

Ynet-News, December 06, 2020 – Sunday

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Israel's COVID relapse worsens as infection rate exceeds 4%

Health authorities confirm 870 virus cases out of 21,388 tests conducted since midnight;

PM adjourns virus Cabinet meeting regarding spike in infections after lawmakers fail to reach an agreement on whether to keep shopping centers open

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The Health Ministry reported Sunday evening that the national infection rate has surpassed 4% for the first time in weeks as COVID-19 continues spreading across Israel.

Health authorities confirmed 870 cases of coronavirus out of 21,388 tests conducted since midnight, meaning 4.1% of all tests came back positive.

There are currently 554 coronavirus patients hospitalized across the country, among them 239 patients in serious condition and 85 patients on ventilators.

Since the onset of the pandemic in Israel, 2,915 Israelis have passed away due to COVID-19.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu adjourned a Coronavirus Cabinet meeting regarding the spike in infections after lawmakers failed after a 3-hour-long discussion to reach an agreement on whether to keep shopping centers open.

The Cabinet will convene again at 7pm Monday and a government pilot program to keep some shopping malls open under health guidelines was extended by 24 hours.

National Security Council Deputy Director Eitan Ben David said in the meeting that the pilot has "met all the required criteria and was a success, **proving that malls are the best managed and safest trading place in the field.**"

Head of Public Health Services at the Health Ministry Dr. Sharon Elrai-Price said that **Israel's exit strategy from the COVID lockdown cannot solely rely on vaccines**, the first batches of which are supposed to arrive in Israel in the coming weeks.

She said that **significant distribution of the vaccine**, which has to be **administered in two doses several weeks apart**, **will not begin before March**, assuming the vaccine proves effective and the public cooperates.

A senior Health Ministry official told Ynet on Sunday Israel is on the precipice of a third wave of coronavirus infections.

"If it looks like an outbreak, sounds like an outbreak and feels like an outbreak, it's a new outbreak. Enough closing our eyes," he said.

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Palestine should not miss negotiating opportunity with two Gulf states & Israel

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Abraham Accords are 'opportunity' for Palestinians, Ashkenazi says

Foreign Minister calls on Ramallah to return to the negotiating table, says Jerusalem's move away from West Bank annexation creates 'window to solve conflict'

AFP| Published: **12.06.20** , 15:01

The landmark **Abraham Accords** that Israel has struck with two Gulf states **are an opportunity for the Palestinians and do not come at their "expense"**, Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi said Sunday.

The UAE and Bahrain broke decades of Arab consensus with their move, condemned as a "stab in the back" by Palestinian leaders for abandoning the position that there would be no relations with the Jewish state until it made peace with the Palestinians.

But at a regional security conference in Manama, Ashkenazi said that the diplomatic shift could help resolve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, after talks between the two sides were frozen in 2014.

"The Abraham accords do not come at the expense of the Palestinians. Quite the opposite, they are **an opportunity that should not be missed**," he said in a virtual address. "I call on the Palestinians to change their minds and **enter direct negotiation without preconditions**. This is the only way to solve this conflict," he said.

"We believe as Israel moves from annexation to normalization, there is a window to solve this conflict," he said, referring to its agreement to put annexation plans on hold in return for the normalization deal.

The United States, which brokered the Abraham Accords, has been intensively negotiating for more Arab nations to come in board, notably Saudi Arabia, the biggest Gulf power.

Saudi to sign up?

Mutual concern over Iran has gradually brought Israel and Gulf nations closer, and there were reports last month that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had held secret talks in Saudi Arabia, fuelling speculation a normalization accord could be in the making.

Riyadh, however, denied that the meeting, reportedly between Netanyahu and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, had occurred.

Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan told AFP in Manama Saturday that the kingdom's position remained resolute.

"We've been quite clear that in order for us to proceed with normalization we will need to see a settlement of the Palestinian dispute and the formation of a viable state of Palestine along the lines envisioned in the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative," he said.

"Without a settlement between the Palestinians and the Israelis we are not going to see true peace and stability in the region."

Asked whether that effectively ruled out the establishment of ties with Israel any time soon, he said he was "optimistic that there is a path towards a resolution between the Palestinians and Israelis".

However, Prince Turki al-Faisal, the Saudi former intelligence chief who is said to be close to the top leadership, gave voice to the strong support that the Palestinian cause still has in the region, with a fiery presentation to the Manama meeting.

He accused Israel of depicting itself as a "small, existentially threatened country, surrounded by bloodthirsty killers who want to eradicate her from existence".

"And yet they profess that they want to be friends with Saudi Arabia," he said, outlining a history of forcible eviction of Palestinians and destroyed villages.

"You cannot treat an open wound with palliatives and painkillers. The Abraham Accords are not divine writ."

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U.S. Navy official says 'uneasy deterrence' reached with Iran

Top sailor says both sides maintain 'healthy respect' despite tense encounters with the Islamic Republic's naval forces in the Persian Gulf in recent months

Associated Press| Published: 12.06.20, 19:11

The top U.S. Navy official in the Mideast said Sunday America has reached an "uneasy deterrence" with Iran after months of regional attacks and seizures at sea, even as

tensions remain high between Washington and Tehran over the Islamic Republic's nuclear program.

