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ICC gives Israel month to seek deferral of war crimes probe  
Prosecutor's office confirms it had sent formal notices to Israel and the PA regarding the investigation, expected to focus on the 2014 Gaza war, 2018 protests in the Hamas controlled enclave and Israel's settlement expansion in the West Bank  
Associated Press| Published: 03.18.21 , 22:19

The International Criminal Court said Thursday it has sent formal notices to Israel and the Palestinian Authority about its impending investigation into possible war crimes,

giving them a month to seek deferral by proving they are carrying out their own investigations.

Earlier this month, the ICC announced it would investigate possible war crimes committed by Israel and Palestinian militants following a request by the Palestinians, who joined the court in 2015 after being granted nonmember observer status in the U.N. General Assembly.

Israel has fiercely condemned the investigation, accusing the ICC of bias and saying it has no jurisdiction since the Palestinians do not have a state. Israel is not a member of the ICC, but its citizens could be subject to arrest abroad if warrants are issued.

The ICC prosecutor's office confirmed in a written statement that on March 9 the letters were sent to all of the court's member states and those states that would normally exercise jurisdiction, including Israel and the Palestinian Authority.

Israeli and Palestinian officials declined to comment.

The ICC is expected to focus on the 2014 Gaza war, Israel's crackdown on often-violent border protests in Gaza in recent years and Israel's settlement activities in the West Bank. The probe will also look at militant rocket fire from Gaza onto civilian areas in Israel. Israel could respond to the letter by detailing its own efforts to investigate potential crimes and hold its citizens accountable. If the court is satisfied with the process, it could allow it to unfold under periodic ICC supervision, postponing or even canceling its own investigation.

Israel could potentially avail itself of that option for the allegations regarding Gaza violence, as it says it routinely investigates and punishes wrongdoing by its own troops. But the construction of settlements in the West Bank and annexed east Jerusalem, territories Israel captured in the 1967 war that the Palestinians want for their future state, is an official state policy going back decades.

Some 700,000 Israeli settlers live in east Jerusalem and the West Bank, where Israel subsidizes housing and provides security and infrastructure.

International law forbids the transfer of civilians to territory occupied in war. Israel views Jerusalem as its unified capital and the West Bank as a special case whose future status should be decided in negotiations with the Palestinians, which have been moribund for more than a decade.

Israel's Channel 13 said the Article 18 letter was received last week and that Israel has around three weeks left to respond. It said the National Security Council has discussed the matter without making a decision. Israel is holding national elections on Tuesday and it could take several weeks to form a new government.

Israel's mostly ceremonial President Reuven Rivlin and its military chief, Lt. Gen. Aviv Kohavi, have meanwhile been rallying opposition to the ICC during a European tour this week that has taken them to Germany, Austria and France.

"Every attempt to twist Israel's hands through international bodies by cynical or political exploitation of international law is doomed to failure," Rivlin said in Paris on Thursday.

The Palestinians have expressed outrage at the idea the ICC would investigate militant rocket fire or the use of civilians as human shields by Hamas, which rules Gaza, and other militant groups. They view such actions as self-defense and are extremely unlikely to seek a deferral by launching their own investigation.

03.18.21

Biden plan to renew PA embassy in US toward goal of two-state solution

03.18.21

Sources: Biden administration crafting plan to reset U.S. ties with Palestinians  
Internal document reveals U.S. looking to reverse Trump-era policy by reinstating financial aid to Palestinians and taking tougher stance on Israeli settlement activities  
Reuters| Published: 03.18.21 , 09:22

The Biden administration is crafting a plan aimed at resetting U.S. ties with the Palestinians that all but collapsed under former President Donald Trump, according to an internal draft memo.

Two people familiar with the State Department document, which was first reported by the United Arab Emirates-based newspaper The National, said it was still in an early "working stage" but could eventually form the basis for rolling back parts of Trump's approach that Palestinians denounced as heavily biased in favor of Israel.

Since President Joe Biden took office on Jan. 20, his aides have said they intend to repair relations with the Palestinians. The administration has pledged to resume hundreds of millions of dollars in economic and humanitarian assistance and work toward reopening the Palestinians' diplomatic mission in Washington.

Biden's aides have also made clear they want to re-establish the goal of a negotiated two-state solution as a priority in U.S. policy on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. But they have moved cautiously with Israel's March 23 elections looming, followed by Palestinian elections scheduled in coming months.

