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The Weekly Israel News Update

Artzeinu ◦ www.artzeinu.org ◦ Vol. 18 No. 599 ◦ January 12, 2019

Could the left finally defeat Bibi? No way, Israelis say

With new elections less than three months away, polls show the ruling Likud party will likely again emerge as the largest faction in the 120-member legislature, giving it the clearest path to form a ruling coalition, Arutz Sheva reports.

While the emergence of new parties, which have yet to clearly define themselves on the left-right spectrum -- including former Yisrael Beytenu MK Orly Levy's Geshet faction, and former IDF chief of staff Benny Gantz's Hosen Yisrael -- have reduced the right-wing bloc's lead in polls, a majority of Israelis say they back the formation of a center-right or right-wing government after the April elections.

According to the poll, conducted by the Israel Democracy Institute's Guttman Center in conjunction with Tel Aviv University, a plurality of Israeli Jews (37.2%) hope that a right-wing government is established following the elections to the 21st Knesset. Just over a third (35.6%) hope the new government will be center-right, for a total of 72.8% backing a coalition on the right side of the political spectrum.

By comparison, just 3% of Jews hope the government will be left-wing, while a further 16.8% hope for a center-left government, giving a total of less than 20% who back a coalition on the left side of the spectrum.

Israeli Arabs were more likely to back a left-wing government, with 50% supporting such a coalition, compared to 16% in favor of a center-left government, 5% in favor of a center-right one, a 16% backing a rightist coalition.

Israelis -- both Arabs and Jews -- expect the new government to be either right-wing or center right. A total of 42.4% of Jews and 57.4% of Arabs say they next government will be right-wing, compared to 43.6% of Jews and 10.8% of Arabs who believe it will be center-right. Only 0.8% of Jews and 12.6% of Arabs think the new coalition will be left-wing, with a further 3.6% of Jews and 6.3% of Arabs saying the next government will likely be center-left.

Victory for Labor's Gabbay

The Labor Party on Thursday approved the proposal of party chairman Avi Gabbay to amend the party's rules and list ahead of the elections for the 21st Knesset, Israel Hayom reports. The proposal grants Gabbay the authority to reserve three spots on the Labor party's Knesset list for candidates of his choice.

In a speech before the vote on the proposal, Gabbay called on Yair Lapid and Benny Gantz to commit that they will not sit in a government headed by Binyamin Netanyahu after the elections.

IDF tracks down, arrests Samaria shooter

On Tuesday, Israeli security forces captured Asam Barghouti, the Palestinian Arab said to be responsible for last month's terrorist attack at the Givat Assaf junction north of Jerusalem that killed two Israeli soldiers and seriously wounded another and the resident of a nearby town, World Israel News reports.

The capture of Barghouti was carried out in a joint operation of the Israel Defense Forces, the Shin Bet (or "Israeli Security Services") and Israel's Yamam, a counter-terrorist unit that also carries out police duties akin to SWAT in the U.S. Israeli

security forces said that Barghouti was planning other attacks and that they also found a Russian-style Kalashnikov rifle, large quantities of ammunition and night-vision devices in his possession.

The parents of one of the murdered soldiers, Staff Sgt. Yoel Mor Yosef, however, expressed dissatisfaction that Barghouti was captured alive. Ilanit, the soldier's mother, said to Israel Hayom, "He wasn't captured dead; he was taken alive. This disappoints us. This isn't a person who needs to remain alive."

IDF arrests officer, 4 soldiers for allegedly beating Palestinians

Military police on Wednesday arrested a platoon commander and four of his soldiers on suspicion of beating two Palestinian prisoners arrested for allegedly assisting in a terrorist shooting at the Givat Asaf outpost in Samaria in December, Israel Hayom reports.

The soldiers, who serve in the ultra-Orthodox Netzah Yehuda Battalion in the IDF's Nahal Brigade, are the comrades of the late Staff Sgt. Yoel Mor Yosef and Sgt. Yoel Cohen, who were killed in the attack. They also took part in the operation to track down and arrest anyone suspected of helping the shooter, said to be Asam Barghouti.

According to the allegations, the five suspects beat the detainees until they were no longer fit for questioning.

The IDF said that the "arrested officer and soldiers are expected to be brought before a military court on Thursday, which will discuss extending their remand."

