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## Israel and Middle East News Update

*Friday, April 9*

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# News Excerpts

April 9, 2021

## I24 News

### **Bennett to Meet Netanyahu at Residence for Coalition Talks**

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was set to meet Yamina party leader Naftali Bennett as the embattled Israeli leaders look to form the next government. Earlier this week, President Reuven Rivlin handed Netanyahu the mandate to form a government after receiving 52 recommendations from fellow lawmakers following the election. The premier, however, is facing an uphill battle to reach a 61-seat majority in the Knesset, and will need the help of the Yamina party, which recommended Bennett for the position. If Netanyahu is unable to form a new government, the mandate will either be handed to the Yesh Atid party, which received the second most recommendations at 45, or back to the Knesset where lawmakers will have an opportunity to choose a consensus candidate. [Dig Deeper "Bennett Breaks Anti-Arab Vow in Meeting with PM" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

## Ynet News

### **Israel Tells ICC it Does Not Recognize Court's Authority**

Israel does not recognize the authority of the International Criminal Court (ICC) and will not cooperate with its investigation into alleged Israeli war crimes against the Palestinians, senior officials decided. Netanyahu held a round of consultations with Defense Minister Benny Gantz and Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit, as well as several other higher-ups in the defense establishment to respond to an ICC notification letter. Israel could have opted to launch an independent probe, but senior military officials warned that such a move could create a precedent, effectively recognizing ICC's authority to investigate Israel and forcing it to report to the court on the status of the investigation every six months. Israeli officials could have also requested to postpone its reply to the court's letter due to technical difficulties as the country grapples with a political deadlock following four indecisive election cycles in just two years. [Dig Deeper "Israeli Academic Won't Receive Israel Prize Over Boycott Petition" \(Ynet News\)](#)

## Al-Monitor

### **Israeli Construction Plan to Encircle Jerusalem**

Defense Jerusalem's Local Planning Committee has approved several plans for construction of new homes in the west and the east of the city. But one plan in particular irked leftist and anti-occupation groups: 540 new housing units to be built in the Har Homa neighborhood in the southeast of Jerusalem, beyond the Green Line. The new plan includes two 30-floor towers, three buildings 12 floors tall, a large public green space, a new road, spaces designated for future public buildings and another open space for the preservation of an ancient aqueduct. The so-called Har Homa E area is an extension of the existing Har Homa neighborhood toward another Jewish neighborhood in the area called Givat Hamatos. [Dig Deeper "KKL-JNF Said set to Okay Purchase of West Bank Land for Isolated Settlements" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

## **Republicans Delay Biden Admin's Funds to Palestinians**

Congressional Republicans put a hold on \$75 million of the newly reinstated US aid to the Palestinians, two sources in Washington confirmed. Sen. Jim Risch and Rep. Michael McCaul used their respective positions as ranking member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and lead Republican of the House Foreign Affairs Committee to stop the USAID's notification about the reinstated funding from reaching the committees, which means the aid will not start on April 10 as planned. The USAID programs for the Palestinians include roads, sidewalks, bus lots, emergency preparedness, adapting to climate change, "community initiatives" and "safe spaces to engage in community initiatives." Risch and McCaul said, shortly after the announcement, that "resuming assistance to the West Bank and Gaza without concessions from the Palestinian Authority undermines US interests. [Dig Deeper "5 Things to Know about US funding to Palestinians and Terror Payments \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

## **Amnesty Pans Israel Over Not Vaccinating Palestinians**

[Amnesty International](#) accused Israel of "institutionalized discrimination" for vaccinating its own citizens but not inoculating the five million Palestinians living in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. "This move flagrantly violated Israel's obligations as an occupying power under international law," the rights group said in a statement. The 539 roadblocks and checkpoints that Israel maintains in the West Bank "heavily restrict the movement of Palestinians and access to rights, including health, education and work," it said. Lumping Israel together with Egypt, Iran, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Syria and the PA, the report accused the countries of extensively using "exceptional courts, such as military, revolutionary and security courts" where "trials grossly violated fair trial standards." At least 996 Palestinians were displaced through the destruction of 848 homes and livelihood structures, according to the report, which cited figures from the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. [Dig Deeper "Coronavirus Rages in Gaza, with Record Tally of New Daily Cases" \(Ynet News\)](#)

## **Hamas Boosts Military Capabilities Amid Preps for Elections**

As Hamas and Fatah continue to hold talks on the upcoming Palestinian elections, Israeli statements and reports have circulated about Hamas' growing military capabilities. The Israeli reports on Hamas' military capabilities have coincided with the movement's preparations to run in the elections in a few months and its ongoing political talks with Fatah. This has raised questions on any potential contradictions between the military and political paths Hamas has opted for recently. A close associate of President Mahmoud Abbas spoke on condition of anonymity, "The national dialogues between Fatah and Hamas are currently focused on the general elections. The talks on problematic issues, such as the arms [used] and attacks against Israel, were postponed to a later time. Such a positive atmosphere in the Palestinian arena requires that Hamas focuses on unifying the domestic front, away from any regional ties with countries that seek political influence in the Palestinian territories, even if through military support."

