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Election Day polls opened in 99 embassies for votes to arrive by March 23

03.10.21
Israel's elections get underway as polls open for diplomats abroad
Envoys serving in foreign countries traditionally cast ballots two weeks before Election Day so they can be counted with rest of votes; officials abroad include Yonatan Peled, who in last 4 elections has voted in 4 countries on 3 continents
Itamar Eichner| Published: 03.10.21 , 23:40

Israel's fourth election in two years got underway Wednesday when polls started to open at 99 Israeli missions around the world, ahead of the official Election Day on March 23.

The first to vote were the diplomats in the New Zealand capital of Wellington. The last were to be the envoys at the Israeli consulates in Los Angeles and San Francisco.

A total of 4,000 Israelis have the right to vote abroad, and this year for the first time diplomats will also be voting at the newly opened missions in Abu Dhabi and Dubai in the UAE and Rabat in Morocco.

It was only in the 1990s that Israel decided to allow officials serving abroad to vote in Knesset elections.

The elections in the embassies take place about two weeks before the polls open in Israel and the ballots cast abroad arrive in Israel by Election Day.

The voting slips from abroad are counted together with the "double envelope" ballots cast by IDF soldiers, police officers and people in hospital, called so because of the two envelopes used to protect the secrecy of the vote.

Jonathan Peled, who currently serves as Israel's acting ambassador to Australia, this election creates a unique record: Over the most recent four elections, he will have voted in four countries on three different continents.

During the elections for the 21st Knesset, in April 2019, Peled cast his vote in Mexico City during his time as ambassador to Mexico.

In the 22nd Knesset elections, in September 2019, Peled voted in Israel, and in the March 23, 2020 elections, he cast his vote in Miami, where he was serving as acting consul general for Florida.

Peled started his career at the Foreign Ministry about 30 years ago, during which time he has voted in a myriad of countries, including Turkey, Argentina, El Salvador and the U.S. The current election campaign is the seventh in which he has voted abroad.

"My [New Zealand] team thinks that in Israel we always vote three times a year, and my children are sure that I fly abroad especially to vote," said Peled.

"I hope to reassure my staff and my children that the next time I vote will be in four years time and this time in my homeland."

03.10.21

Netanyahu on UAE trip could achieve more peace agreements if re-elected

03.10.21

Report: Netanyahu may meet Saudi crown prince on UAE trip

PMO, UAE do not immediately confirm report by public broadcaster but Saudi official denies; unclear if prime minister will also visit Bahrain on one-day visit to Gulf that comes less than two weeks before Israel goes to polls for fourth time in two years
Reuters, Ynet| Published: 03.10.21 , 20:11

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu may meet with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman during his visit Thursday to the United Arab Emirates, Israeli public broadcaster Kan reported Wednesday.

The report was not immediately confirmed by Netanyahu's office or by the UAE.

Kan said he would hold talks with Abu Dhabi's Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan and that bin Salman might join them.

If it goes ahead, the meeting would not be the first between the Israeli and Saudi leaders. Netanyahu made a secret trip to Saudi Arabia for talks with bin Salman in November 2020.

The prime minister was accompanied by Mossad Director Yossi Cohen, while then-U.S. secretary of State Mike Pompeo also attended the meeting.

A Saudi official source on Wednesday denied that bin Salman would be meeting with Netanyahu, saying that the prince would not be visiting the UAE the day after.

Netanyahu's planned trip to the UAE was postponed last month due to the coronavirus pandemic. Sources said that the Gulf kingdom was worried about the visit's proximity to Israel's March 23 election, but were eventually persuaded.

None of Israel's airlines - El Al, Israir or Arkia - were invited to transport the prime minister to the UAE and it was unclear how he will make his way to Abu Dhabi.

Israel established formal relations with the UAE and Bahrain last September - only its third and fourth normalization deals with Arab states in over 70 years - as part of a U.S.-brokered agreement. The three countries share common concerns about Iran.

Saudi Arabia, a Gulf powerhouse and Islam's birthplace, encouraged the rapprochement but has stopped short of recognizing Israel itself.

It was not immediately clear if Netanyahu, on what Israeli media said would be a one-day visit, would also go to Bahrain, as he had planned to do during a previously scheduled one-day trip to the Gulf in February which he postponed due to the coronavirus crisis.

Israeli flag on display in Dubai market

Netanyahu, largely running in politically polarized Israel's fourth election in two years on his role in its rapid COVID-19 vaccination program, has also made his drive to forge new relations in the Gulf region a centerpiece of his campaign.

