

Ynet-News, February 13, 2021 – Saturday

02.13.21 – Sa - - - News Placed in Feb 13 spot – Saturday
US Senate vote 57-43 as 7 Republicans flip, but still acquit Trump of insurrection

02.09.21 – Tu - - - News
UN warns of Iran and North Korea cooperation to develop long-range missiles

02.12.21 – Fr - - -
East & West vaccines, which are approved & where used & where made & who pays

02.11.21 – Th - - - News
Hamis replenished Gaza's vast arsenal of rockets, guided missiles and drones

02.11.21 – Th - - - News
Iran convoy of Iraq militia advanced weapons to Syria, attacked by IDF

02.11.21 – Th - - -
Israeli Football Association working deal of 50% shares to UAE royalty

02.11.21 – Th - - - News Placed in Feb 11 spot – Thursday
20 industry officials conducted secret trades of advanced missiles with Asians

02.11.21 – Th - - -
Report: Iranian nuclear scientist killed in November by one-ton automated gun

02.10.21 – We - - - News Placed in Feb 10 spot – Wednesday
Turkey's Libya deal for Mediterranean pipeline may end Hamas support in Gaza

02.09.21 – Tu - - - News Placed in Feb 12 spot – Friday
West Bank & Gaza bolster rocket arsenals as Iran is four months to enrichment

02.09.21 – Tu - - - News
Fatah & Hamas election police will guard voting sites in their own factions

02.08.21 – Mo - - - News Placed in Feb 14 spot – Sunday
Cairo summit of a dozen factions ahead of Palestine May & July elections

02.09.21 – Tu - - -
Trump's trial starting: 'Grievous crime' or just 'theater'?

02.13.21

US Senate vote 57-43 as 7 Republicans flip, but still acquit Trump of insurrection

02.13.21

U.S. Senate acquits Trump as Republicans save him in impeachment again

Chamber votes 57-43 to convict, short of 2/3 majority needed; seven GOP senators vote in favor of conviction; Trump is only the third president ever to be impeached by the House of Representatives, as well as the first to be impeached twice

Reuters| Published: 02.13.21 , 23:04

Donald Trump on Saturday was acquitted by the U.S. Senate in his second impeachment trial in 12 months, as his fellow Republicans shielded him from accountability for the deadly assault by his supporters on the U.S. Capitol, a shrine of American democracy.

The Senate vote of 57-43 fell short of the two-thirds majority needed to convict Trump on a charge of incitement of insurrection after a five-day trial in the same building ransacked by his followers on Jan. 6 shortly after they heard him deliver an incendiary speech.

In the vote, seven of the 50 Senate Republicans joined the chamber's unified Democrats in favoring conviction.

Trump left office on Jan. 20, so impeachment could not be used to remove him from power. But Democrats had hoped to secure a conviction to hold him responsible for a siege that left five people including a police officer dead and to set the stage for a vote to bar him from ever serving in public office again. Given the chance to hold office in the future, they argued, Trump would not hesitate to encourage political violence again. Republicans also saved Trump in the Feb. 5, 2020, vote in his previous impeachment trial, when only one senator from their ranks - Mitt Romney - voted to convict and remove him from office.

The drama on the Senate floor unfolded against a backdrop of gaping divisions in a pandemic-weary United States along political, racial, socioeconomic and regional lines. The trial provided more partisan warfare even as Democratic President Joe Biden, who took office on Jan. 20 after defeating Trump at the ballot box on Nov. 3, called for healing and unity after his predecessor's four turbulent years in power and a caustic election campaign.

Trump, 74, continues to hold a grip on his party with a right-wing populist appeal and "America First" message. The wealthy businessman-turned-politician has considered running for president again in 2024.

Trump is only the third president ever to be impeached by the House of Representatives - a step akin to a criminal indictment - as well as the first to be impeached twice and the first to face an impeachment trial after leaving office. But the Senate still has never convicted an impeached president.

Democrats forged ahead with impeachment despite knowing it could overshadow critical early weeks of Biden's presidency.

The House approved the single article of impeachment against Trump on Jan. 13, with 10 Republicans joining the chamber's Democratic majority. That vote came a week after the pro-Trump mob stormed the neoclassical domed Capitol, interrupted the formal congressional certification of Biden's victory, clashed with an overwhelmed police force, invaded the hallowed House and Senate chambers, and sent lawmakers into hiding for their own safety.

'Fight like hell'

Shortly before the rampage, Trump urged his followers to march on the Capitol, repeated his false claims that the election was stolen from him through widespread voting fraud, and told them that "if you don't fight like hell, you're not going to have a country anymore."

During the trial, nine House lawmakers serving as trial managers, or prosecutors, urged senators to convict Trump to hold him accountable for a crime against American democracy and to prevent a repeat in the future. They played searing video of rioters swarming inside the Capitol and making violent threats toward politicians including House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and then-Vice President Mike Pence. The House managers said Trump summoned the mob to Washington, gave the crowd its marching orders and then did nothing to stop the ensuing violence.

The defense lawyers accused Democrats not only of trying to silence Trump as a political opponent they feared facing in the future but of attempting to criminalize political speech with which they disagreed and aiming to cancel the voices of the tens of millions of voters who backed him.

Trump's lawyers argued the trial was unconstitutional because he had already left office and that his remarks were protected by the constitutional right to free speech. The words Trump used, they argued, were no different than those regularly employed by Democrats. In his previous impeachment trial, the Senate voted to acquit Trump on two charges - abuse of power and obstruction of Congress. That **impeachment arose from Trump's 2019 pressure on Ukraine to investigate Biden** as he sought foreign aid to sully a domestic political rival.

A common theme in the charges at the heart of the two impeachments was Trump's abandonment of accepted democratic norms to advance his own political interests.

The U.S. Constitution sets out impeachment as the instrument with which the Congress can remove and bar from future office presidents who commit "treason, bribery or other high crimes and misdemeanors."

Impeachment, once a rare occurrence, has become more commonplace during America's era of poisonous political polarization in recent decades. In the 209 years after the first U.S. president, George Washington, took office in 1789, there was only one impeachment.

