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03.05.20
Unoffical final election results: Likud with 36 seats, right-wing bloc still short of majority
Six polls to be reviewed to rule out counting errors, but likelihood of change in division
of seats slim to none; Likud petitions Central Elections Committee to delay publication of
results
Amir Alon,Moran Azulay| Published: 03.05.20 , 19:53

With almost all 4,612,007 ballots cast in the March 2 elections counted down, the Central
Elections Committee (CEC) released on Thursday the near-final results showing Likud is
the country's biggest party with 36 seats and main rivals, Blue & White, trail behind with
33.

The third-largest party is the ==Joint List== with ==15== seats; followed by ==Shas== with ==9== seats, ==United Torah Judaism== with ==7==, ==Yisrael Beytenu== with ==7==, ==Labor==-Gesher-Meretz with ==7== and ==Yamina== with ==6== seats.

The ==right-wing bloc; which consists of Likud, United Torah Judaism, Shas and Yamina==; has only managed to muster ==58 seats - 3 short of a majority== in the 120-strong Knesset needed to form a viable majority government.

The CEC published the results after it completed tallying the 4,076 ballots cast at the colloquially called "corona polls" - 16 specially designated polling stations for Israelis who are in quarantine for exposure to the coronavirus.

==Six ballot boxes containing over 4,000 votes will be recounted due to suspected errors,== presumably not an intentional forgery.

The final voter turnout in the March 2020 election was 71.46% - an increase from the previous elections in September, in which 69.8% of those with voting rights arrived at the polls.

Out of the 6,453,255 citizens recorded in the voters' register, 4,612,007 people cast their votes.

Election officials have disqualified 25,053 invalid votes. The electoral threshold stands at 3.25%, which equals to 149,004 votes. Each seat equals to 37,897 votes.

In the coming days, the CEC will further recount thousands of polls to rule out any counting errors.

Shortly before the results were published, Likud petitioned the CEC to delay the publication of the results until all protocols and sheets at the polls were reviewed.

"Likud expects that as long as these documents aren't duly handed over to it and all perusal and error correction procedures are not completed - the CEC will refrain from publishing the results," the party's statement read.

Knesset CEO Albert Sakharovich announced Thursday that the ==inauguration== ceremony of the 23rd ==Knesset on March 17== will be ==held== for the first time ==without an audience==, with the exception of the spouses of "high-level government personal", ==due to concerns over the coronavirus.==

==The pre-inaugural reception for the MKs will also be canceled.==

==03.05.20 – Th== -
German airlines cancel all flights to Israel over entry restrictions barring all non-residents

==03.05.20==
==German airlines cancel all flights to Israel over entry restrictions==
Lufthansa and subsidiaries Swiss, Austrian Airlines suspend Tel Aviv routes ==until March 28,== after Israel bars entry of non-residents from five European nations

AFP| Published: <mark>03.05.20</mark>, 17:51

Airline giant Lufthansa said Thursday it was canceling all flights to Israel until March 28, after Jerusalem barred entry to almost all non-resident arrivals from five European nations, including Germany, over coronavirus fears.

"The Lufthansa group sees itself forced to make this cancellation for economic and operational reasons, as many passengers are no longer entitled to enter the country," the group said in a statement.

Flights to Tel Aviv and Eilat by Lufthansa and its subsidiaries, Swiss and Austrian Airlines, will be canceled starting Sunday, March 8, until the end of the winter timetable on March 28.
Meanwhile, some flights will be halted on Friday and Saturday "as also flight crews are affected by these new restrictions."
The <mark>Health Ministry on Wednesday</mark> barred entry to almost <mark>all non-residents</mark> arriving from France, Germany, Spain, Austria and Switzerland.
Earlier that day, it had already ordered citizens and residents arriving from the same countries to go into home quarantine.
The measures come on top of restrictions previously imposed on arrivals from mainland China, Hong Kong, Thailand, Singapore, Macau, South Korea, Japan and Italy.
<mark>Lufthansa has already announced that it will ground 150 planes, including 25 long-haul</mark> aircraft, and slash its flight plan by 25 percent over the impact of the virus.
On Thursday, it said that would entail canceling 7,100 European flights in March, including 3,750 via Germany's biggest air hub Frankfurt and 3,350 via Munich.

