

# UN says deal reached on committee for new Syria constitution

Author:

By EDITH M. LEDERER | AP

ID:

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UNITED NATIONS: United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres announced Wednesday that a long-sought agreement has been reached on the composition of a committee to draft a new constitution for Syria, an important step toward hopefully ending the more than eight-year conflict.

The UN chief told a news conference that UN special envoy for Syria Geir Pedersen "is doing the final work with the parties in relation to the terms of reference, and we hope that this will be very soon concluded."

Guterres expressed hope that formation of the constitutional committee "will be a very important step in creating the conditions for a political solution for this tragic conflict."

At a Russian-hosted Syrian peace conference in January 2018, an agreement was reached to form a 150-member committee to draft a new constitution. This was a key step toward elections and a political settlement to the Syrian conflict, which has killed over 400,000 people.

There was early agreement on 50-member lists from the Syrian government and the opposition. But it has taken nearly 20 months to agree on the list the United Nations was authorized to put together representing experts, independents, tribal leaders and women, mainly because of objections from the Syrian government.

Pedersen, the UN envoy, told the Security Council in late August that the package to resolve outstanding names and terms of reference and rules of procedure was "nearly finalized, and the outstanding differences are, in my assessment, comparatively minor."

He said he was "quietly hopeful" an agreement would be announced before world leaders gather next week for their annual meeting at the General Assembly.

An agreement on a blueprint for peace in Syria that was approved in Geneva on June 30, 2012 by representatives of the UN, Arab League, European Union, Turkey and all five veto-wielding Security Council members – the US, Russia, China, France and Britain – remains the basis for ending the conflict.

It calls for a Syrian-led political process starting with the establishment of a transitional governing body vested with full executive powers, moving on to the drafting of a new constitution and ending with elections. The Security Council unanimously endorsed the agreement in a resolution in December 2015 that set a timetable for talks and a cease-fire that was never met.



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## [Some important facts and figures about Israeli elections](#)

Author:

Tue, 2019-09-17 23:38

JERUSALEM: Polls opened at 7 a.m. for the 22nd Israeli Knesset made up of 120 members. A coalition of 61 seats is needed to set up a government.

The two biggest parties are the Likud, headed by Benjamin Netanyahu, and Blue and White, headed by former Israeli army general Benny Gantz.

No government in the history of Israel has been formed without a coalition with smaller parties. The current election campaign has focused on a huge split within Israel's Jewish population based on the difference between

secular and religious Jews.

Soviet-born Avigdor Liberman who heads a small party Yisrael Beiteinu, politically is closer to Netanyahu on the right, but is extremely opposed to the religious parties which insist on a waiver from serving in the Israeli army. This makes it near impossible for Netanyahu to form a 61+ coalition.

The last elections in April were not conclusive and the winner of the largest block was unable to form a majority government.

The number of eligible voters is 6.39 million, among them nearly 1 million are Palestinian citizens of Israel. Among the voters, 14 percent are 24 years of age or younger, and 30 percent are 25-39 years old. The largest demographic of voters is between 30-59, which forms 31 percent of the electorate. One quarter of the eligible voters are over 60 years, according to official figures.

The Central Election's Committee says 10,788 election boxes will be supervised by 3,000 civil servants hired by the Israeli central election committee. Since the last elections in April the number of eligible voters has gone up by 50,000.

Palestinian citizens of Israel hope for a rise in the percentage of voters from last April's 46 percent which brought 10 Knesset members, when they ran on two sperate lists, to something closer to the 64 percent that voted for the joint list in the 20th Knesset and sent 13 members to the Knesset. The joint list which had broken up last April was reunited in the summer giving their leaders hope that this unity will produce better results.



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Israel exit polls show Netanyahu, Gantz in tight race  
Palestinians would like to see Netanyahu lose in elections

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## [Palestinians would like to see Netanyahu lose in elections](#)

Tue, 2019-09-17 23:25

JERUSALEM: The Israeli elections have divided Palestinians between those who feel there is little or no difference between the leading Zionist Israeli parties (Likud and Blue and White) and those who insist that the failure of Netanyahu is of utmost importance.

The largest selling Palestinian daily Al Quds led with an editorial on Monday titled "Two faces of the same coin," arguing that expecting much from either of the main Zionist parties is "betting on a loser in many ways." The Jerusalem-based newspaper said that the only bet should be on "our own people and the Arab and Islamic peoples."

But the director general of the Masarat think tank in Ramallah thinks that there is a clear difference. "The substantive difference between (Prime Minister Benjamin) Netanyahu and (opposition leader Benny) Gantz is that Netanyahu is stronger, more dangerous, much more experienced and trying to please the radical right so that they give him immunity from the trial on corruption charges." Hani Masri says that the strong relations between Netanyahu and US President Donald Trump also gives Netanyahu another dangerous tool against Palestinians.

