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12.21.21
US adviser Jake Sullivan in Israel amid concerns of Iran deal & PA relations

12.21.21
U.S. national security adviser to arrive in Israel amid concerns Iran deal imminent

Jerusalem says Iran set to delay agreement on deal until able to enrich uranium to 90% in sufficient amount to produce a nuclear weapon to be loaded on missiles able to travel at least 3,000 kilometers

Itamar Eichner, Reuters | Updated: 12.21.21, 14:23

U.S. national Security Adviser Jake Sullivan will visit Israel this week for detailed discussions with Prime Minister Naftali Bennett on Iran's nuclear program, a senior Biden administration official said on Monday.

Speaking to reporters on condition of anonymity, the official said the U.S. and Israeli officials will talk about how they see the coming weeks unfolding with Iran.

"We will talk about where we see the state of Iran's nuclear program and some of the timelines," the official said. "It will be a good opportunity to sit down face-to-face and talk about the state of the talks, the timeframe in which we are working and to re-emphasize that we don't have much time."

In his talks with the Israelis, Sullivan will reaffirm the U.S. commitment to Israel's security, the White House said in a statement.

Sullivan, joined by the National Security Council's Middle East director Brett McGurk and other U.S. officials, are expected to arrive in Israel on Tuesday.

Israeli officials said despite world powers' pressure on Iran to return to the deal, Tehran has already made the strategic decision to delay an agreement until there is enough uranium enriched to the level of 90%, to produce a nuclear weapon. The officials add that Iran is also expecting to ensure it has the missile capacity to deliver a half ton weapon to a distance of at least 3,000 kilometers (1,860 miles).

The United States believes Iran's breakout time is now "really short" and alarming, a senior U.S. official said last week. Iran denies trying to develop a nuclear weapon. The United States and Israel are in total agreement that Iran must not be allowed to develop a nuclear weapon, the Biden administration official said.

Talks between Iran and world powers have been put on pause until next week. Sullivan will also meet with Palestinian President Mohammed Abbas in Ramallah on the West Bank during his visit, to discuss strengthening U.S. relations with the Palestinians.

12.21.21

UN Guterres & US Hochstein to resume maritime border talks with Israel & Lebanon

12.21.21

Lebanon says ready to resume indirect border talks with Israel

Meeting with UN head Antonio Guterres, who called for unity to aid the crisis-ridden country, Lebanese president Aoun denounces 'Israeli violations' and 'use of Lebanese air space to target Syria'

i24NEWS| Published: 12.21.21, 12:16

Lebanese President Michel Aoun said Monday that Beirut is committed to continuing indirect talks with Israel over demarcating the maritime borders of the Mediterranean neighbors.

Aoun made the remarks during a joint press conference with UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres at the presidential palace in Baabda, east of the capital Beirut.

"When it comes to the situation with Israel, I reiterated to his excellency [Guterres] the commitment of Lebanon to continue the resolution 1701 [UN Security Council resolution intended to resolve the 2006 Lebanon War] and all of its aspects — maintain stability on the southern border and the cooperation between the Lebanese army and UNIFIL [United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon]," Aoun said.

"I also denounce the Israeli violations on land, air and sea and primarily the use of Lebanese air space to target Syria," Aoun added.

Guterres also met Monday with Prime Minister Najib Mikati as he reaffirmed the world body's support for the crisis-hit country, while urging that the parliamentary elections take place on time — legislators voted in October to bump up next year's elections from May 8 to March 27.

At stake in the maritime talks are potentially lucrative natural gas reserves that Lebanon wants to tap as the country endures a devastating economic and fiscal crisis that the World Bank calls one of the worst in a century.

The United States is organizing the indirect maritime border talks.

The current American mediator, Amos Hochstein, reportedly told both sides that he will give up on seeking a resolution to the dispute if a deal is not reached by the March parliamentary elections.

12.20.21

Ex intel chief confirms Israel provided phone tracking in US Soleimani assassination

12.20.21

Ex-military intel chief: Israel was involved in Soleimani assassination

Maj. Gen. Tamir Hayman confirms Israel's part in high-profile assassination of the head of Iran's elite Quds force, adds Israel successfully torpedoed Iranian weapons shipments, entrenchment in Syria

i24NEWS| Published: 12.20.21, 22:14

Israel played a role in the assassination of top Iranian military commander Qassem Soleimani, a former IDF intelligence chief revealed Monday.

Gen. **Soleimani**, the head of Iran's elite Quds force and mastermind of its regional security strategy, was **killed in a U.S. airstrike in January 2020**, near the Iraqi capital's international airport.