Israeli tourists and business executives flocked to the UAE before a national lockdown in Israel largely closed Ben-Gurion International Airport in late January. Restrictions were eased on Sunday.

In an interview with Army Radio on Tuesday, Netanyahu called on voters to re-elect him on March 23 so that he could achieve "more peace agreements" in the area, while ensuring that Iran "doesn't arm itself with nuclear weapons."

Iran denies its nuclear program is aimed at developing atomic weaponry.

03.10.21

Gaza commander of terror Sinwar was re-elected Hamas leader by secret ballots

03.10.21

Yahya Sinwar wins reelection as Hamas leader in Gaza

Former commander of terror organization's military branch fends off challenge from group co-founder Nizar Awadallah after three secret run-off ballots ahead of the Palestinian legislative elections in May

News Agencies| Published: 03.10.21 , 18:52

Hamas firebrand Yehya Sinwar was re-elected on Wednesday as the Palestinian terror group's leader in the Gaza Strip, leaving a figure closely aligned with the hardline wing in charge of the group's strategy in its main stronghold.

Bassem Naim, a senior Hamas figure, confirmed that Sinwar had fended off a challenge from Nizar Awadallah, one of Hamas' founders, to serve another four-year term.

In a statement issued by Awadallah, he stressed his support for Sinwar, saying: "We stand by his side in every position to achieve the goals of our project and our movement." Sinwar is a former member of the group's military wing, the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades, who spent over two decades in an Israeli prison after being convicted of murdering two Israelis.

He was released in a 2011 prisoner swap for IDF soldier Gilad Shalit, who was held captive by Hamas in Gaza for five years. Awadallah was a broker of the deal. Sinwar's victory could have deep implications for Hamas' relations with Israel and other regional players. It also could impact upcoming Palestinian elections, the first in 15 years. While he supports Hamas' opposition to co-existence with Israel, Sinwar has maintained a relatively stable standoff across the Gaza border and has also sought improved ties with Egypt.

"Sinwar's victory shows the man maintains a strong grip on things inside the movement, especially within its vital components such as the military wing," said Gaza political analyst Adnan Abu Amer.

"The win will enable Sinwar to pursue his policies, whether inside Gaza or with regional countries and the handling of the conflict with Israel."

Sinwar maintains close ties to the Hamas military wing and has often promoted a confrontational approach toward Israel.

The Gaza Strip is Hamas' most important area of activity. The group, which opposes Israel's existence, seized control of the territory from the Fatah-dominated Palestinian Authority in a bloody 2007 battle.

Since then, it has fought three wars and numerous skirmishes against Israel, holding on to power despite a crippling Israeli-Egyptian blockade that has devastated the economy. Awadallah was one of Hamas' founders in the late 1980s and has a strong connection to the group's political leaders.

Hamas' political leaders have closer links to Qatar and Turkey and tend to be more pragmatic in their dealings with Israel. The military wing is closer to Iran and favors a more militant approach toward Israel.

Hamas has yet to elect a leader for the West Bank. Sources said his identity would be kept secret as protection against Israel or the administration of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, a Hamas rival.

Filling the position of Hamas' political chief, who also speaks for its military wing, will require more time. The overall leader of Hamas is Ismail Haniyeh, who is also based in Gaza.

Haniyeh is facing a challenge this time by the former head of the group, Khaled Meshaal, who lives in Qatar.

03.10.21

Disreputable Israeli lobbyist in Montreal paid to explain army's coup in Myanmar

03.10.21

Disreputable Israeli lobbyist to be paid millions by Myanmar junta

Iranian born Ari Ben-Menashe was arrested in the U.S. in the 1980s after he tried to sell American weaponry to Iran; claimed to be former Mossad agent and advisor to then prime minister Shamir but Israel denied both claims
Reuters, Ynet| Updated: 03.10.21 , 07:42

An Israeli-Canadian lobbyist hired by Myanmar's junta will be paid \$2 million to "assist in explaining the real situation" of the army's coup to the United States and other countries, documents filed with the U.S. Justice Department show.

More than 60 protesters have been killed and 1,900 people have been arrested since Feb. 1, when Myanmar's generals seized power and detained civilian leaders including State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi.

Ari Ben-Menashe and his firm, Dickens & Madson Canada, will represent Myanmar's military government in Washington, as well as lobby Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Israel and Russia, and international bodies like the United Nations, according to a consultancy agreement.

Iranian born Ben-Menashe was arrested in the U.S. in the 1980s after he tried to sell U.S. made weapons to Iran. He claimed to be a Mossad agent and an advisor to then prime minister Yitzhak Shamir, claims that were denied by Israel.

