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Netanyahu says Israel to begin building Golan Heights community bearing Trump's name
In May 2019, Netanyahu announced the creation of a residential community on the Golan Heights in honor of the US president after Trump signed an order recognizing Israel's sovereignty over the heights

i24NEWS|

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Work will begin on planning the community named after President Donald Trump on the Golan Heights, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced Sunday.

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Speaking during the weekly cabinet meeting Netanyahu declared Israel will begin implementation of a decision announced last year to build a town in honor of Trump.

בנימין נתניהו, שרה נתניהו, דייוויד פרידמן ורעייתו

Prime Minister Netanyahu at the unveiling of the placard for Trump Heights (Photo: EPA)

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"Today, we will begin practical steps toward establishing the community of Ramat Trump on the Golan Heights, Israel's sovereignty over which was recognized by President Trump," a statement from Netanyahu's office quoted the leader as saying. In May 2019, Netanyahu's government announced it would create a residential community on the Golan Heights in honor of the US president after Trump signed an order recognizing Israel's sovereignty over the strategically important plateau captured from Syria in the 1967 Six-Day-War.

A month later Israel held a ceremony unveiling the place-name sign of the new community bearing the name of Ramat Trump, or Trump Heights.

הבית הלבן פגישה בנימין נתניהו ו דונלד טראמפ נשיא ארצות הברית

President Trump and PM Netanyahu (Photo: Getty Images)

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“There is importance in moving forward with the decision of establishing the settlement at this moment in time in order to strengthen the political ties between Israel and the US,” the statement from Netanyahu's office read.

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The move comes as Netanyahu's government is facing controversy over its plan of declaring sovereignty over parts of the West Bank, in accordance with the peace plan put forth by Trump's administration.

Netanyahu, Gantz meet with U.S. envoy over West Bank annexation
Israeli leaders sit down with David Friedman as PM's planned July 1 start date for unilateral move nears and international pressure mounts against application of sovereignty to the region
i24NEWS|
Updated: 06.14.20 , 19:01

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defense Minister Benny Gantz met on Sunday with U.S. envoy David Friedman to discuss the planned annexation of territory in the West Bank.

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Also present at the meeting were Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi and Knesset Speaker Yariv Levin.

ישיבת ממשלה

U.S. envoy to Israel David Friedman and Prime Minister Netanyahu (Photo: EPA)

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The meeting concluded with no official statement released. Another meeting was scheduled for a later date.

On Monday, foreign ministers of the European Union are expected to hold a conference call with U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo over President Donald Trump's peace plan, which Washington unveiled in February.

In a meeting between German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas and Netanyahu last week, the visitor warned Israel of implementing annexation, stressing it is "incompatible" with international law.

בני גנץ נפגש עם שר החוץ הגרמני הייקו מאס בקריה בתל אביב

Defense Minister Gantz and German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas (Photo: The Defense Ministry)

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On Friday, The United Arab Emirates also joined the warning calls, with its Ambassador to the U.S. Yousef al-Otaiba calling Jerusalem to choose between annexation and normalization with the Arab world.

Another voice that had come out in opposition to the U.S. initiative was that of the West Bank settlers' leadership, who implored Netanyahu to heed their advice.

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“We all want you to be the first prime minister who applied sovereignty, but we don’t want you to be remembered as the prime minister who laid the foundations of a Palestinian State,” Yesha Council (the umbrella body of settlement municipal councils in the West Bank) said in a statement released ahead of the premier’s meeting with Friedman.

Yankee go home: What does moving troops out of Germany mean?

In-depth: Trump's plan to reduce active-duty personnel in the country by more than 25% was prompted by Germany's inability to spend 2% of its GDP on defense; the decision was not discussed with Germany, nor with any other NATO members

Associated Press|

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After more than a year of thinly-veiled threats to start pulling U.S. troops out of Germany unless Berlin increases its defense spending, President Donald Trump appears to be proceeding with a hardball approach, planning to cut the U.S. military contingent by more than 25%.

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About 34,500 American troops are stationed in Germany - 50,000 including civilian Department of Defense employees - the plan Trump reportedly signed off on last week envisions reducing active-duty personnel to 25,000 by September, with further cuts possible.

