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04.30.21

Abbas postpones parliamentary elections, his security forces not allowed in Jerusalem

04.30.21

Abbas postpones parliamentary elections, blames Israel

The delay likely to draw intense domestic criticism, with Abbas and his allies weakened by challengers from within his own divided Fatah party as Hamas spokesperson criticizes the move claiming responsibility is on Abbas's faction

Reuters| Published: 04.30.21 , 09:11

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas on Friday postponed planned parliamentary elections amid a dispute over voting in Israeli-annexed East Jerusalem and splits in his Fatah party.

Abbas, 85, blamed Israel for uncertainty about whether it would allow the legislative election to proceed in Jerusalem as well as in the occupied West Bank and Gaza.

The decision came three months after he announced the first national elections for 15 years in what was widely seen as a response to criticism of the democratic legitimacy of Palestinian institutions, including his own presidency.

The outcome of an election could be gains for Hamas, the Islamist militant group that controls Gaza. Abbas's chief domestic rival, Hamas is regarded as a terrorist group by Israel, the United States and European Union but fought a well-organized campaign to defeat a similarly divided Fatah in 2006.

The dispute over Jerusalem was the principal reason cited by Abbas in a speech early Friday following a meeting of Palestinian political factions.

"Facing this difficult situation, we decided to postpone the date of holding legislative elections until the participation of Jerusalem and its people is guaranteed," Abbas said in the speech on Palestinian TV.

The delay of the parliamentary elections set for May is likely to draw intense domestic criticism, with Abbas and his allies weakened by challengers from within his own divided Fatah party.

It was not immediately clear whether a presidential vote scheduled for July would go ahead.

The Palestinian Central Elections Commission said it was suspending the election process following Abbas's decision. The election campaign was supposed to begin on Friday.

Protesters in Gaza and the West Bank called for the elections to proceed as scheduled - for many it would be their first election.

"As a young Palestinian citizen, I call for conducting elections, and I want my right to elect so I would see new faces, young faces, and see new political stances," said Wael Deys, from Hebron.

Hamas criticized the reversal. "We reject this decision which violates the national consensus, and Fatah movement bears responsibility for the consequences of this position," spokesman Sami Abu Zuhri told Reuters.

Abbas had hinted at the delay for weeks by claiming that Israel had not agreed to permit East Jerusalem Palestinians to vote in the city.

A spokesman for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's office said earlier this week that there had been no formal Israeli announcement on whether it would allow Palestinian voting in Jerusalem - as it did during the last elections in 2006 - and Israeli officials said on Thursday that there had been no change.

But many Palestinians regard the Jerusalem issue as an excuse to avoid elections that a divided Fatah might well lose to Hamas.

Internal divisions surfaced in Abbas's Fatah party when jailed Fatah leader Marwan Barghouti and Nasser Al-Qudwa - a nephew of the party's late founder Yasser Arafat - announced a rival slate of candidates to run against Abbas's official lineup.

Nevertheless, election preparations were well under way, with thousands of new voters and three dozen party lists registered.

"The delay will cause a great disappointment among Palestinians, who most of them hoped it was time to end the divisions and bring about a change," said Gaza analyst Talal Okal.

Abbas has been in power since 2005 and has ruled by decree for over a decade.

The timing of his election announcement was seen as aimed at repairing ties with U.S. President Joe Biden after they plummeted under predecessor Donald Trump.

But analysts say that with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict low on Biden's priority list, Washington prefers to avoid elections that could empower Hamas and anger Israel as U.S. officials press ahead on nuclear talks with Iran.

Israel has been making it clear that it prefers an election delay, fearing its coordination with Abbas's security forces in the West Bank would be undermined by the vote, said Shibley Telhami of the Brookings Institution.

"(To) the extent that Biden was prepared to confront Israel, his top priority has been the Iran nuclear deal," Telhami said, adding that, among other factors, "this appeared to have weighed in on the Biden administration, with reduced enthusiasm for the election."

State Department Spokesman Ned Price said on Thursday: "The exercise of democratic elections is a matter for the Palestinian people and for the Palestinian leadership to determine."