Since 1998, there have been three, including Trump's two. **Andrew Johnson was impeached and acquitted in 1868** in the aftermath of the American Civil War and **Bill Clinton was impeached in 1998 and acquitted in 1999** of charges stemming from a sex scandal.

Richard Nixon resigned in 1974 rather than face impeachment over the Watergate scandal.

Trump's acquittal does not end the possibility of other congressional action against him such as a censure motion. Republicans seemed dead set against an idea floated by Democrats of invoking the Constitution's 14th Amendment provision barring from public office anyone who has "engaged in insurrection or rebellion" against the government. The impeachment proceedings also can be viewed in the context of a battle for the future of the Republican Party. Some Republicans - mostly moderates and establishment figures - have voiced alarm at the direction Trump has taken their party. Detractors have accused Trump - who had never before held public office - of undermining the institutions of democracy, encouraging a cult of personality and pursuing policies built around "white grievance" in a nation with a growing non-white population.

02.09.21

UN warns of Iran and North Korea cooperation to develop long-range missiles

02.09.21

Iran and North Korea continue missile cooperation, UN warns

Report also says Pyongyang is continuing to violate various nuclear resolutions, includes denial from Tehran, which said findings were based on 'false information and fabricated data'

AFP | Published: 02.09.21 , 11:22

North Korea and Iran resumed cooperation on the development of long-range missiles in 2020, according to a United Nations report that also confirmed Pyongyang continues to violate various nuclear resolutions.

The annual report, produced by an independent panel of UN experts, was submitted to the Security Council on Monday and seen by AFP.

It said Tehran denies any such missile cooperation with North Korea.

But according to an unnamed member state, North Korea and Iran "have resumed cooperation on long-range missile development projects," the report states.

"This resumed cooperation is said to have included the transfer of critical parts, with the most recent shipment associated with this relationship taking place in 2020."

In a December 21 reply, Iran stated the "preliminary review of the information provided to us by the [experts] indicates that false information and fabricated data may have been used in investigations and analyses."

In their assessment of North Korea, the experts said Pyongyang "maintained and developed its nuclear and ballistic missile programs, in violation of UN Security Council resolutions."

Pyongyang last year announced preparation for testing and production of new ballistic missile warheads and the development of tactical nuclear weapons

02.12.21

East & West vaccines, which are approved & where used & where made & who pays

02.12.21

It's West versus East in the battle to inoculate the Mideast

The coronavirus pandemic has opened a new battlefield as Russia and China compete with Western countries on who will sell the most vaccines as global health organizations raise alarm about ability of poorer countries to obtain the treatment

The Media Line| Published: 02.12.21 , 14:26

The next frontier in the East-West rivalry lies in vaccines against the coronavirus, particularly in the Middle East, where Moscow and Beijing are striving to expand their influence since the United States has scaled back its involvement in recent years.

Foreign policy objectives are being injected into the vaccine distribution process by both the providers and the recipients of the vaccine doses. In some countries in the region, deciding which vaccine to use is only the beginning of the politics involved in getting shots into people's arms.

With not nearly enough vaccines available, global health organizations have raised the alarm about the ability of poorer countries to obtain the treatment.

Yemen and Syria, for example, will have the cost of the preparations entirely paid by COVAX, or COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access, a program set up to improve vaccine equity that was created last year by Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance (formerly known as the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization); the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations; and the World Health Organization (WHO), in collaboration with international agencies such as UNICEF.

Gavi announced its plan late last week to distribute more than 330 million doses to developing nations in the first half of 2021: 240 million doses of the British and Swedish Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine, produced by the Serum Institute of India, and 96 million doses of the same preparation manufactured in-house, under a prior contract between Gavi and AstraZeneca.

COVAX also projects having 1.2 million doses in the first quarter of 2021 of the American-manufactured Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine, the only COVID-19 vaccine already approved by the WHO for emergency use.

"The process of delivering nearly 150 million doses of the Pfizer and AstraZeneca vaccines in the first quarter 2021 could begin as early as February, pending favorable regulatory outcomes and the readiness of health systems and national regulatory systems in individual participating economies," says a Gavi spokesperson.

The Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine is still going through the approval process, as are manufacturing licensees SK Bioscience of South Korea and the Serum Institute of India. Yemen is planning to receive 2,316,000 doses from SK Bioscience in the first half of 2021.

Abdulghani al-Iryani, a senior researcher at the Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies, says

that since COVAX is paying for the vaccine, Yemen will take whatever it can get. “Yemen’s drug board usually takes whatever certification comes from abroad, so approval is a nonissue. It has nothing to do with scientific investigation; it’s a bureaucratic review of the paperwork that is submitted by the manufacturer,” he says. “If the WHO says the vaccine is good, the Yemeni government will take it.”

Afghanistan and Syria, countries for which COVAX is completing funding the vaccine, are slated to receive a projected 3,024,000 doses and 1,020,000 doses, respectively, of the SK Bioscience vaccine in the first half of this year.

Iraq and Iran are expected to receive the AstraZeneca vaccine manufactured by the Indian company. Baghdad is set to receive 2,018,400 doses in the first half of the year, while Tehran is scheduled for 4,216,800 doses.

While the above vaccines were all developed in Western countries, China and Russia are hard at work promoting their own vaccines, Sinopharm and Sputnik V, respectively. According to Galia Lavi, a research fellow at the Israel-China program at the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) in Tel Aviv, China has sold and donated vaccines to MENA countries.

Egypt has launched its vaccine drive using the Sinopharm vaccine, with United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Iraq, Jordan and Turkey greenlighting the inoculation for use.

Lavi believes that through the vaccines, Beijing is reaching for its long-term goal of increased influence in the region.

“They want to improve their image that took a hit because of the COVID-19 outbreak and their late response, and strengthen their connections with the countries of this area,” she says.

“In the future, China hopes those countries will remember who helped them and support China on issues that are important to Beijing.”

Zvi Magen, a senior fellow at INSS and a former Israeli ambassador to Moscow, describes Russia’s Sputnik V vaccine as one of its “toys for foreign policy,” used to garner favor overseas.

“Whether it’s technology, weapons or vaccines, it’s the same common denominator of goods Russia can supply,” he says.

“It’s important for their general image and relationship with those other countries.”

