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## Israel and Middle East News Update

*Friday, July 9*

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# News Excerpts

July 9, 2021

Jerusalem Post

## **High Court Rejects Petitions Against Nation-State Law**

The High Court of Justice upheld the Nation-State Law, as the justices voted 10-1 to reject 15 petitions against the law. They had been asked to determine if the law was fit to be a part of Israel's future constitution, given its content. The High Court said it was not within its purview to order the law be canceled or be involved in its content as a basic law. Regarding the intent of the law, the court said it is to establish the Jewish character of the state without diminishing its democratic nature. Justice George Karra, the lone dissenter, said some parts of the law challenge Israel's democratic nature. The law ignores Arab and Druze citizens of Israel and harms the principle of equality, which is not explicitly established in the law, he wrote in the minority opinion. [Dig Deeper "High Court Overturns Law Halting Benefits for Parents of Teen Security Prisoners" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Reuters

## **Israeli Finance Minister Seeks Sweeping Economic Changes**

Israel's Finance Ministry has proposed sweeping structural changes meant to boost labor force participation, invest more in infrastructure, improve private sector growth and lower the high cost of living. The overhaul plan, delivered to Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, accompanies the 14-month, 2021-2022 state budget that is expected to be approved around November. Finance Minister Avigdor Lieberman pledged to integrate into the workforce ultra-Orthodox men who usually pursue studies rather than jobs, cut red tape for businesses and boost competition to help bring down prices. Around 52% of ultra-Orthodox men are currently employed, and Lieberman is seeking to trim back generous state subsidies to them which are resented by many other Israelis as a strain on the budget hampering the economy. [Dig Deeper "What Do Gov't's Opening Shots on Religious Issues Mean For the Future?" \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

Arutz Sheva

## **Herzog to World Leaders: Join the Fight Against Iran**

President Isaac Herzog has in recent days received greetings from leaders around the world on the occasion of his inauguration as the eleventh President of the State of Israel. Among the leaders who have sent greetings are Queen Elizabeth II of England, King Abdullah II of Jordan, King of Bahrain Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, Russian President Vladimir Putin, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, UAE Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, and Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro. The President responded to the leaders with deep gratitude and stressed that he was concerned about the attempts to challenge the country's security and the calls for its destruction by Iran. "These efforts, led by Iran, along with their relentless efforts to achieve nuclear capabilities, pose a threat to our security and stability in the region. I know that together we can prevent these attempts." [Dig Deeper "Herzog Inauguration Marks New Beginning for Israelis" \(Al-Monitor\)](#)

## **Bennett Met Secretly With Jordan's in Amman**

Prime Minister Bennett met secretly with Jordan's King Abdullah II last week at his palace in Amman in what was the monarch's first meeting with an Israeli premier in three years. Bennett arrived in the Jordanian capital by helicopter and the two leaders discussed Israel supplying greater drinking water provisions to the drought-hit kingdom. With his first meeting with an Israeli prime minister since 2018, King Abdullah signaled he was willing to turn over a new leaf in Israeli-Jordanian ties, leaving behind years of rocky relations with former prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Meanwhile, Foreign Minister Yair [Lapid](#) held a meeting with his counterpart Ayman Safadi at the Allenby Bridge Border Crossing. They agreed to increase Jordan's potential export value to the West Bank from \$160m to \$700m a year, of which \$470m is under the Palestinian Authority (PA) trade standards and the rest in accordance with Israeli trade standards. [Dig Deeper "Amid Signs of Fragility, Biden and Bennett Move to Shore up Jordan's Abdullah"](#) (Times of Israel)

