

Ynet-News, March 01, 2021 – Monday

03.01.21 – Mo - - -

Schools 7 to 10 start Sunday, next phase opens restaurants, cafes & event halls

03.01.21 – Mo - - - News Placed in Mar 02 spot – Tuesday

Court limits tracking, as Secret Track & Trace system was revealed to enemies

03.01.21 – Mo - - - News

Israeli-owned Bahamian-flagged vehicle cargo ship, blast damaged in Gulf of Oman

02.28.21 – Su - - - News

Golan Heights missiles shot down before reaching Iranian entrenchment near Damascus

02.28.21 – Su - - - News

US push against Iran, is deeply connected issue to Saudi normalization with Israel

02.28.21 – Su - - -

Thousands in Jerusalem final day of Purim, Police attacked by three rioters

02.28.21 – Su - - - News

Israel issues vaccines to PA working in Israel, PA bans gatherings spreading strains

02.28.21 – Su - - -

Festive Orthodox celebrated final day of Purim with no worry of restrictions

02.28.21 – Su - - - News Placed in Mar 01 spot – Monday

Gantz claims ties with Jordan King as friend -Moabite & lashed Netanyahu as unwelcome

02.28.21 – Su - - - News Placed in Feb 28 spot – Sunday

Israel vehicle carrier ship in Gulf hit by 2- missiles above the waterline both sides

02.28.21 – Su - - - News Placed in Feb 27 spot – Saturday

Iran set three month deadline to lift all sanctions or reject talks with US & EU

02.26.21 – Fr - - - News Placed in Feb 26 spot – Friday

US strikes Iran militia in Syria after rockets hit US Embassy in Baghdad Monday  
Thursday

03.01.21 – Mo - - - News

Former **French** president Sarkozy sentenced for Bribery & Libyan finances

03.01.21

Schools 7 to 10 start Sunday, next phase opens restaurants, cafes & event halls

03.01.21

Netanyahu, Edelstein agree grades 7–10 to return to school next week

Going against education minister's previous remarks, relaunch of in-person learning reportedly pushed back without him knowing due to resurgence of infection rates

Itamar Eichner, Tamar Trabelsi Haddad | Published: 03.01.21, 17:59

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Health Minister Yuli Edelstein agreed on Monday that schools will resume in-class learning for grades 7 to 10 starting next Sunday.

The decision contradicts an earlier agreement Netanyahu made with Education Minister Yoav Galant who demanded the kids return to school as early as Tuesday.

Education Minister Yoav Galant, who reportedly was not briefed on the change in policy, said earlier Monday that the government will convene as early as Tuesday to discuss relaunching in-person schooling in "green" and "yellow" towns - communities with relatively low coronavirus infection rates.

"I hope and believe the government will adopt my position today that schools should fully reopen immediately," Galant said.

Health Minister Edelstein said the decision was made after the R factor, which indicates the spread of coronavirus in the population, rose to 1, after standing at 0.79 just two weeks ago.

The government was set to convene on Monday to discuss the next phase of the reopening of the economy, which is set to include restaurants, cafes and event halls. The government was also set to decide whether to scrap the Exemptions Committee, the body tasked with monitoring and approving requests to enter or leave Israel.

Another issue on the agenda was whether to scrap compulsory isolation at state-run hotels to all arrivals in Israel from abroad and opt for them to isolate at home.

Health Ministry officials said that they object to such a decision, saying that it would allow the import of coronavirus variants in the future and endanger the vaccines' efficacy.

03.01.21

Court limits tracking, as Secret Track & Trace system was revealed to enemies

03.01.21

Court orders government to limit use of Shin Beit tracking of virus carriers

Seven-judge panel rules the continued use of security tools on civilians threatens the democratic fabric of life in Israel, reveals the agency's capabilities to the country's enemies and should be used only in exceptional cases

Yael Friedson | Published: 03.01.21 , 13:12

The High Court of Justice on Monday ordered the government to severely limit the use of the Shin Bet spy technology to track confirmed coronavirus carriers as the pandemic begins to slow.