Naser Laham, the editor of the Maan News Agency, notes that dramatic changes will happen after the elections from Netanyahu. "If Netanyahu wins, he will find the resistance waiting for him and if he loses, he will have the police ready to put him in jail for corruption."

Ibrahim Milhem, spokesman for the Palestinian government, told Arab News that the sharp shift in the Israeli political map toward the right and far-right has led to the retraction of the left-wing and peace camp. "This has led many to believe that there is no difference between right and left except in how badly they want to oppress Palestinians."

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**[LIVE: Coverage of the Israel's do-over election. Exit polls show Netanyahu, Gantz in tight race](#)**

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Milhem believes that the absence of Netanyahu from the political scene is important. "The absence will be a punishment for his foolish policies. This doesn't mean that his opponents will have any important initiative regarding the two-state solution or the recognition of the rights of the Palestinian people in their independent state on the 1967 borders with Jerusalem as its capital and the recognition of the right of return of the refugees based on UN resolution 194."

Former senior editor of Al-Hayyat Al-Jadida, Montaser Hamdan, told Arab News that the election campaign needs are behind all recent acts and statements. "The threat of annexing the Jordan Valley is clearly aimed at pleasing the far right in Israel as is the call for annexing parts of Hebron." Hamdan says that Israeli candidates are "dealing with Palestinian and Arab blood and rights with the aim of expanding their occupation."

Hamadeh Faraneh, a member of the Palestinian National Council, told Arab News that no two individuals are the same. "There are always differences between people and Netanyahu is clearly the more dangerous of the two candidates for prime minister."

Faranheh says that the current Israeli prime minister is ideologically and politically committed to opposition to the Palestinian people and their rights and in carrying out the most radical Israeli program against Palestinians. "Getting rid of him will remove a major obstacle for peace and allow for a gradual return especially if leaders from the Arab community inside the 1948 areas can have a role with Gantz in a coalition government."

Botrus Mansour, a Nazareth-based lawyer, told Arab News that Palestinian citizens of Israel can have a role in blocking the chances of Netanyahu's return to power. "Their role is important in that they can participate in a blocking coalition that prevents Netanyahu from returning to power even if a left-wing government is not established."



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## [Israel exit polls show Netanyahu, Gantz in tight race](#)

Tue, 2019-09-17 23:06

JERUSALEM: Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his main challenger Benny Gantz were locked in a tight race in the country's general election after polls closed on Tuesday, exit surveys showed.

Three separate exit polls carried by Israeli television stations showed Netanyahu's right-wing Likud and Gantz's centrist Blue and White alliance with between 31 and 34 parliament seats each out of 120.

Ex-defense minister Avigdor Lieberman's nationalist Yisrael Beiteinu party, which could play a kingmaker role, could win between eight and 10 seats, according to the polls.

If the exit polls are reasonably accurate – and they have in the past been off-base – either Netanyahu or Gantz will face tough negotiations to form a government.

Lieberman called for a unity government between his party, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud and the main opposition Blue and White, after polls closed.

The results prompted initial cheers at Blue and White's post-election party in Tel Aviv, where they were shown on large screens, before doubts began to set in.

"We have an advantage, but I see that we are dependent on Lieberman," said supporter Dina Margoli, 40.

The stakes could not be much higher for the 69-year-old Netanyahu, Israel's longest-serving prime minister, who is facing possible corruption charges in the weeks ahead.

He spent the day warning he was on the verge of losing if his supporters did not turn out to vote, and made appearances at Jerusalem's main market and its central bus station, wielding a megaphone to exhort the crowds.

He repeatedly warned, as he has in previous elections, that left-wing and Arab voters were showing up in large numbers to vote him out, appearing on Facebook live to do so.

US "President (Donald) Trump said yesterday that the elections will be tight," Netanyahu said when voting on Tuesday morning, referring to comments by his staunch ally who called the polls "50/50."

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"I can guarantee you this morning that they are very tight."

Gantz voted in his hometown of Rosh Haayin near Tel Aviv and called on the country to reject corruption and "extremism."

"We want new hope. We are voting today for change," Gantz said after voting with his wife Revital.

"We will succeed in bringing hope. We will succeed in bringing change, without corruption and without extremism, all together."

Later he visited a shopping mall in the northern city of Haifa and addressed the public through a megaphone on the beach in Tel Aviv.

Fears of election fatigue appeared not to have materialized.

Turnout as of 8:00 p.m. (1700 GMT) was at 63.7 percent, higher than the same time during April's election, official figures showed.

Netanyahu, who has been prime minister for a total of more than 13 years, suffered one of the biggest defeats of his political career following the April vote.

His Likud, along with its right-wing and religious allies, won a majority which led President Reuven Rivlin to task him with forming a government. But following weeks of discussions, Netanyahu failed, opting for an unprecedented second election rather than risk Rivlin choosing someone else. Many believe that if he wins, Netanyahu could seek to have parliament grant him immunity from prosecution ahead of a possible corruption indictment in the weeks ahead.

