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IAF wraps up surprise three-day exercise to prepare for Hezbollah conflict

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IAF wraps up drill in stark message to Hezbollah

With tensions between Israel and Hezbollah heating up, IDF launches mass drill - dubbed 'Galilee Rose - simulating attacks on some 3,000 targets within 24 hours, almost as many as in one month of fighting in southern Lebanon in 2006 war

Yoav Zitun| Published: 02.16.21 , 18:20

The Israeli Air Force (IAF) completed on Tuesday a three-day exercise along the country's northern frontier amid that concerns Hezbollah is preparing to light up Israel's northern frontier with a series of small-scale conflicts.

The surprise drill, dubbed "Galilee Rose," simulated a conflict with Syria and Lebanon, where the Iran-backed Shi'ite militant group is based.

The exercise showed that the IDF is capable of attacking some 3,000 targets within 24 hours.

Dozens of fighter jets, cargo planes and drones took part in the exercise, operated by conscripted and reserve troops, adding up to 85% of the IAF's personal.

The drill was launched with a mock attack of an Israeli fighter jet on a routine intelligence flight in Lebanon. The attack was followed by a series of strikes against Hezbollah targets, with the terror group, in turn, launching infiltration attempts against IDF forces near the border.

The wargames took place two weeks after a Hezbollah anti-air unit failed to shoot down an Israeli drone. Army intelligence has pointed to a rise in the terror group's intentions to launch a series of small-scale attacks along the border.

The drill simulated a quick response to this possible escalation, with attacks in southern Lebanon, Beirut and the Bakka Valley.

"During a month of fighting in southern Lebanon in 2006, we attacked some 3,500 targets, the same amount we have simulated in just one day," a senior IAF officer said.

"Our attack plans are wide-spanning and up to date."

"During this exercise, we also examined the possibility of Hezbollah attacking through Syria, attacking their cruise missiles and preparing defensively against them," he added.

"We simulated attacks on their command centers, including infrastructure meant to facilitate the transfer of Iranian weapons."

The officer added that an escalation that will lead to rocket attacks on civilians ending within a few days is "unrealistic."

02.16.21

Israeli settlers vandalize six Palestinian cars near Shiloh in response to militants
Tuesday

02.16.21

Suspected Israeli settlers vandalize Palestinian cars

In an apparent 'price tag' attack, footage shows around 10 people, all wearing hoods and masks, puncturing tires and smashing windows of parked cars near the West Bank settlement of Shiloh

Associated Press | Published: 02.16.21, 17:46

Suspected Israeli settlers vandalized several vehicles belonging to Palestinian workers in the West Bank on Tuesday in broad daylight in an incident caught by security cameras.

It appeared to be the latest in a series of so-called "price tag" attacks, in which hard-line Israeli nationalists attack Palestinians and vandalize their property in response to Palestinian militant attacks or perceived efforts by Israeli authorities to limit settlement activity.

Footage carried by Israeli public broadcaster Kan appeared to show around 10 people, all wearing hoods and masks, puncturing the tires and smashing the windows of parked cars near the West Bank settlement of Shiloh.

Police spokeswoman Shlomit Bakshi said at least six vehicles were damaged and that officers have launched an investigation into the incident. No suspects have been apprehended.

She said that earlier in the day the army and border police had removed a structure erected without authorization from a nearby illegal settlement outpost.

Israeli media identified the site as Alei Ayin, a small, remote cluster of buildings unauthorized by the Israeli government. Peace Now, an Israeli anti-settlement watchdog, said the Alei Ayin illegal outpost was established in 2020 near the settlement of Shiloh and the neighboring Palestinian village of Turmus Aya.

Brian Reeves, a Peace Now spokesman, said there has been a marked rise in settler violence against Palestinians in recent months.

Israel captured the West Bank and East Jerusalem from Jordan in the 1967 Six-Day War and began settling the territory shortly thereafter. More than 600,000 Israelis now live in settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem.

Most of the international community considers Israeli settlements illegal and an obstacle to peace with the Palestinians, who seek the West Bank and East Jerusalem as part of a future independent state.

02.16.21

Saar's party of former Netanyahu allies pose obstacle to a right-wing & religion

02.16.21

Saar's party to review ties with scandal-hit Lincoln Project

Party claims to be working with members of anti-Trump Republican group and not the organization itself, says it will review contractual agreement after organization rocked by sex harassment claims involving cofounder John Weaver

Associated Press | Published: 02.16.21, 15:05

A leading challenger to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in elections next month said Tuesday that he is reviewing his ties with the founders of the Lincoln Project -- a Republican group that opposed former president Donald Trump and whose leadership has been engulfed in a sexual harassment scandal.

The New Hope party, headed by Netanyahu's former Likud rival Gideon Saar, hired several consultants from the Lincoln Project in January as campaign advisers in Israel's upcoming parliamentary election.

Last week, revelations surfaced that the Lincoln Project knew about allegations of sexual harassment involving John Weaver, one of its co-founders, several months before acknowledging them publicly.