04.30.21

At least 44 dead, hundreds hurt in crush at Lag BaOmer event in northern Israel

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At least 44 dead, hundreds hurt in crush at Lag BaOmer event in northern Israel

Preliminary police investigation shows that some attendees at festivities on Mount Meron had slipped on the steps, creating a 'human avalanche' that crushed members of the crowd; police say all wounded had been evacuated to hospitals

Ynet, Agencies | Updated: 04.30.21 , 07:38

At least 44 people were killed and as many as 150 injured, 23 of them critically overnight in a crush at the Lag BaOmer festivities on Mount Meron in northern Israel.

A stampede broke out after Midnight on Thursday at the Jewish religious gathering in the compound occupied by an ultra-Orthodox insular Hasidic movement Toldos Aharon.

The injured were transported to hospitals in the north and the center of the country.

Eli Beer, director of Hatzalah, said he was shocked by the size of the crowd at the Lag BaOmer celebrations at Mount Meron. Police were quoted as saying **some 100,000 people were there.**

He told Army Radio that there were **four to five times the number of people** that should have entered a location like this. "More than 40 people died as a result of this tragedy," he said.

A 24-year-old witness, identified only by his first name Dvir, told the Army Radio station that "**masses of people were pushed into the same corner and a vortex was created.**" He said a **first row of people fell down**, and **then a second row**, where he was standing, also began to fall down from the pressure of the stampede.

"I felt like I was about to die," he said.

Firefighters worked to free the trapped, supported by Israeli Air Force helicopters and rescue services.

Police were trying to clear the tens of thousands who attended the event from the area. A preliminary police investigation revealed that some of the attendees **slipped on the stairs, creating a "human avalanche" that crushed members of the crowd.**

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called it a "heavy disaster."

Cellphone reception crashed as families **attempted to contact relatives** on the scene and Israel police asked that calls be made to their emergency hotline for information. hospitals also set up hotlines for enquiries:

The Ziv Medical Center in Safed - 1255161, The Galilee Medical Center in Nahariya - 1255141, The Baruch Padeh Medical Center in Tiberias - 1255162 and the Rambam Health Care Campus in Haifa - 1255144. For enquiries about missing relatives the public can call - *1201.

The Jerusalem Municipality opened a crisis center to assist families in locating relatives that can be reached by dialing 106 from Jerusalem. The **municipality** said they **will offer assistance to the families of the dead and injured.**

Tens of thousands of ultra-Orthodox Jews had gathered **at the Mount Meron** tomb of the **2nd-century sage Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai** for annual Lag BaOmer commemorations that include **all-night prayer and dance.**

The ecstatic crowds congregated despite warnings by health officials to avoid presenting COVID-19 risks.

Witnesses said they **realized people had been asphyxiated or trampled** when an organizer appealed over a **loudhailer** for the **throng to disperse.**

"We thought maybe there was a [bomb] alert over a suspicious package. No one imagined that this could happen here. Rejoicing became mourning, **a great light became a deep darkness,**" a pilgrim who gave his name as Yitzhak told Channel 12 TV.

"Rabbi Shimon used to say that he could absolve the world ... If he didn't manage to cancel this edict on the very day of his exaltation, then **we need to do real soul-searching.**"

Police shut down the site and ordered revelers out.

The tomb is considered to be one of the holiest sites in the Jewish world and it is an annual pilgrimage site.

Videos posted on social media showed chaotic scenes as Ultra-Orthodox men clambered through gaps in sheets of torn corrugated iron to escape the crush, as police and paramedics tried to reach the wounded.

Bodies lay on stretchers in a corridor, covered in foil blankets.

On Twitter, Netanyahu called it a "heavy disaster" and added: "We are all praying for the wellbeing of the casualties."

Private bonfires at Mount Meron were banned last year due to coronavirus restrictions, but lockdown measures were eased this year amid Israel's rapid COVID-19 vaccination program.

Police said on Thursday that they had arrested two people for disrupting officers' efforts to keep order at the site.

04.28.21

Federal probe into Giuliani involves the Ukraine recordings of Biden

04.28.21

Feds execute warrant at Rudy Giuliani's NYC home, sources say

The Trump attorney and former New York City mayor has been under investigation for several years over his business dealings in Ukraine, suspected of dig up dirt against Joe Biden and his son Hunter

Associated Press| Published: 04.28.21 , 19:44

Federal investigators have executed a search warrant at the Manhattan home of former President Donald Trump's attorney Rudy Giuliani, a law enforcement official told The Associated Press on Wednesday.