Like the Chinese vaccine, the Russian preparation is generally not being used in the West, highlighting the importance of MENA as a market.

“No one in the West will use it, but it could be useful in places like Iran or somewhere in Africa or the Middle East, like Syria,” Magen says.

“The rest of the world is very suspicious of Russian technologies.”

Iran has approved Sputnik V for use in the Islamic Republic. This comes against the backdrop of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei prohibiting the use of U.S. and UK vaccines due to the sanctions imposed on the country.

“Let me be clear: A few hours after Khamenei made that decision, Iran’s Red Crescent Society declared that it stopped receiving 150,000 vaccine doses from a US philanthropist,” says Arash Azizi, a researcher at New York University and author of “The Shadow Commander: Soleimani, the U.S. and Iran’s Global Ambitions.”

He adds: “The international **sanctions are a problem**, but Khamenei’s self-declared policy of not accepting the main vaccines of the world has come at the price of Iranian lives and is one more sign that Iranians can fear their government does not care for their lives.”

Iran started dealing with the coronavirus in February 2020, whereas the rest of the world started tackling it in March. The country has been hit hard by the pandemic.

Azizi says that the East-oriented sector of society has been influenced by the close collaboration of Iran and Russia in the Syrian civil war, as the Assad regime was the main Middle Eastern power to invite Moscow to intervene on its soil.

“What this shows is that there is a desire on the part of elements in both the Iranian and the Russian leaderships to position the regimes closer together in some sort of an anti-Western axis, but these relationships are also always full of contradictions,” he says.

The author notes, for example, how Russia also has close ties to Israel and has looked the other way when Jerusalem attacked Iranian targets in Syria.

Tehran is not as close to the other Eastern power, China. Beijing has made pledges to invest in Iran but has not come through with much of what it has promised.

“China has one of the world’s biggest economies. Iran is a very troubled economy under all sorts of international sanctions; this is in no way an equal relationship,” Azizi says.

“Iran is more of a sideshow for China.”

This is, in part, due to Beijing’s dependence on the U.S. economy.

“China will never prioritize its relationship with Iran over its relationship with the United States, which is much more important to it,” Azizi says.

Iraq has approved the Chinese vaccine for use, as well as Pfizer’s and Oxford-AstraZeneca’s.

A., an Iraqi political analyst who asked that his name be withheld, says the country is not picky about who makes its vaccine.

“Pfizer has already been used and tested and the Iraqi government has opened channels with all the other vaccine options. Whoever is willing to deliver is the one we will pick,” he says.

Iraq is also caught up in the East-West divide, with protesters in 2019 demonstrating against Iranian influence over their government. There is, of course, American influence in Baghdad as a result of the 2003 invasion.

“Russia, China, Iran is one group versus the U.S. and the West,” A. says.

“One of the main issues in Iraq is there is no Iraqi identity. It’s like the country either becomes too Iranian and you join with China and Russia because Tehran partners with them on the economy and everything else, or you become too American. I don’t think either option is good.”

Politics surrounding the coronavirus vaccine in Iraq is based on connections, and there is concern about malfeasance.

“I think there will be a lot of corruption involved with the vaccine; that’s where there will be black markets and a few private clinics will have it,” A. says. “It will be based on who you know and who can get you it first.”

“That is what’s happening with COVID testing. You’ve got to know somebody to do the test. And there were a few private clinics, although the government said there were no private clinics to do this, which did this and made a lot of money,” he says.

In addition, Iraq's Ministry of Health has received criticism for paying for hotel rooms for people to quarantine in without any transparency over the cost.

"A crisis is the best time for corruption," A. says.

Article written by Tara Kavalier. Republished with permission from The Media Line

02.11.21

Hamas replenished Gaza's vast arsenal of rockets, guided missiles and drones

02.11.21

Top IDF commander says Hamas has amassed vast arsenal

Unnamed Israeli officer says terror group that rules Gaza has also acquired dozens of unmanned aerial vehicles, has army of some 30,000 militants, including 400 naval commandos with equipment to carry out seaborne operations

Associated Press| Published: 02.11.21 , 23:18

The Hamas terror group ruling Gaza has replenished its arsenal since a 2014 war with Israel and now has a vast collection of rockets, guided missiles and drones, a senior Israeli military commander said Thursday.

According to Israeli military estimates, Hamas has some 7,000 rockets, as well as 300 anti-tank and 100 anti-aircraft missiles, the commander said.

It also has acquired dozens of unmanned aerial vehicles and has an army of some 30,000 militants, including 400 naval commandos who have received sophisticated training and equipment to carry out seaborne operations, the commander added.

He spoke on condition of anonymity under military guidelines.

The smaller Islamic Jihad terror group, which often acts independently of Hamas, boasts a similar arsenal, the commander said.

That includes 6,000 rockets, dozens of drones and anti-tank and anti-aircraft missiles, and some 400 naval forces.

Hamas also made use of attack tunnels beneath the Gaza frontier during the 2014 war.

Israel has discovered and destroyed around 20 tunnels since hostilities ended, including a large one last October that was still under construction.

The commander said an underground barrier equipped with sensors to detect tunnels is 99% complete and will cover the entire 37-mile (60-kilometer) frontier.

Hamas, which is opposed to Israel's existence, seized control of Gaza from rival Palestinian forces in 2007. Since then, Israel has fought three wars with Hamas and numerous smaller skirmishes with it and Islamic Jihad.

Israel has pointed to Hamas' increasingly sophisticated military capabilities to justify the blockade it has imposed on the coastal strip since the militant group seized power. The blockade, supported by neighboring Egypt, has taken a heavy toll on the territory's population of 2 million Palestinians.

Last week, the International Criminal Court in the Hague ruled that its chief prosecutor had jurisdiction to open an investigation into possible war crimes by Israel and Hamas. If an investigation is opened, the prosecutor has said she could look at Israeli military strikes in Gaza as well as Palestinian terror groups' rocket fire and use of human shields. Israeli officials say they are not deterred.

IDF Chief of Staff Aviv Kohavi warned in a recent speech that in future conflicts, Israel would use heavy force **in residential areas where rockets are stored and launched**. He said **Israeli** troops **would warn civilians to evacuate** their homes **before** launching such **strikes**.