## **Israel Demolishes Family Home of Palestinian Attacker**

Israel drew US [criticism](#) when it destroyed the family home of a Palestinian-American accused of involvement in a shooting that killed an Israeli and wounded two others in the occupied West Bank. Muntasir Shalabi was indicted in an Israeli military court over the attack in May near the city of Nablus in which student Yehuda Guetta was shot dead. After an appeal in an Israeli court by Shalabi's family against the demolition was unsuccessful, the military said, the villa in Turmus Ayya, a village in which many Palestinian-Americans live, was levelled in a controlled explosion. Israel says such demolitions deter potential Palestinian assailants. Palestinians and rights groups condemn the policy as collective punishment. In a statement after the home was destroyed, the US Embassy in Jerusalem called on "all parties to refrain from unilateral steps that exacerbate tensions and undercut efforts to advance a negotiated two-state solution" of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. [Dig Deeper "US Now to 'Prioritize' Pushing Israel to Stop Demolishing Terrorists' Homes"](#) (Times of Israel)

## **Palestinian Held in Israel to Be Released Amid Hunger Strike**

Ghadanfar Abu Atwan, 28, held by Israel without charges will be released from custody and transferred to a Palestinian hospital in Ramallah after being on a hunger strike for more than two months. A lawyer for Abu Atwan had said that his client's condition had deteriorated and that he wanted to be transferred from Israel's Kaplan Hospital. The records described him as "noticeably weak, almost unable to speak" and unable to move his lower limbs. The case has drawn renewed attention to "administrative detention," a controversial Israeli policy in which it holds Palestinian suspects without charges for months at a time. The policy has drawn criticism from human rights groups. The Shin Bet internal security service said Abu Atwan is a member of a Palestinian militant group but is no longer seen as a threat because of his health condition. [Dig Deeper "Palestinians Start Applying For Citizenship Under Family Unification Laws"](#) (Jerusalem Post)

## **Israel, Hamas on Path to More Violence, Warns Official**

Israel and Hamas are “on a path” toward another round of violence just weeks since the most recent flareup in the Gaza Strip, according to an official familiar with the indirect negotiations between the sides in Cairo. The official noted Israel’s toughened stance since the 11-day May war vis-a-vis the Kerem Shalom goods crossing, where only limited humanitarian essentials, such as food, medicine and fuel, have been allowed in and almost all exports have been barred. Defense Minister Benny Gantz has also led a policy conditioning the rehabilitation of the Strip on the return of a pair of Israeli civilians and the bodies of two fallen IDF soldiers being held by Hamas. The official familiar with the negotiations also pointed to Hamas’s “emboldened” position since the war, which its leader Yahya Sinwar has characterized as a victory over Israel, all while public support for the rival Fatah movement led by PA President Mahmoud Abbas continues to plummet. A second source familiar with the matter confirmed that no breakthroughs have been made in Cairo and that the sides were not optimistic. However, the source noted that Israel and Hamas “might not be as interested in another round of violence as much as they are letting on.” [Dig Deeper “UN Pans Israel’s ‘Narrow’ Definition of Humanitarian Assistance for Gaza” \(Times of Israel\)](#)

## **Congress Oks Budget for US Consulate for Palestinians**

The US Congress’ Budget Committee approved the budget for the reopening of the American Consulate for the Palestinians in Jerusalem. The bill passed with 32 members voting in favor and 25 opposing it. The mission was closed in 2019 after former President Donald Trump decided to merge it with the American embassy, which had moved from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem a year earlier. The decision was among several catalysts that caused a severing of ties between the Trump administration and the Palestinians. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken was asked to report to Congress on the reopening date and the return of the consulate staff to operations, and to describe the implications of the opening of the consulate on US-Palestinian relations. It is not yet clear when the consulate on Jerusalem’s Agron Street will reopen, but PA officials estimate that this is expected within a few months. Last week, Israeli and Arab media reported that Prime Minister Bennett’s government had asked President Joe Biden’s administration to delay the opening of the consulate, over fears the move will might put a strain on the nascent coalition. Bennett’s office did not respond to inquiries. [Dig Deeper “PA Orders Palestinian Businesses to Remove Hebrew Signs” \(Jerusalem Post\)](#)

