

Ynet-News February 17, 2020 – Monday –

02.17.20 – Mo - - - News

Abbas agrees to Oslo in 1993 & PA state in pre-67 border & East Jerusalem as capital

02.17.20 – Mo -

Iran's vow to deliver a crushing response, deflated by airstrike on Damascus warehouses
airstrikes last Thursday

02.16.20 – Su - - - News Placed in Feb 16 spot - Sunday

Councils seek immediate change to Gaza attack response, & not wait 2-wk for election

02.16.20 – Su -

Palestine pushing International Court beyond jurisdiction for territory sovereignty

02.16.20 – Su - - - News

Netanyahu & Barkat plans build hospitals, freeze tax & reduce costs on houses & food

02.16.20 – Su - - - News

Munich Conference voiced EU support for Palestine, Egypt & Saudi Arabia for plan

02.16.20 – Su -

Israeli plane uses Sudan airspace for first time to help country in modernization

02.16.20 – Su - - - News Placed in Feb 17 spot - Monday

Gantz open religion cabinet will demand quiet border & will strike smallest infraction

02.13.20 – Th - - - News Placed in Feb 15 spot - Saturday

IDF budget drones, night vision & anti-aircraft; PM requests offense advanced

02.05.20 – We -

Senate acquits Trump in historic vote as re-election battle looms

02.17.20 – Mo - - - News

Lebanon PM Diab requested IMF of Iran & Qatar help Beirut financial crisis

02.17.20 – Mo -

Abbas agrees to Oslo in 1993 & PA state in pre-67 border & East Jerusalem as capital

02.17.20

Israel holds key to next chapter of PA ties'

Top Palestinian Authority sources warn the PA will end cooperation with Israel in case of a one-sided annexation and violence will certainly return to the region; 'Peace comes at a price,' they say but doubt whether Israel is willing to pay it

Itamar Eichner| Updated: 02.17.20 , 22:09

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas's spokesperson, Nabil Abu Rudeineh, says the security cooperation with Israel is ongoing but warned that may not be the case for much longer.

Before traveling with the president to Germany, Abu Rudeineh on Sunday told diplomatic correspondents from Israeli media outlets who were invited to Ramallah to hear the Palestinian point of view on the new U.S. plan for Mideast peace that the PA is still maintaining its policy and not calling for civil disobedience that would surely bring about clashes with Israeli troops.

"Abbas is committed to peace," Abu Rudeineh said. "The peace agreement we had reached in Oslo in 1993 with Prime Minister [Yitzhak] Rabin, [then-Foreign Minister Shimon] Peres and every Israeli prime minister since, including Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, was constructed on the basis that there would be a Palestinian state in the pre-1967 border with East Jerusalem as its capital."

The Palestinian official said that is a basis for an ever-lasting peace, and if the next government installed in Jerusalem is prepared to proceed along those lines, "I am sure we can reach an agreement in the space of two weeks."

Abu Rudeineh blamed the current U.S. administration for pushing both Israel and the Palestinians into perpetuating their conflict.

"The Trump plan will only lead to bloodshed," he said. "We tell every Israeli prime minister and every American president we are pleased if you hope to resolve our problem, that is a good start, but if we are to solve the conflict we have to sit down and talk."

"These are difficult times," Abu Rudeineh said. "Everyone is waiting for the results of both the Israeli and the American elections, and the lack of confidence is seen in Gaza and Southern Lebanon."

He insisted the Palestinian Authority seeks peace but said the Israeli government refuses to hold any talks because they are hoping for a solution that will keep the occupation in place forever, "and this we cannot agree to."

Regarding Netanyahu's claims of normalization with the Arab world, Abu Rudeineh was skeptical. "This will not bring you peace and you have to live with the Palestinians and not the Omanis or the Sudanese," he said.

"Abbas truly wants a lasting peace," he said. "There will never be a Palestinian leader that will accept the American plan. Since it was revealed Arabs everywhere are with us and no one has supported the U.S. proposal."

Abu Rudeineh also warned the U.S. is creating a dangerous situation and the Israeli government will have to understand that no negotiations at all will create more problems.

"No one will feel safe in Tel Aviv or Jerusalem. We must go back to talking about the occupied land and Jerusalem as the capital of Palestine. That must be the starting point."