The former New York City mayor has been under investigation for several years over his business dealings in Ukraine. Details of the search were not immediately available, but it comes as the Justice Department continues its investigation into the former New York City mayor and staunch Trump ally.

The official could not discuss the investigation publicly and spoke to the AP on condition of anonymity.

The federal probe into Giuliani's overseas and business dealings stalled last year because of a dispute over investigative tactics as Trump unsuccessfully sought reelection, and amid Giuliani's prominent role in subsequently disputing the results of the contest on Trump's behalf.

The full scope of the investigation is unclear, but it at least partly involves the Ukraine dealings, law enforcement officials have told the AP.

Giuliani was central to the then-president's efforts to dig up dirt against Democratic rival Joe Biden and to press Ukraine for an investigation into Biden and his son, Hunter — who himself now faces a criminal tax probe by the Justice Department. Giuliani also sought to undermine former U.S. ambassador to Ukraine Marie Yovanovitch, who was pushed out on Trump's orders, and met several times with a Ukrainian lawmaker who released edited recordings of Biden in an effort to smear him before the election. A message left for Giuliani's lawyer wasn't immediately returned. Giuliani had previously called the investigation is "pure political persecution." The U.S. Attorney's office in Manhattan declined to comment.

04.29.21

Agreeing to elections in Jerusalem allows claim as the capital of a future state

04.29.21

Abbas: Palestinians to hold polls if Israel approves Jerusalem voting
PA president tells Palestine Liberation Organization meeting that Israel told him they could not agree to holding elections in East Jerusalem since the current government is interim and cannot make decision of this magnitude
Ynet,AFP| Published: 04.29.21 , 22:14

Palestinian elections can take place only when Israel approves voting in East Jerusalem, President Mahmoud Abbas said Thursday.

Palestinian leaders were set to decide Thursday whether to hold the first parliamentary elections in 15 years next month as scheduled or call a delay that could trigger further frustration in a divided society which last voted in 2006.

"If Israel said it agreed to the elections in Jerusalem, they would take place, we would have campaigned, and whoever won, won," Abbas told a meeting of the Palestine Liberation Organization, which was set to decide whether the first Palestinian vote in 15 votes would be postponed.

"We want elections in Jerusalem the same way we want them in Ramallah. With full election propaganda in the Holy City. We made it clear that we would not go to the polls without Jerusalem," said Abbas, adding that East Jerusalem is "the eternal capital" of Palestine.

An official announcement of the postponement of the elections has not yet been published.

As expected, Abbas made Jerusalem the focus of his speech, including the recent clashes between Palestinians and Israeli security forces in the city. He also claimed Israel urged the settlers "to keep calling for the 'death of all Arabs'." Abbas also criticized the European Union and the United States, and implicitly criticized Arab countries, as he sought to justify his reasons for the delay.

Local media reports quoted Abbas as saying that Israel told by the U.S. and several Arab states that the government could not agree to the elections being held in Jerusalem as it was an interim government and therefore not authorized to make such decisions. The Palestinian president reportedly dismissed this as "nonsense."

Abbas' opponents, led by Hamas, believe that the issue of voting in East Jerusalem is an excuse to cancel the elections due to Fatah's fear of its multiple lists of candidates losing to the terror group, which is running on a single unified list.

Hamas said Wednesday that it would hold Israel accountable for the decision to delay the elections. "No Palestinian can accept holding elections without Jerusalem," the group said.

According to Haaretz newspaper, deputy Fatah leader Mahmoud al-Alul told Palestinian radio that agreeing to elections without the vote being held in Jerusalem was tantamount to ceding any claim on the city as the capital of a future state.

"It won't be written in history books that we gave up on Jerusalem," the paper quoted al-Alul as saying.

04.29.21

Israel delegates in US say Iranian actions destabilize countries & fund militants

04.29.21

Our warplanes can reach Iran, Israeli minister warns amid nuclear talks

Intelligence Minister Eli Cohen reiterates Israel's position that it has the freedom to act in an event U.S. rejoins Iran nuclear deal and lifts sanctions off Tehran; 'A bad deal will send the region spiraling into war,' he says

Reuters| Published: 04.29.21 , 21:51

An Israeli cabinet minister sharpened his country's warnings against what it would deem a bad new nuclear deal between Iran and world powers, saying war with Tehran would be sure to follow.