## **Four Likudniks Walk into the Cafeteria**

By Ben Caspit

- **Bennett leads a government that the Americans have described as a grand experiment. They are following the new government's adventures in amazement. This bizarre, unprecedented creature has been pleasantly surprising for now (the American condemnation of the demolition of the terrorist's home in the village of Turmus Aya was predictable). A government that has right-wing, left-wing, centrist and even Arab elements. A government where no one is trying to score political capital by smearing someone else. "Nothing will happen on the right-left axis," Bennett said in a private conversation this week, "everything will be professional.**
- **The economy, healthcare, roads, [the planned Tel Aviv] subway, the budget, reforms, gaps. We'll work on all of this quietly." What about Netanyahu? It hasn't dawned on him yet, say sources close to Bennett. He's been trying to create a false impression that he's still here, that he'll be back soon, that this is all temporary. That sense will dissipate. The prime minister believes that when Avi Dichter, Nir Barkat and their colleagues look at themselves in the mirror and realize that they voted against the explicit recommendation of the GSS director and against Israeli security, just because of a frustrated politician's personality cult, they will begin to sober up. They will have a lot of free time to reflect on this, so Bennett believes.**
- **All of this optimism notwithstanding, Bennett also has cause for concern. The coalition came under acute criticism (primarily from the center-left) for its performance over the vote on the citizenship law. Also for the fact that sometimes Bennett and Shaked look like troop leaders in the Israel Scouts, letting Chikli lead them by the nose and pull the wool over their eyes. The fact that another potential rebel, Eli Avidar, has not been dealt with either, looks problematic. Figures in Bennett's orbit, along with those of several others in the coalition, have rebuffed this criticism with ease. As opposed to the outward impression, this week was good for the coalition, not the opposition. The score is 3-1 for Bennett and Gideon Saar, one of the architects of this government.**
- **Although the citizenship law was defeated, they scored three resounding victories: extending the timeframe to pass the budget from 100 days to five months; the expanded Norwegian Law, which will allow the coalition to inject new blood into the Knesset and its committees, which are facing repeated all-nighters; and of course, the law to enable [a minimum of] only four MKs to break away (from the Likud, that is). From Netanyahu's perspective, these laws had to be blocked at all costs, and yet they passed. They passed after the defeat of the citizenship law, which is a sign of the coalition's internal unity and surprising resolve. "Just imagine," a senior minister told a colleague this week, "now every time four Likudniks sit down together in the cafeteria, Bibi will be sure that it's the plot of the millennium to split the Likud." The week peaked during the funeral for the sister of MK Meir Yitzhak Halevi, the former mayor of Eilat and a member of New Hope. The Likud announced that it would refuse to pair with him.**

- It was an immoral, unrestrained and unconscionable statement. Justice Minister Gideon Saar was surprised to see MK Yoav Ben Tzur (Shas) at the funeral. It turns out that Ben Tzur is a distant relative of Yitzhak Halevi's, and Ben Tzur immediately agreed: I will pair with Meir during the funeral and the shiva [seven-day mourning period], he pledged. Saar conveyed this via proper procedure to the faction chairpersons, and everything looked fine. It was 6:00 PM. At 9:00 PM, the advisor of Opposition Coordinator Yariv Levin called New Hope's secretary to confirm that Yitzhak Halevi was not coming. Immediately after that was ascertained, Ben Tzur was seen strolling into the Knesset plenum. That was the night when the laws that mattered to the coalition were approved. For lack of other options, MK Yitzhak Halevi was summoned to the plenum, his shirt still torn as a sign of mourning.
- The Likud was quick to rail against the coalition for violating the pairing agreement. The coalition chuckled. If Yoav Ben Tzur is in the plenum, then what pairing are you talking about? The Likud informed the coalition that this was a case of "leapfrog pairing." It wasn't Ben Tzur, he was replaced by Gila Gamliel, they said. This is a fraudulent deception, of course. There's no such thing as "leapfrog pairing." Pairing in the Knesset is done on the basis of individuals, not parties. The Likud tried to steal a vote at the last minute, at the expense of an MK who was mourning the death of his sister. The coalition spotted this and reacted quickly. The laws passed (by a margin of three votes). This is the new Bibi-ism, version 2.0. They both cheat and accuse the other side of cheating, shamelessly.