02.11.21

Iran convoy of Iraq militia advanced weapons to Syria, attacked by IDF

02.11.21

Reports: Iranian arms convoy attacked near Syria-Iraq border

Iraqi media reports **strike** carried out by Israel, while UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights says attack **targeted convoy linked to pro-Iranian militias**; unusual attack **in daylight hours** could be indication of **sense** of **urgency**

Ynet| Published: **02.11.21** , 23:13

Social media and Telegram channels were buzzing Thursday afternoon with reports of an apparent **attack on Syria's border with Iraq** that **targeted a convoy of vehicles**.

Images of the purported attack showed a car that was ablaze.

The social media reports initially pointed the finger at the U.S. and later at Israel. But official reports on the alleged attack were slow to follow.

Outlets affiliated with Iraqi Shiite militias reported that unidentified **aircraft** had **targeted** a **vehicle** that carried **“logistical equipment”** **belonging to** an **Iraqi militia** group.

Iraqi outlets, meanwhile, reported that Israel had carried out a “rare” airstrike against a **military shipment en route to Syria from Iran**, according to the Hebrew-language media.

The UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said that the attack targeted a convoy linked to pro-Iranian militias.

The strike unusually occurred during the hours of daylight - perhaps an indication of a sense of urgency to disrupt the convoy's mission.

Ynet war correspondent Ron Ben-Yishai said that the **attack** was apparently carried out in order **to stop a shipment of advanced weapons** that passed from Iran to Syria through the Iraqi border town of Al-Qa'im.

Intelligence sources told Channel 12 television on Thursday that the **aim** of the latest strike **was to destroy the weapons systems** and send a **message to Tehran that they are vulnerable** to attack even in eastern Syria.

A large blast was reportedly heard following the strike, but other than damage to equipment, there were no reports of casualties.

Iraqi militias backed by Iran have been using the corridor between Iraq and Syria to deliver weapons.

The apparent strike came one month after a similar attack also attributed to Israel, which hit a convoy carrying what was described as "tie-breaking" weapons systems that was guarded by an Iranian force that included three senior commanders of the Iranian Quds Force.

02.11.21

Israeli Football Association working deal of 50% shares to UAE royalty

02.11.21

Beitar Jerusalem F.C. halts deal with UAE royalty over money

Issues with the \$90 million dollar deal first rose when a company hired by the Israeli Football Association to scrutinize bin Khalifa's capital statement found troubling discrepancies between his declared wealth and his actual assets

Nadav Zenziper | Published: 02.11.21 , 22:33

The Israeli Football Association's Transfer of Rights Committee announced Thursday that Beitar Jerusalem F.C. has asked to cease the transfer of 50% of the club's shares to Emirati businessman and royal family member, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Nahyan.

According to the committee, the deal was put on hold because the sheikh failed to produce the documents required by the association to complete the deal, including papers attesting to his financial security as well as a certificate of integrity, despite bin Khalifa receiving two extensions to produce the paperwork.

The committee added that despite withdrawing from the deal, "Beitar may submit a new request for the transfer of rights in accordance with regulations."

Issues with the deal first rose when an intelligence company the association hired to scrutinize bin Khalifa's \$ 2.5 billion capital statement found troubling discrepancies between the sheikh's declared wealth and the tangible assets he has.

Among other things, it turned out that a significant portion of the sheikh's capital includes non-marketable Venezuelan bonds, whose value is significantly lower than the amount bin Khalifa initially declared.

The deal falling through means that the team's owner, Moshe Hogeg, will now have to deal with the loss of the NIS 300 million (approx. \$90 million) that the sheikh pledged to invest in the team.

"After the transfer committee asked for several more documents to complete the deal, club owner Moshe Hogeg planned to fly to Dubai to meet bin Khalifa," the team said.

"Unfortunately, the skies are still closed and instead of asking for another extension we

preferred to withdraw the current request and submit a new request. The reports that the deal fell through are incorrect."

02.11.21

20 industry officials conducted secret trades of advanced missiles with Asians

02.11.21

Ex-defense industry officials accused of illegally trading missiles with Asian country
At least 20 Israelis were arrested after Shin Bet probe revealed they had developed, tested, manufactured and sold advanced loitering munition to unnamed country; some tests were conducted in Israeli cities
TPS, Ynet | Published: 02.11.21 , 13:43

Dozens of Israelis, including former defense industry officials, are suspected of illegally trading advanced weapons with an unnamed Asian country, the Shin Bet investigation revealed.

At least 20 people were detained, who according to the security agency, developed, tested, manufactured and sold advanced loitering munition. Some of the tests were conducted in Israeli cities, the investigation found.

They were investigated in recent months on suspicion of committing offenses against the state's security under the Defense Export Control Law and money laundering among others.

During the investigation, it emerged the suspects had received instructions from entities related to the Asian country, not considered hostile by Israel, in exchange for receiving massive funding and other benefits. The communication was conducted in secret in an attempt to disguise the entity for which the missiles were being developed.

"The investigation revealed a great deal of information about the methods used by foreign bodies vis-à-vis Israelis, including the use of concealment techniques in carrying out the transactions," the police and the Shin Bet said in a statement.

"The affair illustrates the potential damage to national security such transactions represent ... including the fear that this technology may spill over into countries hostile to Israel."

The investigation material has recently been submitted for examination to the Economics Department of the State Attorney's Office. It has yet to be determined if all the suspects will be prosecuted for the offenses.

It is also unclear if the group was successful in providing a fully developed product to the unnamed country.

A gag order has been placed on other details of the investigation, including the identity of the suspects and the name of the country that ordered the weapons.

02.11.21

Report: Iranian nuclear scientist killed in November by one-ton automated gun

02.11.21

Report: Iranian nuclear scientist killed by one-ton automated gun in Israeli hit
Jewish Chronicle, citing sources within Mossad, says more than 20 agents, including
Israeli and Iranian nationals, carried out the ambush on Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, mastermind
of Iran's nuclear program, after 8 months of surveillance

Reuters| Published: 02.11.21 | 08:29

The Iranian nuclear scientist assassinated near Tehran in November was killed by a one-ton gun smuggled into Iran in pieces by the Israeli intelligence agency Mossad, according to a report by The Jewish Chronicle on Wednesday.

