

ISRAEL REPORT

To provide greater exposure to primary Israeli news sources and opinions in order to become better informed on the issues, and to gain a better understanding of the wide range of perspectives that exist in Israeli society and politics.

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POLL: LIKUD LEADS BY DOUBLE DIGITS (Arutz-7 12/25/18)

	Current Knesset	Poll
Likud	30	32
Zionist Union	24	11
Joint List (Arab)	13	11
Yesh Atid	11	17
Kulanu	10	6
Jewish Home	8	12
Shas	7	4
Yisrael Beiteinu	5	6
United Torah Judaism	6	8
Meretz	5	8
Orly Levy	1	5

IT'S OFFICIAL: POPULAR FORMER GENERAL GANTZ ANNOUNCES NEW PARTY (JPost 12/27/18)

After months of speculation about his political future, former IDF chief of staff Benny Gantz announced Thursday that he is formally running the country's upcoming April elections with his own, new party.

The party is called "Hosen L'Yisrael" (Israel Resilience Party). No other details about the party or its members have been released.

According to the documents filed with election authorities, the goals of the party are "the ongoing foundation and strengthening of the State of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state in the light of the Zionist dream as expressed in the Declaration of Independence, and through the establishment and redefinition of national priorities in the following areas: education, national infrastructure development, agriculture, law, internal security, social welfare, peace and security."

The Israeli political establishment has been rife with rumors about when, if and how the popular former general, who is seen as a main challenger who can unseat Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, would enter politics.

Earlier Thursday, Israel Hayom reported that Gantz had sought out former deputy prime minister Dan Meridor to join his list, and other reports that Gantz contacted Yerucham Mayor Michael Biton.

Zionist Union leader Avi Gabbay allegedly offered Gantz to lead his party and was turned down, Channel 10 news reported Tuesday.

The latest polls have predicted Gantz's party would win 16 seats if the election were held today, even though he has not revealed his political views on key issues yet.

NETANYAHU COULD CUT HISTORIC BRAZIL VISIT OVER POLITICS AT HOME (Arutz-7 12/26/18)

Israel's Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu may cut his five-day visit to Brazil short over the political developments in Israel.

Both Israeli and Brazilian media reported on the possibility of a shortened trip on Tuesday evening, more than a day after the ruling coalition agreed to dissolve the government and go to early elections.

Netanyahu's visit centers on the inauguration of Jair Bolsonaro as Brazil's new president on Jan. 1 in the country's capital city, Brasilia. His presence at the ceremony is now uncertain due to the likely changes in the agenda, yet to be confirmed.

The historic visit – the first of a sitting Israeli prime minister to Brazil – is

considered strategic because both leaders will discuss face to face the details of the transfer of the Brazilian embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, one of Bolsonaro's flagship promises during his campaign.

Netanyahu is scheduled to land in Rio on Friday, where he will be the first and only foreign leader to meet with Bolsonaro before he is sworn in next week. After the private bilateral meeting, Netanyahu will attend an afternoon service at a synagogue in Copacabana. He also is scheduled to meet Evangelical Christian leaders on Sunday, when he will fly to Brasilia or to Tel Aviv, depending on whether the visit is shortened.

ISRAELI OFFICIAL CONFIRMS AIRCRAFT STRUCK IRANIAN TARGETS IN SYRIA (Ha'aretz 12/27/18)

An Israeli security official has confirmed Wednesday that Israel carried out an overnight airstrike in Syria, saying a series of Iranian targets were hit.

The official says the airstrike hit Iranian storage and logistic targets being used to transfer weapons to the Hezbollah militant group. The official said Israel also took out a Syrian anti-aircraft battery near Damascus that fired at the Israeli warplanes.

The official spoke on condition of anonymity under standard security protocols. The Israeli military has not commented on the incident.

Israeli aircrafts struck an arms depot west of Syria's capital city of Damascus from Lebanese airspace, Syrian state media reported Tuesday. According to reports, three Syrian soldiers were wounded in the attack which targeted Hezbollah depots.

A report in the American weekly Newsweek said several senior Hezbollah officials were wounded in the alleged attack.

