

Newsletter Sunday November 18, 2018

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| PM Netanyahu steps up efforts to avert snap elections

"This is a sensitive time security-wise and we shouldn't call for [early] elections," PM tells ministers • PM to meet with Kulanu head Moshe Kahlon, says coalition's fate is in Kulanu's hands • Zionist Union, Meretz to submit bill to dissolve Knesset.

Mati Tuchfeld, Gideon Allon, News Agencies and Israel Hayom Staff

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu | Photo: Reuters

There is no reason to call for snap elections at this sensitive time, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu told ministers at the start of the weekly cabinet meeting Sunday.

Speaking of his efforts to avert early elections, Netanyahu said, "Over the past few days, I have spoken with all the coalition faction leaders, and this evening I will meet with Finance Minister [and Kulanu party head Moshe] Kahlon. This is a sensitive time, security-wise and we shouldn't call for [early] elections.

"We all know what happened in 1992 and 1999, which brought about the Oslo disaster and the catastrophe of the Intifada," he said, referring to elections when a right-wing government lost power to the Left.

Earlier Sunday, Netanyahu canceled the weekly coalition heads' meeting, during which they coordinate the coalition's agenda in the Knesset and in the government.

While Netanyahu continues to insist he wants to try to stabilize his fractured coalition following the resignation of Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman last week, Kahlon and Habayit Hayehudi leader and Education Minister Naftali Bennett said over the weekend that the die has essentially been cast and election season will officially begin soon.

Justice Minister Ayelet Shaked (Habayit Hayehudi) expressed support for dissolving the government and reiterated her party's demand that to avoid that, Bennett must be named defense minister.

"The only justification for this government's continued existence until November 2019 [when elections fall due] is having Bennett revolutionize security and restore Israel's deterrence, which was lost under Lieberman. He [Bennett] can help alleviate the [public's] deep crisis of confidence in security. Without that, this is a government that calls itself 'rightist,' but carries out left-wing policies," she said.

Netanyahu and Kahlon were expected to meet Sunday morning in a last-ditch effort to stave off early elections, but the meeting was postponed to the evening. Some ministers

were quoted over the weekend as saying they favor elections as early as this March.

Lieberman stepped down Wednesday over what he described as the government's anemic policy against Hamas and other Palestinian terrorist groups in the Gaza Strip, leaving the government with a razor-thin majority – just 61 of the 120 seats in the Knesset. Each of the remaining government factions now has the power to effectively dissolve the coalition.

Kahlon was the first coalition partner to call for early elections after meeting Netanyahu on Thursday.

His calls were echoed by Interior Minister Aryeh Deri, head of the ultra-Orthodox Shas party. Bennett has asked to succeed Lieberman as defense minister but was turned down by Netanyahu on Friday.

Alex Kolomoisky

Finance Minister and Kulanu party head Moshe Kahlon and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu

On Saturday, the prime minister tweeted, "Tomorrow [Sunday] morning, I will meet with Moshe Kahlon for a decisive sitdown before the [weekly] cabinet meeting, in a final attempt to convince him not to topple the government.

"If the Kulanu faction doesn't topple the government, there is a government. A right-wing government must not be toppled. All members of the Likud faction want to continue serving the country another full year, until the term ends in November 2019."

But in an interview with Hadashot evening news, Kahlon said, "That kind of spin doesn't work on me.

"A defense minister from a very important coalition member resigned. It's impossible to run a coalition in its fourth year with 61 Knesset members. This isn't the first year of a term. We all want elections for our own reasons. I'll sit with Netanyahu; maybe he'll pull a rabbit out of his hat?"

Kahlon stressed that his desire for elections was unrelated to Bennett's demand for the defense portfolio.

"I have no problem with Bennett as defense minister. I don't appoint ministers, do I?" he said.

Addressing the criticism against him from senior Likud members, Kahlon said, "Those are spins and they should stop making threats. I left Likud and established a party of my own. I don't work there, I'm their partner, and they will have to accept my opinion. I don't

need a kosher certificate from them, certainly not from [former coalition chairman] David Bitan."

Bennett, who met with Netanyahu on Friday, told Channel 13's "Meet the Press" on Saturday: "We're heading for an election – there is no government. There's a blame game being fought on who will be the one to pronounce it dead."