New Hope said that it had never worked directly with the Lincoln Project or Weaver, rather it had engaged four consultants from the organization: co-founders Steve Schmidt, Rick Wilson, Stuart Stevens and Reed Galen. Schmidt resigned from the Lincoln Project last week.

"In any event, due to financial considerations, the contract with the consultants is under review, and in the coming days, we will examine the possibility of further cooperation," the party said.

Saar's New Hope party, a hardline nationalist faction made up mostly of former Netanyahu allies, seeks to unseat the longtime prime minister in the March 23 vote, Israel's fourth parliamentary election in four years. Saar charges that Likud has become the party of Netanyahu and has lost direction.

Recent public opinion polls give Saar a projected 13 seats in the 120-seat Knesset, enough to pose an obstacle to Netanyahu's formation of a right-wing, religious governing coalition.

02.16.21

Russia & Israel Ministers met & Cabinet met on Syria & PA; IDF holds details

02.16.21

Cabinet holds urgent, secret meeting on humanitarian issue with Syria connection
Ministers conclude session that comes against backdrop of intensive talks between top Israeli and Russian officials; IDF censor places embargo on details of ministerial meeting
Itamar Eichner | Published: 02.16.21, 19:25

Cabinet ministers were summoned Tuesday evening to an urgent meeting amid intensive talks between top Israeli and Russian officials on a humanitarian issue pertaining to Syria.

Earlier on Tuesday, some ministers were told that the meeting, whose details have been put under embargo by the IDF Military Censor, revolved around a "sensitive security issue."

Also on Tuesday, Israeli Ambassador to Russia Alex Ben Zvi met with Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov.

The Russian Foreign Ministry relayed that the diplomats exchanged their views on key issues in the Middle East, with an emphasis on resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The two also discussed current issues on the Russian-Israeli bilateral agenda.

Ben Zvi also met with Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu last week.

Defense Minister Benny Gantz also spoke with Shoigu last week and his office said the two "agreed to continue the important dialogue between Russia and Israel in order to

maintain the security of their troops, as well as the need to promote humanitarian measures in the area."

Earlier in the month, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu spoke on the phone with Russian President Vladimir Putin and the two leaders discussed the ongoing security cooperation between the countries among other regional matters.

Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi also had a phone conversation with his Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov. Ashkenazi said that **Russia has a vital role** to play in **preventing Iran's progression towards nuclear capability** as well as its efforts of entrenchment in the region.

02.14.21

France efforts to rescue Lebanon debt forming cabinet power with Hezbollah

02.14.21

Lebanon's Hariri sees no way out of crisis without Arab support

Premier says Lebanon cannot be staging point for Gulf attacks, blames President Aoun for delays to government as country seeks rescue from financial meltdown

Reuters| Published: 02.14.21 , 23:03

Lebanese Prime Minister-designate Saad al-Hariri on Sunday said that his country could not be rescued from its current **crisis** without the **support of Arab countries** and the international community.

Gulf states have long channeled **funds** into **Lebanon's** fragile **economy**, but they are alarmed by the **rising influence of Hezbollah**, a powerful group **backed by** their arch-rival, **Iran**, and so far appear **loath to ease** Beirut's worst financial **crisis** in decades.

"There is **no way out of the crisis** ... **without a deep reconciliation with our Arab brothers** and an **end to using the country as a staging point for attacking** Gulf countries and threatening their interests," Hariri said in a televised speech marking 16 years since the assassination of his father, ex-premier Rafik al-Hariri.

A UN-backed tribunal in December convicted a Hezbollah member of conspiring to kill Rafik al-Hariri in a 2005 bombing. Hezbollah has denied any links to the attack.

Saad al-Hariri, a former prime minister himself, was given the task of forming a government in October but is **struggling so far to cobble together a cabinet to share power** with all **Lebanese parties, including Hezbollah**.

After a meeting with President Michel Aoun on Friday, Hariri said **there had been no progress on the formation of a government**.

Under a sectarian power-sharing system, **Lebanon's president must be a Maronite** Christian and the prime minister a Sunni Muslim. President Aoun is an ally of Hezbollah, listed as a terrorist group by the United States.

On Sunday Hariri blamed Aoun for impeding progress, saying he had visited the president 16 times since his nomination as prime minister and proposed names to no avail.

France has been spearheading efforts to rescue Lebanon from its worst crisis since the 1975-1990 civil war.

A new government is the first step on a French roadmap that envisages a cabinet that would take steps to tackle endemic corruption and implement reforms needed to trigger billions of dollars of international aid to fix the economy, which has been crushed by a mountain of debt.

"In all my communications there is a readiness and an enthusiasm to help Lebanon, to stop the collapse and rebuild Beirut," Hariri said.

"But it is all waiting for the push of a button and that button is government formation."