Mahmoud al-Habash, adviser on religious affairs to President Abbas and head of the Sharia courts in the Palestinian Authority, was defiant when speaking to the Israeli journalists. "The plight of the Palestinians has existed for 100 years and could continue for 100 more," he said. "Netanyahu is leading you on when he said he is normalizing relations with the Arab world. Everyone is with us. All Arabs, all Muslims." What do you want?" he asked. "My parents and their families had lived in Ashkelon for centuries - not decades like your settlers, they are prepared to give up their hope to return, but what price are the Israelis willing to pay for peace? Peace must come with a price and giving us back the land you occupy is not a price you will be paying, it is justice." Abbas' close aide warned that "if the two-state solution is buried for good – more Palestinians will demand one binational state. "After Oslo, a rightwing extremist assassinated Rabin, then [late Palestinian leader Yasser] Arafat was killed by you. Thirteen million Palestinians believe their leader was killed by Israel."

Ashraf al-Ajrami, who served as the minister for prisoners' affairs in the PA, warned the street is becoming restless. "If there is annexation [in the West Bank], the PA will have to make its own decisions and security cooperation will have to stop."

The final Palestinian official to speak with the journalists was Elias Zananiri, Vice-Chairman of the PLO Committee for Interaction with the Israeli Society. He was even less ambiguous in his warning.

"If there is one-sided annexation, there will be no more governance by the PA. You will have to deal with every mains burst, every sewage problem, and the military will have to retake all of the West Bank. Israel holds the key to what happens next and the threat of violence is ever-present."

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02.17.20 – Mo -

Iran's vow to deliver a crushing response, deflated by airstrike on Damascus warehouses
airstrikes last Thursday

02.17.20

Satellite images show damage to Syrian sites after alleged Israeli strike

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said seven people were killed in the attack that targeted posts for Iranian-backed militias in the area near the Damascus international airport

Itay Blumenthal| Updated: 02.17.20 , 20:34

New satellite images released on Monday show significant damage to warehouses and office buildings at Damascus International Airport, following airstrikes last Thursday attributed to Israel.

The photographs released by ImageSat International show that several warehouses, apparently used to store weapons that were flown into Syria from Iran, were destroyed in the strikes along with multiple buildings used as headquarters for the operations at the site.

In addition, a hangar was damaged during the attack.

At approximately at 11:45 pm last Thursday, incoming missiles struck five weapons depots near Damascus International Airport, including an attack on a military position south of the Syrian capital, the Al-Arabiya news channel reported, citing unidentified sources.

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, which monitors the war, said seven people were killed in the attack of suspected Israeli missiles that targeted posts for Iranian-backed militias in the area between the Damascus international airport and the Sayeda Zeinab neighborhood, south of the capital.

The Observatory said some of the missiles hit their targets. It didn't say whether there were any casualties.

On Wednesday Iran vowed to deliver a crushing response to any Israeli action against its interests.

"The Islamic Republic of Iran will give a crushing response that will cause regret to any kind of aggression or stupid action from this regime against our country's interests in Syria and the region," ministry spokesman Abbas Mousavi said.

The unusual statement came after a plane belonging to the Revolutionary Guard Corps took off from Tehran to Damascus.

The plane had been out of commission for the past six months after it was damaged in a June 2019 airstrike on Syria attributed to Israel. Shortly before the Boeing 747 cargo plane landed in Damascus, Iranian officials accused Israel of carrying out attacks against military forces in Syria that are allied with Tehran.

First published: 20:32 , 02.17.20

02.16.20 – Su -

Councils seek immediate change to Gaza attack response, & not wait 2-wk for election

02.16.20

Netanyahu says campaign in Gaza before elections would be 'difficult'

In a meeting with heads of communities bordering the Strip, PM is quoted as saying that although all options are on the table, a ceasefire deal would be 'better than war'; heads of the local councils decry 'never-ending election cycle'

Matan Tzuri, Itamar Eichner | Published: 02.16.20 , 22:38

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu apparently told the heads of Israeli communities bordering the Gaza Strip that it would be challenging to launch a wide-scale operation in the Hamas-controlled enclave **two weeks before the national elections**.

Netanyahu convened the officials at the Prime Minister's Office on Sunday for a private meeting to discuss the situation on the southern border. The **tensions along the Israel-Gaza border** have risen in recent weeks **due to the continuing rocket and explosive balloon attacks**.

"Before the elections, it would be difficult to open a significant military campaign," Netanyahu was quoted as saying to the forum of the local councils of the Gaza border communities and the city of Sderot. He added, however, that Israel is prepared for war should the situation on the ground require it.

"If there is no choice then it's [war] also an option," he said, adding, "an arrangement is better than war and we must exhaust every possibility."