Coalition Chairman MK David Amsalem lambasted Bennett Sunday, saying his demand to be named defense minister, which Netanyahu rejected, further destabilized the coalition.

"We have a nationalist government that could continue for another year," Amsalem told Israel Radio, referring to the election's due date in November 2019.

"Let there be no doubt, we're going to elections because of Naftali Bennett. In my view, the talks [to prevent the coalition's collapse] are borderline hopeless. Naftali is pitting us all against each other, giving us grades. It's unprecedented chutzpah," he said.

A poll published by Hadashot showed Likud falling by one seat from 30 to 29, after months of polls have shown it gaining seats.

Only 17% of respondents said they were happy with Netanyahu's Gaza policy.

On the other side of the political aisle, the Zionist Union and Meretz announced plans to present a bill to dissolve the Knesset. Both parties plan to present their motions on Wednesday.

"This government needs to be dismantled and we should go to elections as soon as possible," said Meretz Chairwoman MK Tamar Zandberg.

"The Israeli public is sick of loyalty and nationality laws, incitement, marking enemies and warmongering. Thank heavens we're rid of this government which only has this to offer. The Israeli people will choose differently and better, in an election campaign based on hope and truth – not fear and fake news."

Zionist Union leader Avi Gabbay said, "The fight in the upcoming elections is between the Zionist Union and Israelis who hope and believe in change, and Likud and others who are willing to accept the current situation. Israel is ready for change and we will lead it."

The proposals to dissolve the Knesset and go to elections will be subject to a preliminary reading and will require a majority of 61 MKs to pass, meaning coalition members will have to support them. Even if a majority is secured, a motion for the dissolution of the Knesset would still have to pass three additional readings.

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Report: Israel, Hamas progressing in prisoner exchange talks

German diplomat has secretly been mediating between Israel and Hamas, says report in UAE-based Al-Khaleej • Senior Israeli official: Report incorrect • Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar: My message to Netanyahu and his next war minister – Gaza is a death trap.

Daniel Siryoti, Ariel Kahana, Nikki Guttman and Lilach Shoval

Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar in Gaza on Friday, with a pistol allegedly plundered from the firefight with IDF commandos last week

The recent cease-fire understandings in the Gaza Strip could lead to a prisoner exchange deal with Hamas for the bodies of IDF soldiers Lt. Hadar Goldin and Staff Sgt. Oron Shaul and information on two Israeli civilians being held in Gaza.

The United Arab Emirates-based Al-Khaleej news website reported over the weekend that significant progress has been made between Israel and Hamas on a prisoner exchange deal. According to the report, which is based on senior Egyptian diplomatic sources, a German diplomat who visited Israel and Gaza recently and met with leaders on both sides has secretly been mediating between the sides.

It was also reported that Israel has told the German mediator it is willing to accept Hamas' condition for the release of dozens of Hamas terrorists who, after they were released in the Gilad Schalit prisoner swap in 2011, returned to terrorist activities and were subsequently reincarcerated.

The Egyptian sources were quoted as saying that an Israeli delegation of senior security officials is expected to visit Cairo soon to finalize the deal, and that if there are no objections in Israel over releasing some of the prisoners Hamas has demanded, then the "prisoner exchange could happen quite soon."

In Israel, officials stressed there is no agreement to re-release Hamas terrorists from the Schalit deal. A senior Israeli official said the Al-Khaleej report was incorrect.

Also Friday, Hamas military leader Yahya Sinwar spoke at a memorial service for members of the group's military wing who were killed in a gunfight with Israeli commandos last Sunday.

During his speech, Sinwar brandished a pistol he claimed was taken as a bounty from the incident.

"The people of Gaza kicked [recently resigned Defense Minister Avigdor] Lieberman," he boasted. "I spoke with the commander of the military wing, Muhammad Deif, about an attack on Tel Aviv – but he said the attack should speak for itself. My message to [Prime Minister Benjamin] Netanyahu and his next war minister – Gaza is a death trap. Those who said we sold the blood of shahids [martyrs] for dollars and fuel will be disappointed yet."

In Lebanon, deputy Hezbollah leader Naim Qassem said, "Lieberman's resignation is the best proof of the success of the resistance in Gaza."

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