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02.21.22

Probe clears Israel Police of Pegasus misuse; Likud rejects findings as unreliable

02.21.22

Probe clears Israel Police of misuse of NSO spyware

Justice Ministry review of alleged widespread hacking by police using NSO technology probed all police use of the spyware since it was first put into operation by the force;

Likud rejects findings calling them unreliable

Tova Tzimukij Updated: 02.21.22, 20:06

The investigative body in the Justice Ministry completed its review of the alleged illegal use of the Pegasus spyware by the police and found no evidence that there was wide spread misuse of the technology.

The allegations of police misuse of the spyware, first came to light in a report published by Ynet's sister organization Calcalist, which has said it stands behind the reporting.

"The investigative team with the assistance of technology experts from Israel's security agencies, completed a thorough review of all the data pertaining to the police tapping of devices using the Pegasus software, since it was first put into operation by the force, including the data stored in the NSO servers," the report stated.

"According to NSO, the police were not given any access into its system other than through its customer interface and therefore the information stored there, cannot be altered."

The probe did find misuse of the technology on the phone of Shlomo Filber, former director general of the communication's ministry who is a state witness in the corruption trial of former prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu. According to the report, investigated over stepped authority given to them by a court order.

Netanyahu is on trial for bribery, fraud and breach of trust.

The probe did find, however, that no material illegally obtained from Filber's devices was used by investigators in the course of his questioning by police or was provided as evidence against him or his former boss, Netanyahu.

The devices of the former PM's co-defendant Iris Elovich, wife of the communications mogul who is charged along with her husband with bribing Netanyahu, was hacked by the spyware but within the parameters of a court order.

Calcalist published consecutive investigative reports in which they asserted that the NSO spyware was systematically used against civilians, social activists and government officials, but offered no evidence of the claims.

Netanyahu's Likud party issued a statement on Monday after the findings were first published, claiming the findings were unreliable and that the Justice Ministry and the police cannot be trusted to conduct a credible investigation of the matter because they themselves may be implicated.

Netanyahu has long-claimed the charges against him were politically motivated and trumped up by former Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit, his office and the police.

02.21.22

Chairman Gideon Saar appointed first-ever Muslim as Supreme court justice

02.21.22

Israel appoints first-ever Muslim Supreme court justice

Khaled Kabuv (63) respected long serving Judge leaves position at head of District Court; chosen by committee among four new Justices after contentious selection; Justice Minister says balance of conservative and liberal justices achieved

Tovah Tzimukij Updated: 02.21.22, 19:28

Israel's Judicial Selection Committee announced Monday the appointment of four new justices to the Supreme Court, including the first-ever Muslim judge to sit in the country's highest court.

The four are Judge Ruth Ronen, Judge Gila Kanfei-Steinitz, private sector lawyer Yecheil Kasher and Judge Khaled Kabuv - Israel's first Muslim Supreme Court Justice.

The four's appointment comes amid efforts to reorganize the 15 justice body presiding over Israel's top court.

While Kasher and Kanfei-Steinitz - wife of MK Yuval Steinitz - are both viewed as moderate right-wingers, Ronen is considered a moderate-activist while Kabuv holds constitutional views.

"The Judicial Selection Committee bears heavy responsibility in selecting Israeli judges in general and in shaping the image of the Supreme Court in particular," said justice Minister Gideon Saar, who heads the selection committee and who brought forth the four as candidates.

"My proposal reflects the right choice according to the three metrics I have set: excellence, balance and diversity."

"This composition is diverse as it is balanced in terms of legal perceptions and reflects our diverse social mosaic," added Saar.

Interior Minister Ayelet Shaked, said: "I will admit and won't deny - if I had served as chairman of the committee today, the result would have been different."

"It's no secret that I wanted to appoint other judges during today's meeting," added Shaked, who opposed the appointment of Ronen and abstained from voting on Kabuv's appointment.

"The head of the committee, the justice minister, chose to lead a different line. He did however insist on the important principle of balance and that there should be two candidates for each side [of the political spectrum]," she added.

02.20.22

Gantz says Israel will 'never come to terms' with a nuclear Iran

02.20.22

Gantz says Israel will 'never come to terms' with a nuclear Iran

Speaking at the Munich Security Conference, defense minister says world powers must maintain surveillance of Tehran's uranium enrichment and prevent development of ballistic missiles capable of carrying nuclear warheads

Itamar Elchner | Published: 02.20.22, 15:03

Defense Minister Benny Gantz said on Sunday that Israel "will never come to terms" with Iran becoming a nuclear threshold state.

Speaking at the Munich Security Conference, Gantz said all steps must be taken "to ensure Iran never becomes a nuclear state".

Gantz said that an agreement that is likely to be signed between world powers and Iran in Vienna, that may come as soon as this week, cannot be the end of the efforts to stop Tehran from obtaining a nuclear weapon.

"Action must be taken to ensure that Iran does not continue to enrich in additional facilities and oversight must be increased," Gantz said, adding that IAEA must continue to monitor and investigate open files, referring to Iranian violations of the 2015 deal.

"Development of ballistic missiles capable of carrying nuclear warheads must be stopped," Gantz said.