As President Joe Biden explores a possible U.S. return to the 2015 deal to contain Iran's nuclear program that his predecessor Donald Trump abandoned, Israel has stepped up calls for more sweeping curbs to be imposed on sensitive Iranian technologies and projects.

Iran, which this week resumed indirect talks with U.S. envoys in Vienna on reversing its retaliatory violations of the deal in exchange for the removal of sanctions reimposed by Trump, has ruled out any further limitations on Iranian actions.

Reiterating Israel's position that it does not consider itself bound by the diplomacy, Intelligence Minister Eli Cohen said: "A bad deal will send the region spiraling into war." "Anyone seeking short-term benefits should be mindful of the longer-term," he said. "Israel will not allow Iran to attain nuclear arms. Iran has no immunity anywhere. Our planes can reach everywhere in the Middle East - and certainly Iran."

Diplomats of the EU, China, Russia and Iran at the start of talks on a U.S. return to the Iran says its nuclear ambitions are peaceful.

Cohen said that in addition to denying Iran the means of enriching uranium and developing ballistic missiles, world powers should make it stop "destabilizing other countries" and funding militants.

The Vienna talks have been overshadowed by what appeared to be mutual sabotage attacks on Israeli and Iranian ships, as well as an explosion at Iran's Natanz enrichment plant that Tehran blamed on Israel.

Cohen, in keeping with Israeli policy, declined all comment.

Israel sent senior delegates to Washington this week to discuss Iran with U.S.

counterparts. The White House said the allies agreed on the "significant threat" posed by Iran's regional behavior.

The Israeli ambassador to the United States, Gilad Erdan, said the Biden administration would consult with Israel about any new nuclear deal - the prospects for which he deemed hazy.

"We assess, to our regret, that the Iranians will refuse such a discussion," he told Israel's public radio station Kan, alluding to Iran's insistence on restoring the original deal, which Trump called too limited in scope and duration.

"But if it emerges that we were mistaken, and the Americans succeed in securing a discussion of a different, better deal, we will certainly be part of that discussion. We made that clear and the (Biden) administration welcomes this, of course."

04.29.21

If Abbas delays elections, we will start with demonstrations, encourage by Hamas

04.29.21

Palestinian leaders weigh delay of long-awaited vote

In-depth: Wafa news agency says PA leader Mahmoud Abbas would chair a meeting on Thursday evening to decide whether first elections in 15 years should be held or cancelled due to Israel's alleged refusal to allow the vote in East Jerusalem

AFP| Published: 04.29.21 , 19:44

Palestinian leaders were set to decide Thursday whether to hold elections next month as scheduled or call a delay that could trigger further frustration in a divided society which last voted in 2006.

Palestinians in the West Bank and blockaded Gaza Strip have voiced hope that the polls could help restore credibility and heal rifts.

Fatah, which controls the West Bank-based Palestinian Authority, reached an agreement with its long-standing rival Hamas, the Islamists who control Gaza, to hold legislative polls on May 22 and a presidential vote on July 31.

The official Wafa news agency said Thursday that Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, also Fatah's leader, would chair a meeting "tonight in Ramallah that includes all the political factions to discuss the latest with the elections and whether they should be held or cancelled."

"A final decision" would be made before Friday, Wafa reported.

Hamas said Wednesday it "rejects any attempt to postpone the elections."

Hamas won a surprise victory in the 2006 elections but it was not recognized by Abbas.

The Islamists took power in Gaza the following year in a week of bloody clashes.

Abbas critics charge that he is seeking to buy time as Fatah's prospects have been threatened by splinter factions, including one led by a nephew of iconic Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat and another by a powerful, exiled former Fatah security chief, Mohammed Dahlan.

"If Abbas delays elections, we will start with demonstrations," Daoud Abu Libdeh, a candidate with Dahlan's "Future" faction, told AFP in Jerusalem.

Jerusalem

Palestinians insist on the right to hold elections in East Jerusalem, which Palestinians claim as the capital of their future state.