“Soleimani’s assassination is an achievement, since our main enemy, in my eyes, are the Iranians,” said former head of Israeli military intelligence Maj. Gen. Tamir Hayman - marking the **first time a top Israeli official confirms Israel's role** in the U.S.-led operation.

“Two significant and important assassinations can be noted in my term,” added Hayman, referring to the assassination of Islamic Jihad leader Baha Abu al-Ata in 2019.

According to Hayman, Israel carried out multiple **operations to disrupt the proliferation of Iranian weapons**, adding that Israel has largely succeeded in stopping Iranian attempts to entrench itself in Syria.

“We thwarted a lot of ways they tried to smuggle weapons and money and the headline of all of this is stopping the Iranians from entrenching themselves in Syria,” he said.

In May, it was reported that **Israel provided the U.S. with key intelligence** support, including **tracking Soleimani's cellphone**, according to Yahoo News. Former U.S. president Donald **Trump was** reportedly **unhappy with Israel's** level of **involvement in the assassination**, according to an Axios report.

12.20.21

Egypt warns Hamas that Israel may use target killings, following West Bank attacks

12.20.21

Israel threatens targeted killings following West Bank attacks, report says
Warnings said to have been **relayed to Hamas** by Egyptian officials currently visiting Gaza in an attempt **to maintain the ceasefire** between the Islamist group and Israel
i24NEWS| Published: **12.20.21**, 18:45

Israel threatened to use targeted killings in the **Gaza Strip** **as well as abroad** in response to a recent wave of terrorist attacks in the West Bank, Lebanese newspaper Al-Akhbar reported Monday.

According to the source, the suspected warnings were **relayed to the Hamas** terrorist organization ruling Gaza **by Egyptian security officials** currently visiting the Palestinian territory.

The leaders of the Islamist group made no comment.

Two Egyptian delegations of intelligence officers and civilian engineers traveled to Gaza for talks with Hamas officials on ways to preserve the ceasefire with Israel and to advance plans to rebuild the territory following the war in May.

Hamas, meanwhile, expressed to the Egyptians its dissatisfaction with Cairo's failure to keep its promises to ease travel restrictions on Gazans, Al-Akhbar said.

Hamas also pleaded for a "legitimate struggle until [Israel] is expelled from all Palestinian lands and the settlers are evicted."

Israel's warning follows the shooting attack near the West Bank outpost of Homesh last Thursday in which 25-year-old Yehuda Dimentman was killed by a Palestinian terrorist. This latest attack follows several others in the West Bank and East Jerusalem - which prompted the United Nations' envoy for the Middle East, Tor Wennesland, to express alarm at the "escalation of violence" between the two long time foes.

"These tragic incidents underscore the volatility of the situation and the urgency for political, religious and community leaders to talk to each other and reject violence," said Wennesland.

12.20.21

'You'll be destroyed': LGBTQ Israelis receive hate texts allegedly sent by rabbi

12.20.21

'You'll be destroyed': LGBTQ Israelis receive hate texts allegedly sent by rabbi
Israel's LGBTQ Task Force asks police to launch an investigation after thousands of messages, including death threats, were sent to people, whose info said to have been stolen from an app; rabbi and his yeshiva deny any involvement
Hadar Gil-Ad | Published: 12.20.21, 14:28

Thousands of members of Israel's LGBTQ community have recently received disturbing hateful text messages, which were allegedly sent by a yeshiva rabbi, police revealed Monday.

The Aguda – Israel's LGBT Task Force has asked the police to launch a criminal investigation after receiving messages signed by the rabbi, whose name is not allowed for publication.

The organization that leads the public struggle of the gay community claimed that thousands of people had received the text, saying, "You are LGBT, and therefore you will be destroyed. You deserve severe punishment, death, and expulsion from the country. Come to the yeshiva to repent, we would love for you to go through a conversion to faith."

The association showed concern that there is a connection between the messages and the cyber ransomware attack of an Israeli LGBTQ dating site two months ago, in which information of former and present users was leaked.

Cyber experts told Ynet they estimate the phone numbers were indeed taken from the database leaked by the hackers, who hacked the community dating site.

The yeshiva and the rabbi, meanwhile, deny any connection to the text messages. "The yeshiva administration strongly opposes the messages issued on behalf of the head rabbi of the yeshiva. A complaint was filed to the police in order to determine the identity of the message distributor."

The Aguda said in a statement: "the hate messages and threats received by thousands of LGBTQ people in and out the closet are not only dangerous incitement but also a deliberate intent to harm members of the gay community. We demand the police to launch a criminal investigation to solve this matter and we ask to you to report to us if you have received this kind of message."