At the end of the discussion, the heads of the local **councils** issued a statement **calling on** the government to **change the current response policy to the attacks originating in the Strip**.

"We expect to see a **change in policy vis-à-vis terror** organizations in the Gaza Strip," said the statement.

"We have made it clear, the fact that Israel is in a **never-ending election** cycle **cannot detract from maintaining the security** of 60,000 citizens of the State of Israel who live in the Gaza border region and in Sderot."

Netanyahu commended the residents of the region on their resilience and instructed PMO's Acting Director General Ronen Peretz to implement as soon as possible the order to accelerate economic development in communities bordering the enclave.

02.16.20 – Su -

Palestine pushing International Court beyond jurisdiction for territory sovereignty

02.16.20

Israel hopes ICC members will help stave off Palestinian investigation

Some ICC member states, including Germany, argue court's jurisdiction does not extend to Palestinian territories; Netanyahu lauds response to Israeli lobbying over case

Reuters| Published: **02.16.20** , 21:11

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Sunday hailed what he called efforts by friendly states to stop the **International Criminal Court** from opening an investigation into alleged war crimes against Palestinians.

The court's chief prosecutor Fatou Bensouda said in December there was enough evidence for an investigation into thousands of killings - but asked the court to rule on whether it had the jurisdiction over the Palestinian territories.

Brazil, Hungary, Austria, Germany, the Czech Republic and Australia have asked the court over the past two weeks to let them file "amicus brief" opinions on the case, ICC records show.

Some, including Germany, said they would argue the **court's jurisdiction did not extend to the Palestinian territories.**

Brazil said it would argue that the **Israeli-Palestinian crisis should be resolved through political dialogue, not a court ruling.**

Netanyahu told his cabinet countries had responded to Israeli lobbying over the case.

"We are struggling against this (proceeding) and, at our side, I must say, are many friends around the world (which) joined the U.S. in a steadfast stand alongside Israel," said Netanyahu.

The **Palestinians** were accepted as an **ICC member in 2015** after they signed the court's founding Rome Statute, based on their United Nations "observer state" status.

Israel and the United States, neither of them ICC members, dispute the court's jurisdiction in the absence of a sovereign Palestinian state in the West Bank, Gaza or East Jerusalem.

The **Organisation for Islamic Cooperation, representing 57 Muslim states**, asked to file a brief, arguing that the **Palestinians have sovereignty over the Palestinian territories.**

The Palestinian Bar Association, the International Commission of Jurists and other legal and human rights organization have also asked to file briefs with the court to say it does have jurisdiction in this case.

U.S.-sponsored Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking stalled in 2014. A new U.S. peace plan, unveiled by U.S. President Donald Trump last month, envisaged **Israel keeping East Jerusalem** and swathes of **West Bank land**, and was **rejected by the Palestinians.**

02.16.20 – Su -

Netanyahu & Barkat plans build hospitals, freeze tax & reduce costs on houses & food

02.16.20

More hospitals and cheaper houses: Netanyahu, Barkat unveil new financial plan
PM and his candidate for finance minister announce six ambitious **potential reforms**, ranging from **housing market to healthcare**, which are set to be implemented **if Likud wins** next month's elections

Roi Rubinstein | Published: **02.16.20** , 19:59

Prime Minister Benjamin **Netanyahu** and his candidate for finance minister, Likud MK Nir **Barkat**, on **Sunday** presented a financial that contains several wide-ranging and

ambitious reforms. The plan is set to be implemented by Netanyahu's next government if his Likud party emerges victorious at next month's elections.

Netanyahu said if he is to be re-elected after the March 2 vote, he would lead six major financial reforms, including: lowering house and food prices; massive investments in health care; investment in Israel's socio-geographic periphery in the Negev, Galilee and the West Bank, and investment in small businesses, start-ups and technology.

"The first thing is to drastically reduce food prices in the country," Netanyahu said at a special press conference at the Tel Aviv Stock Exchange. "Currently, food prices [in Israel] are 30% higher than in the rest of the world. We will tear down monopolies and decentralize the [food] market," he added.

"Second thing is to drastically reduce housing prices. We will cut bureaucracy significantly. Sixty percent of the price of an apartment in Israel today is the price of land and taxes," he said.

"The third reform is a sizeable investment in healthcare. We will complete the construction of two hospitals in Be'er Sheva and Kiryat Ata, and in the near future, we will approve [the construction of] two more hospitals.