Citing a Department of Defense source familiar with the details of the attack

Mazal Tov to Gavi Sragow on his Aufruf this Shabbat and upcoming marriage to Shayna Lerner of Baltimore, MD

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Flatbush Park Jewish Center, Mill Basin, NY	Young Israel of New Hyde Park, NY
Harvard University Library	Young Israel of North Woodmere, NY
Hebrew Academy of Long Beach, NY	Young Israel of New Rochelle, NY
Hillel at Baruch College	Young Israel of Sharon, MA

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via senior Israeli representatives, the report said Israeli aircrafts struck a few minutes after the officials had gotten on board a plane to Iran.

On Wednesday, Russia criticized the airstrikes, saying they had endangered civilian flights.

The ministry did not specify which flights had been threatened but said one of the flights was landing in Beirut and the other in Damascus. It added that Syrian air defenses had destroyed 14 of 16 Israeli missiles launched against unspecified targets near Damascus by six Israeli F-16s on Tuesday.

The Israeli official said, however, that Israel alerted Russia about the airstrikes ahead of time.

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu alluded to Israel's activity in the north, saying Israel will not allow an Iranian entrenchment in Syria. "We will act against it vigorously and continuously including during the current period," he said at an Israel Air Force graduation ceremony.

Lebanon's Foreign Ministry responded to the alleged Israeli air raids later on Wednesday, saying the strikes posed a danger to commercial air traffic that could have caused a major civil aviation disaster.

Israel has previously confirmed carrying out scores of airstrikes in Syria, mostly believed to be aimed at suspected weapons shipments to Hezbollah.

IDF FULLY PREPARED FOR WAR, INVESTIGATIVE COMMITTEE FINDS (Israel Hayom 12/26/18)

In around three weeks, IDF Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Gadi Eizenkot will finish his term as the 21st commander of the Israel Defense Forces.

Military readiness for war has been an issue dear to Eizenkot's heart. But in recent months Eizenkot has been forced to confront harsh criticism and warnings from IDF Ombudsman Maj. Gen. Yitzhak Brik, who, based on visits to IDF field units, has published worrisome reports in which he concludes that the IDF Ground Forces are not prepared for a real conflict.

Although high-ranking officers in the Ground Forces refuted Brik's claims, the ombudsman continued to send reports and letters to government officials. Two weeks ago, he laid out his concerns before the Knesset State Control Committee. Eizenkot decided to appoint an investigative committee headed by IDF Comptroller Brig. Gen. Ilan Harari to examine the Ground Forces' readiness for war. The committee members included former GOC Central Command Maj. Gen. (res.) Avi Mizrahi, former GOC Southern Command Maj. Gen. (res.) Doron Almog and Professor Asher Tishler, an economic consultant who works with the IDF.

The committee presented its findings to Eizenkot on Monday. The committee evaluated six main issues: the Ground Forces' digital systems, manpower, training, capabilities in a state of emergency, logistics, and the situation of communities in the western Negev, adjacent to the Gaza Strip.

Harari said Monday that the committee had found "a large discrepancy between the IDF ombudsman's report and our own."

"The IDF is prepared for war, period," he said.

"We found that the IDF's level of preparedness has improved significantly as a result of the Gideon work plan, changes to priorities and other processes. However, we have found deficiencies. Armies have deficiencies. Some are known and some we have presented to the chief of staff."

Problems the committee identified include the mobility of the army's fleet of supply trucks, which hold military equipment; the lethality of the IDF infantry; the IDF's ability to employ precision tactical fire; the amount of reservists' training; personnel cuts and a drop in the number of career personnel, along with the quality of training in general.

The committee said the army was short thousands of trucks needed to move supplies and it would take a decade to meet the current need.

Some of the "deficiencies" identified by Harari and Mizrahi reflect what Brik reported. However, Mizrahi said Tuesday there was a "chasm" between his and Harari's findings and the ombudsman's report.

Discussing the defenses of communities near the Gaza border in a state of war – one of the many topics Brik cited – Harari admitted that the situation

there is unsatisfactory and that a plan to arm the communities has not been fully implemented.