12.20.21

IDF troops come under fire while readying to raze West Bank terror house

12.20.21

IDF troops come under fire while readying to raze West Bank terror house

Soldiers say they were fired at and had explosives thrown at them as they were mapping a house of Palestinians suspected of carrying out a deadly shooting last week that killed Yehuda Dimentman; none of the soldiers were hurt

Yoav Zitun, Ilana Ushomirsky | Published: 12.20.21, 11:08

Israel Defense Forces troops came under heavy fire in the West Bank on Sunday night while mapping a house of Palestinian brothers suspected of carrying out a shooting attack last week that left one Israeli dead.

The brothers are suspected of killing Yehuda Dimantman, 22, on Thursday when the car he was in was ambushed near the illegal West Bank outpost of Homesh as he was making his way from a yeshiva to his home in the settlement of Shavei Shomron. Two other people were lightly hurt in the attack.

According to the military, the troops who entered the Arab village Silat al-Khartia, came under heavy gunfire and also had explosives thrown at them.

The mapping was done to examine the possibility of demolishing the house, as part of Israel's policy which serves as a means of deterrence for potential terrorists plotting future attacks.

The IDF said the soldiers fired back at the shooters and none of the soldiers were hurt. The military added that a riot broke out at the scene, in which dozens of Palestinians threw stones at the troops, who had to respond by using riot control measures.

Alleged terrorists involved in the murderous attack were arrested on Saturday night without resistance or gunfire, in a collaborative operation including the IDF, Shin Bet, and Israel's National Counter Terror Unit of the Israel Border Police.

Prime Minister Naftali Bennett was present in the command center overseeing the joint operation, and congratulated the security forces, and said: "Every terrorist should know he's on borrowed time."

The IDF informed that in total, six or seven suspects were arrested, including two or three men who assisted the shooters. The Shin Bet said that the weapons used by the terrorists to carry out the shooting were also captured - two M16 rifles and one Carlo - which is an improvised submachine gun manufactured by small workshops in the Palestinian Territories.

IDF spokesperson, Gen. Ran (Ranko) Kochav, said after the arrest that "this is a joint technological-intelligence operation which reached a rapid closure and included a lot of different security forces who worked together under winter weather. I hope their arrest and investigation will thwart further attacks." The operation is another message for terrorist organizations that Israel will reach any terrorist anywhere."

12.20.21

Iran general Rashid pledges 'crushing' response against any Israeli attack

12.20.21

Iran pledges 'crushing' response against any Israeli attack

Iranian general Gholamali Rashid says during a military maneuver that Tehran would immediately strike 'all centers, bases, routes, and spaces used to carry out the aggression' Reuters, Yossi Yehoshua | Published: 12.20.21, 09:09

Iran will retaliate with a "crushing" response against any Israeli attack, a commander said according to an Iranian news agency linked to the country's top security body.

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"If Israel carries out attacks against Iran, our armed forces will immediately attack all centers, bases, routes, and spaces used to carry out the aggression," Gholamali Rashid said during a military maneuver which started on Sunday, nournews added.

Last week, The Tehran Times newspaper published an article, revealing a map of dozens of Iranian targets in Israel, in an event the Islamic Republic opts to strike the Jewish state. In the article, titled "Just One Wrong Move," the paper said "the Zionist regime has forgotten that Iran is more than capable of hitting them from anywhere".

The piece was published days after it was revealed by Ynet's sister publication Yedioth Ahronoth revealed that Israel's alleged strike on Syrian chemical weapons sites six months ago was a "direct message" to its enemies.

Chief of General Staff of Iran's Armed Forces Mohammad Bagheri was quoted by the paper as saying that Iran never takes lightly threats made by its "enemies".

"Despite our confidence in our deterrence, our forces are prepared for the smallest of threats in the strategic field," he was quoted as saying.

"At the strategic level, we do not intend to strike anyone, but at the operational and tactical level we are ready for a decisive response and a quick and tough offensive against the enemy."

12.19.21

Hamas, Palestine agree Sunday to step up attacks in West Bank and Jerusalem

12.19.21

Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad agree to facilitate attacks on Israel

Iranian-backed groups agree to increase coordination between military wings in what analysts consider new challenge for PA, whose security forces continue to crack down on rivals in West Bank

i24NEWS| Published: 12.19.21, 21:23

Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) stuck an agreement on Sunday to step up terrorist attacks against Israel, especially in the West Bank and Jerusalem.

The Iranian-backed groups have also agreed to increase coordination between their military wings, the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades and the Al-Quds Brigades.

