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12.26.19

Early exit polls show Netanyahu to remain at Likud helm

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Early exit polls show Netanyahu to remain at Likud helm

PM appears to have fended off the challenge by Gideon Sa'ar as Channel 12 poll gives Netanyahu 71.52% of votes; by the time the polls closed at 11 pm, 48.94% of the party's

116,000 eligible voters had cast ballots

Ynet, Reuters| Updated: 12.26.19 , 23:54

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu appeared to have faced down a fresh challenge to his power on Thursday when his Likud party held a leadership vote in the run-up to a March national election, the country's third in under a year.

An exit poll cited by the political correspondent for Channel 12 news predicted that Netanyahu, head of Likud for the past 14 years, would retain the right-wing party's leadership with 71.52% of votes.

The challenge by Gideon Saar, whom the exit poll gave 28.48% of votes, has added to pressures that have mounted this year on the four-term premier, who is under indictment and fighting for political survival.

Earlier in the day, Netanyahu and his main challenger MK Gideon Sa'ar painted a conflicting picture of the Likud leadership election's voter turnout.

Some 116,048 members of the Likud party began voting at 106 polling stations across the country on Thursday morning to set the stage for a showdown that presents the most serious challenge to Netanyahu's Likud leadership in years.

By the time the polls closed at 11 pm, it appears some 48.94% of the party's 116,000 eligible voters had cast ballots.

Netanyahu claimed the turnout is "extremely low," urging his voter base to beat the inclement weather and come out to vote.

"I've been calling people and they tell me: 'We want you tremendously and we're sure you will win anyway,'" he said. "Because those people are convinced that I will win, they don't come out to vote, narrowing the gap."

Meanwhile, Sa'ar's official HQ directly contradicted Netanyahu's claims. "The voter turnout is higher than average," said the official statement.

The Likud administration also seemed to be dissatisfied with the turnout, urged the party members to come out and cast their ballot. "Do not give in to the cold weather, do not give up your democratic right to vote and make a difference," said the party in a statement.

12.26.19

March of Return protests of Gaza Arabs of 1948, is now monthly, to calm border

12.26.19

Hamas says Gaza protests to be scaled back early in 2020

The announcement that March of Return demonstrations will only take place once a month, apparently signals that Gaza's rulers wish to maintain the relative calm on the border in an effort to strengthen unofficial 'understandings' with Israel

Associated Press| Published: 12.26.19 , 16:35

The organizers of the weekly Palestinian demonstrations along the Gaza Strip's frontier with Israel said Thursday that they will significantly scale down the gatherings early next year.

The announcement by the organizing committee of Gaza's Great March of Return is the latest sign that Hamas is trying to maintain calm in hopes of strengthening unofficial "understandings" with Israel that would ease a crippling 12-year blockade of the coastal territory.

The committee said the demonstrations will only take place once a month, beginning in March, the second anniversary of the protests.

The demonstrations were initially launched as a grassroots effort to draw attention to difficult living conditions in Gaza and to call for the return of Palestinian refugees to long-lost homes in what is now Israel. Some 80% of Gaza's 2 million residents are refugees or descendants of refugees who either fled or were forced from their homes during the war surrounding Israel's establishment in 1948.

But Hamas, an Islamic group that opposes Israel's existence, quickly took control of the protests, turning them into heated confrontations with Israeli troops as young men tried to cut through the border fence, burned tires and threw stones and firebombs toward the soldiers.

Israeli fire has killed some 215 Palestinians, most of them unarmed, including 47 people under the age of 18 and two women, according to the Al-Mezan Center for Human Rights. Hundreds of others have been seriously wounded in the demonstrations.

Israel has said it was defending its border against attacks and infiltration attempts. But Palestinians and international human rights groups have accused the Israelis of using excessive force.

An Israeli-Egyptian blockade, imposed after Hamas seized control of Gaza in 2007, has ravaged Gaza's economy.