Mizrahi, a senior director at the Elbit Systems electronic defenses manufacturer, said Tuesday, "I will recommend that the prime minister, who has named five issues the IDF needs to address, add a sixth: Ground Forces preparedness." Mizrahi said he would recommend that the government transfer funds to the IDF to bolster the Ground Forces' readiness for war.

"Things are lacking, but that doesn't mean the IDF isn't prepared for war," Mizrahi said.

PRESIDENTIAL PATS FOR THE CANINE COP WHO BROUGHT DOWN TERRORIST (YNet 12/26/18)

It's not every day that you meet a canine cop with a stirring battle tale and more than three years of successful police service under his belt. But on Tuesday, President Reuven Rivlin and his wife, Nechama, got to meet Rambo, the dog behind the operation to take down Ashraf Na'alwa, the terrorist who committed the shooting attack at the Barkan industrial area.

Rambo, who sustained a gunshot wound to the neck during the operation, was warmly greeted by President Rivlin, who thanked the brave pup and his comrades from the Israel Police Yamam counter-terrorism unit for their important contribution to Israel's security.

"All outstanding soldiers come to the president's residence, and from time to time I'm happy to host outstanding dogs as well. Take care of yourselves; your work is extremely important. The entire nation thanks you," Rivlin said.

After a brief conversation between the president and the fighters, Rivlin asked to feed Rambo but was told not to, since the dog is under a strict training regimen. "Trust me, if we were alone, I would have pampered you" the president told Rambo, who was sitting at Rivlin's feet and enjoying the attention.

Rambo was first in when troops cornered Na'alwa at hideout in the Askar refugee camp in the West Bank, some two weeks ago. The dog sustained a gunshot wound to the neck from what turned out to be the same gun that was used to kill Kim Levengrond Yehezkel, 28, and Ziv Hagbi, 35, in the West Bank shooting attack.

"We reached the house... and I ordered Rambo to search inside," said A., a sergeant major of command and Rambo's handler. "We heard gunshots....and I saw Rambo coming out of the house and walking toward me...he had a gunshot wound to his neck and shrapnel all over his body."

The Belgian shepherd, was immediately evacuated to the Veterinary Teaching Hospital in Beit Dagan, where a veterinary team decided to leave the 9 mm bullet in his neck, fearing any attempt to remove the bullet would cause further damage.

"Thanks to Rambo, the terrorist was found and fighters' lives were saved," A. said.

Rambo, almost five years of age, was just a small puppy when he started his training. He was born in the Yamam unit and became operational after a year and a half. The canine cop is beginning a long rehabilitation process, but his brothers in arms hope he will soon return to full operational activity.

His father also serves in the unit as an assault dog.

ISRAELI STARTUP DEVELOPS DEVICE TO JUMPSTART DIGESTIVE SYSTEM (Times of Israel 12/26/18)

Israeli medical devices startup E-Motion Medical Ltd. has developed a way to restore digestive movement in patients who, due to trauma, neurological dysfunction or old age, have lost the ability to swallow.

The company's patented technology — a tube that can be inserted into patients like a feeding tube — delivers unique patterns of electrical stimulation to the esophagus, creating contractions of the muscle in a variety of locations along the esophageal body that mimic the natural lower esophageal swallowing motions in a healthy person.

The system restores the natural motor function of the digestive system for

patients with acute gastrointestinal dysmotility (GID).

Acute GID is common in neurological, trauma, surgical, geriatric and severely diabetic patients. It manifests itself as reduction in, or lack of, motility in the digestive system, and leads to increased risk of complications and longer recovery time.

"There is currently no adequate solution available for the widespread problem of acute digestive dysmotility. Our technology provides a new therapy to promote the physical function of the digestive system, speeds up recovery and consequently lowers the financial burden on the healthcare system," said Amichay Gross, co-founder and CEO of E-Motion Medical, in a phone interview.

After a trauma or surgery, or if a patient is in coma or in an induced coma, the digestive system shuts down. The electric stimulation generated by E-Motion's tube has several positive effects, including pushing down gastric content and preventing it from refluxing up the esophagus, increased gastric emptying, and helping push food down to the intestine for it to be digested and absorbed as nutrients that the critically ill body needs for healing.