צרפת G7 דונלד טראמפ ג'סטין טרודו ועידה

Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel and U.S. President Donald Trump at the G7 summit in France (Photo: MCT)

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But as details of the still-unannounced plan trickle out, there's growing concerns it will do more to harm the U.S.'s own global military readiness and the NATO alliance than punish Germany.

The decision was not discussed with Germany, nor with any other NATO members - additionally, Congress was not officially informed - prompting a letter from 22 Republican members of the House Armed Services Committee urging a rethink. "The threats posed by Russia have not lessened, and we believe that signs of a weakened U.S. commitment to NATO will encourage further Russian aggression and opportunism," Rep. Mac Thornberry of Texas wrote in a letter to Trump with his colleagues. Sen. Jack Reed.

The ranking Democrat on the Senate Armed Services Committee slammed Trump's move as "another favor" to Russian President Vladimir Putin.

But Richard Grenell, who resigned as U.S. ambassador to Germany two weeks ago, told Germany's Bild newspaper that "nobody should be surprised that Donald Trump is withdrawing troops."

Grenell, who declined to comment for this article, said he and others had been pushing for Germany to increase its defense spending and had talked about troop withdrawals since last summer.

ה נשיא דונלד טראמפ נאום מצב האומה ב קונגרס וושינגטון ארצות הברית ארה"ב
Trump in a speech in front of the U.S. Congress (Photo: EPA)

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"Donald Trump was very clear he wants to bring troops home," he said, "there's still going to be 25,000 American troops in Germany." □

The suggestion that removing troops will punish Germany, however, overlooks the fact that American troops are no longer primarily there for the country's defense, said retired Lt. Gen. Ben Hodges, who commanded U.S. Army Europe from 2014 until 2017.

Gone are the days when hundreds of thousands of American troops were ready to fight in the streets of Berlin or rush into the strategic Fulda Gap, through which Soviet armor was poised to push into West Germany during the Cold War.

"The troops and capabilities that the U.S. has deployed in Europe are not there to specifically defend Germany, they are part of our contribution to overall collective stability and security in Europe," said Hodges, now a strategic expert with the Center for European Policy Analysis, a Washington-based institute.

American facilities include Ramstein Air Base, a critical hub for operations in the Mideast and Africa and headquarters to the U.S. Air Forces in Europe and Africa. The Landstuhl Regional Medical Center, which has saved the lives of countless Americans wounded in Iraq and Afghanistan. And the Stuttgart headquarters of both the U.S. European Command and the U.S. Africa Command.

There's also the Wiesbaden headquarters of U.S. Army Europe, the Spangdahlem F-16 fighter base and the Grafenwoehr Training Area, NATO's largest training facility in Europe.

Hodges said the facilities are a critical part of America's global military footprint.

אנגלה מרקל

Angela Merkel (Photo: AP)

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"What's lost in all this is the benefit to the United States of having forward deployed capabilities that we can use not only for deterrence ... but for employment elsewhere," he

said. "The base in Ramstein is not there for the U.S. to defend Europe. It's there as a forward base for us to be able to fly into Africa, the Middle East."

Trump indicated last summer that he was thinking of moving some troops from Germany to Poland, telling Poland's President Andrzej Duda during an Oval Office meeting:

"Germany is not living up to what they're supposed to be doing with respect to NATO, and Poland is." □

Duda has been trying to woo more American forces, even suggesting Poland would contribute over \$2 billion to create a permanent U.S. base, which he said could be named "Fort Trump." In the current plan, at least some Germany-based troops are expected to be shifted to Poland.

Following Trump's comments last June, U.S. Ambassador to Poland Georgette Mosbacher tweeted Aug. 8 that "Poland meets its 2% of GDP spending obligation towards NATO. Germany does not. We would welcome American troops in Germany to come to Poland."