With little to show from the protests, Hamas has begun to tone them down as Egyptian, Qatari and U.N. mediators try to broker a cease-fire agreement that would ease the blockade. Israel has said any progress would depend on a halt to the protests, as well as frequent rocket fire out of Gaza.

Late Wednesday, a rocket attack believed to have been launched by the radical Islamic Jihad militant group forced Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu off the stage during a campaign stop in southern Israel.

Israel responded by bombing a series of Hamas targets. Israel says it holds Hamas responsible for all fire out of Gaza, even rockets launched by rival militant groups.

12.26.19

## Gideon Sa'ar considers 30% as positioning to lead Likud when Netanyahu retires

12.26.19

### Netanyahu and Sa'ar face off in Likud leadership race

Netanyahu widely expected to brush off challenge to lead the party to a third election in less than 3 months; preliminary results expected past midnight

ynet, i24NEWS | Updated: 12.26.19, 13:12

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his key rival within Likud party ranks, former education and interior minister Gideon Sa'ar faced off in the party leadership vote on Thursday.

Some 116,048 members of Likud began voting at 106 polling stations across the country from 9 am local time to set the stage for a showdown that makes for the most serious challenge to Netanyahu's Likud leadership in years.

The polling stations will remain open until 11 pm amid fears that wind and rain could keep voter turnout down, with the preliminary results expected sometime past midnight. A former aide and senior Cabinet minister under Netanyahu, Sa'ar has long been considered a rising star in Likud and a potential future heir, but while others are patiently waiting for Netanyahu to step down on his own, Sa'ar has been the only one who has dared to take the incumbent head-on.

Netanyahu is expected to brush off Sa'ar's challenge for the Likud leadership, with Israeli media estimating Sa'ar's chances to unseat Netanyahu are slim.

Sa'ar's allies will consider a result of over 30% support of Likud members as a win, positioning their candidate to lead the party when Netanyahu steps down.

However, after failing to build up a coalition in two consecutive votes, Netanyahu's capacity to form a government in the wake of the third vote cannot be taken for granted. Netanyahu faces charges of bribery, fraud and breach of trust in three corruption cases in which he is accused of trading legislative or regulatory favors in exchange for lavish gifts or favorable media coverage.

He denies any wrongdoing and has waged an angry campaign against the media and law enforcement officials that he said are bent on ousting him from office.

Outwardly, Likud members have strongly supported their leader and joined in denouncing the alleged "coup" of the liberal elites against him.

Even amid the political disarray, Sa'ar's challenge is a risky maneuver in a party that fiercely values loyalty and has had only four leaders in its 70-plus-year history.

Netanyahu himself has denounced Sa'ar as "subversive."

Netanyahu said on Wednesday that he "certainly" plans to annex the Jordan Valley in the near future, despite recent reports suggesting plans have entered a "deep freeze" over concerns that the move could potentially intensify confrontation with the International Criminal Court.

The ICC Chief Prosecutor Fatou Bensouda announced on Friday she is ready to investigate whether Israel was committing war crimes in the Palestinian Territories.

Netanyahu in a rare interview conducted with Army Radio said: “I intend to lead for American recognition of our sovereignty in the Jordan Valley and in all the settlements in the West Bank, as I have led the recognition of the Golan Heights and Jerusalem, Israel’s capital.”

The premier added that there’s a legal hurdle for annexation during an interim government, “but God willing, I will do it when I get elected” - referring to the next general vote in March.

The country's longest-serving premier also talked about his relationship with Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin. According to Netanyahu, Putin told him that “if it wasn’t for you and our relationship, we could have been already at war, in confrontation.”

Netanyahu disclosed that Israel Air Force jets were close to colliding with Russian aircraft on four separate occasions, most likely over Syrian territory, but thanks to close coordination between the armies, these incidents did not occur.

Regarding reports of Netanyahu’s intention to request immunity from the Israeli parliament, he remained tight-lipped, with the deadline for such a request to be submitted expiring next week.

Netanyahu also appeared Wednesday at an election event in the southern city of Ashkelon as rocket fire was launched from the Gaza Strip.