Netanyahu also said he intends to increase the average number of hospital beds by at least another 700. "We have to cut waiting lines. In a few years, we will no longer see patients lying in hospital corridors – this is unacceptable."

Barkat, who served as the mayor of Jerusalem from 2008 to 2018, took to the stage to introduce a new reform meant to boost Israel's struggling periphery, which includes large investments in the Galilee region in the north, the Negev in the south and the West Bank.

"We will give our periphery over 400,000 new jobs in the coming decade. The idea is to provide a child from the periphery the same level of education a child living in the center of the country receives," he said.

Barkat also spoke about reforms meant to promote small businesses.

"We need to help them, we need to tear down barriers and give them certainty. It will require us to do three things: freeze property taxes for 5 years, reform business licensing and equaling the social conditions of freelance workers in Israel [to employees working on a salary]."

The last reform introduced by Barkat promotes further investment in Israel's hi-tech market.

"Israel must be a leading player in future technologies. We, in Israel, have a huge potential when it comes to biotechnology and medicine. The same goes for robotics and public transport. Intel has made Israel their international autonomous vehicle hub. We have more ventures and startups that can definitely change the world."

Netanyahu last week asked Barkat to become the next finance minister in his government should he form a coalition after the March 2 elections.

Current finance minister Moshe Kahlon has announced his retirement from politics after the upcoming vote, which will be Israel's third national ballot in less than 12 months.

02.16.20 – Su -

Munich Conference voiced EU support for Palestine, Egypt & Saudi Arabia for plan

02.16.20

Palestinian PM: Trump's Mideast plan 'will be buried'

Mohammad Shtayyeh tells Munich Security Conference that American blueprint was nothing but 'memo of understanding' between Netanyahu and Trump, would leave future Palestinian state fragmented and with 'no sovereignty'

Associated Press| Published: 02.16.20 , 17:10

The Palestinian prime minister lashed out Sunday at U.S. President Donald Trump's proposal to end the Mideast conflict, saying it would be "buried very soon."

Speaking at the Munich Security Conference, Mohammad Shtayyeh said the U.S. plan was "no more than a memo of understanding between [Prime Minister Benjamin] Netanyahu and Trump."

Shtayyeh criticized the fact that the proposal would leave a future Palestinian state fragmented and with "no sovereignty," allowing Israel to annex large parts of the West Bank. He urged other countries to reject the Trump proposal while maintaining that Palestinians "are open to serious negotiations."

Israel and the Palestinians have not held peace talks in almost than a decade.

Shtayyeh also suggested the Palestinians would seek to increase pressure on Israel through international organizations, citing the recent release by the United Nations human rights office of a list of more than 100 companies operating in Israel's West Bank settlements.

Following the publication of the list last week, Shtayyeh threatened to take international legal action against the companies named on it.

Referring to the March 2 election in Israel, Shtayyeh said the difference between Blue & White leader Benny Gantz and Netanyahu was "not more than the difference between Coca-Cola and Pepsi Cola."

Trump's Mideast plan, announced by the president at the White House on Jan. 28 with Netanyahu at his side, backs Israel on virtually all of the most contentious issues of the decades-old conflict.

It would allow Israel to annex large parts of the West Bank containing the settlements that are home to hundreds of thousands of people as well as the Jordan Valley.

The Palestinians, who cut off ties with the U.S. after Trump recognized Jerusalem as Israel's capital in 2017, have adamantly rejected the plan.

Thousands of Palestinians rallied last week in the West Bank to reject Trump's peace initiative.

"All Palestinian people and all the factions, national and Islamic, are standing behind President Mahmoud Abbas," Shtayyeh told the crowd flooding Ramallah's al-Manara Square.

"All the streets are full," he said. "This is the Palestinian response."

The Arab League has unanimously sided with the Palestinians against the plan, but key U.S. allies Egypt and Saudi Arabia said they appreciated Trump's efforts and called for renewed negotiations.

The European Union issued a statement last week reiterating its support for a two-state solution based on the 1967 lines. The Palestinians want to establish a state in East Jerusalem, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, territories Israel captured from Egypt and Jordan in the 1967 Six-Day War.

EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said the U.S. initiative "departs from these internationally agreed parameters."

02.16.20 – Su -

Israeli plane uses Sudan airspace for first time to help country in modernization

02.16.20

Israeli plane uses Sudan airspace for first time

Aircraft flew from Kinshasa to Tel Aviv over Sudan after Netanyahu met with Sudanese leader earlier this month; other planes have used route but were never registered as Israeli
Itay Blumenthal | Published: 02.16.20, 15:15

An Israeli plane made history this weekend by becoming the country's first-ever aircraft to fly through Sudanese airspace, as it traveled to Tel Aviv from Kinshasa.