מנהיגים בפסגת נאט"ו

Donald Trump and Angela Merkel in the NATO Summit in 2018 (Photo: AP)
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Grenell then tweeted: "it is offensive to assume that the U.S. taxpayers will continue to pay for more than 50,000 Americans in #Germany, but the Germans get to spend their surplus on #domestic programs." □

In response, Chancellor Angela Merkel reiterated Germany's commitment to "work toward" □ the 2% NATO defense spending benchmark - a goal it hopes to meet in 2031. "There is a lot invested here, and I think that we, in very friendly talks, will naturally always continue to heartily welcome these American soldiers, and there are also good reasons for them to be stationed here," said Merkel.

NATO members agreed at a 2014 summit to "aim to move toward" □ spending 2% of GDP on defense." Since then, the year Russia annexed the Crimean Peninsula, overall NATO defense spending has grown annually.

Since his election in 2016, Trump has pushed for the 2% as a hard target, and repeatedly singled out Germany as a major offender, though many others are also below the goal. NATO figures put Germany's estimated defense spending for 2019 at 1.4%, and Poland's at 2%. In dollar terms, however, Germany committed nearly \$54 billion last year - NATO's third-largest budget after the U.S. and Britain - while Poland spent slightly less than \$12 billion.

Nato Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg

Nato Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg (Photo: Gettyimages)

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Germany does need to spend more, Hodges said, but U.S. and NATO interests would be better served if Washington pushed Berlin to spend on broader military needs, like transportation infrastructure, cyber protection and air defense, that would be easier for Merkel's government to justify to a largely pacifist population.

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"We don't need more German tanks, we need more German trains," he said. "Why not be a little bit more strategic and think about what the alliance really needs from Germany?"

U.S., China, Korea, Egypt report rise in virus cases as curbs ease
Chinese report the highest daily rise since mid-April, with most cases recorded in Beijing, while Egypt sees its biggest daily increase since the start of the outbreak; in U.S. some states see more than 1,000 per day

Associated Press|

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China reported its highest daily total of new coronavirus cases in two months on Sunday and infections in South Korea also rose, showing how the disease can come back as curbs on business and travel are lifted.

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Meanwhile, Egypt reported its biggest daily increase on Saturday. Infections were rising in some U.S. states as President Donald Trump pushed for businesses to reopen despite warnings by public health experts.

China had 57 confirmed cases in the 24 hours through midnight Saturday, the National Health Commission reported. That was the highest since mid-April and included 36 in Beijing, the capital.

שוק מזון בסין נסגר עקב הקורונה

Food market in Beijing (Photo: Reuters)

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The biggest wholesale food market in Beijing, a city of 20 million residents, was shut down Saturday after 50 people tested positive for the virus. They were the city's first confirmed cases in 50 days.

The world is seeing more than 100,000 newly confirmed cases every day, according to data from Johns Hopkins University.

China, where the pandemic began in December, and other countries that suffered early on including South Korea, Italy and Spain have seen numbers of new infections decline.

Brazil, India, the United States and other countries are seeing large increases.

China responded to the outbreak with the world's most intensive anti-disease controls, isolating cities with some 60 million people and shutting down much of its economy in steps that later were imitated by some other governments.

שווק מזון בסין נסגר עקב הקורונה

Food market in Beijing (Photo: AFP)

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The ruling Communist party eased most limits on business and travel after declaring victory over the disease in March. Some curbs still are in place including a ban on most foreign travelers arriving in the country.

On Saturday, authorities in Beijing locked down 11 residential communities near the Xinfadi market. White fencing sealed off a road leading to apartment buildings and drivers were required to show identification to enter the area.

South Korea's government reported 34 more coronavirus cases, adding to an upward trend in infections.

The Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said 30 of the new cases were in the greater Seoul area, where half of the country's 51 million people live. New cases have been linked to nightlife establishments, church services, a large-scale e-commerce warehouse and door-to-door sellers.

Hotels in Egypt amid epidemic

Hotels in Egypt amid epidemic (Photo: Reuters)

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The Egyptian Health Ministry announced 1,677 new confirmed cases. Egypt is the Arab world's most populous country and has its highest coronavirus death toll. The country has reported 1,484 deaths and 42,980 confirmed cases.