Recognizing the stakes, Netanyahu spent the final days of the campaign seeking to appeal to right-wing nationalists – key to his re-election bid – and to boost turnout among his base.

Those efforts included a controversial pledge to annex the Jordan Valley, which makes up a third of the occupied West Bank.

He issued unfounded warnings that the vote could be stolen by fraud in Arab communities, leading critics to accuse him of racism.

But Netanyahu has also highlighted the country's growing economy and his relationships with world leaders such as Trump.

Gantz has presented himself as an honorable alternative.

He repeatedly spoke of Netanyahu's willingness to form a coalition with far-right parties that could help him secure immunity.

Gantz says his alliance, which includes three former armed forces chiefs of staff, wants a unity government that the vast majority of Israelis would support.

A campaign by Lieberman's nationalist Yisrael Beiteinu to "make Israel normal again" appeared to have resonated with voters.

The staunch secularist has long campaigned against what he sees as the undue clout of ultra-Orthodox Jewish parties, which he accuses of seeking to impose Jewish religious law on Israel's secular population.

Lieberman has demanded legislation to make military service mandatory for the ultra-Orthodox as for other Jewish Israelis – a demand he refused to drop after April polls, eventually blocking Netanyahu's efforts to form a coalition.

It is not clear he will endorse Netanyahu as prime minister again, which could be enough for Rivlin to allow Gantz to try to form a government.

And if exit polls showing Israel's newly reunified Arab parties with between 11 and 13 seats are accurate, they could block Netanyahu from continuing as prime minister by recommending Gantz.



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## [New spats shake Iraq's teetering stability – and its PM](#)

Author:

Tue, 2019-09-17 22:18

BAGHDAD: As fissures within a powerful paramilitary force go public for the first time and a revolving door of top politicians consults Tehran, Iraq's fragile political balance is crumbling, analysts say, with worrying consequences for its premier.

It has been a shaky 11 months for Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi's government since it was painstakingly stitched together in the prolonged wake of May 2018 elections.

The administration's power rests on the curious coupling of firebrand cleric Moqtada Al-Sadr with Fatah, the political arm of the Hashd Al-Shaabi armed network.

But a cocktail of new pressure points – from Sadr's frustration with the Hashd to purported Israeli strikes targeting the force – are fraying this tenuous deal, said Ihsan Al-Shammari, head of the Iraqi Center for Political Thought.

"The situation is messy. The political parties are repositioning themselves and the major alliances have broken apart," Shammari told AFP.

He predicted the "tactical partnership" between Sadr and Fatah will collapse amid the cleric's escalating criticism of the Hashd's possession of arms and moves to create its own air force.

Sadr even dramatically tweeted last week that Iraq was turning into a "rogue" state.

Days later, he appeared in an unannounced visit to Iran, the influential power broker consulted during times of crisis in Iraq's political scene.

Sadr was likely there to complain about the Hashd or lobby for more support, including having a say in selecting Iraq's next premier in case the government falls, said Shammari.

Sadr would also probably use the specter of popular protests to secure his political goals.

"Sadr remains the government's biggest sponsor, but if it doesn't make progress, he'll put the possibility of protests forward – and we're starting

to see him hint at that,” Shammari said.

In a sign of what may be to come, Iraq’s Sadr-backed Health Minister Alaa Alwan resigned on Sunday out of frustration with what he said was a corrupt administration.

Since Saddam Hussein’s regime was toppled by the US-led invasion of 2003, Iraq’s Shiite parties have revived and thrived.

For years, they were broadly split between those loyal to Iran and its supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei against those supporting Iraq’s own Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, said Renad Mansour, a researcher at the Chatham House think-tank.

“Now, it’s murky and much more fragile. The biggest credit for that goes to the challenge facing the Hashd in becoming a post-Daesh Iraqi institution,” he said.

The Hashd was established in 2014 from mostly Shiite armed groups and volunteers to fight Daesh militants, who had swept across a third of Iraq. But that common enemy was defeated in 2017.

“Because the front has dried up, the groups are no longer able to profit and are now competing with each other for profits and political positions,” Mansour said.

And this summer, purported Israeli strikes on Hashd bases exposed another rift, this time between the force’s official leader Faleh Fayyadh and his deputy Abu Mehdi Al-Muhandis, who is much closer to Iran and is said to hold the real power.

Muhandis was quick to blame Washington and Israel for the strikes, but Fayyadh publicly walked back his statement and said the accusation didn’t reflect the Hashd’s position. Weeks later, a decree signed by Muhandis appeared to authorize the Hashd to create its own air force, later denied by the force.

It was “the first time” the leaders had publicly clashed like this, said Mansour.

“The divide was not a big deal until Muhandis decided that Fayyadh needed to do a better job in protecting Hashd from these strikes,” he told AFP.

“That’s the most important thing – because if Muhandis determines that the leadership is not protecting him, he’ll make moves to remove them,” he said.



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Iraqi PM tightens government grip on country's armed factions