The plane took off from Israel early last week for the capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo and made its return to Ben-Gurion Airport in the skies over Sudan.

The flight comes after Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu met with Sudanese interim leader Abd al-Fattah al-Burhan in Uganda earlier this month. Burhan said his country would now allow Israeli planes – with the exception of flag carrier El Al – to use its airspace.

The plane does not have an Israeli license number but is hangared at Ben-Gurion Airport. In the past, there have been several cases of planes flying either to or from Israel using Sudanese airspace, but they all had to stop over at Amman or another destination so that the flight would not be registered as Israeli.

According to the plane's log, it took off from Israel to Congo on Monday evening, using a route that passed over the Suez Canal, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda, on a flight that took a little less than 7 hours.

"The picture for Sudan changed a lot after I met with Netanyahu," Burhan said at a press conference after his talks with the prime minister.

"The meeting was held without conditions and was coordinated by Washington. The results of the meeting will be announced soon, first and foremost improving the economy. The government will examine the issue of cooperation and then update Israel," he said.

Sudan is a Muslim country in northeastern Africa, with a population of more than 43 million. It does not have diplomatic relations with Israel although pundits believe that by establishing a relationship with Israel and ending its diplomatic isolation, the Sudanese leader aims to help his country go through a process of modernization.

02.16.20 – Su -

Gantz open religion cabinet will demand quiet border & will strike smallest infraction

02.16.20

Gantz: No Joint List, no Netanyahu in my future cabinet

In wide-ranging interview to Ynet just days before elections, Blue & White chairman praises Trump peace plan as 'good starting point', predicts Likud will not be able to form government until current leader, signals agreement with Liberman on ending ultra-Orthodox grip on Jewish religious life in Israel

Attila Somfalvi | Published: 02.16.20 , 11:39

Blue & White Chairman Benny Gantz says should he win Israel's unprecedented third elections in a year on March 2, he will form a government with the center-left Labor-Gesher-Meretz party and the right-wing Yisrael Beytenu.

He said would even be open to a coalition with Likud, on condition that Benjamin Netanyahu no longer leads the party, but definitively ruled out any partnership with the predominantly Arab Joint List.

Gantz made his comments in a wide-ranging interview to Ynet on Saturday, just 15 days before the election and after months of media silence.

"The first stage of my minority government," Gantz said, "will be based on a partnership with Yisrael Beytenu, Labor-Gesher-Meretz and a sizeable Blue & White party. Yisrael Beytenu leader Avigdor Liberman has already stated that he does not want a fourth election or any other partners, which will not be necessary anyway."

According to Gantz, Likud will not be able to form a government with Benjamin Netanyahu at its head - as has been the case in the past two elections - and that a Blue & White-Likud unity government was possible without Netanyahu.

With regards to the Joint List, Gantz reaffirmed his previous statements party would not be part of any coalition he leads, saying their support from outside the coalition would be "unnecessary."

The former IDF chief said that partnership talks with Liberman have gone very well since the start of the campaign season, with "great accomplishments" with regards to their respective positions on religion and state.

Liberman is a fierce critic of the Haredi parties, accusing them of holding a monopoly on religious Jewish life in Israel - something with which Gantz appeared to agree.

"We want civil marriage, an egalitarian prayer section at the Western Wall and open shops and transportation on Saturday," Gantz told Ynet.

"We want to let people live in respect, each to their own beliefs," he said.

"We want a Jewish and democratic Israel, without the risk of a binational state.

Netanyahu has for years worked to divide us; I want to bring us all together as one."

Regarding possible partnerships with the ultra-Orthodox and the religious-Zionist parties, Gantz said that racists "like Transportation Minister Bezalel Smotrich" would have no place in his future government, but did not dismiss Smotrich's Yamina colleagues, Defense Minister Naftali Bennett and former justice minister Ayelet Shaked.

"Anyone who accepts that Israel is a Jewish and democratic state will accept our priorities and outlines for a coalition," said Gantz.

Reaffirming his promises last week that Blue & White would keep both the education and health portfolio for itself, Gantz said that United Torah Judaism co-chief Yaakov Litzman would not continue as health minister in his cabinet.

