid to the Palestinians, restoring a large part of the assistance that was cut off by then-President Trump, people familiar with the matter said. The plan calls for \$150m through the United Nations relief agency UNRWA, \$75m in US economic support and \$10m in development funding, according to a notice emailed by the administration to congressional offices. The new administration has previously pledged to resume hundreds of millions of dollars in economic and humanitarian assistance and work toward reopening the Palestinians' diplomatic mission in Washington. Biden's aides have also made clear they want to re-establish the goal of a negotiated [two-state solution](#) as a priority in US policy on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. But they have moved cautiously so far, and any major steps are likely to wait following Israel's inconclusive election, which will be followed by Palestinian elections. [Dig Deeper "Israel Slams Biden's Resumption of UNRWA Funding for Palestinians"](#) (Jerusalem Post)

Israel Fails To Decide on Response To ICC

A meeting of senior government echelons on how to react to the International Criminal Court's announced intention to probe alleged Israeli war crimes, ended inconclusively, two days before the deadline to respond. Prime Minister Netanyahu, Defense Minister Benny Gantz and Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi, their ministries, the Justice Ministry and the IDF presented their recommendations. The meeting was the first since the ICC sent an official letter last month notifying Israel of its planned investigation. Netanyahu, Gantz and Ashkenazi will need to decide whether to maintain the current policy of not cooperating with the ICC, or to work with it. If cooperation is chosen, Israel's options include opening its own probe of war crimes accusations against Israeli soldiers and officials. However, that would risk legitimizing those claims, and it does not address the settlements issue, which the ICC also plans to investigate. A further government meeting is planned before the April 9 deadline.

King Abdullah Says Sedition Quashed, Country Stable

King Abdullah II addressed the unprecedented public rift within the royal family for the first time, portraying it as an attempted sedition involving his half-brother that had been “nipped in the bud,” but caused him anger, pain and shock. The monarch appeared to be doubling down on the allegations against Prince Hamzah, a former crown prince, while at the same time trying to reassure Jordanians that the nation was returning to business as usual. But even if the current crisis is eventually defused, major challenges loom for the Western-allied monarchy as it confronts growing internal dissent. The statement, presented by a newsreader on Jordan TV, dealt with the internal crisis that erupted over the weekend when Hamzah was confined to his home and accused of being part of a plot to destabilize the kingdom. Authorities have imposed a sweeping gag order on any coverage of the royal dispute in a sign of how sensitive they are to how it is perceived. The gag order and the king’s willingness to sanction his own brother also reaffirmed what Jordanians understand as their “red line” — an absolute ban on criticizing the monarch or the royal family. [Dig Deeper “US Prods Israel To Provide More Water To Jordan” \(Axios\)](#)

Egypt Warns of Potential for Conflict Over Ethiopian Dam

The Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi on Wednesday warned of the risk of conflict over Ethiopia’s giant dam on the Blue Nile after talks involving the two countries and Sudan ended without progress. Ethiopia is pinning its hopes of economic development and power generation on the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, which Egypt fears will imperil its supply from the Nile. Sudan is also concerned about the impact on its own water flows. Delegations from the three governments met earlier this week in Kinshasa in the Democratic Republic of Congo but failed to bridge their differences. Egypt and Sudan, in statements after the Kinshasa meeting, accused Ethiopia of intransigence on restarting negotiations in advance of a second filling of the dam this summer. Ethiopia said it could not enter into an agreement that infringed on its rights to utilize the Nile. [Dig Deeper “Nile Dam Talks Fail, Crisis Escalates” \(Al-Monitor\)](#)

Negotiations in a Minefield

By Yuval Karni

- Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu only has 26 days to form a coalition, 26 days in which he will have to assemble a puzzle with missing pieces. Breathing down his neck are political rivals who don't intend to relent. Netanyahu will meet today with two major landmines on his way to forming a government. Religious Zionist Party Chairman Bezalel Smotrich and Yamina Chairman Naftali Bennett. Considering Bennett and Smotrich's recent statements, Netanyahu's task will be complicated. First, he will have to persuade the chairman of the Religious Zionist Party to agree to be in a government that is supported by the UAL. He will also have to enlist the Yamina chairman and ensure that has not joined Yair Lapid's pro- change bloc in any way. High-ranking Likud figures admit that Netanyahu's opening position is not good. "Smotrich can prevent the establishment of a right-wing government because of a stupid promise he made not to be in a government with Arabs. That will work against him if he drags us into another election as a result," said one. "As for Bennett, we don't even know if he's with us or if he's already closed a deal with Lapid to be prime minister."
- One Likud source said in light of the situation, the option of Netanyahu becoming president was still not entirely off the table. He said that there was quiet talk in the Likud about the possibility that if Netanyahu were unable to form a government, a feasible option would be to offer the institution of the presidency to Netanyahu after the relevant legislation had been passed. "It's clear to us that if Netanyahu steps aside, there won't be a fifth election," he said. "Netanyahu flatly rejected that option in the past, but today he no longer unequivocally rejects it." Even though no coalition negotiations are currently underway and the chances of forming a government appear low, the Likud's negotiating team has been assembled. It will be comprised of Knesset Speaker Yariv Levin and Attorney Yaakov Atrakchi and Michael Rabilo. The Likud still wants to find defectors from other parties, but for the time being that appears to be impossible.
- Despite the fact that the president gave the mandate to form the next government to Netanyahu, Yesh Atid Chairman Yair Lapid said yesterday that he did not intend to sit by quietly and presented the government that he would form, with Bennett being prime minister first in an alternating premiership arrangement. "There have been angry, insult-laced media reports in the last few days over the question of whether this will be a 'right-wing government' or a 'left-wing government.' The answer is that it will be a government of concerned Israelis," Lapid wrote on Facebook yesterday. "We have to take a leap of faith and build a government that is based on our faith that other people too, people who think differently, want a good country." In Lapid's plan, the government will be represented by parties that span the political spectrum: "In the government we are trying to form, there are three parties that are clearly right-wing (Yamina, New Hope, Yisrael Beiteinu), two center parties (Yesh Atid and Blue and White) and two Zionist left-wing parties (Labor Party and Meretz). This means that nobody will get everything they want." "Nobody will abandon their ideology," Lapid promised.