In the United States, the number of new cases in the southwestern state of Arizona has risen to more than 1,000 per day from fewer than 400 when the state's shutdown was lifted in mid-May.

Gov. Doug Ducey is not requiring Arizona residents to wear masks in public despite warnings by public health experts outside the government.

Elsewhere, bar owners in New Orleans were preparing to reopen. San Francisco restaurants resumed outdoor seating Friday and the California government allowed hotels, zoos, museums and aquariums to reopen.

ארה"ב לוס אנג'לס הוליווד נגיף קורונה

Los Angeles (Photo: Reuters)

The states of Utah and Oregon suspended further reopening of their economies due to a spike in cases.

The latest Chinese cases raised the mainland's total to 83,132, with 4,634 deaths, according to the Health Commission. South Korea has reported 12,085 cases and 277 deaths.

Also Sunday, China's air regulator announced China Southern Airlines was required to suspend flights between Dhaka, Bangladesh, and the southern city of Guangzhou for four weeks after 17 passengers on Thursday's flight tested positive for the virus.

Beijing allows each airline to make one flight per week on each route. Under rules announced June 4, a route will be suspended for one week if five passengers on a flight test positive and four weeks if the number rises to 10.

In Europe, France's highest administrative court ruled Saturday that virus concerns no longer justify banning public protests.

פתיחה מסעדה צרפת

Cafés reopen in France (Photo: EPA)

The Council of State's decision allows for demonstrations and marches as long as health protections are respected. Events must be declared in advance to local authorities and not deemed a risk to public order.

Drone strike kills 2 al-Qaeda commanders in NW Syria

Opposition groups report that the two men - a Jordanian and a Yemeni - headed local militias linked to the terror group as part of Coalition efforts to stamp out radical factions in region

Associated Press|

Published: 06.14.20 , 21:22

A drone strike in northwestern Syria on Sunday killed two senior commanders with an al-Qaeda-linked group, opposition activists said.

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The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, an opposition war monitor, said the strike was believed to have been carried out by the U.S.-led coalition, which has been targeting extremists in Syria for years.

Al-Qaeda militants in Syria

Al-Qaeda militants in Syria (Photo: AP)

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The drone strike hit a vehicle carrying the two commanders — a Jordanian and a Yemeni — in the northwestern province of Idlib, the last remaining rebel stronghold in war-torn Syria. Idlib is dominated by al-Qaeda-linked militants, and is also home to 3 million civilians.

The Observatory said the men killed were with the al-Qaeda-linked Horas al-Din group, Arabic for “Guardians of Religion.” Horas al-Din are hardcore al-Qaeda elements who broke away from Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, the strongest insurgent group in the Idlib enclave. Al-Mohrar Media, an activist collective in northern Syria, said the dead were Horas al-Din’s general military commander, known as Qassam al-Urduni, or “Qassam the Jordanian.” It said the second man was a Yemeni citizen known as Bilal al-Sanaani, the commander of the group’s so-called “desert army.”

חיילים אמריקאים בסוריה

U.S. forces in Syria (Photo: AP)

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In December, a drone strike killed a senior Horas al-Din commander, the Jordanian citizen Bilal Khuraisat, also known as Abu Khadija al-Urduni.

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In July last year, the U.S. military said it struck an al-Qaeda leadership and training facility in northern Syria, where it said attacks threatening Americans and others were being planned. The U.S. Central Command said in a statement at the time that the strike occurred near the northern province of Aleppo.

Troubled Iran struggles to maintain sway over Iraq militias

In-depth: Without Soleimani to unify disparate factions, divisions have emerged in the umbrella group of mainly Shiite forces, who decry the lack of cash influx and lack of trajectory to institutionalize the militias

Associated Press|

Published: 06.13.20 , 09:41

Iraqi militia factions expected the usual cash handout when the new head of Iran's expeditionary Quds Force made his first visit to Baghdad earlier this year, succeeding the slain Gen. Qassim Soleimani. Instead, to their disappointment, Esmail Ghaani brought them silver rings.

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For his second visit, Ghaani had to apply for a visa, something unheard of in Soleimani's time — a bold step by Baghdad's new government effectively curtailing Iran's freedom of movement inside Iraq.