'A good starting point'

Turning to diplomatic affairs, Gantz also complimented U.S. President Donald Trump's recently unveiled plan for Middle East peace, calling it a good starting point for further talks with the Palestinians.

"I'm for annexation and the application of Israeli law to the West Bank settlements, but all this should be done during talks and as cooperation continues with the Palestinians and the other Arab countries," said Gantz.

"We are in continuous contact with American officials, which I had going back to my days as the IDF attaché to Washington and as IDF chief of staff. I know how to continue this diplomatic push."

With regards to the current tensions with the Gaza Strip, Gantz who was IDF chief of staff during the 2014 Gaza war, said that the Hamas terror group that rules the coastal enclave will have to make a decision.

"Money will not be transferred to Gaza for bribes or ransom," said Gantz, referring to two Israeli prisoners and the bodies of two fallen IDF soldiers that Hamas is believed to be holding.

"We will demand a complete agreement, total quiet on the border and the return of the Israeli captives in their possession, or the IDF will respond with a fierce and harsh blow," he said.

"I will strike at the smallest infraction, be it a diplomatic violation, a balloon or a rocket," he added.

The Blue & White leader also criticized the meeting between former prime minister Ehud Olmert and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas at the UN last Tuesday, calling the meeting "completely unnecessary and should not have occurred in the first place."

02.13.20 – Th -

IDF budget drones, night vision & anti-aircraft; PM requests offense advanced

02.13.20

IDF five-year plan: More lethal, high-tech army with focus on Iran threat

Momentum Plan calls for strengthening operational capabilities, upgrading quality and quantity of IAF armaments, turning the military into deadly force that fights in unified manner at sea, on land, in air and in electronic warfare

Yoav Zitun | Published: 02.13.20 , 20:35

Efforts to counter the Iranian threat and the integration of new technologies take center stage in the military's five-year plan presented Thursday by Israel Defense Forces Chief of Staff Aviv Kochavi.

"If carried out as planned it will allow a substantial increase in the IDF's abilities," Kochavi said, adding that it will "strengthen our lethal capabilities both in scope and in accuracy."

Iran is high on the army's list of priorities and Kochavi intends to appoint a full general to oversee all elements of the Iranian threat, from the Islamic Republic's nuclear program to its military expansion in the region.

The IDF will form a dedicated command that will work with its counterparts in the Mossad intelligence agency.

The plan, dubbed the Momentum Plan, calls for strengthening the operational capabilities of the regular army, upgrading the quantity and quality of armaments for the Air Force, and turning the military into a deadly, high-tech force that fights in a unified manner at sea, on land, in air and in cyber and electronic warfare.

The IDF believes the new plan will improve its capabilities in the area that has taken precedence over the past eight years: a confrontation on two fronts, one primary and the other secondary, against Hamas in the south and Hezbollah in the north.

The plan takes the basic premise that Hezbollah, Hamas and Iran have narrowed the IDF's advantage over them and aims to once again increase the advantage to levels required to maintain state security, prevent war and reinforce Israeli deterrence.

The IDF has already reallocated NIS 600 million of its own budget to the plan, funding equipment set to be in use in the next two months, including thousands of drones, night vision capabilities and anti-aircraft missiles.

The plan's bottom line calls for dramatically increasing the number of Hamas or Hezbollah targets destroyed during war and improving the quality and frequency for thousands of targets that can be attacked in one day.

Kochavi presented the plan to the IDF General Staff in recent days, opting not to wait for a new government to be sworn in.

He warned that the challenges Israel is facing are too great to put off and therefore the plan must be put into action swiftly.

Israel will be holding its third election in less than one year on March 2.

The plan, which was officially approved by Defense Minister Naftali Bennett, does not yet have budget approval and may see the new government rejecting elements of it.

During the drafting of the plan, Kochavi consulted with his predecessor Gadi Eisenkot and also held talks with former IDF chiefs Benny Gantz and Gabi Ashkenazi of the Blue & White party, who would not then be surprised by the plan should they assume the respective posts of prime minister and defense minister after the elections.

The Prime Minister's Office said in response: "The prime minister was presented with the IDF's five-year plan and supports extensive aspects of it but requested the military's offensive capabilities be further advanced."

02.05.20 – We -

Senate acquits Trump in historic vote as re-election battle looms

02.05.20

Senate acquits Trump in historic vote as re-election battle looms

Acquittal marks second time in 10 months Trump withstands existential threat to his presidency, strengthening incumbent's reelection bid later this year

Reuters| Published: 02.05.20 , 23:47

U.S. President Donald Trump was acquitted on Wednesday in his Senate impeachment trial, saved by fellow Republicans who rallied to protect him nine months before he asks voters in a deeply divided America to give him a second White House term.