Citing intelligence sources, the British weekly said a team of more than 20 agents, including Israeli and Iranian nationals, carried out the ambush on scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh after eight months of surveillance.

Iranian media said Fakhrizadeh died in hospital after armed assassins gunned him down in his car. Shortly after his death Iran pointed the finger at Israel, Foreign Minister Javad Zarif writing on Twitter of “serious indications of (an) Israeli role.”

Israel declined to comment in November and on Wednesday night an Israeli government spokesman responded to the latest report by saying: “We never comment on such matters. There has been no change in our position.”

Fakhrizadeh, 59, was long suspected by the West of masterminding a secret nuclear bomb programme.

He had been described by Western and Israeli intelligence services for years as the mysterious leader of a covert atomic bomb programme halted in 2003, which Israel and the United States accuse Tehran of trying to restore. Iran has long denied seeking to weaponise nuclear energy.

According to the Jewish Chronicle’s report, Iran has “secretly assessed that it will take six years” before a replacement for him is “fully operational” and that his death had “extended the period of time it would take Iran to achieve a bomb from about three-and-a-half months to two years.”

Giving no further details of its sourcing, the world’s oldest Jewish newspaper said the Mossad mounted the automated gun on a Nissan pickup and that “the bespoke weapon, operated remotely by agents on the ground as they observed the target, was so heavy because it included a bomb that destroyed the evidence after the killing.”

It said the attack was carried out “by Israel alone, without American involvement” but that U.S. officials were given some form of notice beforehand

02.10.21

Turkey's Libya deal for Mediterranean pipeline may end Hamas support in Gaza

02.10.21

Turkey and Israel inch closer toward reconciliation

While former allies may seek to rekindle bonhomie of days past after years of antagonism, the Palestinian issue and Ankara's support of Hamas and aversion of Israeli leadership may prove to be too difficult a hurdle to overcome

The Media Line | Published: 02.10.21 , 19:59

News of rapprochement between Israel and Turkey is heating up after years of ebb and flow in their diplomatic ties. According to Turkish officials, the once-close allies are eager to kick-start their renewed relations soon.

Both countries expelled their ambassadors in May 2018 over the killing of dozens of Palestinians by Israeli forces along the Gaza border and following Washington's decision to relocate its embassy to Jerusalem.

In December, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said his country would like to have better ties with Israel but Israeli policy toward the Palestinians remained "unacceptable."

Erdogan champions the Palestinian cause, and has a contentious relationship with Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu.

Erdogan said then that Turkey had some issues with "people at the top level" in Israel, adding that Palestine still constitutes Turkey's red line and that it was impossible for Ankara to accept Israel's "merciless" policies regarding the Palestinian territories. Turkey and Israel, once allies, have had a bitter falling out in recent years. Ankara repeatedly has condemned Israel's occupation of the West Bank and its treatment of Palestinians.

Dr. Hay Eytan Cohen Yanarocak, an expert on Turkey from the Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security (JISS) and the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies (MDC) at Tel Aviv University, says it may be premature to say that things are going to happen soon.

Yanarocak says that despite the "constructive" signals that are coming from both sides, there won't be any major steps forward until the "crystallization" of the results of next month's Israeli elections.

A change in leadership in Israel, he adds, may speed up the warming up of ties.

"If Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu will not be able to preserve his seat then, in Turkish eyes, launching a normalization with Israel will be far easier," Yanarocak said. Turkey also has criticized last years' normalization accords between Israel and four Muslim countries which were signed under US auspices.

Yanarocak says that these accords helped Israel to break out of its regional isolation, and has given it the upper hand in negotiating with Turkey toward improving diplomatic relations.

Hasan Awwad, an expert on Middle East politics at the University of Bridgeport in Connecticut, said that there is much to gain from restoring diplomatic ties.

Last week, the first Israeli passenger plane, from the flag carrier El Al, touched down at Istanbul International Airport after a 10-year hiatus. This move can be seen as a signal that a thaw in relations is underway.

Awwad says the resumption of ties would have a major impact on the two countries' defense industries.

"If the relationship is back to the same level as before the violent Marmara events, we would see closer cooperation in intelligence and commercially," he said referring to the Mavi Marmara incident, when Israeli forces in 2010 boarded a Gaza-bound flotilla carrying humanitarian aid for the Palestinians there that intentionally broke Israel's blockade of the coastal strip, which ended in the death of nine Turkish activists on board. That led to a decade-long freeze in relations between Turkey and Israel.

Yanarocak says having proper relations with Turkey is in Israel's "national interest."

But one major challenge to restoring relations between Israel and Turkey continues to be the Hamas movement.

Ankara is a supporter of the Islamist group that rules the Gaza Strip.

"In order to reach a 'genuine normalization,' the Israeli decision-makers are expecting Ankara to put an end to its support for Hamas," he said.

Mkhaimar Abusada, associate professor of political sciences at Al-Azhar University in Gaza City, said that the Islamist "ideological links" between Hamas, which is part of the Muslim Brotherhood, and the Turkish government led by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who leads the Justice and Development Party in Turkey, are "difficult to break."

"I rule out that the improvement in the Israeli-Turkish relationship will come at the expense of Hamas. I think that it would have repercussions for Hamas, but nothing major," he said.

Abusada points out that Qatar, which he says supports the Muslim Brotherhood, has good relations with both Israel and Hamas.

"Qatar has always used its relationship with Israel to alleviate the human suffering in the Gaza Strip, which is ruled by Hamas. No one seems to object," he said.

But, he added, there may be some Israeli "demands to expel some Hamas leaders" accused of supporting so-called terrorism, but in general, such relations in the end are in the interest of having the presence of mediators to be a link between Hamas and Israel.

Shifting regional alliances such as the normalization deals between Israel and the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco, and the reconciliation of Turkey's ally, Qatar, with the Gulf States including Egypt, may have persuaded Erdogan to re-think his foreign policy.

"Regional political changes are playing a major role. We are facing a stage in which regional differences melt away with the support of the White House and the new US administration, in addition to the great changes that the region is witnessing, such as the normalization deals, having an impact. Turkey does not want to be isolated in its surroundings," said Abusada.

Yanarocak says these new diplomatic ties may have played a role in forcing Turkey to re-think its policy on Israel.