The sirens warning of the incoming rocket fire blared at around 9 pm in Ashkelon and other communities bordering the Hamas-controlled enclave.

IDF said that the Iron Dome missile defense system intercepted a projectile fired at southern Israel. No damage or casualties were reported.

Netanyahu and his wife, Sara, were campaigning in Ashkelon ahead of Thursday's leadership primaries.

The prime minister was immediately rushed to safety by his security team, a scene reminiscent of a September incident in the city of Ashdod.

" Hamas and Jihad do not want me to win," Netanyahu said after being allowed back on stage. "The one who tried to make an impression the last time, is no longer with us, and the one who tried to make an impression now should start packing the bags," he said, referring to the Islamic Jihad commander Baha Abu Al-Ata, who was assassinated by the Israeli military last month.

Three months ago, Netanyahu was evacuated during a rocket siren that blared mid-speech as the prime minister was rallying support a week before the September 17 national ballot. At the time, Netanyahu's quick departure off stage was widely criticized by his political opponents.

During the September incident, attendees of the event remained in the auditorium and did not run for shelter

12.26.19

Wintry weather & widespread flooding in northern and central Israel

12.26.19

Israel hit by widespread flooding as wintry weather persists

Showers cause heavy flooding in some parts of the country as commuters are warned to stay away from affected areas; Sea of Galilee rises by 6 cm in a day

Ynet| Published: 12.26.19 , 11:11

Israel was hit by widespread flooding on Thursday as a wave of torrential downpours and strong gusts swept through the country.

Major flooding was reported in northern and central Israel as entire streets became submerged in Tayibe, Umm al-Fahm, Baqa al-Gharbiyye, Qalansawe and Kafir Qara.

Particularly high rainfall was measured in the Western Galilee, the Golan Heights, and the Upper Galilee.

Some areas have experienced continuous cloudbursts since Wednesday afternoon, with rainfall measurements reaching a staggering 140 mm in the northern city of Ma'alot-Tarshiha within about 24 hours.

The Sea of Galilee reportedly rose by 6 cm within 24 hours, 4.5 cm of which during the night, setting the world's lowest sweet water lake's elevation level at 211.765 meters below sea level.

The storm system, which comes after a period of unseasonably warm and dry weather, hit the north in the early morning hours and was making its way south, with low temperatures, heavy showers and strong gusts expected to last until Saturday.

Before the current rainstorm, measurements showed that this year's annual rainfall in northern Israel stood at around 50% percent of the yearly average, but this number has soared to over 110% of the region's expected quantity of precipitation in a little over 24 hours.

Police forces are on high alert, calling for people to prepare for road closures due to flooding and urged the residents to stay away from low lying areas.

The rain was preceded by a dust storm causing high levels of pollution that were washed away by the precipitation.

Israel also saw its first snowfall of the winter season on Wednesday as snow began falling on Mount Hermon, Israel's highest peak in the north, with the temperatures in the area dropping to 0 degrees celsius in the late hours of the morning.

In the northern city of Haifa, the temperatures will range from 16 degrees celsius during the day Thursday to just 11 degrees at night. In Tel Aviv, the weather will be similar, with a range of 16 degrees during the day and 12 degrees at night.

In the southern city of Be'er Sheva, temperatures will range from 17 degrees throughout the day to 10 degrees at night. In Jerusalem, the temperatures will be cooler, reaching 11 degrees during the day and falling to 7 degrees overnight.

12.25.19

Gaza Rocket fired at Netanyahu's speech in Ashkelon, delayed but rallied support

12.25.19

Rocket fired at Ashkelon during Netanyahu's campaign event in the city  
PM warns those who fired the rocket should 'pack their bags'; Israeli military says one projectile launched from the Gaza Strip into southern Israel was intercepted by the Iron Dome

Matan Tzuri | Published: 12.25.19 , 21:12

Rockets were fired Wednesday from Gaza at the southern city of Ashkelon during Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's appearance at an election event in the city.