"Our system wakes up the gut, and does something like physical therapy for the esophagus," Gross said. "Just as a ventilator keeps the lungs functioning and helps restore their natural functioning, our system keeps the esophagus in action and helps it get back on track sooner."

Last month, E-Motion Medical got the regulatory nod from European authorities to start marketing the device in the EU.

"The CE Mark is an important milestone for E-Motion Medical, as it will allow commercial access to hospitals across Europe," he said.

The company hopes to get permits from the Israeli regulator within two months and from the US authorities by mid-2019, he said.

To date, the E-Motion System has been tested on approximately 230 people in four clinical trials conducted in 12 hospitals in Europe and Canada.

The latest trial was a randomized, double-blind trial of 155 patients. This study demonstrated that the treatment provided by the E-Motion System promotes gastric motility and speeds up recovery.

WIND TO LAUNCH E-SCOOTER SERVICE IN TEL AVIV (YNet 12/26/18)

Berlin-based electric scooter sharing service Wind will start operating in Tel Aviv within the next few weeks, Shahaf Shav Artza, the service's local manager, told Calcalist in a phone interview Wednesday.

Wind operates in a model similar to that of Los Angeles-headquartered electric scooter-sharing company Bird Rides Inc., which has been active in Tel Aviv since August. Both services offer a location-based app that allows users to find, unlock and pay for the use of dockless electric scooters. Wind will also charge the same price as Bird for rides in Israel—a flat fee of NIS 5 (approximately \$1.3) for each ride and NIS 0.5 (approximately \$0.13) per minute, Shav Artza said.

Wind will deploy about 1,000 e-scooters across Tel Aviv while taking into account locations where demand is high or where public transportation is lacking, Shav Artza said. The company intends to expand to other locations in Israel as demand grows, he added.

Wind is operated by BYKE Mobility GmbH, a Berlin-based company that also offers a shared bicycles service, which will not be available in Israel yet.

Data collected by the app will be made available to cities, public transportation companies, and researchers to be used for exploring smart mobility solutions, Shav Artza said.

Before joining Wind, Shav Artza was a business development manager for the Israel operations of Beijing-based bike-sharing service Ofo. In July, the latter discontinued its service in Israel after two months of activity.

In addition to Bird, Wind will face competition in Israel from Chinese bike-sharing company Beijing Mobike Technology Co. Ltd. and several smaller local operators. In September, California-headquartered smart-mobility company Lime, incorporated as Neutron Holdings Inc., also announced plans

to enter the Israeli market, offering on-demand regular and electric bicycles as well as e-scooters.

INTEREST IN ISRAELI ANTI-DRONE FIRM SOARS IN WAKE OF UK INCIDENT (Israel Hayom 12/26/18)

An Israeli technology company says its anti-drone system is drawing major interest after rogue unmanned aircraft sowed chaos at London's Gatwick Airport last week.

Britain's second-busiest airport was paralyzed for 36 hours, stranding thousands of passengers days before Christmas over the prospect of a plane colliding with what police described as industrial-grade drones.

A British couple was arrested in connection with the incident, but both were later released without charge. The investigation into who flew the drones is ongoing, U.K. authorities said.

Israeli company Skylock is part of a growing industry specializing in detecting and downing intruder drones by disrupting their frequencies.

The company said Tuesday that since the Gatwick episode it has seen a 40% spike in inquiries into its product.

Product manager Asaf Lebovitz said the company, which emerged to target militant drone use in Syria, has shifted its focus to commercial applications and has been approached by airports in North America and Europe.

Noam Milstein, drone operations chief for Israel's Civil Aviation Authority, said such systems are "obviously becoming crucial to prevent drone incursions from those who don't care about the regulations in place."

WHERE IS OBAMA WHEN NETANYAHU NEEDS HIM MOST? (Tovah Lazaroff, JPost 12/27/18)

Where is Barak Obama when Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu needs him the most?

If only the US recycled politicians Israeli style, right about now one might find Netanyahu secretly funding and orchestrating Obama's comeback campaign to regain the White House just so he can have a nemesis to combat.

