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Gantz concedes failure, cannot form government
Having failed to form a coalition, Benny Gantz reportedly tells the president he will continue in his efforts to build a government during the 21 days allotted by law for any MK to attempt to form one supported by a 61 member majority
Ynet|Last update: 11.20.19 , 23:35
With hours to go, Blue and White leader Benny Gantz informed President Reuven Rivlin he has failed to form a coalition.

Gantz said Wednesday that he had tried to form a liberal unity government but was stymied by a rightwing and religious bloc that chose the welfare of one man over that of all Israelis.

"I was blocked by a wall of persistent losers, who prevented the establishment of a government headed by me and my party - that had won the election - so that the country can begin to return to political stability."

Though he had returned his mandate, Gantz reportedly told the president that he will not cease his efforts to build a coalition during the 21 period allotted by law to any member of Knesset to attempt to form a government.

Earlier, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu urged his political rival to ignore the opposition of his partner Yair Lapid and join him in a unity government.

"What we need now is not more elections, but a unity government," Netanyahu said at the start of a meeting of his right-wing bloc in Jerusalem, addressing Gantz. "It's not too late, let's sit together and announce that we are forming a national unity government."

Netanyahu's comments came shortly after Yisrael Beytenu leader Avigdor Liberman, whose handful of Knesset seats made him the apparent kingmaker in coalition efforts, said Israel was on track for an unprecedented third election in 12 months.

He said both Netanyahu and Gantz were to blame for failing to establish a unity government.

Gantz has until midnight to put together a coalition before the mandate returns to President Reuven Rivlin, but without Liberman that appears virtually impossible. If he fails, as expected, the country enters the final 21-day period for a candidate to present a majority before new elections are called.

Speaking at a special press conference, the 61-year-old said he made "every effort" and "left no stones unturned" in trying to push for a "liberal" unity government, but after weeks of negotiations he said he could not endorse either side.

Liberman claimed the bid for the unity coalition failed because Netanyahu made the Likud party "slaves" for the ultra-Orthodox, while the Blue and White leader Gantz failed to accept President Reuven Rivlin's outline, which required the prime minister to be the first in rotation for the premiership.

"The only thing that stood in the way of unity government, and I would like to quote the president here, was a 'personal argument,'" Liberman said. "There were no substantial gaps on issues."

Liberman added that any narrow government that could potentially be established now, whether it's Gantz-led minority coalition supported by the Arab parties or Netanyahu-led right-wing bloc coalition, would quickly dissolve. "All we see in the current situation is a sure way to another election," he said.

He said he will push for Knesset to adopt a legislation that makes voting in a national ballot compulsory in an effort to avoid a similar political crisis in the future

"I heard one political analyst this morning say that 'Lieberman understands his stock is currently at an all time high' and the shares need to be sold before they crash," said the Yisrael Beytenu leader.

"Well, according to the media presence here, our stock is indeed at its peak. "We, however, don't sell our principles for ministerial seats, even if it is the most cushioned seat ever."

United Torah Judaism leader Moshe Gafni called Lieberman an "anti-Semite" for refusing to back the right-wing bloc.

"This man is simply anti-Semitic," Gafni said. "This man shouldn't be allowed to be in Israeli political system. Who are you anyway? You're nothing!"

Barring a last-minute development, it looks like Gantz will be forced to inform Israel's president that he has no government to present - just as Netanyahu did before him. The past two elections, held in April and September respectively, have been inconclusive and polls indicate the result of a third will not differ significantly.

"The truth must be said: Netanyahu is rejecting unity and will do anything to deteriorate us to a third election within a year," Gantz wrote on Facebook. "I am ready to make compromises for the benefit of the citizens of Israel but not to cave on our core principles."

Looming above the entire process is the long-expected announcement on Netanyahu's corruption indictment that could remove him from the equation and potentially provide a long-sought way out of the impasse.

Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit has recommended that Netanyahu be indicted on fraud, breach of trust and bribery charges in three separate cases. His final ruling has long been anticipated and is expected in the coming weeks, perhaps sooner. Though Netanyahu will not be compelled by law to step down immediately, it will certainly harden the opposition's stance.

11.20.19

IDF strikes Iranian bases in Damascus in response to rocket fire on Golan Heights
Tuesday's rocket fire on the Golan; Iranian targets in Syria on Wednesday

11.20.19

Report: At least 23 dead in wide-scale Israeli strikes in Syria

War monitoring group says at least 7 of the casualties are foreign nationals; IDF says it carried out the attacks, hitting targets belonging to Iran's elite Quds force, in response to the rocket fire at Israel's north; 'Our message to Iranian leaders: you're no longer immune,' says Bennett

Associated Press, AFP|Last update: 11.20.19, 18:05

The Israeli military said it struck dozens of Iranian targets in Syria on Wednesday, carrying out a wide-scale strike in response to rocket fire on the Golan Heights the day before. War monitoring group reported at least 23 people were killed including foreign nationals.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said at least 7 out of 23 casualties were foreign nationals and are believed to be Iranians. "We cannot confirm whether the seven foreigners killed are all Iranians or pro-Iranian fighters of different nationalities," added Rami Abdul Rahman, the head of the London-based NGO with an extensive network of sources in the country.

The military said its fighter jets hit multiple targets belonging to Iran's elite Quds force, including surface-to-air missiles, weapons warehouses and military bases. After the Syrian military fired an air defense missile, the Israeli military said a number of Syrian aerial defense batteries were also destroyed.

The Syrian Observatory said the airstrikes targeted arms depots belonging to the Quds Force in the Damascus suburbs of Kisweh and Qudsaya. Abdul Rahman added that several other areas were targeted in Wednesday's strikes, including the Mazzeh airbase in western Damascus where air defense units are stationed.

Earlier, Syria's state SANA news agency said the two people were killed by shrapnel when an Israeli missile hit a house in the town of Saasaa, southwest of Damascus.

The report also said several others were wounded in the airstrikes near the capital, Damascus. It claimed that Syrian air defenses destroyed most of the Israeli missiles before they reached their targets.

The strikes further burst into the open what's been a long shadow war between Israel and its archenemy Iran. The two foes have increasingly clashed over what Israel says is Iran's deeper presence along its borders.

Yesterday's Iranian attack towards Israel is further clear proof of the purpose of the Iranian entrenchment in Syria, which threatens Israeli security, regional stability and the Syrian regime, the military said in a statement, adding that it would continue operating firmly and resolutely against Iran in Syria.

Lt. Col. Jonathan Conricus, a military spokesman, said the significance of the operation was the multitude of targets hit.

Several important targets were struck, he said, including what he described as the Iranian headquarters at Damascus airport where senior Iranian officials are based and which is used to coordinate shipments from Iran to its allies in Syria and beyond. He added that Israel also holds Syria responsible for hosting the Iranians.

Tuesday's rocket fire on the Golan was the sixth attempt by Iran to attack Israeli targets since February 2018, and all have been thwarted, Conrucus said.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has issued a series of warnings recently about Iranian aggression throughout the Middle East and has vowed to respond firmly. "I made it clear: whoever harms us, we will harm them. That's what we did tonight," he said early Wednesday. We will continue to aggressively protect Israel's security.

Israel's new hard-line defense minister, Naftali Bennett, issued an equally firm statement.

"The rules have changed: whoever fires on Israel during the day will not sleep at night," he said. "Our message to the leaders of Iran is simple: you are no longer immune. Any place you dispatch your tentacles, we will chop them off."

The rare rocket fire comes a week after an Israeli airstrike against a top Palestinian militant based in Syria. Akram al-Ajouri, a member of the leadership of the militant Islamic Jihad group who is living in exile, survived the attack but his son and granddaughter were killed.