The sirens warning of an upcoming rocket fire blared at around 9 pm in the city of Ashkelon and Israeli communities bordering the Hamas-controlled enclave.

Israeli military said the Iron Dome intercepted the one projectile fired at southern Israel. No damage or casualties were reported.

Netanyahu and his wife, Sara, were in the southern city at an election conference ahead of Thursday's leadership primaries in the ruling Likud party.

The prime minister was immediately rushed to safety by his security team, a scene reminiscent of the September incident in the city of Ashdod.

" **Hamas and Jihad do not want me to win** ," Netanyahu said after being allowed back on stage. "The one who tried to make an impression the last time, is no longer with us, and the one who tried to make an impression now should start packing the bags," he added, referring to the Islamic Jihad commander Baha Abu Al-Ata, who was assassinated by Israeli military last month.

Three months ago, Netanyahu was evacuated during a **rocket alert** siren that blared **mid-speech** as the prime minister was rallying support a week before the September 17 national ballot.

At the time, the video of Netanyahu being escorted by his security was widely criticized by his political opponents.

The video of the incident, uploaded to Netanyahu's Facebook page, was deleted a few minutes later and a host of **videos were posted showing support** for Netanyahu, who insisted on **returning to the stage to continue his speech** even though some thought it was dangerous both for him and for the rest of those present.

12.25.19

Defense Minister Naftali Bennet freezes funds to terrorist families & will expand order  
Wednesday

12.25.19

Bennett puts freeze on bank accounts of terrorists' families

The Defense Minister signed a seizure order for salaries from the PA received by convicted terrorists and also applied it to family members defined as their beneficiaries; 'another step in the campaign against terrorists,' Bennett said

Elisha Ben Kimon | Published: 12.25.19 , 14:08

An executive order signed by Defense Minister Naftali Bennet on Wednesday freezes the bank accounts of eight Palestinian terrorists and their families.

All of the terrorists are currently in prison in Israel, with five serving life sentences.

The order freezes the monthly allowance given by Palestinian sources to them and their families.

Among the terrorists affected by the move is the leader of the squad that in 2003 bombed Tel Aviv Central Station, resulting in 23 deaths; two Israeli-Arabs that facilitated the August 2002 Meron Junction Bus 361 attack, which resulted in the deaths of six civilians and two IDF soldiers.

Also included under in the order is the leader of the 1992 "Night of the Pitchforks" attack, targeting an IDF training base which resulted in three IDF casualties and the perpetrator of the 1984 murder of IDF soldier Moshe Tamam.

Others included are various instigators and terror engineers arrested by the IDF in the course of the First and Second Intifadas.

The Defense Ministry spokesperson stated that this was the first time that Israel is actively working against terrorists' allowances coming from the Palestinian Authority – and that similar orders will be signed into action.

According to the spokesperson, the order was put into effect following a thorough review with security agencies in the ministry, together with police, Israel Prison Services, Israel Money Laundering and Terror Financing Prohibition Authority and other government agencies.

Following the signing of the order, Bennet said: "We are taking action, this is a further step in the fight against terrorism."

"We are working to make the spilling of Jewish blood, not economically profitable," he said.

The issue of these allowances has come up lately in an opinion filed by the Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit to the Israel Labor Court.

In the opinion, the attorney general described the background of the payments and stated that they should be classified as income – therefore subject to taxation.

Since its founding, the Palestinian Authority has made monthly payments to terrorists under arrest in Israel, with sums ranging from NIS 1,400 to NIS 12,000 a month.



According to the Israeli-based media watchdog "Palestinian Media Watch", more than NIS 500 million were given to terrorists serving prison sentences in Israel during 2018.