The deal was reached during meetings between Hamas and PIJ top brass officials in Lebanon and the Gaza Strip in recent days.

The deal is seen by Palestinian political analysts as a new challenge for the Palestinian Authority (PA), whose security forces continue to carry out a massive crackdown on Hamas and PIJ members in the West Bank.

"Hamas and PIJ hope to kill two birds with one stone," said a Ramallah-based analyst.

"They know the attacks make [PA Chairman Mahmoud] Abbas appear to be losing control of the situation."

A Ramallah official said the PA's security forces have received "strong instructions" from the Palestinian leadership to prevent lawlessness in the West Bank.

Eight attacks against Israelis were carried out in the West Bank and East Jerusalem this month, raising fears of yet another wave of terror.

On Thursday evening, Palestinian terrorists shot at a vehicle near the Homesh settlement, killing Israeli Yehuda Dimentman and wounding two others.

12.16.21

Christian officials accuse Israel of discrimination as policy does not allow foreigners

12.16.21

Christian officials accuse Israel of holiday discrimination

A spokesman for Christian churches in the Holy Land has accused Israel of discriminating against Christian tourists during the normally busy Christmas holiday season

Associated Press| Published: 12.16.21, 10:27

A spokesman for Christian churches in the Holy Land on Wednesday accused Israel of discriminating against Christian tourists during the normally busy Christmas holiday season.

Israel closed its borders to foreign tourists in November in response to the global Omicron outbreak, and after several cases of the newly discovered coronavirus variant were found within the country.

But this week, Israeli officials decided to make an exception for "Birthright," a popular program that provides free trips to Israel to young Jews from around the world. Groups from the United States are expected to arrive next week, with participants all fully vaccinated and remaining in small "capsules."

For now, restrictions remain in effect for other foreign tourists, including Christian pilgrims who traditionally have flocked to sites like Jerusalem, Nazareth and Bethlehem, the biblical town in the West Bank revered by Christians as the birthplace of Jesus. Wadie Abunassar, a spokesman and adviser to churches in the Holy Land, said various denominations were upset over the selective treatment and he accused Israel of discriminating against Christian pilgrims.

"Racist discrimination should never be accepted in any way!" he wrote on Facebook. "I urge the Israeli authorities to treat all those who want to visit the country equally without any discrimination between religion."

An official with the Catholic Church said church officials were shocked and angry by the Israeli decision. He said the church, along with other denominations, have appealed to the Tourism Ministry to allow Christian pilgrims to come for the holiday. The official spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak to the media. The Interior Ministry, which oversees entrance policies at the country's borders, said the policy remains not to allow foreigners into Israel.

But it said a number of exceptions have been made, including a "specific" decision for the Birthright program. It said officials would be discussing the possibility of other exceptions in the near future, but gave no further details.

The travel ban has crushed the tourism industry in Israel, and officials in Bethlehem, whose economy relies heavily on Christmas visitors, say the restrictions have ruined the holiday season for a second straight year. The West Bank does not have its own airport and most foreign visitors enter from Israel.

12.15.21

UN negotiations continue in Vienna, Iran forcing absurd deals with US out of talks

12.15.21

UN watchdog says Iran will allow new cameras at nuclear site

Cameras to be reinstalled at Karaj following what Tehran describes as a sabotage attack by Israel; IAEA chief Grossi warns that limited access to area hurts international efforts to monitor Islamic Republic's nuclear program

Associated Press| Published: 12.15.21, 16:42

The United Nations' nuclear watchdog and Iran reached a deal Wednesday to reinstall cameras damaged at an Iranian site that manufactures centrifuge parts, though inspectors remain limited on what footage they can access.

The agreement will see cameras put back at Karaj, which came under what Iran describes as a sabotage attack in June. Iran had since refused the International Atomic Energy Agency access to replace cameras damaged in the incident, part of an ongoing hard-line tact taken by Tehran at negotiations underway in Vienna over its tattered 2015 nuclear deal with world powers.

Iranian media first reported the deal without citing a source. IAEA Director-General Rafael Mariano Grossi later tweeted out a statement detailing the arrangement. "This is important for verification under the Iran nuclear deal, and work will continue to address other outstanding safeguards issues," Grossi wrote.

The IAEA said the cameras would be reinstalled at Karaj in the "coming days." Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian reportedly said earlier Wednesday that Iran had "reached a good agreement" with the IAEA.

Tehran blamed the Karaj assault on Israel amid a widening regional shadow war since former U.S. president Donald Trump unilaterally withdrew America from Iran's landmark nuclear accord with world powers.