A portion of the draft memo quoted by The National said the U.S. vision is "to advance freedom, security, and prosperity for both Israelis and Palestinians in the immediate term."

The document was cited as saying \$15 million in COVID-19 pandemic aid to the Palestinians could be announced by the end of March. It is also reported to take a tougher stance on Israeli settlement activities and mentions efforts "to obtain a Palestinian commitment to end payments to individuals imprisoned (by Israel) for acts of terrorism."

One source, speaking on condition of anonymity, said the document was a preliminary draft subject to revision and any final version would require inter-agency review. "We don't have any comments on that specific memo," U.S. State Department spokeswoman Jalina Porter told reporters at a daily briefing.

03.17.21

IDF early voting at request of Elections Committee to speed up vote count

03.17.21

IDF holds early voting ahead of March 23 election

Some members of armed forces cast ballots ahead of Election Day to help speed up vote count, as Israel braces for many absentee votes due to people in quarantine or hospital due to the coronavirus pandemic

i24NEWS| Published: 03.17.21 , 20:00

The IDF on Wednesday held a one-day round of early voting ahead of the March 23 elections next week, hoping to make the process smoother due to the pandemic.

Some 335 dedicated polling stations were distributed at bases around the country to allow service personnel to cast their ballots. Further voting will take place at bases on Election Day itself.

The early ballots were meant to help speed up vote-counting on Election Day, as soldiers use the "double envelope" system for absentee votes that ensures their anonymity, but is more time-consuming to count.

The early voting was held at the request of the Central Elections Committee, which said 550 ballot boxes would be deployed at bases throughout Israel on Election Day.

Officials were expecting a larger number of absentee votes this year, estimated at over 550,000, due to many Israelis in quarantine or hospitalized due to coronavirus.

03.17.21

UN delivered vaccine to West Bank & Gaza as equal distribution around the world

03.17.21

Palestinians receive first batch of COVID vaccines from UN

Delivery of some 60,000 doses of Pfizer and AstraZeneca vaccines through the COVAX program arrived earlier at Ben Gurion Airport; PA set to begin vaccinating the elderly, cancer patients and medical personnel from Sunday

AFP| Published: 03.17.21 , 13:57

Palestinians on Wednesday received their first delivery of coronavirus vaccines via the United Nations COVAX program, meant to ensure an equal distribution of the jobs around the world.

Earlier, some 60,000 doses of Pfizer and AstraZeneca vaccines allocated to the Palestinians under the UN scheme arrived at Ben Gurion Airport near Tel Aviv, according to an Israeli security source.

The UN's Middle East envoy, Tor Wennesland, welcomed the delivery. "Those vaccines being sent to the West Bank and Gaza will be critical tools in our fight against the pandemic and for socioeconomic recovery," his office quoted him as saying.

The Palestinian Authority said that vaccination would begin on Sunday, primarily for those aged over 75, cancer patients and medical personnel.

Israel has provided 5,000 doses to Palestinian medical personnel, and vaccinated 90,000 Palestinians who work inside Israel or in Jewish settlements in the West Bank.

But while rights groups have urged it to extend its inoculation campaign throughout the territory, as the occupying power, Israel says health responsibilities there fall to the Palestinian Authority according to the Oslo Accords.

A refrigerated truck loaded with the first delivery of coronavirus vaccine via the United

The United Arab Emirates has sent around 60,000 doses of the Russian vaccine Sputnik V to the Gaza Strip, a Palestinian enclave of two million inhabitants.

The Palestinians are also to receive 100,000 Chinese vaccine doses and nearly two million other jabs through the COVAX scheme, set up by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Alliance for Human Rights.

In Gaza, health authorities have confirmed more than 57,000 infected people, including more than 568 dead, since the start of the pandemic. In the West Bank, around 156,000 patients have been recorded, including more than 1,745 deaths.

03.17.21

Concrete & bronze statue of Netanyahu in Tel Aviv appears to be a protest



03.17.21

### 'Gollum' Netanyahu statue causes stir in Tel Aviv square

Bronze and concrete image that appeared in heart of city is latest in series of protest art directed at prime minister; with no one claiming piece that drew comparisons to Lord of the Rings character, authorities barricade it off and then remove it  
Itay Blumenthal | Published: 03.17.21 , 13:35

A concrete and bronze statue depicting a naked Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu crouching behind a wall appeared in Habima Square in Tel Aviv on Wednesday morning.

It sparked great interest from passers-by, some of whom compared it to the depiction of the Gollum character in the Lord of the Rings movies.

