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## Israel and Middle East News Update

*Tuesday, May 4*

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# News Excerpts

May 4, 2021

Ynet News

## **Netanyahu Offers Bennett First Spot in Rotating Deal**

In a dramatic announcement, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu offered [Naftali Bennett](#) a first spot in a rotating [premiership deal](#), as the premier scrambles to form a new government. Netanyahu's latest move appears to have been made in an effort to stop Yesh Atid chief [Yair Lapid](#) from having a shot at establishing a coalition. Lapid is the likely candidate to be tasked next for form a government by President Reuven Rivlin, with rumors circulating that Yesh Atid head and Bennett have made a deal to form a unity government. Netanyahu added that if he fails to form a new government, the right-wing bloc will run in the next elections as one political alliance. Bennett said Netanyahu's offer makes no sense and that the prime minister should not try to escape responsibility for his own failure to form a government. [Dig Deeper "Rivlin Set to Ask Lapid to Form Coalition, Won't Give Mandate to Bennett" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Times of Israel

## **Shaked Calls Netanyahus 'Tyrants' With 'Lust for Power'**

Senior Yamina MK Ayelet Shaked described [Netanyahu](#) and his wife, Sara, as "dictators" and "tyrants" with a "lust for power," and said the premier only cares about his ongoing corruption trial, in bombshell recordings. The recordings were played on Channel 12, as Netanyahu was engaged in a [last-minute attempt](#) to draw Yamina into a right-wing coalition. According to Maariv, the comments by Shaked, a former justice minister, were made during a meeting with national religious rabbis, one of whom chose to record her. Shaked has been reported to prefer a coalition with Netanyahu over a unity government with the centrist Yesh Atid party, in which the chairman of her slate, Naftali Bennett, would serve first as premier in a rotational agreement. But the recordings revealed that she was still prepared to back a unity government if efforts to form a right-wing coalition failed to bear fruit.

Jerusalem Post

## **Netanyahu Vows Meron Incident Will Be Probed, but Not Yet**

Netanyahu promised to ensure that there would be a proper investigation of the Meron disaster, but he asked for patience. Netanyahu said he would check the procedures for entering and leaving the Meron site, security issues, the role of the police, engineering changes needed for the mountain and taking governmental control of the site. Defense Minister Benny Gantz mocked Public Security Minister Amir Ohana at the Knesset session for saying that he would take responsibility but not blame. Ohana told the plenum that he had been meeting all week with families of victims and that what the families care about is unity among the people of Israel and not assessing blame. Yisrael Beytenu head Avigdor Liberman said that United Torah Judaism leaders Moshe Gafni and Ya'acov Litzman and Shas leader Arye Deri must resign due to their behavior ahead of the Meron disaster. [Dig Deeper "Deri Defends Himself on Meron Tragedy, Calls for Overhaul of Site" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

## **Abbas Declares State of Emergency After Election Delay**

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas declared a 30-day state of emergency in the Palestinian Authority. While the announcement follows the leader's decision to indefinitely postpone what would have been the first [Palestinian elections](#) in 15 years, such declarations have become routine during the coronavirus pandemic. Following the postponement, Hamas, the Gaza Strip-based terror group that would have faced off against Abbas's Fatah party accused Abbas of perpetrating a "coup" against their partnership. Protests against Abbas immediately flared both in Ramallah and in Gaza City. While the leader cited the tense situation in East Jerusalem as the pretext for calling off the vote, critics have said that the 85-year-old's decision is due rather to his unwillingness to submit to the electoral process. EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell described the deferment as "deeply disappointing." [Dig Deeper "Palestinian Authority Says Working 'to Prevent Violence'" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