The businessman-turned-politician, 73, survived only the third presidential impeachment trial in U.S. history - just like the two other impeached presidents - in his turbulent presidency's darkest chapter. Trump now plunges into an election season that promises to further polarize the country.

Trump was acquitted largely along party lines on two articles of impeachment approved by the Democratic-led House of Representatives on Dec. 18, with the votes falling far short of the two-thirds majority required in the 100-seat Senate to remove him under the U.S. Constitution.

The Senate voted 52-48 to acquit him of abuse of power stemming from his request that Ukraine investigate political rival Joe Biden, a contender for the Democratic nomination to face Trump in the Nov. 3 election. Republican Senator Mitt Romney joined the Democrats in voting to convict. No Democrat voted to acquit.

The Senate then voted 53-47 to acquit him of obstruction of Congress by blocking witnesses and documents sought by the House. A conviction on either count would have elevated Vice President Mike Pence, another Republican, into the presidency. Romney joined the rest of the Republican senators in voting to acquit on the obstruction charge. No Democrat voted to acquit.

On each of the two charges, the senators voted one by one on the Senate floor with U.S. Chief Justice John Roberts presiding.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell and other Republicans engineered a stripped-down trial with no witnesses or new evidence. Democrats called the trial a sham and a cover-up. Trump called the impeachment an attempted coup and a Democratic attempt to annul his 2016 election victory.

Throughout the impeachment drama, Trump and his Republican allies kept up their attacks on Biden's integrity. It remains to be seen how much political damage it inflicted. In the first of the state-by-state contests to determine the Democratic challenger to Trump, Biden placed a disappointing fourth in Iowa, according to incomplete results from Monday's voting. Biden has accused Trump of "lies, smears, distortions and name-calling."

'APPALLING ABUSE'

Trump faces no serious challengers for his party's presidential nomination. He is poised to claim the nomination at the party's convention in August and previewed in his State of the Union address on Tuesday campaign themes such as American renewal, economic vitality and hardline immigration policies.

Romney, the 2012 Republican presidential nominee, broke with his party to vote to convict Trump on the abuse-of-power charge. Romney called the president's actions in pressuring Ukraine to investigate Biden "grievously wrong" and said Trump was "guilty of an appalling abuse of public trust."

"What he did was not 'perfect,'" Romney said on the Senate floor, as Trump has described his call with Ukraine's president that was at the heart of the scandal. "No, it was a flagrant assault on our electoral rights, our national security and our fundamental values. Corrupting an election to keep one's self in office is perhaps the most abusive and destructive violation of one's oath of office that I can imagine."

Romney, a moderate and elder statesman in his party, paused during his speech as he became choked with emotion after mentioning the importance of his religious faith. Republican Senator Lindsey Graham lashed out at Democrats, saying: "What you have done is unleash the partisan forces of hell."

Chuck Schumer, the top Senate Democrat, said Trump's acquittal in an unfair trial was worth nothing.

"No doubt, the president will boast he received total exoneration. But we know better. We know this wasn't a trial by any stretch of the definition."

In his speech, McConnell said: "The architects of this impeachment claimed they were defending norms and traditions. In reality, it was an assault on both."

BIGGEST VICTORY YET

Democrats expressed concern that an acquittal would further embolden a president who already challenges political norms. They have painted him as a threat to U.S. democracy and a demagogue who has acted lawlessly and exhibited contempt for the powers of Congress and other institutions. They also have voiced concern over Russia interfering in another American election.

Trump's legal team offered a vision of nearly unlimited presidential powers, a view Democrats said placed any president above the law.

The acquittal handed Trump his biggest victory yet over his Democratic adversaries in Congress. Democrats vowed to press ahead with investigations - they are fighting in court for access to his financial records - and voiced hope that the facts unearthed during the impeachment process about his conduct would help persuade voters to make him a one-term president.

Trump's job approval ratings have remained fairly consistent throughout his presidency and the impeachment process as his core conservative supporters - especially white men, rural Americans, evangelical Christians and conservative Catholics - stick with him.

The latest Reuters/Ipsos poll, conducted on Monday and Tuesday, showed 42% of American adults approved of his performance, while 54% disapproved. That is nearly the same as when the House launched its impeachment inquiry in September when his approval stood at 43% and disapproval at 53%.