"Thanks to the Abraham Accords Israel no longer feels isolated and, thanks to this new

geopolitical fact on the ground, is feeling more confident to ask Turkey to make a comprehensive policy change vis-a-vis Jerusalem,” he said.

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The talk of closer ties with Israel comes at a time when Turkey's relations with both the US and Europe reached a low point.

Erdogan's conciliatory tone in recent weeks can be attributed to the changing of the guard in the White House.

“It is related to President Biden's victory,” Yanarocak said. “From the Turkish perspective, US-Turkish relations are in a very fragile situation as it has never experienced before and by mending the relations Turkey is planning to enjoy the Israeli influence on Capitol Hill to decrease the diplomatic pressure.”

Erdogan had a cozy relationship with the former American president, with their relationship something of a “bromance” that had the two leaders constantly showering each other with praise. A Biden presidency is predicted to be more challenging for Ankara.

Former President Donald Trump bragged that world leaders came to him for help with Erdogan, saying Turkey's leader listened only to him.

Turkey's maritime claims in the Mediterranean are also a source of tension with Israel. Expecting the worst, Erdogan seems to be taking precautionary measures; for example, by signing a maritime border deal with Libya giving Turkey a path for exploration and pipeline construction in the Mediterranean.

Ironically, the two countries found common ground when they both backed Azerbaijan in its conflict with Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh, the disputed, mainly ethnic-Armenian enclave in Azerbaijan. Israeli and Turkish drones and reported intelligence support from the two countries proved pivotal there in Azerbaijan's victory over Armenian forces backed by Iran.

Written by Mohammad Al-Kassim, republished with permission from The Media Line.

02.09.21

West Bank & Gaza bolster rocket arsenals as Iran is four months to enrichment

02.09.21

IDF: Hezbollah looking to spark escalation for first time since 2006

Intelligence Directorate report warns that Iran wishes to return to 2015 nuclear deal and is only less than 2 years away from a bomb; military is doubtful whether Palestinian elections will maintain stability in the West Bank and Gaza

Yoav Zitun| Published: 02.09.21 , 23:24

Lebanon's Hezbollah terror group is looking to initiate a "limited offensive" against Israel for the first time since the Second Lebanon War in 2006, said an IDF intelligence report published Tuesday.

The Intelligence Directorate report said over the past few weeks they've identified the initiative on the part of the Iran-backed group to spark an escalation, similar to those initiated by Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

Over the past years, the Iranian proxy has launched small direct attacks against soldiers in revenge for alleged Israeli raids against its operatives or facilities in Lebanon and especially Syria, where Iran has a strong military presence.

However, the terror organization changed its tactics last July, when it tried and failed twice to infiltrate the northern border in retaliation for the killing of its member in an airstrike, attributed to Israel, near Damascus.

The intelligence analysis says the group has a trained "shock" unit, which it will utilize for a limited offensive lasting two to three days, without being dragged into an all-out war.

The IDF says at least two incidents occurred on the northern frontier over the past week that might point to an increase in tensions in the area and Hezbollah's intentions.

At the beginning of the week, two unarmed Lebanese suspects infiltrated an Israeli enclave across the border fence. The two were chased off by IDF soldiers, who fired in the air upon seeing them.

Officials in the 91st Division, or the Galilee Division - which oversees the frontier with Lebanon - believe the incident was not a coincidence given the infiltration attempt last July had also been preceded by a "clearing of the field" event by Lebanese herdsmen.

The second incident occurred last week, when a Hezbollah air-defense unit attempt to down an IDF drone that crossed into southern Lebanon, with Russian made weapons. The missile appeared to have missed the target and the army refrained from retaliating.

The army's Northern Command, however, launched a wide-spanning exercise across the frontier, dubbed "Lighting Storm". The exercise will simulate incidents similar to the infiltration attempt last summer.

A possible rise in tension along Israel's border with Lebanon could bring back the possibility of rocket attacks that could drive Israel's northern communities into bomb shelters, a situation not seen in the area for nearly 13 years.

The Intelligence Directorate believes this time Hezbollah will go for an all-out attack against IDF targets in an attempt to "square up" with Israel over its alleged strikes against the organization over the past years, despite the governmental, health and economic crisis gripping Lebanon.

Taking a page from Hamas, military analysts say that Hezbollah will opt for a limited offensive which would force Israel to either minimize or stop its alleged attacks in Syria. The offensive would have to be carried out without harm being done to Israeli civilians, which would cause the IDF to expand the conflict to a wider scale.

According to Arab media, one of the IDF's main targets in Syria are the shipments of precision missile parts, which can allow the Shi'ite militant group to turn simple projectiles into GPS guided rockets, able to strike strategic facilities in Israel.

The army estimates that Hezbollah already possesses several dozens of these GPS guided missiles, but the Intelligence Directorate does not recommend launching a preemptive strike against these arsenals since the IDF possess weapons or capabilities to counteract them.

"We are constantly working on dealing with the precision missiles and counteract them through various means, both overt and covert," said IDF Intelligence Directorate chief Maj. Gen. Tamir Hayman. "We have already managed to attack hundreds of targets in our battle against these weapons thanks to high intelligence capabilities."

The army receives every 24 hours nearly ten terabytes of photos and aerial simulations, collected from phone and online tracking, the IDF said.

Hamas, Iran and Hezbollah increasing in strength despite pandemic

The intelligence assessment for the coming year reveals that despite the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, Israel's enemies have not stopped their effort to bolster their strengths.

Hamas, Hezbollah and Iran have continued their efforts to invest heavily in advance military capabilities.

This has prompted the IDF to continue its "War Between the Wars" operations - targeted covert inter-war attacks and strikes - against Hezbollah and Iran's continued presence in Syria.

For Israel, the "War Between the Wars" has become the norm on the ground.

Iran, like its proxy Hezbollah, is still looking for attempts to take revenge against Israel, who it blames for the killing of a senior Iranian scientist two months ago in Tehran.

The Intelligence Directorate says that Mohsen Fakhrizadeh's knowledge and experience were nearly irreplaceable, and his death was a serious blow to the Islamic Republic's nuclear program.