Iraqi militiamen march and chant anti U.S. slogans while carrying a picture of Soleimani, left and al-Muhandis, with Arabic that reads 'our martyr leaders'

Iraqi militiamen march and chant anti-U.S. slogans while carrying a picture of Soleimani, left and al-Muhandis, with Arabic that reads 'our martyr leaders' (Photo: AP)

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The episodes, relayed by several Iraqi officials, illustrate Iran's struggles to maintain sway over Iraqi militias six months after America assassinated Soleimani and top militia

leader Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis in a drone strike. Iran at the same time is grappling with the economic fallout from U.S. sanctions and the coronavirus outbreak.

Without imposing figures like Soleimani and al-Muhandis to unify disparate factions, divisions have emerged in the Popular Mobilization Forces, the umbrella group of mainly Shiite forces.

Their deaths also disrupted a trajectory to institutionalize the militias, which al-Muhandis had been meticulously planning with Soleimani's blessing.

"With al-Muhandis gone, there is an absence of an anchor around which (PMF) politics revolves," said Fanar Haddad, an Iraq researcher.

Reduced funds and clout

Among Iraq's Shiite political and militia factions, Soleimani, a chief architect of Iran's proxy groups across the region, held almost legendary status.

Charismatic and a fluent Arabic speaker, his rapport with Iraqi officials was unmatched. He slipped in and out of Iraq regularly to plan, mediate and give out cash assistance. One surprise visit by him was sufficient to broker an agreement between rival factions, officials said.

Since his death, Shiite factions have shown discord, arguing over a premier candidate twice before they settled on Mustafa al-Kadhimi.

Maj. Gen. Esmail Ghaani, the new commander of the Revolutionary Guard's Quds Force

Maj. Gen. Esmail Ghaani, the new commander of the Revolutionary Guard's Quds Force

(Photo: AP)

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Soleimani's successor as Quds Force commander, Ghaani, is less familiar with Iraqi militia leaders and speaks to them through an interpreter. Meetings in Iraq have increasingly been handled by Iranian Ambassador Iraj Masjedi, himself a former Quds Force member.

Ghaani's gift of silver rings — symbolically important in Shiite Islam — rather than cash came during a meeting in April with leaders of several militia factions, according to three officials. They spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to talk to the press.

Ghaani told them that, for the moment, they would have to rely on Iraqi state funding, they said, a sign of Iran's economic crisis.

The PMF are paid primarily through the state — \$2 billion in the 2019 budget — but the funds are not dispersed equally. Smaller Iranian-backed groups rely on other informal means of revenue and receive extras from Iran, roughly \$3-9 million, two Iraqi officials close to the militias said.

Growing fractures

The PMF was created in 2014 as a framework to organize and pay the thousands who volunteered to fight the Islamic State group after a fatwa by Iraq's top cleric, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. Since then, its political and military might has soared. Under the staunchly pro-Iranian al-Muhandis, it became a channel for Tehran's influence.

His death opened the door for factions opposed to that influence — particularly ones associated with al-Sistani — to break from the PMF leadership. Militias complain that Iran-friendly groups receive preferential treatment.

Shiite Muslims demonstrate over the U.S. airstrike that killed Iranian Revolutionary Guard Gen. Qassem Soleimani

Shiite Muslims demonstrate over the U.S. airstrike that killed Iranian Revolutionary Guard Gen. Qassem Soleimani (Photo: AP)

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The man seen as al-Muhandis' likely successor, Abdulaziz al-Mohammadawi, known as Abu Fadak, met opposition from factions who saw him as the Iranian-backed choice. He has not been officially recognized by the prime minister, though he has assumed some administrative duties, according to officials.

Some of the most Iran-friendly militias under the PMF have shown signs of splintering. Attacks against U.S. forces in March were claimed by a purported new group, Usbat al-Thairen, believed to have emerged from the powerful Kataib Hezbollah, which the U.S. accused in previous attacks.

Recently, four militias affiliated with the shrines connected to al-Sistani said they would take orders directly from Iraq's premier, bypassing the PMF leadership.

