

Ynet-News January 1, 2020 – Wednesday

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Netanyahu asks for parliamentary immunity; Gantz is leading Accusers

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Steinitz: Leviathan supplying gas to Jordan, locals' pollution fears 'hysterical'
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Cabinet approves Bennett's proposal to cut Palestinian taxes funding terrorist families

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US strikes three Iranian militia missile storage bases in Iraq, two in Syria
-- Abbreviated -- **US strikes 3 Iranian missile bases in Iraq, 2 in Syria**
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01.01.20 – We -
Trump eases Iran strife as US may raise up to 4-thousand Iraq troop presence

01.01.20
Netanyahu asks for parliamentary immunity from prosecution; Gantz is leading Accusers

01.01.20
Netanyahu confirms he will ask for parliamentary immunity from prosecution
PM affirms bid for immunity in last-gasp statement, saying it is meant to protect public servants from false allegations; Gantz and Liberman vow to instruct respective party lawmakers to vote against move
Ynet| Published: 01.01.20 , 21:54

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said on **Wednesday** that he will seek parliamentary immunity from prosecution in the three graft cases against him, mere hours before the deadline to file such a request expires.

"I will stand in court to crush all the unfounded allegations against me. The immunity law is meant to protect public servants from false allegations and to ensure they will be able

to serve the people according to the public's will, not the will of the bureaucrats," said Netanyahu in a statement.

"If the state prosecutor and investigators decide to neutralize a Knesset member, they'll open an investigation against them."

The incumbent said he would file an official request to Knesset Speaker Yuli Edelstein in the coming days in order to start the immunity process.

Blue & White party leader MK Benny Gantz gave his own statement minutes after Netanyahu, saying the prime minister was guilty of the charges against him.

"Netanyahu knows he's guilty, a person who believes that he's innocent is not afraid to stand trial," Gantz said. "Either we'll have a radical immunity government or a unified national one. Immunity is not the bedrock of democracy, it is a detriment to democracy," he said, referring to a recent claim by Netanyahu.

Gantz also said that his party will do anything it can to thwart Israel's longest-serving prime minister efforts to receive immunity.

"Blue & White will make every possible legal effort to form the Knesset House Committee in order to prevent immunity from those indicted for crimes."

Yisrael Beytenu Chairman MK Avigdor Liberman announced that his party lawmakers would vote against Netanyahu's request for immunity.

"It is now clear without a shadow of a doubt that all Netanyahu cares about is immunity," said Liberman. "Israel has been taken hostage by his personal and private problems. The only thing standing in the way of a government is immunity. We are not going to be part of an immunity coalition, we will vote against immunity."

A spokesperson on Edelstein's behalf said that the Knesset speaker intends to meet with Knesset legal advisor Eyal Yinon, receive his opinion on the issue and only then will he make his decision whether to initiate an immunity

01.01.20

Steinitz: Leviathan supplying gas to Jordan, locals' pollution fears 'hysterical'
Tuesday

01.01.20

Steinitz: Leviathan supplying gas to Jordan, locals' pollution fears 'hysterical'

Energy minister says newly opened field will also be delivering gas to Egypt within days, Israel will soon see closure of two coal power stations and begin to enjoy millions of dollars in revenue from exports

Ilana Curiel | Published: 01.01.20, 14:15

Energy Minister Yuval Steinitz said Wednesday that Israel's newly online Leviathan field is now supplying gas to Jordan, as he rapped residents of the north for "baseless, hysterical" fears that the fully operational rig would cause harmful pollution.

"And thus Israel has become an energy exporter for the first time in its history," Steinitz told Ynet, although Israel's Tamar gas field has been exporting gas to Jordan for the past two years after signing an agreement in 2014.

"It is happening right now at this moment and I am announcing here for the first time that at this moment Israel is becoming a gas exporter to Jordan. Another week, 10 days - to Egypt," Steinitz said.

After a series of delays, natural gas began to flow Tuesday afternoon from Israel's Leviathan rig off the coast of Haifa.