So far, it seems most of Iran's attempts were conducted through cyber warfare. Military Intelligence says that Tehran sees Israel as its counterpoint in the region following the normalization agreements with the UAE, Bahrain, and Sudan, the resumption of diplomatic relations with Morocco and signs of possible talks with Turkey and Qatar.

The report also says that Tehran is less than two years away from developing its first armed nuclear missile. According to the army, Iran has yet to create the two necessary components for an armed missile, a bomb and a special alloy warhead.

The Islamic Republic currently has 1,300 kgs of uranium, enriched at a level of 4% and 17 kgs enriched at 20%. In order to manufacture one bomb, Iran will need 40 kgs of uranium enriched at 90%. To reach this level of enrichment would take Iran about four months.

However, Iran has already taken several measures, which the IDF labels as "irreversible" to shorten the manufacturing time.

The army also estimates that Tehran does wish to return to the nuclear deal along with the provisions put in place in 2015. According to the accord, by 2023, Iran will be able to import components for surface-to-surface missiles; in 2026, all restrictions on nuclear research and development will be lifted and in 2031 it will be able to freely enrich uranium.

In addition, the lifting of economic sanctions with free up billions of dollars Iran could invest in its proxies in Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, Gaza and Iraq.

This is why the Intelligence Directorate is urging the Biden administration to continue with the sanctions, even if talks between U.S. and Iran resume.

"Iran is at an all-time low following the past years, and not just because of the pandemic, but it has not abandoned its nuclear program or its aspirations to advance it," Maj. Gen. Hayman said. "At the current state, Iran sees the nuclear deal as its only way out of the crisis and is working to at least return to an agreement similar to the one signed in 2015." 'Qatari money for a false peace'

The report also said that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad will try to better his country's relations with his neighbors and attempt to return to the Arab League, as well as rebuild his army, in particular the air-defense divisions.

Large swaths of Syria, mainly in the north, will continue to remain under Kurdish or Turkish control. Assad still is reluctant to act against Iran's continued enrichment in his country and is unlikely to change his mind in the coming future.

Of all of Israel's frontiers, the Palestinians seem to be the most stable.

Although Hamas is working to reach a long-term arrangement with Israel, the current quiet on the border with the Gaza Strip is very fragile. The army is also doubting the success of the upcoming parliamentary and presidential elections, which the Palestinian Authority plans to hold in May and July - first since 2006.

Hamas and Islamic Jihad will continue to build up their power in Gaza, with an emphasis on their rocket arsenals, while trying to silence voices calling for an attack on Israel.

Regarding the new administration in Washington, the Intelligence Directorate sees a great opportunity to work with the new leadership. Biden's picks for various security positions are considered experienced by IDF officials, who see them as a chance for deeper talks and strengthening of ties between Israel and the U.S.

The army estimates that the new administration will be far more involved globally than its predecessor.

02.09.21

Fatah & Hamas election police will guard voting sites in their own factions

02.09.21

Rival factions agree on procedures for Palestinian elections

According to joint statement, groups agree on the formation of an 'election court' to rule in any legal election disputes; Fatah police to guard voting sites in West Bank and Hamas forces to monitor proceedings in Gaza

Reuters| Published: 02.09.21 , 22:12

Rival Palestinian factions agreed on Tuesday on steps aimed at ensuring Palestinian elections are held as planned later this year and pledged to respect their results, a joint statement said.

No Palestinian elections have been conducted in the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem for 15 years amid a deep rift between President Mahmoud Abbas's Fatah nationalist group and the Hamas Islamist movement.

The two dominant factions - Fatah holds sway in the West Bank, and Hamas rules Gaza - convened on Monday for talks in Cairo to prepare for parliamentary elections on May 22 and a presidential vote on July 31.

A joint statement at the end of the two-day session said both groups and 12 other Palestinian factions, including the militant Islamic Jihad movement, pledged "to abide by the timetable" for balloting and "respect and accept" the results.

There has been widespread skepticism the elections will even happen.

Many Palestinians believe they are mainly an attempt by Abbas to show his democratic credentials to new U.S. President Joe Biden, with whom he wants to reset relations after they reached a new low under Donald Trump.

At the Cairo talks, the groups agreed on the formation of an "election court", with judges from the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem, to rule in any election legal disputes, the statement said.

It said Fatah police would guard voting sites in the West Bank and Hamas police would deploy in Gaza, effectively freezing out more secretive security services whose presence might intimidate voters.

Fatah and Hamas also agreed to release detainees held on political grounds in the West Bank and Gaza and allow unrestricted campaigning.

Abbas, 85, announced in January the dates for the elections, and he is expected to run.

There are 2.8 million eligible voters in Gaza and the West Bank. The last ballot, in 2006, ended in a surprise win by Hamas in its first parliamentary elections. That set up a power struggle between Hamas in Gaza and Fatah in the West Bank.

02.08.21

Cairo summit of a dozen factions ahead of Palestine May & July elections

02.08.21

Hamas and Fatah hold reconciliation talks in Cairo

Egyptian-brokered summit comes ahead of May and July elections, which many Palestinians believe is Abbas attempt to show off democratic credentials to Biden, with whom he wants to reset relations after tense period under Trump

Reuters| Published: 02.08.21 , 15:27

Leaders of rival Palestinian factions began Egyptian-brokered reconciliation talks in Cairo on Monday to try to heal long-standing internal divisions, ahead of planned Palestinian elections later this year.

Egypt has tried in vain for 14 years to reconcile Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas's nationalist Fatah faction and its bitter rival Hamas, the armed Islamist movement that opposes any negotiations with Israel.

No Palestinian elections have been held in Gaza, the West Bank and East Jerusalem for 15 years.

As well as Hamas and Fatah there are thought to be around a dozen other factions represented in the Cairo talks. Among those invited was Islamic Jihad, an Iran-backed terror group that boycotted the 1996 and 2006 elections and which Palestinian sources say is now mulling whether to take part this year.

But such is the mistrust between the rivals that issues on the agenda include electoral basics such as how ballot stations will be guarded and how courts will adjudicate election disputes.

There is widespread skepticism that the elections will even happen.

Many Palestinians believe they are primarily an attempt by Abbas to show his democratic credentials to the new administration of President Joe Biden, with whom Abbas wants to reset relations after they reached a new low under President Donald Trump.