Mourners carry the coffin of Iran's top general Qassem Soleimani during his funeral in Karbala, Iraq

Mourners carry the coffin of Iran's top general Qassem Soleimani during his funeral in Karbala, Iraq (Photo: AP)

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A senior official from Kataib Hezbollah said the move has weakened the PMF and its legitimacy among the public. For many Iraqis, the group's credibility is derived from al-Sistani's fatwa.

The fissure was plain to see when, weeks into his leadership, Prime Minister al-Kadhimi visited the PMF headquarters. To his right, sat figures friendly with Tehran, to his left, those affiliated with al-Sistani.

It marks a "major wrench" by the Shiite establishment led by al-Sistani into Iran's broader plans, said Randa Slim, director of the Conflict Resolution and Track II Dialogues Program at the Middle East Institute.

"They are basically saying we do not want an organ that takes its orders from Iran," she said.

Uncertain future

A larger question looms over the future of the PMF.

Al-Muhandis had been directing plans to transform a band of independent militias into a more professional force. Those plans remain unfinished, said three militia commanders on a recent visit to Mosul.

Under al-Muhandis, the PMF began referring to its units by brigade numbers rather than faction names and made moves toward imposing military rank structures and disciplinary courts. He oversaw the creation of engineering units providing services such as roadworks.

Mourners march during the funeral of Iran's top general Qassem Soleimani, and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, deputy commander of Iran-backed militias in Iraq known as the Popular Mobilization Forces and fellow militant leaders, in Baghdad, Iraq

Mourners march during the funeral of Iran's top general Qassem Soleimani, and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, deputy commander of Iran-backed militias in Iraq known as the Popular Mobilization Forces and fellow militant leaders, in Baghdad, Iraq (Photo: AP) Advertisement

He held immense influence over militias and their supporters.

When protesters attacked the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad on Dec. 31 in response to American strikes on Kataib Hezbollah targets, it was al-Muhandis and not Iraqi security forces who was ultimately called upon to have them pull back, according to two Iraqi officials.

“Hajj Abu Mahdi made us an official group, it’s the most important thing he did,” said Mohammed al-Mousawi, a PMF commander. For the years ahead, he had planned greater training for fighters, academies and recruitment to improve management, al-Mousawi said.

Iran appears to be taking a back foot in Iraq. But, experts said, this is likely be short-lived.

Iran daily virus deaths exceed 100 for first time in 2 months

Islamic Republic officials claim rise in cases is result of increase in testing rather than worsening caseload, but skepticism still remains at home and abroad over official toll
AFP|

Published: 06.14.20 , 18:44

Iran on Sunday reported over 100 new deaths in a single day from the novel coronavirus, for the first time in two months.

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In televised remarks, health ministry spokeswoman Sima Sadat Lari announced 107 Covid-19 fatalities in the past 24 hours, raising the overall toll to 8,837.

Shiite Muslim women wearing protective face masks while praying

Shiite Muslim women wearing protective face masks while praying (Photo: AP)

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"It was very painful for us to announce the triple-digit figure," said Lari.

"This is an unpredictable and wild virus and may surprise us at any time," she added, urging Iranians to observe health protocols.

Iran last recorded triple-digit daily fatalities on April 13, with 111 dead.

Lari also announced 2,472 new cases confirmed in the past day, bringing the total infection caseload to 187,427, with over 148,000 recoveries.

There has been skepticism at home and abroad about Iran's official COVID-19 figures, with concerns the real toll could be much higher.

איראן טהרן רחובות עמוסים פתיחת חנויות נגיף קורונה

Shoppers in Tehran (Photo: AFP)

Iran has struggled to contain what has become the Middle East's deadliest outbreak of the illness since it reported its first cases in the Shiite holy city of Qom in February.

But since April it has gradually lifted restrictions to ease the intense pressures on its sanctions-hit economy.

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani on Saturday reproached citizens for failing to observe measures designed to rein in the virus.

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Official figures have shown a rising trajectory in new confirmed cases since early May, which the government has attributed to increased testing rather than a worsening caseload.