During the last Palestinian election, East Jerusalem residents cast ballots on the outskirts of the city and thousands voted in post offices, a symbolic move agreed to by Israel.

Israel, which now bans all Palestinian political activity across Jerusalem, has not commented on whether it would allow voting in the city.

In a meeting with EU diplomats this week, Foreign Ministry political director Alon Bar said elections were "an internal Palestinian issue, and that Israel has no intention of intervening in them nor preventing them."

Wafa quoted top official Fatah Mahmoud Aloul as saying that holding elections that excluded Jerusalem would be "treason".

Palestinian journalist and Abbas critic Nadia Harhash, a candidate on the "Together We Can" electoral list, said using Jerusalem as an excuse for postponement "is definitely not a smart move for the PA".

She argued it would give Israel de facto veto power over the Palestinian right to vote.

Hamas said a delay amount to a surrender to "the (Israeli) occupation's veto".

Tensions in Jerusalem surged at the weekend as Palestinians clashed with Israeli police over the right to gather in an Old City plaza after evening Ramadan prayers. Following several days of unrest that left dozens injured, Israeli police removed the barricades blocking Damascus Gate, allowing Palestinians to resume their gatherings.

Hamas said such "heroic victories" should encourage Palestinians to press ahead with Jerusalem voting.

Factions

The elections are seen in part as a unified effort by Hamas and Fatah to bolster international faith in Palestinian governance ahead of possible renewed U.S.-led

diplomacy under President Joe Biden, after four years of Donald Trump that saw Washington endorse key Israeli objectives.

Harhash argued that Abbas had hoped the elections would allow Fatah and Hamas to continue sharing power, but felt threatened by the emergence of strong splinter factions and the rise of new political groups critical of his leadership.

The main challenges to Abbas include the "Freedom list" headed by Arafat's nephew Nasser al-Kidwa, which has been endorsed by Marwan Barghouti, who is serving multiple life sentences in Israel prison.

Dahlan, who poses another threat, has been credited with bringing coronavirus vaccines into Gaza and distributing financial aid across the enclave, as well as in the West Bank.

04.28.21

Private patient cases of deceased psychologist found on the street

04.28.21

Private patient cases of deceased psychologist found on the street

Hundreds of files that included personal information were thrown out from a local center for psychology and treatment of learning disabilities in Ramat Gan that was shut down after the psychologist passed away a year and a half ago

Hadar Gil-Ad | Published: 04.28.21 , 22:42

The documents of a deceased psychologist, containing private assessments and personal information on patients, some of whom were children, were found on a street in Ramat Gan on Tuesday.

The documents included the patients' full names, birthdates, ID numbers, family status, personal details of their lives and the issues for which they were seeking treatment.

"Severe difficulties with entire school curriculum," said one file.

"On an emotional level, the child demonstrates a total lack of faith in her abilities," said another.

"The kindergarten teacher threatened the child on several occasions. During the time before preschool showed severe motor difficulties," another file said.

A mother whose child was treated at the facility said she was mortified when she heard about about this disposal of the files.

"This is just awful. Every patient's nightmare is that such a thing would happen," she said.

"My daughter was not problematic, but did have certain difficulties, and I made sure for her to get out of a public clinic and to receive private personal treatment in order to ensure her privacy. The fact that such a thing could happen at a private clinic is frightening."

Dr. Yoram Schleyer, head of the Israel Psychological Association, said that unfortunately there are not specific protocols in place to ensure that such an incident does not occur.

"Such a thing must be regulated," he said. "There needs to be a protocol for when a trained professional passes away or retires, transfer the documents to another professional who can take proper care of them."

Asked to comment, the Health Ministry said that talks were being held with health officials on this matter and that reforms were being developed.

04.29.21

Saudi bans Lebanese imports after massive Hezbollah drug and weapons seizures

04.29.21

Hezbollah exported drugs, weapons, with Lebanon government knowledge
Saudi Arabia bans import of Lebanese goods after massive drug and weapons seizures;
Gulf allies support move as failed Levantine state sinks further into lawlessness under
terror group's clutches

Hudhaifa Ebrahim/The Media Line| Published: 04.29.21 , 15:15

Saudi Arabia on Sunday imposed a ban on the import or transit through the kingdom of all fruits and vegetables from Lebanon after a series of seizures, drugs and weapons in shipments coming from the Land of the Cedars to the Gulf countries.