It was unclear who was behind the creation of the statue, which appeared to be a protest against the prime minister just days before Israel goes to the polls for the fourth time in two years.

The statue was removed at around 10am, a few hours after its appearance. A sign bearing the signature "Sporadi" was placed on the statue and a table carrying juice and cookies was set up next to it.

In the past, artists who placed pop-up pieces in the public arena later went to explain the message sought to convey but no such appearance happened Wednesday morning.

While some passers-by said that the statue reminded them of J.R.R. Tolkien's Gollum as portrayed on screen by Andy Serkis, others said the fact that the figure was hiding behind a wall indicated shame.

Others claimed that the statue actually depicted Netanyahu urinating in a solitary cell, as the piece had been placed in a puddle with water dripping from it.

Tel Aviv municipal inspectors tried to find out who was responsible for the statue and being unable to do so, attached a notice for it to be immediately removed.

Local police officers also arrived at the square and began asking passers-by if they had any connection to the statue. They then erected barriers around the piece to stop people from touching it.

Sculptures or other pieces about Netanyahu have been placed in the Israeli public arena several times.

In 2016, artist Itai Zalait placed a gilded statue of the prime minister in Rabin Square in Tel Aviv.

"This is the atmosphere we are currently enduring," he explained at the time.

A few hours later the statue was toppled, and Zalait removed it from the square.

In December 2020, demonstrators placed a statue called "Hero of Israel" in Paris Square in Jerusalem, next to the prime minister's official residence and the primary location for demonstrations against him.

The statue, also created by Zalait, depicted a demonstrator who was photographed at the height of the protests holding the Israeli flag as he was hit by a jet from a police water cannon.

The bronze statue, which rose to a height of 5.5 meters, was inspired by a July 2020 photograph of protester Nimrod Gross. After its removal from Paris Square, the statue was briefly placed in Rabin Square at the invitation of Tel Aviv Mayor Ron Huldai.

03.16.21

Labor faction will back Yair Lapid to prevent Netanyahu right-wing government

03.16.21

Labor party says will back Yair Lapid as next PM

Labor party's announcement comes a day after left-wing Meretz party made a similar proclamation, according to which they will also recommend opposition leader for prime minister post

i24NEWS| Published: 03.16.21 , 20:19

A member of the Labor party said on Tuesday that the political faction will back Yesh Atid Chairman Yair Lapid for prime minister after the country's upcoming March 23 elections.

“We will recommend Yair Lapid... **we think he can lead a coalition**,” said Nachman Shai, a former lawmaker and Labor's number eight. “For us, [Lapid] is the head of the bloc.”

Lapid, leader of the centrist bloc and the **current head of opposition**, has been **polling higher than most other opposition** candidates across the political spectrum and is projected to win **between 18 and 20** seats in the 24th Knesset.

Shai's announcement comes a day after the left-wing Meretz party made a similar announcement in support of Lapid for prime minister.

“I see him as the **head of the largest party in our bloc** with the best chance to form a government,” Meretz Chairman Nitzan Horowitz told Ynet on Monday. “We will be part of the government with him [at the helm].”

The Meretz party has struggled to make inroads with voters in this latest election round and has been hovering around the electoral threshold of 3.25% in major polls in the run-up to the vote.

“A **strategic vote** is to vote for Meretz in order **to prevent** Netanyahu from **forming a narrow right-wing government**,” Horowitz added.

Parties that meet the electoral threshold automatically win four seats in the Knesset. The March 23 election will mark Israel's fourth election in just over two years.

03.16.21

Israel, Greece & Cyprus cable funded by EU in Turkish claimed waters

03.16.21

Turkey slams Israel, Greece and Cyprus subsea cable deal

Turkey's state media reports the **route of world's longest undersea electricity cable transgresses Turkish territorial waters** and the 3 countries needed to seek Ankara's approval before conducting feasibility studies

Associated Press| Published: 03.16.21 , 09:26

Turkey has **protested** a recent agreement reached between **Israel, Greece and Cyprus** advancing **plans to build** a 2,000-megawatt **undersea electricity cable** connecting the three, the state-run news agency reported Monday.

Turkey formally protested against the agreement, arguing that the **route** of the planned cable, **expected to be funded by the EU**, transgressed Turkish territorial waters, the Anadolu Agency reported.

In diplomatic protest notes presented to Greek, Israeli and EU diplomats in Ankara, **Turkish officials** also **stated** that the three countries **needed to seek Turkey's approval before conducting** feasibility **studies**, the agency reported.