Aliyah rises by 5%

Jewish immigration to Israel rose by 5%

in 2018 compared to the previous year, with the largest number of immigrants arriving from the countries of the former Soviet Union, Ynetnews reports.

The figures released by the Jewish Agency show that more than 29,600 people immigrated to Israel last year, compared to 28,220 olim (Jewish immigrants) who came to the country in 2017. Immigration from Russia spiked by some 45% from 2017, with over 10,500 Jewish immigrants relocating to Israel, with another 6,500 olim arriving from Ukraine, although that was a decline of 9% drop from last year. The number of immigrants from the United States and Canada remained steady, with 3,550 people arriving in Israel in 2018. The number shows no significant change compared to the previous year.

Treasury cuts 2019 growth forecast, ups deficit target

Israel's Ministry of Finance today warned that the 2019 budget deficit would reach NIS 50 billion (\$13.6 billion), or 3.5% of GDP, Globes reports.

The ministry attributes the higher projected deficit to the revision of its growth forecast for the year to 3.1% from 3.4%. The main reason for the lower growth forecast is a slowdown in private consumption, investments, and exports.

According to the forecast, the gap between revenue and spending is NIS 9.8 billion (\$2.7 billion) more than in the original budget for 2019.

Ministry of Finance sources said that the higher forecast was not a major problem, explaining, "There is a deviation of a few billion shekels. We will use the budget reserves and take other measures."

Storms raise Kinneret levels

As a storm system that hit Israel at the beginning of the week entered its final stage, cold temperatures plummeted Wednesday to this winter's record low, Ynetnews reports.

Nearly a meter (3.28 feet) of snow accumulated on Mt. Hermon and the water levels in the Sea of Galilee rose by at least 19.5 cm (7.7 inches) during the 48

hours that ended Wednesday.

The Sea of Galilee waterline still stands at -214 below sea level and 1.10 meters (3.6 feet) below the lower red line (the intermediate warning signal indicating a crisis). The water level keeps rising due to the strong influx from rivers flowing into the northern freshwater lake.

Meanwhile, the Mt. Hermon ski site on the Golan Heights will open to skiers for the first time this winter this weekend.

Right stuff, found

The Israeli military on Monday recovered the canopy of an F-15 fighter jet that detached without warning at 30,000 feet during a recent training flight, according to The Times of Israel.

The canopy — the glass enclosure surrounding the pilots — was found near Hebron, on Monday night, the military said in a statement.

The pilot and navigator of the fighter jet were able to land the plane safely at a nearby airport after the canopy blew off suddenly last Wednesday. The Israel Defense Forces said air force technicians would inspect the recovered canopy as part of their investigation to determine why it suddenly came off mid-flight.

IDF officials praised the aircraft's pilot and navigator for displaying a "calm temperament" despite their sudden exposure to frigid air (-49 degrees), vicious winds, and deafening noise.

Moshe Arens, 93

Moshe Arens, a veteran Israeli politician and defense minister under three prime ministers, died last Monday at his home near Tel Aviv, JTA reports. He was 93.

The funeral took place this past Tuesday where Arens was eulogized by P.M. Netanyahu and President Rivlin.

Arens was a member of the Knesset for the Likud Party between 1973 and 1992 and again from 1999 until 2003. As ambassador to the United States beginning in 1982, Arens hired Netanyahu as part of the diplomatic corps and later appointed him as Israel's ambassador to the United Nations. These were Netanyahu's first appointments.

Arens served as Israel's defense minister under three prime ministers: Menachem Begin, Yitzhak Shamir and Netanyahu. He also served as foreign minister.

Prior to entering politics, Arens was Deputy Director General at Israel Aircraft Industries, where he oversaw major development projects, including the Kfir fighter jet project.

Arens was born in Lithuania and immigrated to the United States with his family in 1939. After graduating from George Washington H.S. in Washington Heights, he served during World War II in the United States Army. Arens, who met Ze'ev Jabotinsky as a teenager while active in the youth group Betar in the US, immigrated to Israel shortly after it declared independence. He joined the Zionist paramilitary organization, the Irgun. He subsequently studied at M.I.T. and Caltech.

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Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is expected to appoint Yuval Steinitz as foreign minister. Steinitz, a 60-year-old Likudnik, is currently Minister of Energy, in charge of Israel Atomic Energy Commission and a member of the Security Cabinet.