<mark>Many of the cancellations will fall on high-frequency domestic services to cities like</mark> Berlin and Hamburg.
Meanwhile, "a second focus of the route cancellations" was Italy, with the affected cities including Milan, Venice and Rome.
Passengers are advised to check the Lufthansa website before departing for the airport, as "in addition to domestic German and Italian connections, other flights to Scandinavia, Great Britain, the Baltic States, Poland, Russia, France, Spain, Portugal, etc. are affected," Lufthansa said.
Among long-haul services, Lufthansa has canceled all routes to virus hotspots, mainland China and Iran, until late April and reduced capacity on routes to Hong Kong and Seoul.
The group has also instituted a hiring freeze.
"It is not yet possible to estimate the impact on earnings" from the virus measures, Lufthansa said.

The International Air Transport Association (IATA) warned Thursday the total revenue <mark>impact on the industry could be in the range of $63-$100 billion.</mark>

03.05.20 – Th -
Israel announced compulsory 14-day quarantine to nationals returning from 13 countries on Wednesday

03.05.20
21 Greek pilgrims who visited Israel infected with coronavirus
Health Ministry say the travelers stayed in the country between February 19 and 27;
Israel and PA see thousands of visitors every year who come to see holy sites; earlier, Palestinians closed the Church of the Nativity amid coronavirus fears
Reuters,Ynet| Published: 03.05.20, 15:35

Twenty-one Greek travelers who recently returned from a pilgrimage to religious sites in Israel have tested positive for coronavirus, Greece's health ministry confirmed on Thursday.

"Tourists from Greece who were staying in Israel and the Palestinian Territory between February 19 and 27, tested positive for coronavirus upon arrival," said Health Ministry.
A priest and visitors wear masks at the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem after a suspected coronavirus outbreak in the city, March 5, 2020
A priest and visitors wear masks at the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem after a suspected coronavirus outbreak in the city, March 5, 2020 (Photo: AP)
The pilgrims also appeared to have visited Egypt. The total number of COVID-19 cases in Greece now stands at 31.
Israel and the Palestinian Authority see hundreds of thousands of visitors every year who arrive specifically to see holy sites, including the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem and the city of Nazareth among others.
Last month, 18 members of a group of South Korean pilgrims tested positive for coronavirus after a week-long trip to Israel organized by their Catholic church.

The Church of the Nativity, meanwhile, was ordered closed earlier in the day and foreign tourists were banned from West Bank hotels after four suspected coronavirus cases were found in the Palestinian town of Bethlehem.
The measures announced by the Palestinian Authority's tourism ministry came as a particular blow to the Biblical town, whose businesses are largely dependent on Christian visitors to the church, built on the traditional site of Jesus's birth.
The Latin Patriarchate of the Holy Land said the Church of the Nativity, which was first founded in 339 and rebuilt and extended over the centuries, would be closed for two weeks, along with other churches and mosques in the Bethlehem area.
The ban on foreign guests at West Bank hotels will also last two weeks, the tourism ministry said.

"This affects us dramatically," said Joey Canavati, manager of the 58-room Alexander Hotel in Bethlehem. "Our workers are essentially laid off for the next 14 days. We will be closed down completely. It destroyed our business from every perspective."

In the meantime, Israel on Wednesday announced that it has extended its compulsory 14-day quarantine to nationals returning from Spain, Germany, France, Switzerland and Austria.

Travelers returning to Israel from China, Singapore, Thailand, Japan, Hong Kong, Macau, South Korea, and Italy have already been instructed to do the same.