"When I formulated the gas deal about five years ago, I said that during my tenure there would be no situation in which Leviathan [gas rig] would remain stuck out at sea while we continued to die from the air pollution from coal and I was told I was mistaken," Steinitz said Wednesday.

"When I stated at a High Court hearing that there might be gas exports to Egypt and Jordan, they said I was misleading the judges. So Leviathan was developed and air pollution is already starting to decline and will be drastically reduced thanks to Leviathan's development.

"The next two years will see the closure of the coal power station in Hadera and then the one in Ashkelon. Tens of billions of dollars in revenue will also reach us in the coming years," he said.

Steinitz also took a swipe at the residents along the coast close to the rig, who vacated their homes during the emission of gases before Leviathan came online.

"There was completely baseless, unnecessary hysteria that I had never seen before. It is not even worth discussing. There are thousands of such facilities in Europe and the U.S. - communities were never evacuated because of them," he said.

The mammoth gas treatment facility has given rise to concerns of worried citizens, fearing polluting emissions from the gas rig will pose a possible threat to their health and the environment.

Leviathan's first two gas wells were opened at 2am and began pushing pollutants out of the pipeline as part of a flushing process.

The Ministry of Environmental Protection said Tuesday afternoon that the major part of the process was carried out between 3.20pm and 4.30pm, during which time large quantities of carbon, including benzene, were emitted.

According to ministry data, the actual volume of emissions from the rig was significantly lower than the quantities predicted in an assessment before the process began.

"The ministry is monitoring the rate of hydrocarbon emissions on the rig and the concentrations measured at the onshore monitoring stations," it sa

12.31.19

Sunday US attacked Iranian militia; Tuesday riot at Baghdad US Embassy

12.31.19

Trump: Iran to blame for riots at U.S. Embassy in Baghdad

Tweeting from his Florida estate, president says Tehran 'will be held fully responsible' for breach of compound, says 'we expect Iraq to use its forces to protect the Embassy, and so notified!'; Iraqi officials say ambassador, other staff evacuated, despite State Department claim of no evacuation

Reuters, Associated Press | Updated: 12.31.19 , 17:19

U.S. President Donald Trump on Tuesday accused Iran of orchestrating a violent demonstration at the American embassy in Baghdad, warning Iran would be held responsible.

Dozens of Iraqi Shiite militiamen and their supporters broke into the Embassy compound in Baghdad earlier Tuesday, smashing a main door and setting fire to a reception area, prompting tear gas and sounds of gunfire, angered over deadly U.S. airstrikes targeting the Iran-backed militia.

"We strongly responded, and always will," Trump said Tuesday.

"Now Iran is orchestrating an attack on the U.S. Embassy in Iraq. They will be held fully responsible. In addition, we expect Iraq to use its forces to protect the Embassy, and so notified!"

Trump tweeted from his estate in Palm Beach, Florida, where he is in the midst of two-week plus vacation.

He's been largely out of sight and the tweet marked his first comment on the weekend U.S. airstrikes in Iraq and Syria.

An Associated Press reporter at the scene saw flames rising from inside the compound and at least three U.S. soldiers on the roof of the main embassy building. Guards hit back with stun grenades and tear gas and Iraqi officials said the ambassador and other staff had been evacuated but this could not be confirmed with American officials.

A man on a loudspeaker urged the mob not to enter the compound, saying: "The message was delivered."

There were no reports of casualties. The State Department said all American personnel were safe, and there were no plans to evacuate the embassy.

On Sunday, U.S. planes had attacked bases belonging to an Iranian-backed militia, a move that risks drawing Iraq further into a proxy conflict between Washington and Tehran at a time when mass protests are challenging Iraq's political system.

The attack on the Kataib Hezbollah militia was in response to the killing of a U.S. civilian contractor in a rocket attack on an Iraqi military base.

The two Iraqi foreign ministry officials did not say when the U.S. ambassador or other staff had left but added that a few embassy protection staff remained.