Israel has used the practice of tracking confirmed COVID-19 patients since the start of the coronavirus outbreak in Israel, insisting it's a necessary measure to keep track of the spread of infection. Rights groups, meanwhile, argued the measure is unconstitutional and blatantly violates the citizens' civil rights.

A seven-strong judges panel instructed the state to utilize the security agency's tracing tools only after March 14 - once the economy fully reopens - and only in cases where the patient refuses to cooperate with authorities during an epidemiological investigation. The judges also ruled that the government's use of such surveillance tools "creates a serious, exceptional and draconian violation of the right to privacy and the democratic fabric of life in Israel."

"The damage described is made worse when taking into account the use of Shin Bet's tracking tech has been in use since last March (except for a short hiatus during the summer). When contact tracking is used for such a prolonged period, it is no longer an unusual and short-term event, but a worrying practice," the judges stated in their ruling.

Chief Justice of the Supreme Court Esther Hayut noted in the ruling that the use of such measures - which were developed to combat enemies of the state - on civilians should "wipe the sleep off the eyes of any supporter of democracy."

Justice Hanan Melcer added the use of Shin Bet's tracking tools has diminished is no longer justified due to Israel's vaccination campaign success, the Shin Bet's own preference to limit tracking of civilians and the number of mistakes in tracking that sent Israelis who had never been in contact with a carrier into forced self-isolation.

Melcer added the country's representatives have admitted that Israel was the only democratic state to use such measures.

Justice Yitzhak Amit criticized the government for using such a powerful and confidential tool, meant to ensure public security, in such a reckless manner that its existence was exposed to the world, including Israel's enemies.

"With the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, the basement door of the Shin Bet opened and the country's sophisticated and powerful track and trace system was revealed," Amit wrote.

"Until that, few knew about the system, since the Shin Bet used it wisely and cautiously as part of its efforts to thwart terrorism and for security purposes only. The exposure of Shin Bet tools and capabilities, as well as its limitations, may harm its activities at the expense of public safety in the future.

“No other democracy has used the capabilities of its own security agencies to track civilians, even during the coronavirus crisis,” added Amit.

In a previous petition filed against the government's use of the Shin Bet tracking technology, the High Court ruled that the government cannot continue to utilize the Shin Bet without passing a law on the matter and therefore must find civilian alternatives. Following the ruling, the government ceased to utilize the Shin Bet, due in part to pressure from the Shin Bet chief, but later passed a law to allow it to track civilians via the security service when the number of infected surged.

03.01.21

Israeli-owned Bahamian-flagged vehicle cargo ship, blast damaged in Gulf of Oman

03.01.21

Iran denies Netanyahu's accusations it was behind blast on Israeli-owned ship  
Iranian Foreign Ministry says security of Persian Gulf is 'extremely important to Iran; PM earlier accused Tehran of carrying out the explosion, which left holes above the waterline in both sides of the hull of the MV Helio carrier  
Associated Press| Updated: 03.01.21 , 10:08

Iran strongly rejects Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's claim that Tehran was behind a blast aboard an Israeli-owned ship in the Gulf of Oman last week, an Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman said in a televised news conference on Monday.

"We strongly reject this accusation... the security of the Persian Gulf is extremely important for Iran," Saeed Khatibzadeh said.

Netanyahu earlier on Monday accused Iran of attacking an Israeli-owned ship in the Gulf of Oman last week.

Without offering any evidence to his claim, Netanyahu told Israeli public broadcaster KAN that "it was indeed an act by Iran, that's clear."

"Iran is the greatest enemy of Israel, I am determined to halt it. We are hitting it in the entire region," Netanyahu added.

The mysterious explosion struck the Israeli-owned MV Helios Ray, a Bahamian-flagged roll-on, roll-off vehicle cargo ship, as it was sailing out of the Middle East on its way to Singapore on Friday.

The crew was unharmed in the blast, but the vessel sustained two holes on its port side and two on its starboard side just above the waterline, according to American defense officials.

The ship came to Dubai's port for repairs on Sunday, days after the blast that revived security concerns in Mideast waterways amid heightened tensions with Iran.