On Friday, Saudi authorities intercepted over 2.4 million amphetamine pills, concealed in a shipment of pomegranates coming from Lebanon.

Walid al-Bukhari, the Saudi ambassador to Beirut, tweeted on Sunday that his country had seized more than 600 million narcotic pills and hundreds of kilograms of hashish smuggled from Lebanon over the last six years.

In addition, Greece announced on Thursday evening, following information received from the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, that it had seized four tons of cannabis in Piraeus Port, which was hidden in a shipment of industrial cupcake-making machines bound from Lebanon to Slovakia.

The decision, which will also affect Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, will lead to more than \$70 million in estimated annual lost sales, NGOs concerned with agriculture in Lebanon told local media outlets.

Four Gulf countries issued statements of support for the Saudi decision by press time, namely Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman and the UAE, while Qatar had yet to issue a reaction. Newspapers in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait reported that decisions will be issued soon related to permanently banning imports from Lebanon until a solution is found to the problem of drug and weapons smuggling.

The products coming from Lebanon constitute at most 10% of the Gulf Cooperation Council countries' produce imports. said by authorities in Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Kuwait, Bahrain and Oman. Countries such as Egypt, Jordan, Pakistan and India will be able to fill the gap.

RO (whose full name has been withheld for fear of assassination), a former Hezbollah member who used to export arms and drugs to various countries, told The Media Line, “Hezbollah relies mainly on [the sale of] drugs since the lack of funding caused by U.S. sanctions on a number of party members and against Iran, in addition to the collapse of the Lebanese state.

“We were working all day on Hezbollah farms in villages like Yammoune [in the Baalbek-Hermel Governorate] and other Lebanese villages in Shebaa Farms [known in Israel as Mount Dov], which are the main source of drugs in Lebanon and are under the protection of the party’s forces, in addition to sections of the Lebanese army,” RO said.

“The volume of drugs that the party used to ship from Lebanon alone up to 2016 was estimated at more than \$5 billion annually, not including its cooperation with Iranian facilities at drug farms in certain Latin American countries. It is a network of drug cartels,” he continued.

“As for farms that export vegetables, they are not owned by Hezbollah, but whoever does not cooperate with it, will have their agricultural crops burned, or they would be threatened or killed, done with the knowledge of the Lebanese state, who cannot do anything about it,” RO said.

He explained: “More than 10,000 people, all of them Lebanese, work with salaries not exceeding \$100 a month to pack drugs, and sometimes weapons, and any truck driver who does not cooperate with the party will obtain permits for his exit from Lebanon or regarding other security measures.

“Weapons are imported from Iran, Syria or Iraq, and they are also sent via shipments of vegetables, fruits and some other products exported by Lebanon, such as electrical appliances,” RO said.

“Arms constitute only a small part of these exports, given the difficulty of exporting them, and the countries to which arms are exported in the Gulf are Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Bahrain,” he said.

“Hezbollah owns more than five camps to train fighters from the Ansar Allah Al-Houthi [Iran-backed Yemeni rebel] group as well as fighters from Bahraini and Kuwaiti groups belonging to the Shiite sect, who undergo training courses of between two weeks and six months in duration,” RO added.

“The weapons that are exported are machine guns and handguns, in addition to detonators, and [explosive] materials such as TNT and C-4. As for the rest of the materials from which bombs are made, they are available in the local market,” the former Hezbollah operative said.

“The Lebanese security services are aware of all these transactions, but they cannot talk about them what with the collapse of the Lebanese state, and what happened in the port of Beirut [the huge explosion last August] was a small example of what Hezbollah owns inside Lebanon. The army, Interior Ministry, customs service, ports and airport are all under the control of Hezbollah,” RO said.

Ibrahim Al Moussawi, a Shi’ite member of the Loyalty to the Resistance Bloc, the political wing of Hezbollah in the Lebanese parliament, told The Media Line that accusations against Hezbollah of smuggling and trading in drugs are untrue, saying,

“What Saudi Arabia did is part of the campaign to starve the Lebanese people in the service of American, Western, and Israeli interests. We do not trade in drugs, and it is forbidden according to Sharia, and the secretary-general of the party, Hassan Nasrallah, has denied these accusations several times.”