03.04.20 – We -
Gantz proposed bill (struck down last September) barring indicted PM from serving

03.04.20
Center-left pushes bill barring indicted PM from serving
Unclear if initiative will be backed by all opposition parties, which combined have Knesset majority; also unclear if it's technically possible during transitional government; Netanyahu backed similar bill in 2008 during then-PM Olmert's criminal investigations
Ynet| Published: 03.04.20 , 19:29

Blue & White on Wednesday confirmed it was working on getting a Knesset majority to support a bill that would prevent an indicted prime minister from serving, which would effectively oust current Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Blue & White chairman Benny Gantz proposed such a law after the 2019 September elections, but it was struck down at the time by Yisrael Beytenu party leader Avigdor Liberman.

However, Liberman could now support the legislation, according to a senior source who has spoken with Liberman about the matter.
After more than 99 percent of the votes were tallied, Likud and its right-wing allies control 58 out of the 120 Knesset seats.
The right-wing bloc supporting Netanyahu — consisting of Likud, the ultra-Orthodox Shas and United Torah Judaism and Yamina — thus fell short of the 61-MK majority needed to form a government.
Netanyahu is set to go on trial on March 17 for bribery, fraud, and breach of trust. The new Knesset will be sworn in on the same day.
A similar law banning an indicted prime minister from serving, was proposed in 2008 when then-prime minister Ehud Olmert was facing corruption charges, was supported by Netanyahu himself.
The law did not pass, but Olmert resigned before criminal charges were filed against him.
The law was also reportedly backed at the time by members of Netanyahu's current bloc, including United Torah Judaism co-leader Yaakov Litzman and fellow Likud MK Gideon Sa'ar.

It wasn't immediately clear whether the legislative proposal was technically possible, with some observers arguing that private, non-governmental draft law cannot be filed during a transitional government.

Blue & White believes it is possible, and that it isn't different from Likud proposing a law to dissolve the Knesset and call new elections, which was voted on and passed. Gantz reportedly plans to file the draft law immediately after the new Knesset is sworn in.

Apart from Blue & White, Labor-Gesher-Meretz and the Joint List MKs on Wednesday voiced support for the law, while Yisrael Beytenu officially kept mum.

Labor-Gesher-Meretz MK Nitzan Horowitz tweeted Wednesday that the law was "politically and morally justified and reflects the will of most voters." He added: "Let's go for it with everything we've got."

His party member Itzik Shmuli said he was on board, adding: "It's time for our political camp to seek decisive victory."

While the Joint List hasn't officially commented on the matter, its veteran MK Ahmad Tibi said, "I estimate that [supporting the bill] will be our direction."

Netanyahu in response said during a right-wing bloc meeting on Wednesday, Gantz is trying to "steal the elections" by passing such a law.

"Such a bill undermines the foundations of democracy," he added.

Members of Netanyahu's bloc reacted with outrage to the initiative.

Yamina party leader Naftali Bennett on Twitter called it "an anti-democratic move, spitting in the face of half the country." He added: "Two days ago there were elections, and already they are trying to bypass the people's will through illegitimate means."

Shas leader Aryeh Deri said such a law would be a "disgrace" and break the "rules of the political game." He lambasted Blue and White for being "willing to sacrifice the benefit of the country and the people's unity on the altar of personal hate toward Netanyahu."

Culture Minister Miri Regev, of Likud, accused Gantz of "succumbing to Tibi's pressure" and starting an "attempted coup."

03.04.20 – We -
US army linguist sent names & techniques of US assets to Lebanon for Hezbollah

03.04.20
U.S. army linguist charged with spying for Hezbollah
Prosecutors say that starting in late December, during the six-weeks flare-up between the United States and Iran in Iraq, 61-year-old Mariam Thompson repeatedly accessed dozens of files that she had no need to review, copying them and concealing them in her house
Associated Press| Updated: 03.04.20 , 21:39

A U.S. Defense Department contract linguist has been charged with giving classified information, including the names of American intelligence assets, to a Lebanese national with ties to the Iran-back terrorist group Hezbollah, the Justice Department in Washington announced Wednesday.