## **Palestinians Torch Car Said to Be Used in Drive-by Attack**

Palestinians torched a car believed to have been used in Sunday's drive-by shooting at Tapuah Junction in the northern West Bank in which three Israelis were wounded. The torching occurred after Palestinian security forces found the vehicle in the West Bank village of Aqraba, southeast of Nablus. According to images, the car was hit by at least two bullets, one of which shattered the back windshield and the other hit the trunk door, probably from IDF soldiers who returned fire at the scene of the attack. The [IDF](#) decided to beef up forces' presence in the West Bank as searches after the suspected gunmen persisted. A military spokesperson said the forces are being bolstered to assist with the manhunt but also for fear of further attacks, which might be carried out in the wake of the cancellation of the Palestinian elections, for which Palestinian officials blame Israel. [Dig Deeper "Settlers Raid West Bank Village After Tapuah Attack; IDF Detains 11 Palestinians" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

## **US Condemns Violence by Palestinians & Jewish Extremists**

The United States condemned both Palestinian and Jewish extremist violence as unrest rocked the West Bank in the aftermath of a shooting attack Sunday at the Tapuach Junction that left two Israeli, [19-year old](#) seminary students, in serious condition. The US spoke out amid reports of Jewish extremist attacks against Palestinian homes and field in the West Bank village of Jalud in the aftermath of the shooting of the two Israeli teens. The line is in keeping with the Biden's administrations pattern of statements that speak broadly of Israeli and Palestinian behavior without unduly singling out either side. But it is a different tone from that set by the former Trump administration that solely condemned Palestinian terror. [Dig Deeper "Islamist Party Chief Abbas Condemns Terror Attack, Calls Victims 'Innocents'" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

## **US Officials in Mideast to Reassure Jittery Allies Over Iran**

Top Biden administration officials and US senators crisscrossed the Middle East seeking to assuage growing unease among Gulf Arab partners over America's re-engagement with Iran and other policy shifts in the region. The trips come as the US and Iran, through intermediaries in Vienna, discuss a return to Tehran's tattered 2015 nuclear deal with world powers that former President Donald Trump abandoned three years ago. The UAE, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf allies, excluded from Obama-era nuclear negotiations, have repeatedly pressed for a seat at the table, insisting that any return to the accord must address Iran's ballistic missile program and support for regional proxies. Sen. Chris Coons, a key Biden ally dispatched on overseas diplomatic missions, told reporters in the UAE's capital of Abu Dhabi that he hoped to allay the sheikhdom's "understandable and legitimate concerns" about the return to the landmark deal and to create "broader engagement" with Gulf partners. The visits follow the Biden administration's decision to plow ahead with Trump-era arms sales to Gulf countries, including a \$23b transfer of F-35 combat aircraft, Reaper drones and other advanced weapons to the UAE, despite objections from Democrats wary of states' entanglement in the devastating war in Yemen, authoritarian policies and ties to China.

### Reuters

## **France to Sell 30 Fighter Jets to Egypt**

Egypt has signed a contract with France to buy 30 Rafale fighter jets, its defense ministry said in a statement, in a deal that investigative website Disclose said was worth \$4.5b. President Emmanuel Macron said in December he would not make the sale of weapons to Egypt conditional on human rights because he did not want to weaken Cairo's ability to counter terrorism in the region, a comment that drew the ire of critics. Egypt's defense ministry said the deal would be financed through a loan to be re-paid over at least 10 years but did not disclose the value of the deal or further details. France's finance, foreign and armed forces ministries were not immediately available for comment. France was the main weapons supplier to Egypt between 2013-2017, including the sale of 24 warplanes with an option for 12 more. Those contracts dried up, including deals for more Rafale jets and warships that had been at an advanced stage. Diplomats said that was as much to do with financing issues over fears about Cairo's long-term ability to repay state-backed guaranteed loans, rather than concerns Paris had with the human rights situation in Egypt.