Israel frequently strikes Iranian interests in Syria. But last week's airstrike appeared to be a rare assassination attempt of a Palestinian militant in the Syrian capital. It came the same day as another Israeli airstrike killed a senior Islamic Jihad commander in Gaza, settling off the fiercest round of fighting there in years.

Iran has forces based in Syria, Israel's northern neighbor, and supports Hezbollah militants in Lebanon. In Gaza, it supplies Islamic Jihad with cash, weapons and expertise.

Netanyahu also has claimed Iran is using Iraq and far-off Yemen, where Tehran supports Shiite Houthi rebels at war with a Saudi-led coalition backing the government, to plan attacks against Israel. Hamas also receives some support from Iran.

11.20.19

Vatican refutes US stand as Risky; leaving Israel & Palestine dispute to local courts

11.20.19

Vatican says Israeli-Palestinian peace process at risk after U.S. move

The Roman Catholic Church says it supports the right of Israel to live in peace and security but the decision by the Trump administration to back Jewish settlements in the West Bank 'undermines regional stability'

Reuters|Last update: 11.20.19, 15:44

The Vatican said on Thursday the search for peace between Israelis and Palestinians had been put at risk after the United States backed Israel's building of settlements in the West Bank.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced Monday that the U.S. is softening its position on Israeli settlements in the West Bank and parts of East Jerusalem, the latest in a series of Trump administration moves that weaken Palestinian claims to statehood.

"In the context of recent decisions that risk undermining further the Israeli-Palestinian peace process and the already fragile regional stability, the Holy See reiterates its position of a two-state solution for two peoples, as the only way to reach a complete solution to this age-old conflict," the Vatican said in a statement.

"The Holy See supports the right of the State of Israel to live in peace and security within the borders recognized by the international community and supports the same right that belongs to the Palestinian people, which must be recognized, respected and implemented," it added.

Pompeo repudiated a 1978 State Department legal opinion that held that civilian settlements in the occupied territories are "inconsistent with international law." The move angered Palestinians and immediately put the U.S. at odds with other nations working to end the conflict.

"Israel's legal system, which has proven itself fully capable of addressing legal questions related to the settlements, is the appropriate place for these matters to be adjudicated - not biased international forums that pay no attention to history or facts," Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said after the decision.

11.21.19

UN members Britain, France, Germany, Belgium, & Poland rebuke US on settlements

11.21.19

UN Security Council members rebuke U.S. on Israeli settlements

Europeans called on Israel 'to end all settlement activity, in line with its obligations as an occupying power,' saying such activity 'erodes the viability of the two-state solution'

Associated Press| Updated: 11.21.19 , 00:09

In a sharp rebuke to the Trump administration, the 14 other U.N. Security Council members on Wednesday strongly opposed the U.S. announcement that it no longer considers Israeli settlements to be a violation of international law. They warned that the new American policy undermines a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The council's monthly Mideast meeting, just two days after U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's announcement, was dominated by negative reaction to the new American policy from countries representing all regions of the world who said all Israeli settlements are illegal under international law.

Only Israel's U.N. ambassador, Danny Danon, who is not a council member, spoke in support of the U.S. action, saying it "rights a historical wrong." He also called the criticism an "obstacle to peace" that is "preventing direct negotiations" between Israelis and Palestinians.

"When the international community tries to force its solutions, it achieves the opposite effect," Danon said. "When Palestinians see that their battles are being fought for them, why would they agree to come to the negotiating table where they would have to compromise?"

Before the meeting began, five European allies of the United States — Britain, France, Germany, Belgium, and Poland — reiterated in a joint statement that "all settlement activity is illegal under international law."

The Europeans called on Israel "to end all settlement activity, in line with its obligations as an occupying power," saying such activity "erodes the viability of the two-state solution and the prospects for a lasting peace."

They also reiterated concern "about the calls for a possible annexation of areas in the West Bank."