"There are equal chances for success and failure," said Hani Al-Masri, a political analyst in the West Bank, who is taking part in the talks as an independent.

Abbas's western-backed Palestinian Authority, which has limited self-rule in the West Bank, plans to hold parliamentary elections on May 22 and a presidential vote on July 31. There are 2.8 million eligible voters in Gaza and the West Bank, and more than 80 percent of them have so far been registered with the Central Election Commission. Palestinian voting age is 18 years old.

The last ballot in 2006 ended in a surprise win by Hamas in its first parliamentary elections. That set up a power struggle between Hamas, with its power base in Gaza, and Abbas' Fatah in the West Bank.

02.09.21

Trump's trial starting: 'Grievous crime' or just 'theater'?

02.09.21

Trump's trial starting: 'Grievous crime' or just 'theater'?

Becoming the first U.S. president to face charges after leaving office, Trump hit with accusations of inciting deadly Capitol riot in a motion that is highly unlikely to garner the two-thirds majority needed to convict the former Republican commander-in-chief

Associated Press| Published: 02.09.21 , 13:38

Donald Trump's historic second impeachment trial in the Senate is an undertaking like no other in U.S. history, the former president charged by the House with inciting a violent mob attack on the U.S. Capitol to overturn the election in what prosecutors argue is the

"most grievous constitutional crime."

Trump's lawyers insist as the trial opens Tuesday that he is not guilty on the sole charge of "incitement of insurrection," his fiery words just a figure of speech, even as he encouraged a rally crowd to "fight like hell" for his presidency. The **Capitol siege on Jan. 6 stunned the world as rioters stormed the building** to try to stop the certification of President-elect Joe Biden's victory.

No witnesses are expected to be called, in part because the senators sworn as jurors, forced to flee for safety, will be presented with graphic videos recorded that day. Holed up at his Mar-a-Lago club in Florida, Trump has declined a request to testify. The first president to face charges after leaving office and the first to be twice impeached for high crimes and misdemeanors while in office, Trump continues to challenge the nation's civic norms and traditions even in defeat. Security remains extremely tight at the Capitol. While acquittal is likely, the trial will test the nation's attitude toward his brand of presidential power, the Democrats' resolve in pursuing him, and the loyalty of Trump's Republican allies defending him.

"In trying to make sense of a second Trump trial, the public should keep in mind that Donald Trump was the first president ever to refuse to accept his defeat," said Timothy Naftali, a clinical associate professor at New York University and an expert on Richard Nixon's impeachment saga, which ended with Nixon's resignation rather than his impeachment.

"This trial is one way of having that difficult national conversation about the difference between dissent and insurrection," Naftali said.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki said Monday that Biden will be busy with the business of the presidency and won't spend much time watching the televised proceedings. "He'll leave it to his former colleagues in the Senate," she said. In filings, lawyers for the former president lobbed a wide-ranging attack against the House case, dismissing the trial as "political theater" on the same Senate floor invaded by the mob.

Trump's defenders are preparing to challenge both the constitutionality of the trial and any suggestion that he was to blame for the insurrection. They suggest that Trump was simply exercising his First Amendment rights when he encouraged his supporters to protest at the Capitol, and they argue the Senate is not entitled to try Trump now that he has left office.

House impeachment managers, in their own filings, asserted that Trump had "betrayed the American people" and there is no valid excuse or defense.

"His incitement of insurrection against the United States government — which disrupted the peaceful transfer of power — is the most grievous constitutional crime ever committed by a president," the Democrats said.

With senators gathered as the court of impeachment, the trial will begin Tuesday with a debate and vote on whether it's constitutionally permissible to prosecute the former president, an argument that could resonate with Republicans keen on voting to acquit Trump without being seen as condoning his behavior.

Under an agreement between Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer and Republican leader Mitch McConnell, the opening arguments would begin at noon Wednesday, with up to 16 hours per side for presentations.

After that, there are hours for deliberations, witnesses and closing arguments. The trial was set to break Friday evening for the Jewish Sabbath, but Trump's defense team withdrew the request, concerned about the delay, and now the trial can continue into the weekend and next week.

A presidential impeachment trial is among the most serious of Senate proceedings, conducted only three times before, leading to acquittals for Andrew Johnson, Bill Clinton and then Trump last year.

Typically senators sit at their desks for such occasions, but the COVID-19 crisis has upended even this tradition. Instead, senators will be allowed to spread out, in the "marble room" just off the Senate floor, where proceedings will be shown on TV, and in the public galleries above the chamber, to accommodate social distancing, according to a person familiar with the discussions.

Trump's second impeachment trial is expected to diverge from the lengthy, complicated affair of a year ago. In that case, Trump was charged with having privately pressured Ukraine to dig up dirt on Biden, then a Democrat rival for the presidency.

This time, Trump's "stop the steal" rally rhetoric and the storming of the Capitol played out for the world to see. The trial could be over in half the time.

The Democrat-led House impeached the president swiftly, one week after the most violent attack on Congress in more than 200 years. Five people died, including a woman shot by police inside the building and a police officer who died the next day of his injuries.

House prosecutors are expected to rely on videos from the siege, along with Trump's incendiary rhetoric refusing to concede the election, to make their case. His new defense team has said it plans to counter with its own cache of videos of Democrat politicians making fiery speeches.

Initially repulsed by the graphic images of the attack, a number of Republican senators have cooled their criticism as the intervening weeks have provided some distance.

Senators were sworn in as jurors late last month, shortly after Biden was inaugurated, but the trial was delayed as Democrats focused on confirming the new president's initial Cabinet picks and Republicans sought to stall.

At the time, Sen. Rand Paul of Kentucky forced a vote to set aside the trial as unconstitutional because Trump is no longer in office. The 45 Republican votes in favor of Paul's measure suggest the near impossibility of reaching a conviction in a Senate where Democrats hold 50 seats but a two-thirds vote — or 67 senators — would be needed to convict Trump.

Only five Republicans joined with Democrats to reject Paul's motion: Mitt Romney of Utah, Ben Sasse of Nebraska, Susan Collins of Maine, Lisa Murkowski of Alaska and Pat Toomey of Pennsylvania.