That's how badly the premier, who is battling for his political future, needs a bogeyman to justify his tried and true election tactic of fearmongering among right-wing voters when it comes to West Bank settlements.

In fact, fearmongering is pretty much Netanyahu's go-to option when seeking support for, well, almost anything.

It's a straightforward strategy, given that the country's enemies and global threats are likely to pop up during the campaign like jack-in-the-box choruses. Netanyahu will be presented with a multitude of moments, during which he can underscore his role as the country's savior on a host of issues, from Iran to economic woes.

Let's not think this is an exaggeration, one need only look to Netanyahu's statements this morning to settler leaders, who should be his adoring fans. Here he is, the right-wing leader of a right-wing government, on the second day of the campaign. This was his moment to state his achievements and promise them the Sun and the Moon, so that everyone could ride off into a bright future together.

But no, Netanyahu issued a warning instead. If the settler leaders dislike his record to date, his failure to halt terrorist attacks, apply sovereignty, authorize outposts or build in E1, they should realize that it could be much worse. It's not exactly a slogan that wins minds and hearts.

Imagine what would happen if the Left staged an electoral revolution and seized power: Netanyahu explained that then, "The settlements will be in grave danger." But which left-wing government is it, exactly, that is going to destroy all the settlements? In reality, there are only two parties who could lead it: Meretz or the Joint List, which hold to a two-state solution at the pre-1967 lines, and one doesn't need polling data to know that they are unlikely to lead the government.

The battle for the centrist-right voter is so tight, that even Labor Party head

Avi Gabbay, who is supposed to be the leader of the Left, has in the past said he does not plan to evacuate settlements.

So if the Left is not a strong enough foe to bolster Netanyahu's savior image, then who is? US President Donald Trump, with whom he has held a diplomatic bromance for almost two years? Trump routinely tweets angry statements about diplomats, but for Netanyahu, he has only praise.

The US president has also not positioned himself as an enemy of the settlement movement. He has spoken of the need for restrained settlement construction, but has never defined it. His administration has not held that settlements are a stumbling block to the peace process.

Worse, for the last seven months, the Trump administration has had this to say in response to queries about settlement construction: "The Israeli government has made clear that going forward, its intent is to adopt a policy regarding settlement activity that takes the president's concerns into consideration," adding that "The United States welcomes this."

It's a statement that sounds almost as if Israeli approvals and advancements of settler housing -- on the scale of 2,000 units at a time -- fell into Trump's understanding of restraint. It's an idea that was unheard of in the Obama era. But that didn't stop Netanyahu on Wednesday from attempting to portray the Trump administration, with its right-wing Christian base, as menacing on the matter, explaining that he has had to work hard to advance the settlements.

It was a tact that was much easier for Netanyahu to take under Obama, who had a no-tolerance policy toward the settlements. In retrospect, the former president was almost a tailor-made diplomatic foe for Netanyahu. Any steps that the prime minister took in support of the settlements made him look like he was not America's lackey.

In a universe where everything was forbidden, it didn't take much for Netanyahu, the fearless champion of the Israeli right, to seem heroic for managing to advance a fair amount of building during Obama's second term. Obama was also a politician who played by well-known diplomatic rules; there was an acceptable limit to how angry he was likely to get with Israel over Netanyahu's behavior. Even Obama's failure to veto the UN Security Council settlement resolution in 2016 did not stretch those parameters. In short, Obama was a safe foe. Antagonizing him was like Netanyahu walking a tightrope with a safety net right underneath.

The tight Israeli ties with the Trump administration are indeed a credit to Netanyahu's diplomatic charm, and they are among his strong credentials for another term. But his hesitancy to cross Trump by dramatically changing the status quo in Judea and Samaria will make it hard for him to argue that he and he alone can save the settlements should Trump turn his wrath on them. If the future is like the past, than one can almost hear Netanyahu explain to settler leaders that he cannot advance their agenda because he would risk losing US support for needed military action on Israel's borders. It is early in the election season, but if Netanyahu's statements are the opening salvo of a campaign of fear, they are likely to fall flat.