Federal prosecutors accused Mariam Taha Thompson, 61, formerly of Rochester, Minnesota, of turning over information that placed in danger those intelligence assets and American military personnel.

Thompson was due in court later Wednesday for an initial appearance. She was arrested last week on the espionage-related allegation.

"While in a war zone, the defendant allegedly gave sensitive national defense information, including the names of individuals helping the United States, to a Lebanese national located overseas," said Assistant Attorney General for National Security John C. Demers. "If true, this conduct is a disgrace, especially for someone serving as a contractor with the United States military. This betrayal of country and colleagues will be punished."

The investigation leading to this arrest revealed that starting on or about December 30, 2019, a day after U.S. airstrikes against Iranian-backed forces in Iraq, and the same day protesters stormed the U.S. embassy in Iraq to protest those strikes, audit logs show a notable shift in Thompson's network activity on United States Department of Defense classified systems, including repeated access to classified information she had no need to access.

Specifically, during a six-week period between December 30, 2019, and February 10, 2020, Thompson accessed dozens of files concerning human intelligence sources, including true names, personal identification data, background information, and photographs of the human assets, as well as operational cables detailing information the assets provided to the United States government.

A court-authorized search of Thompson's living quarters on February 19, 2020, led to the discovery of a handwritten note in Arabic concealed under Thompson's mattress.

The note contained classified information from Department of Defense computer systems, identifying human assets by name, and warning a Department of Defense target who is affiliated with a designated foreign terrorist organization with ties to Hezbollah. The note also instructed that the human assets' phones should be monitored.

Thompson transmitted the classified information in the handwritten note to a co-conspirator, in whom she had a romantic interest. The FBI's investigation revealed that Thompson knew the co-conspirator was a foreign national whose relative worked for the Lebanese government. The investigation also revealed that the co-conspirator has apparent connections to Hezbollah.

Further investigation revealed that, in a separate communication, Thompson also provided information to her co-conspirator identifying another human asset and the information the asset had provided to the United States, as well as providing information regarding the techniques the human assets were used to gather information on behalf of the United States.

If convicted, Thompson faces a maximum sentence of life in prison.
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03.02.20 – Mo -
Iran has highest number deaths from coronavirus outside China, toll reaches 66

03.02.20
Coronavirus death toll reaches 66 in Iran, includes a senior official
Mohammad Mirmohammadi, aide to Iranian Supreme Leader Khamenei, is believed to
be among the dead as the number of cases in the country reaches 1,501; Iran has the
highest number of deaths from COVID-19 outside China
Reuters| Published: 03.02.20 , 18:23

The death toll from the coronavirus in Iran rose to 66 on Monday, including an official on
a top council, as a World Health Organization (WHO) team headed to Tehran.

"The definite latest numbers we have are 523 new infections and 12 new deaths so the
total number of those infected is 1,501 until now and the number of deaths is 66," Deputy
Health Minister Alireza Raisi announced on state television.

Among the dead was Mohammad Mirmohammadi, a member of the Expediency Council,
a body intended to resolve disputes between parliament and the Guardian Council, the
Tasnim news agency reported. Mirmohammadi is also an aide and a close adviser to
Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.
Several top officials have been infected with coronavirus including Masoumeh Ebtekar,
the vice president for women and family affairs, and Deputy Health Minister Iraj Harirchi.
Government spokesman Ali Rabiei said that a closure of Iran's schools which was
announced on Saturday because of the outbreak would continue through the end of this
week, the official IRNA news agency reported.

Iran has the highest number of deaths from the coronavirus outside China, where the
outbreak began.
A four-person WHO team is expected to arrive in Iran on Monday evening, spokesman
Tarik Jasarevic said in Geneva, and will review measures to deal with the outbreak and
provide technical guidance.
During a week-long visit, the team will meet health ministry representatives and visit
health facilities and laboratories dealing with the response to the coronavirus outbreak.
Several countries in the region have reported coronavirus infections in people who have
visited Iran. These include Kuwait, whose health ministry on Monday reported 10 new
cases in the last 24 hours, all of whom had been in Iran. The Gulf Arab state has now
reported 56 cases of the virus.