12.25.19

Military Chief of staff Aviv Kochavi declares it unethical to publish secret IDF probes

12.25.19

Chief of staff: Military will not tolerate deviation from expected moral standard

Kochavi identified Iran as the immediate enemy facing Israel and told of continued efforts to remove Iranian weaponry from Syria and prevent the threat of precise missiles

Yoav Zitun| Updated: 12.25.19 , 11:40

Following the publication of the IDF probe into the recent round of fighting in the Gaza Strip, Chief of Staff Aviv Kochavi reiterated Israel's high ethical stance and said the military will not tolerate any deviation from its standard of morality.

In the latest outbreak of fighting last November, the IDF targeted a home in the Gazan city of Deir al-Balah which was mistakenly identified as a military compound belonging to Islamic Jihad, resulting in the death of eight members of one family.

The general said mistakes happen but, "we conducted a thorough investigation into the incident and lessons have been learned."

In his first public comments in response to the possible probe by the International Criminal Court into allegations of war crimes, Kochavi sighted Israel's morality and persistent efforts to avoid combat as the necessary ethical footing needed to deploy maximum strength even in urban areas.

The ICC Chief Prosecutor Fatou Bensouda on Friday announced her intent to probe possible war crimes in the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Gaza.

"Israel is a phenomenal success and it is the role of the armed forces to provide safety and protection," Kochavi said in an event near Tel Aviv Wednesday.

"The ultimate goal is to instill in our enemies the feeling of despair and doubt in their ability to achieve their aggressive aims," the military chief said.

"Weaponry is moving from Iraq into Syria and from Iran into the Gaza Strip," the military chief said, adding that Israel is conducting a secret ongoing operation aimed at preventing Shi'ite militia entrenchment in Syria and the threat from precise missiles.

"Iran is continuing to produce precise missiles that can reach Israel and has a military industry that is larger than ours," Kochavi said and added that Iran has thus far has not retaliated against Israel's actions and that "though there is an unlikely possibility of direct conflict with Iran: we are preparing for it but not encouraging it." He said.

Calling Iran Israel's immediate enemy, the general said, "We must continue our efforts to remove Iranian weaponry from Syria and it would have been better had we not been the only ones engaged in that effort:"

In Gaza, Kochavi said Hamas is concentrating on improving the condition of civilians. "There is a strong will not to bring about an escalation of tensions on the part of Hamas and it was the Islamic Jihad under the leadership of its now-dead commander Baha Abu al-Ata that were responsible for the vast majority of attacks on Israel in the past year:" The Chief of Staff went on to say that Hamas is again controlling events in the Strip and with the help of Egypt, Israel can lift some of the restrictions imposed on Gazans while ensuring the safety and security of Israelis along the border.

12.23.19

Education Ministry edict fights legal head to remove liberal rules on non-paying parents

12.23.19

Education Ministry directive threatens students' equality

A new Education Ministry decision effectively overturns a 2016 directive saying that children of parents who will not pay for participation in after-school activities must be included in extracurricular programs

Tamar Trabelsi-Hadad | Published: 12.23.19 , 16:53

Three years ago, the Education Ministry issued a directive stating that even if parents refuse to pay for their children's participation in extracurricular activities, the school must still include those students in their programs.

Now a new ministry edict threatens to overturn the directive meant to ensure equality among the students.

The parents refusing to pay for their child's participation in after school activities (yearly field trips included), usually do so out of principle, as they believe that it's the state's responsibility to pay any extra expenses as part of the law stating that education up until the 12th grade is mandatory.

In 2016, the Ministry of Education issued a directive stating that children of parents refusing to pay out of principle should not be excluded from any extracurricular activities whatsoever.

"The exclusion and estrangement of a child from any activities where the child's entire class is participating, is a move which serves to hurt the child, and not the parents who committed the offence," says the ministry's 2016 directive, which also allows the school to use legal procedures in order to obtain payment from the parents after the participation of their child.

Recently, many parents have asked the Ministry of Education to clarify their policy regarding the participation of students whose parents refused to pay out of principle. As a result, the ministry's department of law and policy issued a statement clarifying that, "a school can decline to provide a student an activity which the student's parent opted not to pay for" - effectively reversing the Education Ministry's directive.