## **Out of Ammo**

By Matti Tuchfeld

- **After quite a few ups and downs, peaks and valleys, zero goals ultimately were scored. Binyamin Netanyahu is probably going to have to inform the president this evening that he failed to form a government. Even the greatest magician of all times at some point runs out of rabbits. Netanyahu's only hope is that the other side will also fail, and his initiative to hold direct elections for prime minister can get underway. The prime minister knows that hoping for one's rivals' failure is not much of a work plan, which is why he will do everything in his power to derail a government that might be formed by Naftali Bennett, Yair Lapid and the left-wing parties. That isn't going to be easy to do. By all signs they appear to be highly motivated. And the temptation animating Bennett—to be prime minister—and the temptation animating all the others—to oust Netanyahu from office—might just be their trump card that supersedes every other consideration and produce just one outcome.**
- **Netanyahu used his doomsday weapon: he publicly said that he would be prepared to concede the first year in power and to give it to Bennett to facilitate forming a right-wing government. That didn't work. Bennett didn't leap at the offer, and Saar announced that he wouldn't join either. Netanyahu had hoped that that public pledge would bring pressure to bear on Bennett to do everything in his power to help Netanyahu form a government. And if not Bennett, then Ayelet Shaked.**
- **He offered Bennett more than just the first year in an alternating premiership arrangement; he also offered to merge the two parties ahead of a new election. Shaked's dream of being integrated into the Likud is just two MKs away—two MKs that she is unlikely to be able to deliver [to Netanyahu] by midnight tonight. Bennett reiterated his preferred outcomes in descending order: first a right-wing government; then a left-wing government; and only last was a new election. Presumably, an absolute majority of right-wing voters would prefer a new election over the nightmare of seeing Nitzan Horowitz, Merav Michaeli and Yair Lapid high-ranking cabinet ministers. But after he made his intentions clear and opened a large door to a left-wing government under his leadership, Netanyahu's chances of winning over two MKs or a faction to swear in a government of his own are next to nil. No one is going to break his word if he knows that another option is waiting right around the corner.**
- **Netanyahu realized that he was out of options when Smotrich announced that he would not change his mind on the question of a government that served with the support of the United Arab List even after Rabbi Tau condoned doing just that. As opposed to Bennett, who blamed Smotrich for the failure to form a right-wing government, Netanyahu has been careful not to be disrespectful towards Smotrich despite the unavoidable conclusion that Smotrich is the one who prevented him from forming a government, which might lead to his removal from office in the next few weeks.**

## **Running Out of Rabbits**

By Ben Caspit

- The game isn't over yet, but Binyamin Netanyahu's supply of rabbits is quickly beginning to run out. Yesterday he pulled two out of his hat at critical junctures, but nevertheless suffered stinging setbacks. The effort to "legitimize" Abbas for Smotrich met with dismal failure, and Netanyahu's dramatic offer to Bennett to be "first" in an alternating premiership arrangement also failed to achieve the desired impact. I wonder what Netanyahu said to his band of sycophants, how he reacted to those whimpering propagandists who for weeks have been screeching, "Bibi isn't holding talks with Abbas."
- I wonder what he is going to say to the Bardugos, who will complain to him that for months they've been saying that someone with seven MKs can't be prime minister. But don't worry about Bibi. His mouthpieces will dry their tears and will soldier on. They have no other choice. They might, in time, come to find alternatives. Meanwhile, the final battle is still being fought and it is important to say: its outcome is still unknowable. No one has won yet. Other dangers and other opportunities still lie ahead, and Netanyahu hasn't given up yet because he never gives up, up to the very last moment and even beyond.
- The last thing Netanyahu might still be able to do is to try to vacate his seat for another senior Likud official for a set amount of time. That was precisely what Nir Barkat spoke about (though he has denied it): the mounting recognition among top Likud officials (Barkat isn't the only one) is that Netanyahu needs to be moved out of the way if they want to save the Likud's hold on power. The problem was precisely identified by Ayelet Shaked, in the (astonishing) recordings of her that were obtained by Amit Segal and were played on Channel 12 News: "He has a lust for government and power. He and his wife. It's like [with] tyrants. Like dictators.
- They aren't willing to move. We don't have that." Ayelet is right: they don't have that; but Netanyahu also appears to be beginning to run out of it as well. A critical mass has been reached. Nobody believes a single word he says; there isn't a single sap in the entire political establishment who will agree to any arrangement with him. The mandate he was given to form a government is due to expire at midnight tonight, and he is going to need a miracle to create a new rabbit. Even his blindest followers are starting to see that the ship is sinking. Soon they'll begin jumping overboard.
- The battle currently is over the mandate. It is hard to believe that the Likud will endorse Bennett for prime minister and advise the president to give him the mandate to form the government. Doing so may not be legal either. The Likud already endorsed Netanyahu. Only the Joint List and New Hope haven't endorsed any candidate yet and can still do so. My guess is that Yair Lapid will be given the mandate to form the government in the next number of days. But that is only a guess. The Shaked recordings last night exposed the backyard of the biblical-political drama that has been playing out here recently. Shaked, who was appalled by the fact that she had been recorded and that her remarks had been made public, needn't worry.