It remains unclear what caused the blast. The Helios Ray had discharged cars at various ports in the Persian Gulf before the explosion forced it to reverse course. It docked in Dubai on Sunday for repairs and inspection.

In recent days, Israel's defense minister and army chief had both indicated they held Iran responsible for the attack.

Overnight, Syrian state media reported a series of alleged Israeli airstrikes near Damascus, saying air defense systems had intercepted most of the missiles.

Israeli media reports said the alleged airstrikes were on Iranian targets in response to the ship attack.

Israel has struck hundreds of Iranian targets in neighboring Syria in recent years, and Netanyahu has repeatedly said Israel will not accept a permanent Syrian military presence there.

The Israeli military declined comment. There was no immediate response from Iran to the Israeli allegations.

Iran also has blamed Israel for a recent series of attacks, including a mysterious explosion last summer that destroyed an advanced centrifuge assembly plant at its Natanz nuclear facility and the killing of Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, a top Iranian scientist who founded the Islamic Republic's military nuclear program two decades ago. Iran has repeatedly vowed to avenge Fakhrizadeh's killing.

Iranian threats of retaliation have raised alarms in Israel following the country's normalization deals with the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain.

02.28.21

Golan Heights missiles shot down before reaching Iranian entrenchment near Damascus

02.28.21

Syria reports Israeli missile attack near capital, Damascus

Syrian state TV says most of the missiles that originated from the Golan Heights were shot down by army's air defenses; there were no reports on casualties, while Israel declined to comment

Associated Press| Published: 02.28.21 , 23:16

Syrian air defenses were activated in the capital Damascus and its southern suburbs Sunday night to repel an Israeli missile attack, state media reported.

State TV quoted an unnamed military official as saying that most of the Israeli missiles, which originated from the Golan Heights, were shot down before reaching their targets near Damascus.

An Israeli military spokesman declined comment when asked about the report. There was no word on casualties.

In a briefing to supporters of his party on Friday, Defense Minister Benny Gantz said Israel was taking action "almost weekly" to prevent Iranian entrenchment in Syria. Regional intelligence sources say Iran's Quds Force and militias it backs whose presence has spread in Syria in recent years have a strong presence in a string of underground bases in the southern outskirts of Damascus.

Israel has launched hundreds of strikes against Iran-linked military targets in Syria over the years, but rarely acknowledges or discusses such operations.

The attack comes after the United States launched airstrikes in Syria on Thursday, targeting facilities near the Iraqi border used by Iranian-backed militia groups. The Pentagon said the strikes were retaliation for a rocket attack in Iraq earlier this month that killed one civilian contractor and wounded a U.S. service member and other coalition troops.

02.28.21

US push against Iran, is deeply connected issue to Saudi normalization with Israel

02.28.21

Pompeo claims 'many' in Saudi want normalization with Israel

Speaking in a video message to the Combat Anti-Semitism Movement, Trump's top diplomat says that Abraham Accords were only possible after the U.S. killing of Iranian general Soleimani

AFP| Published: 02.28.21 , 22:05

Former U.S. secretary of state Mike Pompeo said "many" people in Saudi Arabia want normalized relations with Israel, voicing hope the kingdom will join the Abraham Accords agreed during Donald Trump's administration.

Pompeo, who served as Trump's CIA director and top diplomat, made the comments in a recorded video address to the Combat Anti-Semitism Movement, which will give him its inaugural Global Leadership Award on Monday.

Under the Abraham Accords brokered by Trump last year, four majority Arab states - the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco and Sudan - agreed to establish ties with Israel. The Israeli press was rife with speculation about other Arab nations interested in joining the pact, with powerhouse Saudi Arabia widely regarded as a top prize for the Jewish state.

"Predicting the future has proven a struggle for me," Pompeo said, adding that he thinks "many more" countries will seek ties with Israel.

"I hope that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia can find its way to join the Abraham Accords. I know that many inside that country want that to take place," he said.

Sources in Jerusalem have said Pompeo and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu met with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in November in the Red Sea city of Neom.

The meeting, denied by Riyadh, fuelled frenzied speculation in Israel that a normalization deal might be close.