In an interview Tuesday with the AP, Grossi warned that limited access to Karaj hurt international efforts to monitor Iran's program.

"If the international community through us, through the IAEA, is not seeing clearly how many centrifuges or what is the capacity that they may have ... what you have is a very blurred image," Grossi said. "It will give you the illusion of the real image. But not the real image. This is why this is so important."

Grossi also dismissed as "simply absurd" an Iranian allegation that saboteurs used the IAEA's cameras in the attack on the Karaj centrifuge site. Tehran has offered no evidence to support the claim, though it's another sign of the friction between inspectors and Iran.

As part of Wednesday's deal, the IAEA said it would "make available a sample camera and related technical information to Iran for analysis by its relevant security and judiciary officials, in the presence of the agency inspectors."

However, Iran still will keep all recordings from the cameras — part of another ongoing dispute between the agency and Tehran sparked by the nuclear deal's collapse.

"The agency and Iran will continue to work on remaining outstanding safeguards issues with the aim of resolving them," the IAEA said.

Negotiations continue in Vienna over trying to restore the nuclear deal. However, Iran under hard-line President Ebrahim Raisi has taken a maximalist position in negotiations. Anxiety is growing among European nations at the negotiating table.

"Without swift progress, in light of Iran's fast-forwarding of its nuclear program, the (deal) will very soon become an empty shell," they recently warned.

The U.S. has remained outside of direct talks since abandoning the accord.

12.20.21

Denver 28-car pileup in 2019 - trucker given 110 years - truckers boycott Colorado

12.20.21

FATAL CRASH

Petition for truck driver given 110 years in fatal crash has 4.3M signatures; truckers show support

Monday, December 20, 2021 3:36PM

As the petition to reduce Rogel Aguilera-Mederos' 110-year sentence grows to 4.3 million signatures, truckers nationwide are also showing their solidarity by threatening to stop moving goods to and from Colorado.

There's growing outrage in Colorado, where a truck driver was sentenced to 110 years in prison for a deadly pileup crash that happened in 2019.

A petition on change.org has been set up for Rogel Aguilera-Mederos, urging that the truck driver's 110-year sentence be lowered, commuted for time served or for clemency to be granted.

As of Monday morning, more than 4.3 million people have signed that online petition. According to the website, if it reaches 4.5 million signatures, it will become the top signed petition ever on change.org, which is a popular petition website that offers people the ability to promote petitions they support.

Also, truckers nationwide are showing their solidarity by threatening to stop moving goods to and from Colorado, using hashtags like #NoTrucksColorado and #DontDriveColorado to spread awareness on social media.

In April 2019, Aguilera-Mederos was driving a semi tractor-trailer, traveling at 85 mph, when the brakes failed, he told investigators at the time. He tried to pull over to the shoulder to avoid stopped traffic, but another semi had already stopped there, according to an arrest affidavit.

This resulted in a fiery 28-car pileup that killed four people on a highway in Denver.

Aguilera-Mederos was sentenced last week after the 26-year-old was found guilty in October and convicted on vehicular homicide and 23 other charges.

"Your honor, I don't know why I'm alive." The Houston truck driver spoke emotionally in court as he was sentenced for a fiery crash that killed four people.

The other 23 charges included six counts of assault in the first degree -- extreme indifference; 10 counts of attempt to commit assault in the first degree -- extreme indifference; two counts of vehicular assault -- reckless; one count of reckless driving; and four counts of careless driving causing death.

Legal experts say because Colorado did away with the death penalty, life in prison is the harshest punishment possible.

"Once you have 23 felonies with mandatory minimums that are served consecutively, that can quickly add up," explained Ian Farrell, a law professor at the Sturm College of Law - University of Denver.

The change.org petition, which is titled "Offer commutation as time served, or grant clemency to Rogel Lazaro Aguilera-Mederos, 23" was created by a woman from Colorado who claims she has no relation to Aguilera-Mederos and is simply a supporter, according to the website.

"I made this petition because I am a native to Colorado, who believes this man is NOT a criminal and this was purely an accident," she wrote on a status update on Dec. 15. "I'm not related to Rogel, or any of his family, I simply believe that he doesn't deserve his sentence or these charges."

The petition goes on to say, "Rogel has said several times that he wishes he had the courage to crash and take his own life that day, this tragic accident wasn't done with Intent, it wasn't a criminal act, it was an accident."

A spokesperson for Colorado Gov. Jared Polis said, "We welcome an application" from the defense "and will expedite consideration."

Meantime, the families of those killed call the sentence appropriate under the law and say they're the real victims here. CNN contributed to this report.