The trial formally began on Jan. 16. The Senate voted 51-49 last Friday to defeat the Democrats' bid to call witnesses such as Trump's former national security adviser John Bolton, with only two Republicans joining them.

In the previous presidential impeachment trials, Andrew Johnson was acquitted in 1868 in the aftermath of the American Civil War and Bill Clinton was acquitted in 1999 of charges stemming from a sex scandal.

In the hours before the vote, numerous senators gave speeches on the Senate floor explaining their vote.

SHADOW OF INVESTIGATION

Trump, now seeking a second four-year term, has been under the shadow of some sort of investigation for most of his presidency. The acquittal marked the second time in 10 months that he withstood an existential threat to his presidency.

In March 2019, Special Counsel Robert Mueller found insufficient evidence that Trump engaged in a criminal conspiracy with Russia in its interference on his behalf in the 2016 election. Mueller did not exonerate Trump of obstruction of justice in seeking to impede the investigation but stopped short of concluding the president acted unlawfully. Trump declared full vindication.

Last July 25, Trump asked Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy during a phone call to "do us a favor" and open an investigation into Biden and his son Hunter Biden and into a discredited theory beneficial to Russia that Ukraine colluded with Democrats to meddle in the 2016 election to harm Trump.

Hunter Biden had joined the board of Ukrainian energy company Burisma while his father was U.S. vice president. Trump accused the Bidens of corruption without offering substantiation. The Bidens denied wrongdoing.

Democrats said Trump further abused his power by withholding \$391 million in security aid approved by Congress to help Ukraine battle Russia-backed separatists and by dangling a coveted White House meeting as leverage to pressure Zelenskiy to announce the investigations.

Under the Constitution, impeachment is the mechanism for removing a president or certain other federal officials for "treason, bribery or other high crimes and misdemeanors."

02.17.20 – Mo -

Lebanon PM Diab requested IMF of Iran & Qatar help Beirut financial crisis

02.17.20

Snubbed by Gulf, Lebanon's PM Diab hosts Iranian official

Experts say the Iranian-backed terror group Hezbollah's role in helping Diab form a government could impede securing Western and Gulf aid to solve the country's financial woes

Reuters| Updated: 02.17.20 , 20:01

Lebanese Prime Minister Hassan Diab, who is getting the cold shoulder from Gulf Arab states, on Monday met Iran's parliament speaker, the first senior foreign official to visit since Diab's government took office.

Gulf states had long channeled funds to Beirut but have grown alarmed by the rising clout of Iran-backed terror organization Hezbollah.

Lebanon's rich Gulf neighbors now appear to loathe to help it out of an unprecedented economic and financial crisis.

The heavily armed Hezbollah backed Diab's cabinet after efforts failed to strike a deal with Saad al-Hariri, a traditional Western ally who stayed out of the new government. The economic crisis came to a head last year as slowing capital inflows led to a liquidity crunch and protests erupted against the ruling elite.

Banks are curbing access to cash, the Lebanese pound has slumped and inflation has spiked.

Foreign donors have said they will only help after Lebanon enacts reforms.

However, analysts say Hezbollah's role in forming the government, which took office last month, could impede securing Western and Gulf aid.

Iranian speaker Ali Larijani said in a news conference that Iran stood ready to help Lebanon.

In response to a question on whether this would close the door to any Western aid, he said: "We express our full readiness to support but we do not force this on anyone."

Mohanad Hage Ali, a fellow at the **Carnegie Middle East Center**, said his visit may not help bolster the new Lebanese government's image.

"It's not very helpful at this stage as **Lebanon seeks foreign aid and a bailout** and the help of Gulf Arab states. This is the not message you want to send," he said.

Diab has said his first trip abroad would be to the Arab region, particularly the Gulf monarchies.

But **none of them** have officially commented on the government nor **extended public invitations to Diab**.

An Arab diplomat in the Gulf said **only Qatar had invited Diab** to visit so far. "No other government in the Gulf will invite him," the diplomat said.

Qatar did not immediately respond to a request for comment on whether it had sent an invitation.

Lebanese President Michel Aoun's office said he received an invitation to Tehran during his meeting with Larijani on Monday.

Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah said on Sunday that the cabinet was not "Hezbollah's government" and that opponents who described it that way were damaging Lebanon's ties to foreign states and making it harder to combat the crisis.

A team of IMF experts will begin consultations with Lebanon's government in Beirut on Thursday, a source familiar with the matter said.

The **heavily indebted state formally requested the Fund's technical help** last week.