02.16.21

French bill curbs home-schools to counter Oct teen Islamist beheading a teacher

02.16.21

French Assembly passes bill aiming to curb Islamism

Legislation, which did not single out a particular religion, is set to crack down on practices such as forced marriage and virginity tests, as well as impose tough measures on religious associations and non-mainstream schooling

Reuters| Published: 02.16.21 , 21:29

France's National Assembly on Tuesday approved legislation designed mainly to counter a rise in Islamism in towns and cities which the government says threatens national unity.

The legislation did not single out any particular religion, but it cracked down on practices such as forced marriage and virginity tests.

It included tough measures against online apologists for acts of violence, stricter surveillance of religious associations, and tighter restrictions on educating children outside mainstream schools.

France's Muslim population is estimated to number about five million people, many of whose family origins lie in Algeria or other parts of its former empire.

The country has suffered a wave of Islamist militant attacks in recent years, and tackling religious extremism, French identity and domestic security will be big issues in next year's presidential election.

Presented to parliament on the 115th anniversary of the law that enshrined the separation of state and religion in France, the bill has been branded by some on the left as an attack on Islam and as too weak by the far-right and some conservatives.

The legislation represented a "powerful offensive" by the secular state, Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin said. "It's a tough text...but necessary for the Republic," Darmanin told RTL radio ahead of the vote.

The bill passed by 347 votes to 151 in parliament's lower house, where President Emmanuel Macron's centrist ruling party and its allies hold a majority. The legislation now moves to the Senate, where the center-right opposition dominates.

The debate around the law became more charged after the Oct. 16 beheading of a schoolteacher, Samuel Paty, by a teenage Islamist who said he wanted to punish him for showing cartoons of the Prophet Mohammad in a class on free speech. Far-right leader Marine Le Pen has accused Darmanin of not tackling radical Islam head-on.

"You are restricting everyone's freedom to try to modify the freedoms of a few Islamists," she told Darmanin in a debate last week, referring to the curbs on home-schooling.

02.16.21

France anti-radical Islam bill sparked critical coverage in English-language media

02.16.21

France to vote on 'anti-extremism' bill to tackle radical Islamism

Controversial legislation said to breach religious freedom and criticized as 'heavy handed' by US envoy on religious freedom last year, was prompted by the murder of school teacher Samuel Paty last October after showing pupils cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed

AFP | Published: 02.16.21 , 14:15

The French parliament on Tuesday votes on a bill to battle Islamist extremism, which the state argues is needed to bolster the secular system but critics say breaches religious freedom.

With an eye on 2022 elections, President Emmanuel Macron has championed the bill which seeks to tighten rules on issues ranging from religious teaching, online hate to polygamy.

It has been debated in a highly charged atmosphere in France after three attacks late last year by extremists including the beheading in October of teacher Samuel Paty, who had shown his pupils cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed.

The law is dubbed the anti-separatism bill as ministers fear Islamists are creating communities that reject France's secular identity and laws, as well as its values such as equality between the sexes.

France, home to Europe's largest Muslim community, is still shaken by the succession of massacres committed by Islamist militants from January 2015 that left hundreds dead.

The National Assembly lower house is expected to vote on the legislation in the afternoon after a total of 135 hours of debates that saw some 313 amendments adopted. Macron's ruling party has a large working majority, meaning the legislation is expected to pass, but the upper house Senate will also examine the draft legislation in the coming months and could amend it.

Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin said after the final debate on Saturday that the bill “provides concrete responses to... the development of radical Islam, an ideology hostile to the principles and values on which the Republic is founded.” Paty’s killing prompted the inclusion of the specific crimes of online hate speech and divulging personal information on the internet that could be used to harm a public-sector worker.

Paty was the subject of an online hate campaign started by a parent of a child at his school who objected to him showing the prophet cartoons. Under the legislation, doctors will also be fined or jailed if they perform a virginity test on girls, while it also extends sanctions on polygamy. The state will also have far greater powers to close down places of worship that are found to air “theories or ideas” that “provoke hate or violence towards a person or people.” One of the most contentious articles concerns home schooling, with the rules considerably sharpened to require official authorization on grounds of health or handicap for children to learn at home. But for the right-wing opposition The Republicans (LR) the bill does not go far enough, notably by not restricting the wearing of the Islamic veil in spaces like universities. “It’s a small law on a big subject,” said LR MP Julien Ravier. The right, which has the majority in the Senate, may try to toughen it further when it enters the upper house. Nearly 200 people demonstrated in Paris on Sunday against the bill accusing it of “reinforcing discrimination against Muslims”.

A US envoy on religious freedom last year criticized the bill as “heavy-handed” and it has sparked unusually critical coverage in English-language media, even prompting Macron to write personally to the Financial Times to defend it. Analysts have said Macron, who came to power in 2017 as a centrist reformer, has noticeably tacked to the right over the last months as he scents that his 2022 presidential reelection battle will come down to a run-off duel with far right National Rally (RN) leader Marine Le Pen. Darmanin visibly shocked Le Pen herself and surprised even his own party colleagues by accusing Le Pen of “softness” on Islam during a debate on Thursday night. Le Pen, who has proposed banning the veil in all public places in France, said at the debate she was “disappointed” by the scope of the bill.