Publicly the kingdom has affirmed its decades-old policy of not establishing ties with Israel until a deal is reached to resolve the Palestinian conflict.

The Trump administration courted Riyadh as it sought to isolate common foe Iran and withheld tough criticism of alleged rights abuses in the kingdom, including over the gruesome 2018 murder of Saudi journalist and royal critic Jamal Khashoggi.

Breaking with Trump's approach, U.S. President Joe Biden said Friday Washington would "hold (Saudi Arabia) accountable for human rights abuses" as it released an intelligence report accusing Prince Mohammed of approving Khashoggi's murder by Saudi agents in Istanbul.

Pompeo further claimed the Abraham Accords were made possible by the U.S. killing of powerful Iranian general Qasem Soleimani in an air strike, arguing it built trust between Washington and its Arab allies.

"When leaders in the Arab world saw that the United States was prepared to do this, to push back against Iran, to push back against the IRGC (Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps) leadership in the person of Qasem Soleimani, they knew they had a friend," Pompeo said.

"They knew that they could... build out a set of accords with the State of Israel: these are not disconnected issues, they are deeply connected, one could not happen without the other."

A United Nations special rapporteur on extrajudicial killings, Agnes Callamard, said Soleimani's killing was "unlawful".

02.28.21

Thousands in Jerusalem final day of Purim, Police attacked by three rioters

02.28.21

Thousands of Haredim crowd Jerusalem streets for last day of Purim

Officials from the Gur Hasidic movement, which staged a mass Tish, say all participants are either vaccinated or recovered from COVID; in another incident, intoxicated Haredi men attacked police officers, wounding one and causing damage

Kobi Nachshoni | Published: 02.28.21 , 18:22

Thousands of ultra-Orthodox Israelis crowded the streets of the Jerusalem on Sunday evening, celebrating the last day of the Purim holiday despite the coronavirus restrictions.

Hundreds of ultra-Orthodox Israelis were spotted earlier walking along the highway leading to the capital, determined to celebrate the final day of Purim holiday, despite public and organized group transportation to Jerusalem halted until Sunday night.

A mass Tish - a mass gathering of a senior rabbi and his flock - was held by members of the Gur Hasidic movement at Beit Midrash of their rebbe in the capital. The movement officials said the participants are all either vaccinated or recovered from COVID-19. Large police forces have been patrolling the ultra-Orthodox neighborhoods of the capital since the morning hours in the wake of the possibility the residents would hold mass Tishes and violate the coronavirus regulations.

In addition, dozens of seemingly intoxicated ultra-Orthodox men gathered at the Bar Ilan Junction in Jerusalem and attacked police officers. One of the officers was attacked with pepper spray and needed medical attention.

Police said a large force had been deployed to the scene and was attacked by several rioters who violated the government orders.

"Additional forces were called to the scene and three suspects were detained for questioning, one of whom was injured during his arrest and needed medical treatment," said police in a statement.

It was reported that during the incident, Haredi rioters damaged several police vehicles.

02.28.21

Israel issues vaccines to PA working in Israel, PA bans gatherings spreading strains

02.28.21

Israel to vaccinate Palestinian laborers against COVID-19

COGAT says Israel to inoculate around 130,000 Palestinians with Moderna's vaccine during the campaign that will include pop-up clinics staffed by Israeli healthcare workers in several border crossings and industrial zones in the West Bank

Reuters, Elior Levy/Ynet | Published: 02.28.21 , 17:18

Israel will administer COVID-19 vaccines to Palestinians who work in Israel or in its settlements in the West Bank, the Israeli liaison office said on Sunday.

The vaccination campaign, which could apply to around 130,000 Palestinians, will begin within days, COGAT said.

The full outline of the campaign will be published in the coming days, but it is set to include pop-up clinics in several border checkpoints and industrial zones in the West Bank, which will be staffed by Israeli health care workers and use Moderna's vaccine, according to a statement by COGAT.

Shaher Saad, secretary-general of the Palestinian Workers' Union, said thousands of Palestinians who work in the Israeli service and industrial sectors had already been vaccinated privately by their employers inside Israel.