Vered Windman, the head of the Israel National Council for the Child's legal department, said she was appalled by the ministry's new directive.

"Ignoring our objection to the demand that parents pay for any extracurricular activities, a child should never be punished for the decisions of his parents, whether justifiable or not," says Windman.

"This is with accordance with the student rights' law, which states that any punishment inflicted on the student due to the action of his parents is not only wrong, but may result in sanctions against the educational institution that does so."

According to Windman, its up to the Education Ministry to make sure that schools around the country adhere to the law.

"If the ministry won't uphold students' rights, it will not only commit a great injustice, it will also break the law," Windman says.

The National Parent Organization also criticized the Education Ministry directive, saying it incumbent on the state to meet expenses incurred during mandatory education.

"The state must subsidize expenses during a student's obligatory education along with the cancellation of any further payments by the parents," the organization said.

"Even though we believe its the right of any parents to choose not to pay for any extracurricular activities, we also believe that the burden of payment shouldn't fall on those willing to pay."

The Education Ministry said in response that schools can remove children from those activities for which their parents do not wish to pay.

12.25.19

Iran restricted mobile internet access in several provinces before expected protests

12.25.19

Report: Iran starts internet shutdown before possible new protests

Authorities attempt to stop social media users from sharing images of people killed in the protests as Islamic Republic's bloodiest crackdown on demonstrators in the 40-year history continues; Tehran blames 'foreign enemies' for tensions

Reuters| Published: 12.25.19 , 18:59

Iran's authorities have restricted mobile internet access in several provinces, an Iranian news agency reported on Wednesday, a day before new protests were expected to kick off following calls for the demonstrations on social media.

Social media posts, along with some relatives of people killed in unrest last month, have called for renewed protests and for ceremonies to commemorate the dead to be held on Thursday.

The protests were initially sparked in November by hikes in gasoline prices but demonstrators quickly expanded their demands to cover calls for more political freedom and other issues.

The government, which launched the bloodiest **crackdown on demonstrators** in the 40-year history of the Islamic Republic, blamed foreign enemies for stoking tensions.

An **official denied any order by the authorities to block the internet**, which was shutdown for about a week in the November unrest.

The semi-official news agency ILNA quoted an informed source at the Communications and Information Technology Ministry as saying mobile internet access to overseas sites was blocked by "security authorities" in Alborz, Kurdistan and Zanzan provinces in central and western Iran and Fars in the south.

"According to this source, it is possible that more provinces will be affected by the shutdown of mobile international connectivity," ILNA said.

**Internet blockage** observatory NetBlocks said on Twitter: "Confirmed: Evidence of mobile internet disruption in parts of #Iran ...real-time network data show two distinct drops in connectivity this morning amid reports of regional outages; incident ongoing." The shutdown appeared to be spreading.

"I just checked myself and asked a friend, and the internet is off on our mobiles," a resident in Ahvaz, the capital of the oil-rich Khuzestan province, told Reuters.

But a communications ministry spokesman denied there was an order to shut down the internet. "No such order has been issued by the judiciary or other relevant authorities.

The Fake News are at work," Jamal Hadian said in a Twitter post.

In Alborz province, one of the areas affected by the shutdown, authorities this week arrested the parents of a young man who was shot dead during the protests, after pressuring them to call off a commemoration for their son scheduled for Thursday, citing concerns it could create unrest.

The internet blockage made it difficult for protesters to post videos on social media to generate support and also to obtain reliable reports on the extent of the unrest.

Security forces have been on alert for any events that could spark more unrest after 1,500 people were killed in less than two weeks after protests erupted on Nov. 15, according to a Reuters report.

That figure is much higher than estimates by international human rights groups and was dismissed as "fake news" by a spokesman for Iran's top state security body.

The United States imposed sanctions on Iran's communications minister last month for his role in "widescale internet censorship," a reference to the nationwide shutdown.

Iran has blamed "thugs" linked to exiles and foreign foes - the United States, Israel and Saudi Arabia - for stirring up unrest through social media.