Nickolay Mladenov, the U.N. special coordinator for the Middle East peace process, opened the meeting expressing "regret" at the U.S. action and reiterating the U.N. position that settlements under a December 2016 council resolution "are a flagrant violation under international law."

He also warned that the situation in Gaza remains "highly volatile" after "the most serious recent escalation between Israel and Palestinian militants" that followed Israel's targeted killing of a Palestinian Islamic Jihad commander.

Cherith Norman Chalet, a deputy U.S. ambassador, repeated Pompeo's announcement on settlements, which repudiated a 1978 State Department legal opinion holding that civilian settlements in the occupied territories are "inconsistent with international law."

She stressed that "this complex political problem" can be resolved only through direct Israeli-Palestinian negotiations.

"The U.S. government is expressing no view on the particular legal status of any individual settlement, nor are we addressing or prejudging the ultimate status of the West Bank — that is for Israelis and Palestinians to decide," Chalet said.

Indonesian Ambassador Dian Triansyah Djani, whose country has the world's largest Muslim population, called the U.S. announcement "irresponsible and provocative," saying it "incontrovertibly constitutes a de facto annexation and is a barrier to peace efforts based on the two-state solution."

After speeches by the 15 council members, Israel's Danon and Palestinian Ambassador Riyad Mansour, the council held closed consultations.

When that session ended, ambassadors from the 10 non-permanent council members who serve two-year terms stood before reporters while Deputy German Ambassador Jurgen Shultz read a critical joint statement.

"Israeli settlement activities are illegal, erode the viability of the two-state solution and undermine the prospect for a just, lasting and comprehensive peace" as affirmed by the 2016 council resolution, the statement said.

It also called on Israel to end all settlement activity and expressed concern at calls for possible annexation of areas in the West Bank.

Kuwaiti Ambassador Mansour Al-Otaibi, the Arab representative on the council, then told reporters that 14 countries agreed in the private session on the press statement.

He said one country objected — a clear reference to the United States.

Mansour, the **Palestinian ambassador, said** he was grateful to the 14 council nations and their commitment to international law, saying that all 193 U.N. member nations are required to implement all Security Council resolutions, including on the illegality of all settlements.

In a response to Israel's Danon, Mansour sharply criticized "the nonsense on one delegation inside the chamber saying that you, the international community, if you abide by international law, you help the Palestinians not to come to negotiations."

"If we abandon international law, including Security Council resolutions, it will be the law of the jungle," he warned.

11.20.19

The Glass House Iranian HQ at Damascus International Airport attacked by IDF

Tuesday

11.20.19

The Glass House': The Iranian HQ attacked by Israel

According to the 'Daily Mail', the third and fourth floors were manned by an intelligence unit of the Revolutionary Guard Corps, who essentially man the whole structure.

Sa'ar Haas, Yoav Zitun|

Updated: 11.20.19 , 23:23

The **Israel Air Force attacked** on late **Tuesday** several military targets in Syria, including anti-aircraft batteries, weapon storage facilities and military bases. But **one of the central**

targets within the 20 that were attacked was the "Glass House", the headquarters for the Iranian Revolutionary Guard in Damascus.

IDF's Spokesperson's Unit said that half of the targets attacked were Iranian, among them the sector command and control base for the Al-Quds Division of the Revolutionary Guard Corps at Damascus International Airport.

Reported IDF airstrikes in Syria on late Tuesday
A military official nicknamed the structure, which was attacked for the first time by Israel, as the "Syrian National Defense Office".

During Israel's Operation House of Cards on May 10, 2018, the IDF initiated a vast airstrike on military targets in Syria, the likes of which had been unseen since 1974.

'The Glass House' in Damascus (Photo: Google Maps)

During that attack, the "Glass House" was not hit, but a storage facility next to the building was.

Following the IDF's nighttime attack on Tuesday, in response to rocket fire directed at the Golan Heights, satellite images showed the building being evacuated and its fourth and fifth floors decimated by the attack.