He said Palestinian medical teams would be stationed at checkpoints to administer the vaccines, by agreement with Israeli authorities.

**Sunday's announcement** drew a measured welcome from Dan Waites, spokesman for the International Committee of the Red Cross in Israel and the Palestinian Territories.

"The Palestinian population remains, in the main, unprotected from COVID-19, and we would be glad to see more initiatives of this kind. We would like to see full, equitable access to vaccines for all Israelis and Palestinians," he said.

Israel has given at least one dose of the Pfizer Inc vaccine to more than half of its 9.3 million population, including Palestinians in East Jerusalem.

But it has come under international criticism for not doing more to enable vaccination of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, territories that Israel captured in the 1967 Six-Day War.

The **Palestinians** have **received** around **32,000** vaccine **doses to date**, for the 5.2 million people who live in the West Bank and Gaza.

Israeli officials have said that under the Oslo peace accords, the Palestinian health ministry is responsible for vaccinating people in Gaza and those parts of the West Bank where it has limited self-rule.

On Thursday, **Palestinian** Prime Minister Mohammed Shtayyeh **announced** that schools **across the West Bank will shutter** for the coming **12 days**. In a televised address, Shtayyeh said that the restrictions, which come into effect on Sunday, will not be applied to high schools in the area.

Other restrictions announced by the prime minister will include a **ban on social gatherings, including funerals and weddings**, and limitations on nighttime travel as well as non-essential businesses.

He said that the **restrictions were triggered by the spread of UK and S.African strains** of COVID-19 in the area, with schools identified as key infection hubs.

**02.28.21**

**Festive Orthodox celebrated final day of Purim with no worry of restrictions**

**02.28.21**

**Denied transport, Haredi Israelis walk to Jerusalem for Purim parties**

Police continue to be on alert as illegal **mass parties** take place across capital, with many participants **not wearing face masks or practicing social distancing**, from hardline Mea She'arim quarter to trendy Nachlaot neighborhood

Gilad Cohen| Published: **02.28.21** , 16:54

With public and organized group **transportation to Jerusalem halted until Sunday** night, hundreds of ultra-**Orthodox Israelis** were spotted **walking along the highway** leading to the capital, determined **to celebrate** the final day of **Purim** holiday.

Israel on Thursday imposed a nighttime curfew and limited public transport, while in Jerusalem is was halted altogether, to stop people from staging mass Purim parties amid the ongoing pandemic. Mass, impromptu parties were still staged in the day time hours across many Israelis cities despite the restrictions.

The final day of the holiday is celebrated among the Haredi community with Tisches - mass gatherings of a senior rabbi and his flock.

Police checkpoints were set up at all entrances to Jerusalem on Saturday evening to ensure that no large organized groups arrived in the city. Entry was, however, permitted for private vehicle.

The Transportation Ministry said that the new measures were put in place in order to "prevent expected gatherings for holiday events in Jerusalem as they may become a source of mass coronavirus infection."

Although the nighttime curfew ended on Sunday morning, police still appear to be on alert. The lifting of the measure means that residents could visit another person's home with no fear of a fine, making any police work to find and break up mass gatherings much more difficult.

"We are doing what they did in Tel Aviv," said one young Haredi man, alluding to parties sighted all over the central city during the weekend.

In Jerusalem, meanwhile, Mahne Yehuda Market and Nachlaot neighborhood became the party hotspots, where those participating in impromptu Purim festivities were seen not adhering to social distancing or wearing masks.

Police arrived at both locations and broke up the parties.

In the hardline ultra-Orthodox neighborhood of Mea She'arim, thousands of costumed residents not wearing protective face masks were seen partying, with no police force in sight to enforce restrictions.

"We do not care about your rules, we do what we want," said one resident. "We are a state within a state. We do not recognize the state that has taken the people of Israel and turned them into gentiles. We know what the precautions are, do not worry about us. We can take care of ourselves just fine."