He added, “This is nonsense and false accusations against the Lebanese resistance. Saudi Arabia must tighten its security, but not at the expense of the Lebanese people.”

Ibrahim Al-Tarshihi, head of the farmers and peasants’ association in Lebanon’s Bekaa region, told local Lebanese media outlets that “Lebanese agricultural production is innocent of the charge of exporting drugs to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.”

He added, “Lebanon does not have pomegranates to export. We have noticed for several years that there are goods from several countries that are exported as Lebanese goods. Perhaps Syria is the one who exported this shipment as Lebanese.”

Badr Abdulaziz, a Bahraini political and security expert, told The Media Line that Bahrain had several times “confiscated land shipments of Lebanese goods containing weapons or drugs.

“There are dozens of [Bahraini Shi’ite] fighters whom Bahrain previously announced that Hezbollah had trained in camps in Shebaa Farms or in the southern suburbs of Beirut, but the Lebanese state did not respond to Bahrain or even the Gulf states in this matter,”

Abdulaziz said.

“The Saudi decision should have been taken a long time ago, and what Saudi Arabia announced about 200 million [sic] narcotic tablets is but a small part of what Hezbollah tried to smuggle,” he said.

“We all know that the **Lebanese state is weak and that Hezbollah controls all the important institutions in it**, but the Gulf states cannot allow Lebanon to be a source of drugs or weapons or a training ground for outlaws to destabilize security and stability in the Gulf states,” Abdulaziz said.

“Previously, five or six shipments were seized coming from Lebanon, and this shipment that Saudi Arabia has now seized is perhaps the largest. We in the Gulf countries have not been harmed [by the import ban]. We have other sources to compensate for the simple shortage of vegetables, fruits and other Lebanese products, so the only loser is the Lebanese people,” the Bahraini analyst said.

“An investigation in Bahrain proved that the Lebanese Hezbollah group was planning to try to smuggle weapons into Bahrain, which were seized on a bus coming from Iraq carrying Bahraini Shi’ite visitors, and although the shipment was coming from Iraq, Hezbollah was responsible for smuggling it,” Abdulaziz said.

Muhammad al-Qubban, a Saudi security expert, told The Media Line, “Over the past six years, Saudi Arabia has seized more than 600 million drug pills arriving in shipments from Lebanon.”

“The **decision of the Saudi** authorities **is a message to Lebanon**, that the state, and not political parties and militias in the country, is the responsible actor. Saudi Arabia has informed the Lebanese authorities several times about the smuggling of weapons and drugs from Beirut, but there was no response,” he said.

“Seventy-five percent of the shipments that Lebanon sends to the Gulf contain drugs or weapons and other prohibited items. It is the responsibility of the Lebanese authorities to inspect all containers before they leave Lebanon,” Qubban said.

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04.29.21

Iran president replaced Zarif after he leaked a recorded tape discussing John Kerry

04.29.21

Shakeup in Iran's presidential office after leaked tape

In an audiotape leaked by opposition news channel, Tehran's top diplomat heard accusing slain Revolutionary Guards commander Qassem Soleimani of overreach in foreign policy and colluding with Russia to thwart 2015 nuclear deal

Associated Press| Published: 04.29.21 , 14:40

Iran's president has replaced the head of a think tank that recorded an interview with the country's foreign minister that leaked out this week, a tape that provided a rare glimpse into the theocracy's power struggles and set off a firestorm in Iran.

In the recording of the conversation between Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif and an economist at the Strategic Studies Center, the think tank associated with Iran's presidency, Zarif offers a blunt appraisal of diplomacy and his constricted role in the Islamic Republic.

Iran's presidency announced the former chief of Strategic Studies Center resigned and Ali Rabiei, who already serves as the Cabinet spokesman, would replace him.

The audiotape, leaked earlier this week to London-based, Farsi-language news channel Iran International, set off political controversy across Iran ahead of the country's June 18 presidential election. While Zarif has said he does not want to run in the election, some have suggested him as a potential candidate to stand against hard-liners in the vote.

Zarif's leaked remarks included cutting references to the limits of his power and those of Gen. Qassem Soleimani, a top commander in Iran's paramilitary Revolutionary Guard who was killed in a drone strike in Baghdad.