- **“But at the moment, we have urgent problems. Children were not in school this year, the hospitals are collapsing, we have to prepare for the day in which hundreds of thousands of Israelis will stop getting unemployment pay. These problems are not right-wing and left-wing, these are the problems of real people.”**

“Superman’s” Big Mouth

By Alex Fishman

- The Iranians knew that they would face retaliation for attacking Israeli-owned ships. But what purpose could Israeli political-security officials hope to serve by publicizing an operation of that kind, except for serving the obsessive need to don a Superman cape and to gain the masses’ adoration? Israel generally does not inform foreign officials about operations that are carried out by its special forces. That is mutual. At least that was the custom for many years. At issue are operations that are carried out either deep inside enemy territory or far from our own borders; operations that put the soldiers in physical danger and which also run the risk of causing extensive political damage if the operation either fails or is exposed.
- The commanders of the special forces units—the Naval Commando, Sayeret Matkal and others like them—are fully aware that they have been tasked with a surgical operation, and it is no coincidence that the ships are only damaged but do not sink. Every such operation gets weighed for its cost versus benefit. Every operation of that kind has to be approved by either the defense minister or the prime minister. Secrecy is a tool. Publicizing an Israeli special operation causes damage on two fronts: it exposes the method of operation, which means that that method can no longer be used again in the future, and it also invites retaliation from the injured party and international discomfiture.
- That is why the report in the New York Times yesterday about how Israeli officials informed the US administration that Israel was responsible for the attack on the Iranian ship, Saviz, in the Red Sea off the Eritrean coast, is such a grave development. We do need to admit that in recent years, the cloak of secrecy has repeatedly been lifted and the method of an Israeli security official informing an American administration official, who then tells an American media outlet about a secret operation that Israel carried out, has recurred. There is no practical, cognitive or deterrence justification for that.
- The screws that are supposed to keep Israel’s national-security interests protected have become loose and they have been bent to serve personal interests. The fact that Israel has changed its defense ministers in the past few years like socks has also resulted in the fact that there isn’t anyone around to keep a firm grasp on the reins. It began with the sensational exposé about the theft of the Iranian nuclear archive, continued with drips of information until the assassination of the nuclear scientist in Iran, and now we’ve come to the Naval Commando operation in the Red Sea.
- Those foreign reports have informed us that the Israel Navy has been operating against Iranian ships transporting oil and weapons to Syria for more than two years, and that more than 20 Iranian vessels have been damaged thus far. Whenever a ship laden with military equipment or oil that is designed to bankroll hostile activity in Syria or Lebanon is identified, it needs to be stopped—and optimally as far from Israel’s borders as possible. An operation of that kind must necessarily require a permanent presence in the area to collect intelligence and to follow the ship in real time.

- **Since the operations in question are borderline in terms of international law and run the risk of getting [Israel into] political hot water, operations of that kind probably also require a high-ranking operational official nearby to decide whether to green light it or not. Given the operational complexity, any attempt to ascribe the timing of the operation to a political development, such as the renewal of the talks with Iran about the nuclear agreement, with the goal of disrupting them, is pretentious. This latest incident ascribes to Israel an attack on a mother ship that serves the Revolutionary Guard's naval branch.**
- **The ship in question carries logistics, fuel, military equipment, commandos and so on, and serves as a maritime supply base or a base of departure for units that are sent to carry out special operations. All that is done under the guise of being an innocent cargo ship. According to the report in the New York Times, Israel punished the Iranians, since the commando unit that planted the bomb on a ship owned by an Israeli businessman in the Gulf of Oman had set out from that ship. It seems that that same Israeli official who "informed" an American official so that he might then inform the New York Times isn't going to be satisfied until he sees an Israeli ship blown out of the water. Then a conflagration will erupt and he'll have an opportunity to wave his Superman cape.**