The three countries reached an agreement last week to expedite permits and approvals to conduct feasibility studies for the undersea cable and to coordinate with their respective national electricity regulators on how best to proceed.

Previously, the three countries had teamed up for a planned \$6 billion undersea pipeline to carry gas from new offshore deposits in the southeastern Mediterranean to continental Europe, by bypassing Turkey.

Israel, Greece and Cyprus have also conducted a joint naval exercise last week, in the latest example of increased cooperation between the three which increasingly view Turkey as a rival in the Mediterranean Sea.

Greece and Cyprus are embroiled in a dispute with Turkey, which has sent gas prospecting vessels into waters claimed by Greece and drilling ships into an area where Cyprus claims exclusive rights. The tension brought NATO allies Greece and Turkey close to open conflict last year, but tensions have eased since then.

Israel and Turkey were once close allies but had a major falling-out in 2010, when 10 Turkish citizens were killed by Israeli forces as a Turkish-led flotilla tried to break Israel's blockade on the Gaza Strip.

03.16.21

Hamas exposed names of Shura Council for the first time as a government body

03.16.21

Hamas presents new leadership including a woman for the first time Jamila Shanti formerly served as a minister and a member of the Palestinian Legislative Council; the new Shura Council, Hamas' supreme advisory council is instrumental in determining Hamas' policies, it convened Sunday for its first meeting

TPS| Published: 03.16.21 , 07:41

In a rare move, the Hamas terror group in Gaza, publicly exposed the composition of the recently-elected Shura Council and members of the organization's political bureau in the Gaza Strip that includes a woman for the first time in the organization's history.

Jamila Shanti formerly served as a minister and a member of the Palestinian Legislative Council.

Another woman who will serve under Hamas' leadership but was not be appointed to the Shura Council is Fatma Sharab, who was elected to head the organization's women's movement.

The new Shura Council, Hamas' supreme advisory council which is instrumental in determining Hamas' policies, convened Sunday for its first meeting and elected the various functionaries and members of the movement's political bureau, headed by Yahya Sinwar, who is continuing for another four-year term as Hamas' leader in the Gaza Strip.

Sinwar's deputy in the political bureau will be Khalil al-Haya. Nizar Awadallah, who threatened Sinwar's leadership in four rounds of voting, will serve as a member of the Shura Council, like all members of the political bureau.

Another prominent member of the Shura Council is Mahmoud al-Zahar, who is considered to be the biggest supporter of Hamas' alliance with Iran and its so-called foreign minister.

The Council, which in the past was secret and its members were not exposed, also elected the heads of the various committees.

The Shura Council will be headed by Osama Mazini, known as Abu Hamam, who previously served as Minister of Education in the Hamas government and who held the Gilad Shalit portfolio.

Maher Saabra, a journalist, will be appointed assistant to the Shura Council but will not be a full member.

Ruhi Mishtaha, one of the founders of Hamas and an associate of Sinwar, and Fatah Hamad, also joined the Council. Hamad currently heads an armed militia in the Gaza Strip. He was previously a member of Hamas' Majd squad that eliminated collaborators and led a series of terror attacks. Hamad headed Hamas' al-Aqsa media network and served as the interior minister.

Another member, Marwan Issa, the head of Hamas' military wing in the Gaza Strip, is very close to Sinwar and arch-terrorist Muhammad Def. Together with Sinwar, he transferred his support to Ismail Haniya, who is currently running for the post of head of the Hamas General Political Bureau against Khaled Mashaal.

Another member is Suhail al-Hindi, who was the head of the UNRWA officials' association in the Gaza Strip while he was a senior Hamas figure and left his post following an Israeli protest.

Another member is Salah Bardawil, a member of the Palestinian Legislative Council and former editor of Hamas' Al-Rissala weekly.

Ghazi Hamad, a former Hamas government spokesman and editor of Al-Rissala and Al-Watan, and who was in charge of the Hamas crossings, was also elected to the Council, as was Ismail Barhoum.

The "second-tier" members, who are fairly anonymous and who will lead Hamas in the coming years, were also elected, including Samah Saraj, Zakaria Abu Maamar, Juad Abu Shamala, Kamal Abu Aun – an educator, and Azzam Delis, who is close to Hamas leader Haniyah.

Hamas' decision to expose the names of the Shura Council members is indicative of its attempt to transition from a terrorist group to a government body.