02.28.21

Gantz claims ties with Jordan King as friend & lashed Netanyahu as unwelcome

02.28.21

Gantz holds secret talks with Jordan's King Abdullah

Defense minister tells Blue & White supporters that Netanyahu is unwelcome in the kingdom, hampering advancement of bilateral ties; FM also reported to have held meetings with Jordanian counterpart in recent months

Itamar Eichner | Published: 02.28.21 , 12:15

Defense Minister Benny Gantz recently travelled secretly to Jordan for talks with King Abdullah on Iran and other issues concerning the region, Ynet has learned.

According to sources, Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi has also met twice meetings with his Jordanian counterpart Ayman Safadi in recent months.

In a conference call Friday with members of his Blue & White party, Gantz hinted that he had been in contact with Jordanian officials and said that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was an unwelcome figure in the kingdom.

He said that he hoped relations with the neighboring country would improve. Jordan became the second Arab nation to sign a peace treaty with Israel in a 1994 ceremony on the border of the two countries.

"The ties with Jordan are a huge asset and could be a thousand times better," Gantz said, claiming that he has an ongoing relationship with the king and senior Jordanian officials. "Unfortunately, Netanyahu is unwelcome in Jordan and is hampering the furtherment of relations," he said.

During the call with Blue & White members, Gantz lashed out at the prime minister, saying he was attempting to deal with the Iranian nuclear threat "as if it were his own personal property."

He accused Netanyahu of sidelining the Mossad intelligence agency, the Foreign Ministry and even the IDF when it came to handling the Iranian threat.

"Mossad and the IDF have been displaying creativity, independent of Netanyahu," Gantz said.

"We are building an offensive, defensive and intelligence response and will know how best to protect Israel," he said.

The defense minister said that Israel must work to thwart Iranian plans to acquire a nuclear weapon through "an ongoing dialogue with the U.S. and Europe as well as with Arab countries that share our concerns and interests."

He said that there must be a unified effort by Israel and its "friends" on this issue.

Regarding the sale of sophisticated weaponry to regional states, which was the initiative of former president Donald Trump, Gantz said that he has taken steps to ensure Israel's qualitative edge.

The Biden administration has already announced it would be reviewing the decision to sell advanced weapons to Saudi Arabia and the UAE promised by Trump as part of the Abraham Accords signed last September.

The defense minister also said Israel would benefit from providing coronavirus vaccines to the Palestinian Authority.

"It is in our interest, both politically and from the humanitarian aspect, that Palestinians receive the coronavirus vaccines, as more than 100,000 of them are entering Israel for work on a daily basis," he said.

"This is why we must do all we can to assist them in obtaining the shots and to examine how we can help them in any other way," Gantz said.

02.28.21

Israel vehicle carrier ship in Gulf hit by 2- missiles above the waterline both sides

02.28.21

Israeli investigators to join probe into ship explosions in the Gulf

Defense Minister Benny Gantz says his "initial assessment" was that Iran is responsible for the blasts that left holes above the waterline in both sides of the hull of the Israeli owned vehicle carrier that was on rout from Saudi Arabia to Singapore

Itamar Eichner, Agencies | Updated: 02.28.21 , 07:51

Israeli investigators left on Saturday for Dubai to join the probe into the explosions on Israeli owned MV Helios Ray cargo ship in the Gulf of Oman on Thursday.

Defence minister Benny Gantz said his "initial assessment" was that Iran was responsible for the blasts.

A U.S. defense official in Washington said the explosions left holes above the waterline in both sides of the hull of the vehicle carrier that was on rout from Saudi Arabia to Singapore.

"Iran is looking to hit Israeli infrastructure and Israeli citizens," Gantz told the public broadcaster Kan on Saturday. "The location of the ship in relative close proximity to Iran raises the notion, the assessment, that it is the Iranians."

Security sources in Jerusalem estimated that the ship was targeted as part of an Iranian effort to avenge the death of Iran's chief nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, in November that was attributed to Israel. Iran said at the time that it would make a "calculated" response to the killing.

There was no immediate comment from Iranian officials though video of the strike appeared on Iranian television.

The ship is owned by a Tel Aviv company called Ray Shipping through a company registered in the Isle of Man, according to a U.N. shipping database.