ISI images showing the upper floors of the 'Glass House' destroyed following the IDF strike (Photo: ISI)

Also, earlier this year, on January 10, a significant aerial attack by Israel targeted Al-Quds forces in Syria.

Following that attack, satellite images by ImageSat International revealed no damage to the Iranian headquarters.

But this time, after four rockets were fired at Israel - which were intercepted by Iron Dome - the "Glass House" was not spared. And yet, a security official stated that "the building was attacked, but not destroyed".

The importance of the "Glass House" to the Iranians, was first publicized three years ago, following a Daily Mail expose, detailing the location as the headquarters for the Iranian army in Syria.

According to the report, which was based on information given by the France-based Iranian opposition group NCRI, the third and fourth floors of the building were manned by an intelligence unit of the Revolutionary Guard Corps, who essentially man the whole structure.

Entrance to the building is prohibited to all but senior Syrian army officials.

The report also detailed the first floor consisting of a coffee shop and a private clinic with 20 hospital beds for senior officials wounded during the fighting in Syria.

It also hosts members of the propaganda wing of the Revolutionary Guard Corps and includes prayer and rest areas.

The basement, according to the report, stores millions of dollars in cash and two underground bunkers.

The "Glass House" was originally built as a 180-room hotel, with a capacity of up to 1,000 visitors.

A 2017 report by NCRI said that all forces affiliated with the Revolutionary Guard Corps receive an ID for the "Glass House" upon their arrival in Syria.

It is difficult to fully estimate what is true and what is false regarding the "Glass House". What can be said is that Israel struck an important target of the Iranians on Tuesday night.

11.20.19

Knesset election decision requires 5-day appeals, 90-day statute, & quorum in 21-days

Can Israel rush into new elections?

decision is ultimately made in the Knesset 90-day statute probably be held in early March.

Supreme Court has five days to hear appeals

11.20.19

Can Israel rush into new elections?

Analysis: Under the law, there are strict guidelines for each step of the electoral process, and while there are those in the Knesset who wish to shorten the timeline, they might be defeated by simple logistics

Moran Azulay, Amir Alon | Updated: 11.20.19 , 17:52

Yisrael Beytenu leader Avigdor Lieberman's statement on Wednesday that Israel is headed into fresh elections, with only Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Blue and White leader Benny Gantz to blame, brings Israel a few steps closer to a third election campaign in less than a year.

Such a move entails a relatively long, predefined procedural timeline, enshrined in law. This 90-day period is designed to facilitate the organizational process involved in holding an national election, but inevitably means political maneuvering as well.

Avigdor Liberman addressing his Knesset faction (Photo: Alex Kolomoisky)

But before this 90-day can come into effect, there has to be another 21-day period in which any Knesset member can try to form a new government, with the same caveats that thwarted Gantz and Netanyahu, namely the support of 61 MKs.

Failure to shorten this 111-day timeline will mean that the State of Israel concludes a full year of economic paralysis in a transitional government, in which the Knesset, its committees and important legislative procedures, as well as budgets, remained stuck.

The next election, unless a surprise agreement on a new government is reached by Wednesday midnight, will probably be held in early March.

Some in the political establishment argue that if there is not a new government by the time Gantz's hourglass runs dry, then it is worthwhile reconsidering this time frame, including perhaps skipping the 21 days in which any MK can try to form a government. Those who wish to expedite elections point out that neither Blue and White nor Likud is ready to abandon its basic principles and the prospect of a unity government remains low. One must also take into account Liberman's statement that he will not join a right-wing, religious government led by Netanyahu or a minority government led by Gantz with external backing from the Joint List.

If the Knesset does decide to shorten the timeline in order to accelerate fresh elections, special legislation will be required that needs the support of 61 lawmakers. Sources in the Knesset said that the decision on whether to shorten the timeline before elections also depends, among other things, on the ability of the Central Elections Commission (CEC) to complete its logistical preparations in line with a new timetable.

Justice Hanan Meltzer, head of the Central Elections Commission (Photo: Amit Shabi)
And what does the CEC say?