The Montreal-based firm will "assist the devising and execution of policies for the beneficial development of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, and also to assist in explaining the real situation in the Country," read the agreement, submitted on Monday to the Justice Department as part of compliance with the U.S. Foreign Agents Registration Act and published online.

A spokesman for the Myanmar military government did not answer telephone calls from Reuters seeking comment.

03.07.21

Swiss vote outlaws facial burqa coverings following 2009 ban on new minarets

03.07.21

Swiss agree to outlaw facial coverings in 'burqa ban' vote

Constitutional amendment proposed by the far-right Swiss People's Party passes with 51.2%, with MP dubbing the facial covering 'a symbol of extreme, political Islam' which he says has no place in Switzerland
Reuters | Published: 03.07.21 , 21:35

A far-right proposal to ban facial coverings in Switzerland won a narrow victory in a binding referendum on Sunday instigated by the same group that organized a 2009 ban on new minarets.

The measure to amend the Swiss constitution passed by a 51.2-48.8% margin, provisional official results showed.

The proposal under the Swiss system of direct democracy does not mention Islam directly and also aims to stop violent street protesters from wearing masks, yet local politicians, media and campaigners have dubbed it the burqa ban.

"In Switzerland, our tradition is that you show your face. That is a sign of our basic freedoms," Walter Wobmann, chairman of the referendum committee and a member of parliament for the Swiss People's Party, had said before the vote.

He called facial covering "a symbol for this extreme, political Islam which has become increasingly prominent in Europe and which has no place in Switzerland".

The Central Council of Muslims in Switzerland called the vote a dark day for the community.

"Today's decision opens old wounds, further expands the principle of legal inequality, and sends a clear signal of exclusion to the Muslim minority," it said.

It promised legal challenges to laws implementing the ban and a fundraising drive to help women who are fined.

The proposal predated the COVID-19 pandemic, which has required adults to wear masks in many settings to prevent the spread of infection.

Two cantons already have local bans on face coverings.

France banned wearing a full-face veil in public in 2011 and Denmark, Austria, the Netherlands and Bulgaria have full or partial bans on wearing face coverings in public.

Practically no one in Switzerland wears a burqa and only around 30 women wear the niqab, the University of Lucerne estimates. Muslims make up 5% of the Swiss population of 8.6 million people, most with roots in Turkey, Bosnia and Kosovo.

The government had urged people to vote against a ban.

"After the ban on minarets, a majority of Swiss voters has once again backed an initiative that discriminates against a single religious community and needlessly stirs up fears and division," Amnesty International said.

"The veiling ban is not a measure for women's liberation, but a dangerous symbolic policy that violates freedom of expression and religion."

03.10.21

Tel Aviv's largest Jewish museum in the world reopens after \$100 million upgrade

03.10.21

Tel Aviv's Jewish museum reopens after \$100 million upgrade

Museum underwent major renovations, one third of which was financed by the Nadav Foundation of Russian-Israeli Leonid Nevzlin, while his daughter Irina - wife of Health Minister Edelstein - serves as chair of the board of directors

Associated Press| Published: 03.10.21 , 13:32

From Queen Salome to the late RBG, from Moses to Sandy Koufax, Tel Aviv's newly revamped Museum of the Jewish People attempts the ambitious undertaking of bringing almost 3,000 years of Jewish history and tradition under a single roof.

The museum — formerly known as Beit Hatfutsot and newly branded as ANU, Hebrew for “We” — reopened to visitors this week after more than a decade of renovations costing \$100 million.

Its exhibition space has tripled, making it the largest Jewish museum in the world, officials say. Its old galleries with dioramas and models from when it first opened in 1978 have given way to cutting-edge exhibits with interactive touchscreens and original artwork.

Close to a third of the renovation was financed by the Nadav Foundation of Russian-Israeli Leonid Nevzlin, a former oil magnate. Another \$52 million came from other U.S.-based philanthropists and foundations, and \$18 million from the Israeli government. Nevzlin's daughter Irina, the wife of Health Minister Yuli Edelstein, serves as chair of the museum's board of directors.

The refurbished museum adopts a fresh approach to telling the story of the Jewish people, said chief curator Orit Shaham-Gover. It focuses on the diversity of Jewish culture and the accomplishments of the Jewish people, not just its tragedies, she said.

“Everyone walking in here needs to see themselves regardless of gender, denomination, ethnic background,” said Dan Tadmor, the museum's CEO. “This is our story and you need to feel part of it.”