Hebrew Language Channel 13 News said that officials believed the Iranian navy had launched a precision strike to avoid casualties, firing two missiles at a part of the ship that if damaged would not have sunk the vessel.

The ship was diverted to the port of Dubai for repairs.

Rami Unger, who the owner of Ray Shipping said he did not believe his vessel was targeted because of its Israeli ownership. "I think this is part of the game between Iran and the United States," he said.

Dryad Global, a maritime intelligence firm said it was very possible the blast stemmed from "asymmetric activity by Iranian military."

The United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations (UKMTO) said an investigation into the incident was underway and added a warning that "Vessels transiting the area are advised to exercise caution."

Tensions have risen in the Gulf region since the United States re-imposed sanctions on Iran in 2018 after then-president Donald Trump withdrew Washington from a 2015 nuclear deal between Iran and major powers.

Washington has blamed Iran for a number of attacks on shipping in strategic Gulf waters, notably on four vessels, including two Saudi oil tankers, in

02.28.21

Iran set three month deadline to lift all sanctions or reject talks with US & EU

02.28.21

Iran rejects offer of direct talks with U.S., EU on nuclear deal

Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman says the Islamic Republic 'does not consider this the time' to hold negotiations, hinting U.S. must first lift sanctions; WSJ reports Israel was made aware of the negotiations

i24NEWS, Reuters | Published: 02.28.21 , 21:34

Iran on Sunday ruled out holding an informal meeting with the United States and European powers to discuss ways to revive its 2015 nuclear deal with major powers, insisting that Washington must lift all its unilateral sanctions.

"Considering the recent actions and statements by the United States and three European powers, Iran does not consider this the time to hold an informal meeting with these countries, which was proposed by the EU foreign policy chief," Foreign Ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh said, according to Iranian media.

The United States said it was disappointed, but that it remained ready to "re-engage in meaningful diplomacy" on the issue.

Iranian officials had said Tehran was studying a proposal by European Union foreign policy chief Josep Borrell to hold an informal meeting with other parties to the nuclear pact and the U.S., which reimposed sanctions on Iran after then-president Donald Trump quit the deal in 2018.

Iran and the new U.S. administration of President Joe Biden have been at odds over who should take the first step to revive the accord. Iran insists the United States must first lift sanctions while Washington says Tehran must first return to compliance with the deal, which it has been progressively breaching.

Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif sketched out a potential choreography on Feb. 1 to overcome the impasse.

The meeting was set to take place in the coming days, the Wall Street Journal reported earlier, adding that Washington alerted Israel in advance about the potential negotiations. Iran last week effectively set a deadline to lift the U.S. sanctions within three months, after which it said it would erase surveillance footage of its nuclear facilities. It has also limited some monitoring of its activities which is meant to help ensure that Tehran's nuclear work is peaceful.

The UN's nuclear watchdog, the International Atomic Energy Agency, has also reported that Iran has added 17.6 kilograms (38.8 pounds) of uranium enriched up to 20% to its stockpile as of February 16 — far past the 3.67% purity allowed under the JCPOA.

02.26.21 - - Fr - -

US strikes Iran militia in Syria after rockets hit US Embassy in Baghdad Monday Thursday

02.26.21

U.S. strikes Iranian-backed militia in Syria after Baghdad attack

Pentagon spokesperson says calibrated response to rocket attacks against American targets in Iraq destroyed multiple facilities at border control point used by number of Iranian-backed militant groups

Reuters | Published: 02.26.21 , 10:12

U.S. President Joe Biden on Thursday directed American military air strikes in eastern Syria against facilities belonging to what the Pentagon said were Iran-backed militia, in a calibrated response to rocket attacks against U.S. targets in Iraq.

The strikes appeared to be limited in scope, potentially lowering the risk of escalation.

Biden's decision to strike only in Syria and not in Iraq, at least for now, also gives the Iraqi government some breathing room as it carries out its own investigation of a Feb. 15 attack that wounded Americans.

"At President Biden's direction, U.S. military forces earlier this evening conducted airstrikes against infrastructure utilized by Iranian-backed militant groups in eastern Syria," Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said in a statement.