The United Arab Emirates sent a shipment of medical supplies, including gloves and
surgical masks, to Iran on Monday, state news agency WAM reported.

03.05.20 – Th -
Russia, Turkey ceasefire as 3.6 million Syrian refugees cross into Europe

03.05.20
Russia, Turkey agree ceasefire deal for Syria's Idlib
Presidents convene in Moscow and declare truce starting midnight; Erdogan stresses right to respond to attacks by Syrian government in country's last rebel stronghold
Reuters| Published: 03.05.20 , 21:34

Turkey and Russia have agreed on a ceasefire deal on Thursday in Syria's Idlib region, their two leaders said after lengthy talks in Moscow to contain a conflict which has displaced nearly a million people in three months.

Russian President Vladimir Putin, standing next to his Turkish counterpart Tayyip Erdogan, said he hoped their agreement would lead to a halt of military action in Syria's last rebel stronghold in the far northwest of the country.

"I express hope that these agreements will serve as a good basis for a cessation of military activity in the Idlib de-escalation zone (and) stop the suffering of the peaceful population and the growing humanitarian crisis," Putin said.
Erdogan told reporters the truce would come into effect at midnight on Thursday. "We will work together to supply aid for the Syrians in need," he said, adding that Turkey retained the right "to respond to all (Syrian) regime attacks in the field."
Russia and Turkey back opposing sides in Syria's nine-year conflict, with Moscow supporting Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad and Turkey backing some rebel groups. They have in recent years reached several ceasefire deals in Idlib which have collapsed.
Russian airstrikes have propelled an offensive by Assad's forces in Idlib that sparked what the United Nations says may be the worst humanitarian crisis yet in a war that has driven millions from their homes and killed hundreds of thousands.

The Russian military has, however, repeatedly played down any talk of a refugee crisis and accused Turkey of violating international law by pouring enough troops into Idlib to make up a mechanized division.
Turkey, which has the second-largest army in the transatlantic NATO alliance, has funneled troops and equipment into the region in recent weeks to resist the Syrian government advance and prevent a wave of refugees over its southern border.
Russia also raced to reinforce its troops in Syria by sea and air before the Putin-Erdogan talks.
More deaths
The Kremlin said the two leaders had spoken for three hours on their own before being joined by their officials.
The two leaders also agreed to establish a secure corridor near the M4 highway, which runs east to west through Idlib, and hold joint patrols along the road from March 15.

In a joint statement read out by the Turkish and Russian foreign ministers, the two sides said the corridor would stretch 6 km to the north and 6 km to the south of the M4 - effectively advancing Russia's presence further north into Idlib.

They said their defense ministers would agree on the parameters of the corridor within seven days.

The fighting, which has raised the prospect of a direct clash between Russia and Turkey, has killed 60 Turkish troops in the region since last month, including the death of a Turkish soldier reported by a regional governor on Thursday.

Putin expressed his regret to Erdogan about the recent killing of 34 Turkish troops in an airstrike, saying the Syrian military had not known of their location.

Ahead of the talks, at least 16 civilians were killed when Russian airstrikes hit a gathering of displaced people near the town of Maarat Misrin in Idlib, according to civil defense workers helping clear the rubble and search for survivors.

Russia denies targeting civilians.

Two witnesses also reported seeing more Turkish military reinforcements deploying into Idlib, and Russia's RIA news agency said rebels had resumed shelling the strategic town of Saraqeb in Idlib where Russian military police are based.

The Turkish defense ministry said it had destroyed four tanks, five rocket launchers and a dozen military vehicles in artillery and airstrikes in the last 24 hours.

Turkey hosts some 3.6 million Syrian refugees and says it cannot handle more. Seeking to extract more funding and support from Europe over Idlib, Ankara said last week it would no longer abide by a 2016 deal in which it stopped migrants crossing into the European Union in return for billions of euros in aid.