- She was telling the truth. She confirmed with her remarks that she is the staunchest right winger in Yamina and that she would prefer a partnership with Netanyahu, mainly to serve her personal ambitions (and to make her lifelong dream of joining the Likud come true). But she also said that she would not stand in Bennett's way of becoming prime minister if Netanyahu were unable to form a government. We also learned from her remarks that the two people who are most consistently insistent on the need to evict the Netanyahu family from Balfour Street are Gideon Saar and Avigdor Liberman.
- Shaked said that the two of them believe that Netanyahu is a danger to Israel. I'll add here that Saar and Liberman aren't alone on that count. Many others, including members of the Likud, are intimately familiar with the ever-mounting danger that that family poses to Israel. The madness, the paranoia, the narcissism, the belief that what is best for the family is synonymous with what is best for the country and so on and so forth. Shaked described that better than I have in the past decade. She was very precise.
- As far as I can tell, the recording was made in an incident that is highly reminiscent of the recording of Yisrael Bachar by Rabbi Guy Habura on the eve of the election. The person who made the recording apparently is cut from the same cloth. The assessment in Shaked's inner circle is that the person who made the recording is a respected and very prominent rabbi, the principal of one of the most important national- religious yeshivas in Israel. The conversation had been held earlier in the day. Despite the fact that the recordings were made public, Shaked continued to receive tempting offers to defect to the Likud along with Amihai Shikli and Idit Silman.
- Shaked went underground until things settled back down again. Her comments were like gasoline that was doused on the perpetually glowing embers on Balfour Street against the Bennett-Shaked duo. The chances of this bloody romance between the Netanyahus and the Yamina duo ever ending in a marriage of any kind dropped to the barest of minimums.
- Bennett hasn't made a final decision yet, but he has begun to signal. He displayed leadership in his public speech and then subsequently in his remarks at the Yamina faction meeting. He faced his MKs and did away with any speculation: anyone who can't live in peace with my way needs to say so now and we'll part ways, said Bennett while looking straight into MK Amihai Shikli's eyes. Now they just need to reach a few final agreements about the details. The pro-change bloc wants to present a new government within a matter of days.
- A transitional government. The format is as follows: it will only be comprised of the seven party leaders: Lapid, Bennett, Liberman, Saar, Michaeli, Gantz and Horowitz. Bennett will be prime minister for the first two years and will then alternate with Lapid. The core portfolios will be divided up among those ministers, but in a non-final arrangement. The Knesset will give that new government a vote of confidence, and in the following number of weeks they will reach understandings about which parties control which portfolios.

- **The important thing is to get things moving, to stop the bleeding and to get some poor sod to take out a large life insurance policy and to climb the stairs to the second story of the Prime Minister's Residence on Balfour Street to inform the Missus that the time has come to begin to pack, and to let her know that Gilat Bennett will be stopping by the following week to discuss the arrangements.**