Outside the embassy, protesters threw stones at the gate while others chanted, "No, no, America! ... No, no, Trump!" Iraqi special forces were deployed around the main gate to prevent them from entering the embassy. U.S.-trained and -equipped Iraqi Counter-Terrorism forces were later dispatched to reinforce these units.

'Closed in the name of the people'

Iraqis have been taking to the streets in their thousands almost daily to condemn, among other things, militias such as Kataib Hezbollah and their Iranian patrons that support Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi's government.

But on Tuesday, it was these militias who were spraying "Closed in the name of the people" on the gates of the U.S. Embassy and smashing the surveillance cameras around the building with bricks and stones. Some set up tents in preparation for a sit-in.

U.S. Senator Marco Rubio tweeted that Iran was responsible for the disorder.

Qais al-Khazali, leader of the Iranian-backed Asaib Ahl al-Haq militia, and many other senior militia leaders were among the protesters.

"Americans are unwanted in Iraq. They are a source of evil and we want them to leave," Khazali told Reuters. Khazali is one of the most feared and respected Shi'ite militia leaders in Iraq, and one of Iran's most important allies.

Kataib Hezbollah is one of the smallest but most potent of the Iranian-backed militias. Its flags were hung on the fence surrounding the embassy.

12.31.19

Iraqi supporters of Iran-backed militia attack U.S. Embassy

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Rioters forgather to protest host of U.S. airstrikes that decimated three locations in Iraq, Syria in retaliation for death of American civilian contractor in rocket attack

Reuters| Published: 12.31.19 , 14:14

The U.S. ambassador to Iraq and other staff were evacuated from their embassy in Baghdad for their safety on Tuesday, Iraqi officials said, as thousands of protesters and militia fighters thronged the gates in fury at U.S. airstrikes in Iraq.

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A few hours into the protest, tear gas was fired in an attempt to disperse the crowd and some of the militias encouraged protesters through loudspeakers to leave.

"We have delivered our message, please leave the area to avoid bloodshed," said one announcement.

CLOSED IN THE NAME OF THE PEOPLE

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Militia commander Jamal Jaafar Ibrahim, also known as Abu Mahdi al-Mohandes, and Badr Organisation leader Hadi al-Amiri were also at the protest.

12.29.19

Cabinet approves Bennett's proposal to cut Palestinian taxes funding terrorist families

12.29.19

Cabinet approves NIS 150M cut from Palestinian taxes over pay-for-slay policy

Decision follows similar February trimming of funds, for which PA retaliated by boycotting all tax handovers for more than half a year, stirring worries it could go bankrupt

Itamar Eichner, Reuters | Published: **12.29.19**, 21:59

The **Security Cabinet approved on Sunday** Defense Minister Naftali **Bennett's proposal** to deduct NIS 150 million from the tax money that Israel transfers to the Palestinian Authority, **intended for families of terrorists.**

The decision followed a similar trimming in February of funds to offset the Authority's payouts to jailed Palestinian terrorists, for which the PA retaliated by boycotting all tax handovers for more than half a year, stirring worries it could go bankrupt.

Under interim peace deals from the 1990s, Israel collects taxes on behalf of the Palestinians, who put the current sums at \$222 million a month. With diplomacy stalled since 2014, Israel has at times withheld money as a measure of protest or pressure. Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, though hit by steep U.S. aid cuts by the Trump administration, has held to paying stipends to the families of Palestinians jailed on terror charges and of those killed or wounded by Israeli forces during terrorist activity. Israel and the United States say the policy, which is scaled to give greater monthly payouts for prisoners serving longer sentences, invites violence. Abbas describes the Palestinian inmates and casualties as "heroes" of a national struggle.

"This (Israeli decision) will cost us a lot," Abbas told members of his Fatah party in the Palestinian hub city of Ramallah. "But we have rights and we will not be afraid." Saying Abbas' administration had paid 150 million shekels (\$43.37 million) in stipends for terrorist casualties in 2018, the Israeli security cabinet said the same amount would be garnished from within the taxes collected for the Palestinian Authority over the coming year.