## **Bennett is Happy**

By Nahum Barnea

- **“I made a mistake,” Prime Minister Naftali Bennett said. Two words that sounded so genuine, so natural, so ordinary, that we almost forgot that we had not heard them for 12 years from the mouth of a prime minister. Why only 12? It appears that the last Israeli prime minister who was prepared to admit a mistake was Yitzhak Rabin. The mistake that Bennett was admitting to was including Amichai Chikli, a counselor at a pre-military academy, in the first group of seven on Yamina’s Knesset list. It cost the coalition a defeat in the vote on the citizenship bill on Tuesday. I will elaborate further on the mistake and its consequences later. Bennett is the subject that needs expanding on. Twenty-five days ago, he began his tenure as the prime minister of Israel. His term could last a few months or two and a half years. There will be a lot of questions along the way. Two are particularly intriguing: will and how will being prime minister change him; will and how will he change the premiership?**
- **For now, he’s happy. He is filled with adrenaline. Ben Gurion devoted a few months in 1947, one year before the state’s establishment, to an intense study of the Yishuv’s security problems. He called this his “seminar.” Bennett decided to begin his term with a similar seminar. Thirty to 40 percent of his day is devoted to studying the security problems between us and Iran and to reexamining policy vis-à-vis Hamas in Gaza. He realizes that Israel does not have the power to change the clauses of the nuclear agreement with Iran. The agreement will be signed without us. In everything relating to uranium enrichment, Israel should regard Iran as a nuclear threshold state. This has military and diplomatic ramifications. Netanyahu waged an open, blunt battle against the Obama administration, he pushed the Trump administration out of the agreement and was paralyzed after the emphatic decision of the Biden administration to rejoin the agreement as is. Bennett is planning to go to Washington in a month. He believes that this will be after the agreement is signed. His talk with Biden will focus on the day after.**
- **In regard to Gaza, he seeks to continue the stick and carrot policy, but to enlarge both the stick and the carrot. Sending in the Air Force after incendiary balloons were flown brought about quiet. He knows that this is temporary. He likes the government, he doesn’t like the Knesset. The fuel that is driving the government is the good will of the ministers. The abundance of good will surprised Bennett, as did its restraint. He is astounded by the considerate, noble behavior of Yair Lapid (Lapid has even surprised himself, it seems to me); he is amazed by Benny Gantz’s transformation. The hell that he suffered under Netanyahu steeled him. Bennett has reached the conclusion that Gantz is a good man and strong defense minister. He works harmoniously with him. If there is any personal baggage, it is between Gantz and Lapid. He asked the ministers to be restrained. When you have a problem, he told each minister, solve it with another minister; when you are told that another minister is plotting against you, don’t run to the media. Pick up the phone and check.**