Vice Adm. Sam Paparo, who oversees the **Navy's 5th Fleet based in Bahrain**, struck an academic tone in comments to the annual Manama Dialogue hosted by the International Institute for Strategic Studies. He described having a "healthy respect" for both Iran's regular navy and the naval forces of its paramilitary Revolutionary Guard.

"We have achieved an **uneasy deterrence**. That uneasy deterrence is exacerbated by world events and by events along the way," the vice admiral said. "But I have found Iranian activity at sea to be cautious and circumspect and respectful, to not risk unnecessary miscalculation or escalation at sea."

Iran's mission to the United Nations did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

While Iran has not directly seized or targeted a tanker in recent months, a **mine** recently **struck an oil tanker** off Saudi Arabia and a cargo ship near Yemen came under assault. Suspicion immediately fell on Yemen's Iranian-backed Houthi rebels for being behind both attacks. The Houthis have not commented on either attack.

Paparo, a former Navy fighter pilot who most recently served as director of operations at the U.S. military's Central Command, offered a different stance than his immediate predecessor, Vice Adm. James Malloy. In one of his last comments to journalists in August, Malloy referred to Iran as "**reckless and provocative**" and always trying in dramatic naval drills to "lower the denominator until they're sure that they can look like they've won something."

Malloy's tenure saw oil tankers seized by Iran and a series of limpet mine explosions targeting tankers that the Navy blamed on Iran. Tehran denied being involved, though Revolutionary Guard members were filmed taking an unexploded mine away from one tanker.

By contrast, the several **months that Paparo's been in charge** have **not seen** any major **crises**.

The U.S. Navy routinely has tense encounters with the Revolutionary Guard, whose speed boats race alongside American warships in the Persian Gulf and sometimes conduct live-fire drills with machine guns and missile launches in their presence. The Guard typically patrols the shallower waters of the Persian Gulf and its narrow mouth, the Strait of Hormuz. Iran's regular navy largely operates in the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Sea. While previous commanders have made a point to differentiate between the professionalism of the two, Paparo dismissed it as an "old idea" that included a lingering belief that the service was still loyal to Iran's former shah, who was toppled in the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

"Forty-one years into the revolution, I think we can dispense with that notion," the vice admiral said. "I sincerely doubt there's a difference among them."

Paparo also said he did not believe the 5th Fleet's mission would be affected by the Navy potentially reconstituting a 1st Fleet responsible for the Indian Ocean.

Still, Paparo's remarks carried a clear warning, quoting former U.S. Defense Secretary Jim Mattis at one point.

“Be polite, be professional and have a plan to kill everyone in the room,” he said. “That’s how we conduct ourselves at sea.”

12.06.20

Iran Un-confirmed; Khamenei declining health may transfer power to successor

12.06.20

Iran Supreme Leader Khamenei hands power to son due to health – report

If true, it is unclear if the role is permanent, as it goes against the Iranian constitution's laws regarding succession.

By AARON REICH DECEMBER 6, 2020 11:59

Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei may have transferred power to his son amid concerns over his declining health, Iranian journalist Momahad Ahwaze reported Saturday.

Taking to Twitter, Ahwaze wrote in Arabic that sources in Iran were concerned regarding the 81-year-old leader's health, and those close to him are reportedly "very concerned" over his deteriorating condition.

As such, his powers have reportedly been transferred to his 51-year-old son, Sayyid Mojtaba Hosseini Khamenei, who currently oversees several important security and intelligence departments in the country. European sources have pegged Mojtaba as a potential successor to the supreme leader's position for over 10 years, and British news outlet The Guardian even dubbed him "the gatekeeper to Iran's supreme leader" in a 2009 article.

Ahwaze noted that it is unclear what has caused such deterioration in the supreme leader's condition overnight, though he did suspect it could be prostate cancer.

Khamenei's deteriorating health has also reportedly seen the supreme leader cancel some important meetings, such as a recently scheduled meeting with President Hassan Rouhani, according to Ahwaze.

Khamenei has been in power since 1989, having taken over following the death of the Islamic Republic's founder, Ruhollah Khomeini. However, he has had health issues in the past, and in 2014 had surgery on his prostate. According to French news outlet Le Figaro in 2015, Western sources believed the supreme leader had suffered from prostate cancer.

No official confirmation has been made regarding any potential transfer of power, and media outlets have been unable to confirm it.

The Iranian journalist gained notoriety due to his coverage of the Islamic Republic's COVID-19 outbreak, despite Tehran's attempts at downplaying its severity, Newsweek reported.

If his reports are true, it would mean that Khamenei is stepping down following increased tensions with the US and Israel, as Tehran blames the Jewish state for the assassination of its chief nuclear scientist, Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, on November 27.

In addition, it is unclear if the succession will be permanent, as it goes against the constitution's rules regarding appointing a new supreme leader.

According to Article 111 of Iran's constitution, the supreme leader's successor is to be chosen by the Assembly of Experts, which currently consists of 88 ayatollahs. In the interim, the country would be administered by a provisional leadership council, which would consist of Iran's president, chief justice and a member of the guardian council. However, according to articles from the prestigious Washington Institute for Near East Policy think tank, it may not be as simple as that, with outside pressure such as from the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps likely wanting a role in the process, due to the military body's influence on the Assembly of Experts.