The sum Israel said it would trim as of February was \$138 million - reflecting prisoner payouts by the Palestinian Authority during 2018.

The total amount of money withheld now equals some 6.8% of tax funds due to the Palestinian Authority. The full remittances make up around half of the Authority's budget. "For too long, we allowed the Palestinian Authority to pay salaries to terrorists. That party is over," Deputy Defense Minister Avi Dichter said on Twitter.

The United States passed legislation last year to sharply reduce aid to the Palestinian Authority unless it stopped the stipends. The measure, known as the Taylor Force Act, was named after a 29-year-old American military veteran fatally stabbed by a Palestinian while visiting Israel in 2016.

Washington has further slashed hundreds of millions of dollars to humanitarian organizations and U.N. agencies which aid the Palestinians as it seeks to pressure Abbas to come back to the negotiation table.

12.29.19

US strikes three Iranian militia missile storage bases in Iraq, two in Syria
Friday

12.29.19

U.S. military carries out 'defensive strikes' in Iraq, Syria against Iranian-allied militia
Officials confirm attack on Kataib Hezbollah that is suspected to be involved in Friday
attack that left one U.S. civilian contractor dead

Reuters, Daniel Salami | Published: 12.29.19 , 19:53

The U.S. military has carried out "defensive strikes" in Iraq and Syria against the Kata'ib Hezbollah militia group, U.S. officials said on Sunday.

The Pentagon said in a statement it had targeted three locations of the Iranian-backed Shi'ite Muslim militia group in Iraq and two in Syria. The locations included weapons storage facilities and command and control locations the group had used to plan and execute attacks on coalition forces.

"In response to repeated Kata'ib Hizbollah attacks on Iraqi bases that host Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR) coalition forces, U.S. forces have conducted precision defensive strikes ... that will degrade KH's ability to conduct future attacks against OIR coalition forces," chief Pentagon spokesman Jonathan Hoffman said in the statement.

The strike was likely carried out by drones and several militia fighters were reportedly killed near the western Qaim district on the Iraq-Syria border.

A U.S. civilian contractor was killed on Friday in a rocket attack on an Iraqi military base near the oil-rich city of Kirkuk and other U.S. service members and Iraq personnel were also wounded in the attack.

A U.S. official had said the United States was looking into the possible involvement of Kata'ib Hezbollah.

01.01.20

Trump eases Iran strife as US may raise up to 4-thousand Iraq troop presence

01.01.20

Trump downplays Iran strife as U.S. bolsters Iraq troop presence

Hundreds of Marines deployed as President says he does not want war with Islamic Republic; Pompeo says attack on Baghdad embassy 'orchestrated by terrorists' after pro-Iranian demonstrators storm compound, setting fires and chanting 'Death to America!'
AFP| Published: 01.01.20 , 09:56

U.S. President Donald Trump said on Tuesday he does not want, or foresee, war with Iran, after he earlier threatened to retaliate against the country following violent protests led by Iranian-backed militias at the U.S. embassy in Baghdad.

Asked about the possibility of tensions spiraling into a war with Iran, Trump told reporters at his Mar-a-Lago club in Florida: "Do I want to? No. I want to have peace. I like peace. And Iran should want to have peace more than anybody. So I don't see that happening."

The United States said Tuesday it is sending hundreds more troops to the Middle East after the mob of pro-Iranian demonstrators stormed the embassy compound, setting fires and chanting "Death to America!"

Angered by U.S. air strikes that killed two dozen paramilitary fighters on Sunday, hundreds of protesters spilled through checkpoints in the high-security Green Zone on Tuesday, demanding the ouster of American troops from Iraq and voicing loyalty to a powerful Iranian general, Qasem Soleimani of the Revolutionary Guard Corps.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said the attack was "orchestrated by terrorists," one of whom he named as Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis.

Muhandis has been identified as second-in-command of the Tehran-backed Hashed al-Shaabi paramilitary group which includes Kataeb Hezbollah, the group that was targeted in the U.S. air strikes.