## **Iran frees S. Korean Ship it Held Amid Dispute Over Funds**

A South Korean oil tanker held for months by Iran amid a dispute over billions of dollars seized by Seoul was freed and sailed away, just hours ahead of further talks between Tehran and world powers over its tattered nuclear deal. MarineTraffic.com data showed the MT Hankuk Chemi leaving Bandar Abbas in the early morning hours. South Korea's Foreign Ministry said Iran released the tanker and its captain after seizing the vessel in January. The ministry says the Hankuk Chemi left an Iranian port after completing an administrative process. South Korea's Yonhap news agency, quoting an anonymous Foreign Ministry official, suggested Seoul may pay off Iran's United Nations dues that had been in arrears. In January, the UN said Iran topped a list of countries owing money to the world body with a minimum bill of over \$16 million. If unpaid, Iran could lose its voting rights as required under the UN Charter. [Dig Deeper "Iran Blames Israel, US for Saviz Cargo Ship Attack" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

## **Amid Iran Tensions, US Defense Chief to Visit Israel**

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin will travel to Israel, Germany, Britain and the NATO headquarters in Belgium in the coming week for talks with government and military leaders, the Pentagon announced. The highest-ranked official of the administration of President Joe Biden to visit Israel, Austin will meet Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defense Minister Benny Gantz, where discussions will cover "shared priorities" and reaffirm Washington's commitment to Israel maintaining military superiority over its neighbors, according to a Pentagon statement. The trip coincides with rising tensions between Israel and Iran just as the Biden administration tries to engage Tehran over returning to the nuclear pact effectively torn up by former president Donald Trump. The visit also comes amid indications the Israel-Iran conflict was increasingly being waged at sea, marking a change in the conflict that previously took place primarily via airstrikes, cyberattacks, alleged espionage activities and on land. [Dig Deeper "Waiting for the Inevitable Biden-Israel Showdown" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

## **Balfour Declaration**

By Yuval Karni

- **Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu met with Religious Zionist Party Chairman Bezael Smotrich and with Yamina Chairman Naftali Bennett, but the meetings mainly revealed differences of opinion within the leadership of the right-wing parties as part of the attempt to reach understandings with regard to forming the government. Likud sources said last night that Smotrich was attempting to drive a wedge between Netanyahu and Bennett, thereby relieving himself of responsibility in the event that Netanyahu did not succeed in forming a government. After the Netanyahu-Smotrich meeting, which ran for about two hours, an official statement was issued on behalf of Smotrich that cast the responsibility for forming a government on Bennett: “The prime minister and Smotrich agreed that every effort should be made to persuade Bennett not to dismantle the national camp and not to go to a left-wing government, thereby bringing more partners to a right-wing government.”**
- **The timing of the statement’s publication was not coincidental. It was issued to the media at 8:30 PM, a few minutes before the meeting on Balfour Street between Netanyahu and Bennett began. Sources in the Likud and Yamina said that this was a ploy by Smotrich aimed at shifting the pressure from him over to Bennett. Bennett, who saw Smotrich’s statement minutes before the start of the meeting, immediately demanded that Netanyahu clarify whether this statement had been coordinated between them.**
- **Netanyahu was angry that the statement issued by Smotrich had not been coordinated with him and disseminated by means of his political spokesperson an irregular statement that said explicitly: “The statement issued on Bezael Smotrich’s behalf is incompatible with reality. This is the time for working together, not for public statements that do not contribute to the joint effort that we are making.” An associate of Smotrich said that Netanyahu’s statement had only been published following the pressure applied to him by Bennett. As far as is known, in the course of his meeting with Netanyahu, Smotrich repeated persistently his stance that he would not lend a hand to forming a right-wing-Haredi government supported by Mansour Abbas’s Raam party.**
- **In an unusual move, Netanyahu invited Bennett for a meeting at his official residence on Balfour Street. This is the first time that Bennett has entered the Balfour Street residence since going into politics. Bennett and Ayelet Shaked are considered personae non gratae in Netanyahu’s official residence on Balfour Street, and they are perhaps the only politicians who have never visited the official residence. Bennett conveyed the message that he is willing to do everything possible to form a right-wing government headed by Netanyahu, but he refused to pledge that he would not form a government with Lapid. Bennett also said that he would not lend a hand to a fifth round of elections in the event that Netanyahu did not succeed in forming a government. “Since the elections, countless Israelis have been reaching out to me with requests, virtually begging, to extricate the State of Israel from the ongoing chaos,” Bennett said prior to his meeting with Netanyahu.**