On the recording, he said that Soleimani took actions that damaged the country, including working with Russia to scupper the nuclear deal.

Earlier this week, Zarif expressed regret that the recording had leaked out as the country's president portrayed the breach as an incident intended to derail ongoing talks over the return to Iran's tattered nuclear deal with world powers.

04.28.21

US Navy fires warning shots at three fast-attack Guard vessels within 68 yards

04.28.21

U.S. Navy fires warning shots in new tense encounter with Iran

In first such incident in nearly 4 years, an American warship fired warning shots when vessels belonging to the Islamic Republic's paramilitary Revolutionary Guard came too close to a patrol in the Persian Gulf

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An American warship fired warning shots when vessels of Iran's paramilitary Revolutionary Guard came too close to a patrol in the Persian Gulf, the U.S. Navy said Wednesday. It was the first such shooting in nearly four years.

The Navy released black-and-white footage of the encounter Monday night in international waters of the northern reaches of the Persian Gulf near Kuwait, Iran, Iraq and Saudi Arabia. In it, lights can be seen in the distance and what appears to be a single gunshot can be heard, with a tracer round racing across the top of the water.

Iran did not immediately acknowledge the incident.

The Navy said the Cyclone-class patrol ship USS Firebolt fired the warning shots after three fast-attack Guard vessels came within 68 yards (62 meters) of it and the U.S. Coast Guard patrol boat USCGC Baranoff.

"The U.S. crews issued multiple warnings via bridge-to-bridge radio and loud-hailer devices, but the (Guard) vessels continued their close-range maneuvers," said Cmdr. Rebecca Rebarich, a spokeswoman for the Mideast-based 5th Fleet. "The crew of Firebolt then fired warning shots, and the (Guard) vessels moved away to a safe distance from the U.S. vessels."

She called on the Guard to "operate with due regard for the safety of all vessels as required by international law."

"U.S. naval forces continue to remain vigilant and are trained to act in a professional manner, while our commanding officers retain the inherent right to act in self-defense," she said.

The last time a Navy vessel fired warning shots in the Persian Gulf in an incident involving Iran was in July 2017, when the USS Thunderbolt, a sister ship to the Firebolt, fired to warn off a Guard vessel. Regulations issued last year give Navy commanders the authority to take "lawful defensive measures" against vessels in the Mideast that come within 100 meters (yards) of their warships.

While 100 meters may seem far to someone standing at a distance, it's incredibly close for large warships that have difficulty in turning quickly, like aircraft carriers. Even smaller vessels can collide with each other at sea, risking the ships.

The incident Monday marked the second time the Navy accused the Guard of operating in an "unsafe and unprofessional" manner this month alone after tense encounters between the forces had dropped in recent years.

Footage released Tuesday by the Navy showed a ship commanded by the Guard cut in front of the USCGC Monomoy, causing the Coast Guard vessel to come to an abrupt stop with its engine smoking on April 2.

The Guard also did the same with another Coast Guard vessel, the USCGC Wrangell, Rebarich said.

The interaction marked the first “unsafe and unprofessional” incident involving the Iranians since April 15, 2020, Rebarich said. However, Iran had largely stopped such incidents in 2018 and nearly in the entirety of 2019, she said.

In 2017, the Navy recorded 14 instances of what it describes as “unsafe and or unprofessional” interactions with Iranian forces. It recorded 35 in 2016, and 23 in 2015. The incidents at sea almost always involve the Revolutionary Guard, which reports only to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Typically, they involve Iranian speedboats armed with deck-mounted machine guns and rocket launchers test-firing weapons or shadowing American aircraft carriers passing through the Strait of Hormuz, the narrow mouth of the Persian Gulf through which 20% of all oil passes.

Some analysts believe the incidents are meant in part to squeeze President Hassan Rouhani’s administration after the 2015 nuclear deal. They include a 2016 incident in which Iranian forces captured and held overnight 10 U.S. sailors who strayed into the Islamic Republic’s territorial waters.

The incident comes as Iran negotiates with world powers in Vienna over Tehran and Washington returning to the 2015 nuclear deal. It also follows a series of incidents across the Mideast attributed to a shadow war between Iran and Israel, which includes attacks on regional shipping and sabotage at Iran’s Natanz nuclear facility.