"President Biden will act to protect American and Coalition personnel. At the same time, we have acted in a deliberate manner that aims to de-escalate the overall situation in both eastern Syria and Iraq," Kirby said.

He added that the strikes destroyed multiple facilities at a border control point used by a number of Iranian-backed militant groups, including Kata'ib Hezbollah (KH) and Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada (KSS).

There was no official comment from Syria on the strikes, but state-owned Ekhbariya TV quoted its reporter in Deir al-Zor as stating that strikes had taken place at dawn against several targets near the Syrian-Iraqi border.

A U.S. official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said the decision to carry out the strikes was meant to send a signal that, while the United States wanted to punish the militias, it did not want the situation to spiral into a bigger conflict.

The official added that Biden was presented with a range of options and one of the most limited responses was chosen.

It was not immediately clear what damage was caused and if there were any casualties from the U.S. strike.

'Necessary deterrent'

Representative Michael McCaul, the top Republican on the House Foreign Affairs Committee, said the strikes were the right move.

"Responses like this are a necessary deterrent and remind Iran, its proxies, and our adversaries around the world that attacks on U.S. interests will not be tolerated," McCaul said.

Suzanne Maloney, of the Brookings Institution think-tank, said the strikes showed the Biden administration could negotiate with Iran on the nuclear deal while pushing back against the militias it backed.

The rocket attacks on U.S. positions in Iraq were carried out as Washington and Tehran are looking for a way to return to the 2015 nuclear deal abandoned by former U.S. president Donald Trump.

It was not clear how, or whether, the strike might affect U.S. efforts to coax Iran back into a negotiation about both sides resuming compliance with the agreement.

In the Feb. 15 attack, rockets hit the U.S. military base housed at Erbil International Airport in the Kurdish-run region, killing one non-American contractor and injuring a number of American contractors and a U.S. service member.

Another salvo struck a base hosting U.S. forces north of Baghdad days later, hurting at least one contractor.

Rockets hit Baghdad's Green Zone on Monday, which houses the U.S. Embassy and other diplomatic missions.

Earlier this week, the Kata'ib Hezbollah group, one of the main Iran-aligned Iraqi militia groups, denied any role in the rocket attacks.

Some Western and Iraqi officials say the attacks, often claimed by little-known groups, are being carried out by militants with links to Kata'ib Hezbollah as a way for Iranian allies to harass U.S. forces without being held accountable.

Since late 2019, the United States has carried out high-profile strikes against the Kata'ib Hezbollah militia group in Iraq and Syria in response to sometimes deadly rocket attacks against U.S.-led forces.

Under the Trump administration, the escalatory back-and-forth stoked tensions, culminating in the U.S. killing of Iranian military leader Qasem Soleimani and a retaliatory Iranian ballistic missile attack against U.S. forces in Iraq last year.

03.01.21

Former French president Sarkozy sentenced for Bribery & Libyan finances

03.01.21

Former French president Sarkozy sentenced to jail over corruption charges

Prosecutors persuade the judges that Sarkozy had offered to secure a plum job in Monaco for top judge in return for confidential information about an inquiry into allegations that he had accepted illegal payments for his 2007 presidential campaign

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Judges found former President Nicolas Sarkozy guilty of trying to bribe a judge and of influence-peddling on Monday and sentenced him to three years in jail, with two years suspended.

Sarkozy, who led France from 2007 to 2012, had denied any wrongdoing, saying he was the victim of a witch-hunt by financial prosecutors who used excessive means to snoop on his affairs.

Retired from politics but still influential among conservatives, Sarkozy has 10 days to appeal the ruling.

He is the second former president in modern France, after the late Jacques Chirac, to be convicted of corruption.

Prosecutors persuaded the judges that Sarkozy had offered to secure a plum job in Monaco for judge Gilbert Azibert in return for confidential information about an inquiry into allegations that he had accepted illegal payments from L'Oreal heiress Liliane Bettencourt for his 2007 presidential campaign.

This came to light, they said, while they were wiretapping conversations between Sarkozy and his lawyer Thierry Herzog after Sarkozy left office, in relation to another investigation into alleged Libyan financing of the same campaign.