Its members are reluctant to change the law so that elections can be held in less than 90 days.

"We are working on an accurate 90-day preset schedule and which poses problems if truncated," the committee said.

"For example, at present the Supreme Court has five days to hear appeals about decisions by the CEC on disqualifications from running in the elections. If they cut the timeline further - there will be no time for this.

"You can't tell the Supreme Court to discuss all the disqualifications within a day, that's the most important thing about democracy. Any change will make it more difficult for the process to be carried out. There is a reason for the 90-day statute, which is based on the required preparation time period that we need."

However, the committee says that the decision is ultimately made in the Knesset and it will implement whatever is decided there.

"If they want a change, we will present the problematic data, but the commission will do its best anyway. There may be a certain problem (with staffing) because we use civil servants who have already worked two election campaigns in succession. In the last ele

11.20.19

Gaza-made version of Iranian rocket landed in the Eshkol region amplifying concern

11.20.19

Gaza rocket leaves a crater in southern Israel

Residents of Eshkol region were shocked to discover that one Islamic Jihad missile was far stronger than anything they'd encountered before; IDF says it is aware of and has prepared for this new kind of projectile

Elior Levy, Matan Tzuri

Updated: 11.20.19, 21:07

During last week's fighting between Israel and Islamic Jihad, one exceptionally powerful rocket fired from Gaza landed in the Eshkol region between Ashkelon and Be'er Sheva, leaving a small crater and amplifying concern of the local populace regarding Islamic Jihad's true military might.

The Iranian-backed terror group is known to possess only two types of rockets capable of inflicting so much destruction.

The crater made by the exceptionally powerful blast

The first is the Badr-3, a rocket capable of delivering a 250kg warhead to a distance of up to 40km. The Badr-3 made its first appearance during the escalation of May 2018, and according to Islamic Jihad's military branch, is a home-made model.

The second rocket, subtly named "Ashkelon's Hell," is a short-range rocket that carries a disproportionately large warhead, according to Islamic Jihad. This rocket was first used in November 2018, when it was fired towards the southern city of Ashkelon and again last week.

According to military correspondent, Ron Ben-Yishai, "Ashkelon's Hell" is actually the Gaza-made version of a rocket named "Burkan" which was developed during the Syrian civil war and is actually possessed by both Islamic Jihad and Hamas.

Ashkelon's Hell rocket

The Burkan is meant to be used to rain down destruction on Israeli communities close to the Gaza border, but due to the model's inaccuracy, the rocket has mostly failed to reach its targets, as they usually fall in open areas near the Gaza Strip.

On Tuesday, the commander of the southern brigade of the Gaza Division, Col. Liron Batito, met with the heads of various Gaza border communities to discuss this new threat by Islamic Jihad.

"The rocket that made the crater in Eshkol is a threat that we are well aware of, and are prepared for," he said.

Islamic Jihad fighters launching rockets from Gaza

"Over the past year, Islamic Jihad has reared its head and unveiled the power it has amassed during the last few years," said Batito. And yet, according to the IDF commander, Israel's readiness in the Gaza front is extremely effective and strong.

"The IDF squads and special forces units that have been deployed to the area are creating a very strong protective envelope," he said.

Islamic Jihad's Badr-3 rocket

Batito added that even though he has served all over Israel, he feels a special connection to the people living near the Gaza Strip.

"I continue to admire the resilience and strength of those that live in the communities surrounding Gaza," he said.

Badr-3 rocket

Islamic Jihad official in Gaza, Muhamad al-Hindi, warned Israel last week against conducting any further targeted eliminations against its forces, hinting that it had the means to inflict heavy damage on Israel.

"Israel needs to know that any further assassination attempts would carry a heavy price," he said. "Israel's intimidation has worn off."

Al-Hindi added that Islamic Jihad's retaliation for the death of Baha Abu al-Ata, which triggered the round of fighting, had achieved its set goals.

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