Scattered through 72,000 square feet (6,690 square meters) of galleries are historical artifacts and mementos: a jawza — a type of stringed instrument — belonging to 20th-century Iraqi musicians known as the Al-Kuwaity brothers, one of late Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg's signature collars, a Book of Esther scroll from pre-Inquisition Spain, and a monumental carved stone from a first-century A.D. synagogue on the shores of the Sea of Galilee.

Visitors can use a digital bracelet to capture memorable elements — from literary quotations, to recipes and family trees — and take them home by email. Shaham-Gover, the curator, said the open-space gallery of contemporary Jews is “a celebration of life and culture and lights and colors.”

“The museum is not a muted temple,” she said. “It’s about life. So you come here, you have sounds, you have light and colors. It’s part of you.”

Its grand opening comes as the fundamental issue of who is a Jew has resurfaced in Israeli politics ahead of this month's fourth parliamentary election in two years. The Supreme Court recently ruled that people who had undergone Reform and Conservative conversions to Judaism in Israel would qualify as Jews when applying for citizenship under Israel's Law of Return. The decision has outraged Israel's powerful ultra-Orthodox religious establishment, which has long held a monopoly over conversions, along with members of the ruling Likud party.

Upon entering the main gallery, visitors encounter life-sized projections of Jews from a kaleidoscope of different affiliations and lifestyles — from Reform to ultra-Orthodox and everything in between — explaining how they define their Jewish identity. Anat Lieberman, a museum visitor from the town of Ramat Gan, said the presentation of people from “all colors of the rainbow” was moving, and showed that it was a museum “for the entire Jewish people.” Tadmor avoided touching on the politics of the issue and insisted the institution does not take a stance on the question of who is a Jew. “We’re nonpolitical. We don’t favor any denomination. We’re floating 20,000 feet above all of that,” he insisted. “We just want to make sure that everyone is represented and you don’t come out feeling like ‘I’m transparent.’”

03.02.21

Supreme Court rule to recognize Liberal Reforms is attempt to alter Israel’s identity

03.02.21

Religious MKs vow Jewish Orthodoxy to be conversions to Judaism authority
Religious lawmakers across the board commit to changing the law to ensure Reform or Conservative conversions in Israel are not recognized by the state, with one calling them 'ridiculous' while others slam judges for 'attempt to alter the identity of the country'
Kobi Nahshoni, Yael Freidson | Published: 03.02.21 , 14:24

Religious politicians on Tuesday said they will demand legislation on Orthodox conversion to Judaism as a precondition to joining the next coalition.

After a Supreme Court ruling on Monday that instructs the state to recognize more liberal conversions conducted in Israel by Conservative and Reform rabbis, religious politicians and rabbinical leaders demanded the ruling be overlooked until a new law can be passed.

The Chairman of the Knesset Constitution, Law and Justice Committee Haredi MK Yaakov Asher said the decision by the Supreme Court to announce its ruling ahead of the

March 23 elections is a blatant interference in the political sphere. "It is time to limit the judges' activism," he said.

The landmark ruling of the eight Judge panel, 15 years in the making, centered around the combustible question of who is Jewish and marked an important victory for the Reform and Conservative movements. These liberal streams of Judaism, which represent the vast majority of affiliated American Jews, have long been marginalized in Israel.

The ruling only interprets the existing law, the court said, while parliament "at any time can set a different arrangement in the law".

Housing Minister Yaakov Litzman who heads the United Torah Judaism Party and his second in command, MK Moshe Gafni said they would not join a new coalition unless there is a firm commitment to legislate that only an Orthodox conversion would be valid in Israel.

Interior Minister Arye Deri leader of the Shas party said the court ruling is unfortunate and would bring about a rift among Jews. "I am committed to repair the legislation to ensure that only the Orthodox conversion will be recognized."

A member of Deri's party, Religious Affairs Minister Yaakov Avitan called the more liberal factions' conversions "ridiculous."

"Jews protected their identity over thousand of years of observance to Halachik law," he said. It is absurd to see that in Israel of all places, a miserable decision by Judges can void the country from its Jewish identity."

The right-wing Yamina Party headed by former Defense Minister Naftali Bennet agreed. In a statement released on Monday the party said that the democratically elected representatives of the and not the unelected judges should determine such an important issue.

MK Bezalel Smotrich who heads the far-right Religious Zionist Party, said he had been concerned that such a ruling would be delivered.

"Only a rightwing government will be able to pass a law ensuring Orthodox conversions as well as legislation that would allow the Knesset to bypass other Supreme Court rulings that could change the nature of Israel as a Jewish state," the Religious Zionist Party added in a statement released on Monday.