- **“I am coming to the meeting with a great deal of goodwill, and I undertake to do everything in my power to extricate Israel from the chaos and to form a good and stable government for the State of Israel. This is the time for national responsibility.”**

## **“Unfit”**

By Ben Caspit

- While the prime minister was giving another anti-Iran speech, Iran continued to work: the Iranian news agency revealed this week that the trial-run has begun for the advanced new IR-9 centrifuge, which is 50 times faster and more powerful than the first-generation IR-1 centrifuges. From the standpoint of the Iranian nuclear program, the switch to these centrifuges is comparable to the transition from the horse-drawn carriage to the Mercedes. It's faster, bigger and stronger. These centrifuges will enable Iran to leap forward, far closer to a nuclear bomb than was agreed upon under the nuclear agreement that was struck during President Obama's term in office. The entire world (except for the world of Netanyahu's mouthpieces) knows that the Iranians have never been as close to the bomb as they are now.
- All of this has been happening concurrently with the resumption of the negotiations (indirectly, at this stage) between Iran and the United States, and the end is foretold: the US will rejoin the nuclear agreement without attaining any significant achievements whatsoever. While Israel is losing what remains of its governability and is focused with all its might on consolidating a “new arrangement” that will allow Netanyahu to fit Gideon Saar, Mansour Abbas, Itamar Ben Gvir, Bezalel Smotrich and Yaakov Bardugo into one suitcase and hide it in the attic, the catastrophic strategy that Netanyahu devised has continued to fall apart in front of us.
- The Biden administration has taken advantage of Israel's lack of a qualified prime minister and the paralysis of its security- political establishment to restore the status quo ante: resuming support for UNRWA, serially leaking information that compromises Israeli military action against Iran, reinstating the term “the occupied territories” for Judea and Samaria, lifting the sanctions on the prosecutor from the International Criminal Court in The Hague and, of course, crawling back to the negotiations with Iran. Remember the warnings that were communicated to Netanyahu when he rushed to deliver a speech to a joint session of Congress over President Obama's head in 2015, just so that he would beat Herzog in the election? Well, all of that, absolutely all of it, is coming to pass now.
- But don't despair. The prime minister had a few significant successes on the real front this week. He managed to convert the Holocaust Remembrance Day ceremony into an election rally. In the next stage, the “Everyone Has a Name” ceremony will be renamed something more electoral, like “Everyone Has a Vaccine.” The religious Zionist rabbis have been asked to stop waiting obsequiously on Mansour Abbas and the Islamic Movement for a minute and write a new prayer of thanksgiving that will imply that the Holocaust only took place so that we would have the privilege of knowing Albert Bourla several decades later. The slogan “Never Again” will be replaced, per the decision of Ceremonial and Symbolic Affairs Minister Miri Regev, by “Thank You, Bibi.” A minor adjustment will be made to “Remember and Don't Forget,” adding the closing line, “everything that Bibi did for our sake.”

- **And in order to make the best use of the momentum, expedited negotiations are currently being held to have Pfizer sponsor the Memorial Day events. Netanyahu deserves great credit for the vaccines, which is an issue with nearly total consensus. The problem with the man and his close associates is that they don't settle for credit. They want a North Korean-style cult of personality. If there is still someone, somewhere, who has dared not to heap praise on the amazing, divine genius of the leader's wife and her husband, then that person will hear from them and their mouthpieces. They will glorify, exalt, enhance, and embarrass themselves as much as necessary. No wonder that Mrs. Netanyahu was nicknamed Ri Sol-ju, the name of the North Korean leader's wife, in a WhatsApp group for Walla. The Netanyahus' appetite for honors, praise, credit and perks is, as they used to say back then, "insatiable."**
- **Along with the credit for the vaccines, the debacles cannot be ignored. Over 6,000 Israelis died in spite of the convenient opening conditions and a built-in advantage over the absolute majority of the world. When he was glorifying and lavishing praise on himself on the eve of Holocaust Remembrance Day for the campaign to inoculate Holocaust survivors, Netanyahu should have asked for forgiveness from the 900 Holocaust survivors who died of COVID-19. Had the state not imported industrial quantities of COVID-19 patients and mutations from Brooklyn and Dubai in irresponsible airlifts under cover of the disgraceful mismanagement of the crisis, most of the people who died would be observing Holocaust Remembrance Day this week together with us, as well as Memorial Day and Independence Day next week. That fact is beyond dispute as well.**