After nine years of waiting, the pro-settlement camp is more afraid of the status quo than left-wing Israelis or a US administration. The leader likely to get their vote is one who is willing to take real risks to cement their future.

NETANYAHU'S CHRISTMAS GIFT TO ISRAEL: EARLY ELECTIONS

(Sami Peretz, Ha'aretz 12/25/18)

Even if the next government looks more or less like the current one, the decision to move up the election to April is a good development for the economy. Most of 2018 was run as a preparation for the election, with a host of legislation and machinations aimed at bolstering Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and improving the standing of ministers like Miri Regev (the cultural loyalty bill), Ayelet Shaked (the legal advisers bill) and Naftali Bennett (building an image as a potential defense minister).

Also, Netanyahu and Finance Minister Moshe Kahlon surrendered to lobbying by the police -- including police retirees -- the Mossad and the Shin Bet security service that will cost Israeli taxpayers \$5.8 billion.

Avigdor Lieberman's departure as defense minister upended the balance in the governing coalition, and it has become impossible to advance many initiatives. It might seem this situation is perfect: A narrow coalition preempts the passing of dubious bills and makes the prime minister navigate the various security fronts with excessive caution.

But the police deal unveiled something very worrying. Even though Netanyahu and Kahlon believed there was no room for signing such a costly agreement that eats into civilian budgets in the coming years, both wanted to be the good cop. And such concessions are costing the state 22 billion shekels and counting.

The message telegraphed by this behavior is one of economic irresponsibility, a message that very quickly gets picked up by blackmailers and opportunists. It's very tough to run a country this way, and it's certainly hard to preserve the current government's achievements -- whether it be the low unemployment, the reduction of socioeconomic gaps and fiscal responsibility. The impression created by the government in recent months is that all these achievements could crumble with the next election.

But the thought that Netanyahu decided to go to an election because of his concern for the economy is naive. A reminder: Netanyahu decided to go to the March 2015 election after accusing then-Finance Minister Yair Lapid and then-Justice Minister Tzipi Livni of attempting a putsch. He claimed they were working against the government regarding the Iranian nuclear issue, negotiations with the Palestinians and construction in Jerusalem.

But two years later Netanyahu gave a completely different reason: the so-called Israel Hayom bill that would have limited the circulation of that free tabloid traditionally close to Netanyahu. The prime minister said that, two years earlier, he sought an election because people in the government were subverting his efforts to block that bill.

All this happened following the revelation of Netanyahu's quid-pro-quo conversations with Yedioth Ahronoth publisher Arnon Mozes (Case 2000), whose paper competes with Israel Hayom.

This bill also got him into trouble when he concentrated all power in his hands in the communications industry and allegedly acted in a conflict of interests with his friend Shaul Elovitch to advance Bezeq's interests (Case 4000). The attorney general thus forced Netanyahu to yield the communications portfolio.

This reminder is for anyone who thinks the government is falling over the bill to draft the ultra-Orthodox into the army, the conversion bill or budgetary worries. Netanyahu's main concern lies with the corruption investigations against him, which are what have gotten the current election cycle going.

Netanyahu probably feels he can get to April 9 without an indictment; for example, a pre-indictment hearing can be postponed on the grounds of election preparations, the security situation and/or the prime minister's frequent visits abroad.

What has been totally clear in recent months is that Israel's economy can't wait for Netanyahu's considerations. Despite the achievements of recent years, in recent weeks we've seen worrying developments in the increased cost of living, volatility in financial markets and fears of a crash, an increased budget deficit that could worsen in 2019, and a delicate security situation on three fronts that may seem under control but could quickly deteriorate.

These challenges demand serious attention and an ability to look far beyond the coming election. A government at the end of its term can't make tough decisions; every action is examined through the election prism. The result is paralysis at best and expensive, populist decisions at worst.

An early election will put an end to the budget-busting legislation that serves politicians and not the public. Because of the early election, not much will be advanced over the next six months regarding the economy, but at least the uncertainty on the timing of the election has been lifted.

In six months we'll have a new government. Maybe the composition will be similar, maybe not, but it will be the kind that has enough time to make long-term decisions, not provide Band-Aid solutions.