- For now, it's working. He never saw himself, not even in his worst nightmares, as a prime minister whose partners are Merav Michaeli, Nitzan Horowitz and Mansour Abbas. The partnership with the left-wing parties and with the United Arab List was a constraint, the lesser evil. After 25 days in the premiership, he thinks the opposite: today he thinks that from the outset a government with the center-left should have been the preferred option, rather than a fully right-wing government. This political experiment is good for the country and good for society. This is a dramatic change. The premiership has perhaps not changed Bennett's ideological credo, but it has changed his political view. UAL Chairman Mansour Abbas told me this week that he believes that the establishment of the pro-change government had altered Yamina's voter pool. It lost voters to the right of the Likud; its future voters are to the left of the Likud, among the moderate national-religious, between the Likud and Blue and White. It seems to me that Bennett would not disagree.
- At the moment, he has no base, no voters that he can count on. This weakness comes with an advantage: he doesn't owe anything to anybody, not to central committee members, not to vote contractors, neither to a television station nor to a newspaper. Ayelet Shaked is a loyal partner. She has not undergone a similar reversal. Bennett changed his point of view after he got to know his partners well. Michaeli, Horowitz and Abbas have stopped being names in an election campaign. They have become his partners in dialogue. Abbas has charmed him over. He particularly admires his courage. On Tuesday morning, when the coalition needed two votes out of the UAL's four in the vote in the citizenship bill, Abbas did not assign the job to one of his colleagues. He volunteered to stand in the line of fire himself and paid a price for it.
- Netanyahu wanted Abbas and his party to play the role of mistress: he preferred concealing the relationship that he had forged with him. Bennett invited him in through the front door. It is important to him to show that Abbas made a good deal, that the Arab population will gain. Bennett realizes that dismantling the landmines that Netanyahu deliberately left behind—the citizenship bill, the Evyatar outpost—forced the left side of the coalition to make concessions. He promises that the asymmetry will be balanced down the road: the right-wing side of the coalition will have to concede. That will make him happy: in this government, nobody will be able to rely on ideology. Everyone's success will be judged by what they do, even though that is less sexy.
- The crucial test awaiting his government is the budget. Bennett is confident that it will pass. After it passes, the reality in the Knesset will change. The opposition will realize that the government is here to stay. Its members will lower their expectations, perhaps even lower their tones. Netanyahu will undergo the same process that Trump did: his supporters will dwindle, his language will become more extreme. The new law that the coalition passed on Tuesday night, which enables four MKs to quit their faction, was meant to address this. The coalition realizes that the dreams of an internal implosion in the Likud are unlikely to ever come true. They will not quit, one minister told me this week, but the possibility of a dignified departure will lower the level of fear in the Likud. The dictatorship will lose some of its power.

- The assumption that the campaign that Netanyahu is waging against the government will fade makes it possible for Bennett not to be in a rush to move to Balfour Street. His four children attend school in Raanana. He does not intend to take them out of their schools. What remains from the demonstrations outside his Raanana home are three people with a megaphone. In the end, they'll also leave.
- The coalition's second front, against the Haredim, is more complicated. Bennett believes in positive incentives. He wants to lower the exemption age for Haredi enlistment to 21. Haredi MKs will not like that decision—the sword of being drafted enables them to keep their young people captive in yeshivas—but they will not be able to openly oppose a benefit to their voters. Bennett believes that 30 to 40% of Haredi young people will take advantage of such a decision to join the workforce. He believes less in sanctions. Finance Minister Liberman's decision to end subsidized daycare surprised the other ministers, perhaps him as well. It is contrary to the spirit of restraint that he wishes to have prevail on the political establishment. The Haredi MKs may have panicked, but it lit a fire under the Haredi public. "Liberman went too far this time," said two top ministers.
- The feeling in Yamina toward Amichai Chikli is harsh: traitor, defector, social media "likes" whore, crook. The accusations go way back, to what his team members in his commando unit said about him. Bennett prefers to call him odd. The coalition knows that it can't rely on him. Ultimately, there will be no choice but to declare him a renegade. Bennett assumed full responsibility. He and only he, had brought Chikli into Yamina. The mistake was his, from start to finish. Ministers from other parties in the coalition say that they warned Bennett and Shaked. They attribute naïveté to Shaked, and perhaps to Bennett. When referring to the prime minister and the interior minister, that is not exactly a compliment. But the coalition recovered from the citizenship bill vote quickly. It was defeated on Tuesday morning. It recovered by the evening. When Eli Avidar, the Yisrael Beiteinu rebel, showed up for the vote, Chikli was absent; when Chikli arrived, Avidar was absent. "Why do MKs rebel? To change the situation, to get attention," says one minister. "When they realized there would be no fuss, they went home."