Defense Secretary Mark Esper said in a statement that around 750 troops from a rapid response unit of the 82nd Airborne Division are prepared to deploy over the next several days to the region.

"This deployment is an appropriate and precautionary action taken in response to increased threat levels against U.S. personnel and facilities, such as we witnessed in Baghdad today," he said.

The U.S. had already flown a rapid response team of Marines into Baghdad to reinforce its embassy after the attack Tuesday, which left smoke and flames rising from the embassy entrance and further heightened tension between Tehran and Washington.

Esper's announcement is the latest move by Washington to step up its defenses in the region since Trump in May 2018 pulled out of a multinational nuclear deal with Iran and re-imposed crippling economic sanctions.

Trump blamed Tehran for the embassy attack and warned that it would face punishment if Americans are killed.

An Iraqi supporter of the Hashed al-Shaabi paramilitary network lifts a picture of Iraq's top Shiite cleric Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani in front of the U.S. embassy in Baghdad "Iran will be held fully responsible for lives lost, or damage incurred, at any of our facilities," Trump said on Twitter.

"They will pay a very BIG PRICE! This is not a Warning, it is a Threat," wrote Trump, adding "Happy New Year!"

Just prior to Esper's announcement a U.S. official had told AFP that Washington had already deployed hundreds of American troops to Kuwait in response to the unrest, and they would likely to be sent on to Iraq.

"At least 500 members of the U.S. Army's 82nd Airborne Division have left Fort Bragg in the U.S., and up to 4,000 may ultimately be deployed," the official said.

Surprise, fury

Trump's message came at the end of a day in which Washington officials appeared surprised and furious over the ease at which the protesters entered the Green Zone, reaching the U.S. embassy compound for the first time in years.

They carried flags of the hardline Kataeb Hezbollah (Hezbollah Brigades), a component of the Hashed al-Shaabi paramilitary network.

Live broadcasts showed the protesters battering down the high-security doors of the embassy reception building, smashing windows and burning a sentry box.

The State Department and Pentagon demanded Iraq's leaders provide security to the compound -- which was already heavily fortified.

By the time a contingent of U.S. Marine reinforcements flew in, some of the demonstrators had receded and others settled in for a sustained protest, preparing food for the evening.

Tehran said the United States is itself to blame for air strikes that killed about two dozen Kataeb Hezbollah fighters on **Sunday**.

"The surprising audacity of American officials is so much that after killing at least 25... and violating the country's sovereignty and territorial integrity, that now... they attribute the Iraqi people's protest against their cruel acts to the Islamic Republic of Iran," said foreign ministry spokesman Abbas Mousavi.

'Strategic patience'

American soldiers take positions around the United States embassy in Baghdad, Iraq after supporters and members of the Hashed al-Shaabi military network breached the outer wall of the mission

The mob attack put a focus on the strains in the U.S.-Iraqi relationship. Allies of Iran, which enjoys significant support in parts of the Iraqi government, increasingly challenge Washington's influence in the country.

U.S. jet fighters on Sunday struck five Kateab Hezbollah outposts in Iraq and Syria after a series of rocket attacks on U.S.-occupied facilities in Iraq over the past two months that are blamed on the group and its alleged Iranian sponsors.

One of those attacks, in Kirkuk on **Friday**, left an American civilian contractor dead and exhausted what U.S. officials called Trump's "strategic patience" with Tehran.

'First lesson' to U.S.

Iraqi protesters tear a security camera off a wall at the U.S. embassy compound in Baghdad

It also added to the growing calls by some political factions in Iraq to push U.S. troops out of the country nearly 17 years after they entered and overthrew Saddam Hussein's regime.

The protesters who besieged the U.S. embassy on **Tuesday** carried posters reading: "Parliament should oust U.S. troops, or else we will!"

Late Tuesday Kataeb Hezbollah hailed the attack as a "first lesson" to Washington, "so that Trump knows he did something extremely stupid".