"It is critical that the sunset clause is not understood as an expiration date that enables Iran to revisit its nuclear ambitions."

Gantz said Iran's aggressions go beyond its nuclear program and that it was behind attacks on, among others, Israel's regional partners.

"Iran takes over failed states, forcing them to defend Iranian interests while committing human rights violations," he said.

The defense minister accused Iran of endangering innocent civilians when it transports weapons systems to its proxies via the Syrian port of Latakia.

He also warned the Iran-backed Hezbollah group in Lebanon that **Israel** will defend its security and **if attacked** it **would respond forcefully** while holding Lebanon responsible. Earlier, Prime Minister Naftali Bennett told the cabinet the pending return of world's powers to the nuclear **deal with Iran will delay its plans** to acquire a weapon by **no more than 2.5 years**.

"Unless the deal includes an **extension of restrictions** [on uranium enrichment] on Iran - **due to expire in 2025** - stadium-full centrifuges will be put into action and in exchange Iran will receive **tens of billions of dollars in sanction relief**," he said.

**02.20.22**

**Congo to recover \$2 billion worth of royalty payments from Israeli investor**

**02.20.22**

**Congo to recover \$2 billion worth of assets from Israeli investor**

African country is close to a **deal** with Fleurette Group, controlled by Dan Gertler, who has been sanctioned by U.S. for leveraging his friendship with former Congo President Joseph Kabila **to secure lucrative mining deals**

Reuters| Published: **02.20.22**, 09:37

Democratic Republic of Congo said its close to a deal with Israeli owned Fleurette Group, a group of several companies owned by Dan Gertler, primarily engaged in natural resource development in Africa. This deal **could enable Congo to recover** mining and oil **assets** worth about **\$2 billion**.

In Friday's cabinet meeting, a commission was said to set up to negotiate with Fleurette Group and had concluded terms of a memorandum of understanding (MoU), what would enable the government to recover a substantial part of royalties from "Kamoto **Copper** Company" that were ceded to the group.

President Felix Tshisekedi directed the justice ministry to analyze and sign the MoU as soon as possible to enable Congo to recover full possession of the mining and oil assets. Fleurette Group could not be reached for comment.

The **U.S.** Treasury imposed **sanctions on Gertler** and **more than 30 of his businesses** in December 2017 and June 2018, accusing him of **leveraging his friendship with former Congo President** Joseph Kabila **to secure** lucrative mining **deals**.

Gertler denies any wrongdoing.

Anti-corruption group "**Congo is Not for Sale**" (CNPAV), which has previously warned the mineral-rich **country could lose** out on **\$1.76 billion in** potential **royalty payments** **from copper and cobalt** mining deals with Gertler's Group, said in a statement the potential MoU was a first step.

"For years we have been screaming loud and clear that Congo has already lost billions due to deals with Dan Gertler and it will only get worse if nothing is done," CNPAV spokesman Jean-Claude Mputu said in a statement.

He added there were still some crucial aspects of the deal to be clarified, particularly details of the MoU, and the final destination of the assets that will be recovered.

02.17.22

Israel citing bias; UN chief Pillay brands Israel an apartheid nation & backs PA

02.17.22

Israel, citing 'bias,' won't cooperate with UN rights team

Israel claims it is the only country in the world whose rights record comes up for discussion at every council session; also raised concerns about the council's makeup, saying it includes countries with poor rights records or open hostility toward it  
Associated Press| Updated: 02.17.22, 22:26

Israel on Thursday formally announced it would not cooperate with a special commission formed by the United Nations' top human rights body to investigate alleged abuses against Palestinians, saying the probe and its chairwoman were unfairly biased against Israel.

The decision, delivered in a scathing letter to the commission's head, Navi Pillay, further strained what already is a tense relationship between Israel and the U.N.-backed Human Rights Council in Geneva.

"It is obvious to my country, as it should be to any fair-minded observer, that there is simply no reason to believe that Israel will receive reasonable, equitable and non-discriminatory treatment from the Council, or from this Commission of Inquiry," said the letter, signed by Meirav Eilon Shahaar, Israel's ambassador to the U.N. and international organizations in Geneva.

The council established the three-person investigative commission last May, days after an 11-day war between Israel and Hamas militants in the Gaza Strip. Over 260 Palestinians, including scores of women and children, and 14 Israelis were killed in the fighting. At the time, the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, said that Israeli actions, including airstrikes in civilian areas, might have constituted war crimes.

Since then, a number of international rights groups, including Human Rights Watch, have said Israeli attacks appear to have constituted war crimes. Both Bachelet and HRW have also said that indiscriminate Hamas rocket fire at Israeli cities also violated the international laws of war.

Israel blames Hamas for civilian casualties, saying the group uses residential areas for cover while carrying out military activities. Many rockets were fired from neighborhoods.

But the commission's responsibilities go well beyond the Gaza war. A "Commission of Inquiry" is the most potent tool of scrutiny of rights violations and abuse at the council's disposal. The assigned mandate of this one is to monitor alleged rights violations in Israel, Gaza, and the occupied West Bank. It is the first such commission to have an "ongoing" mandate.

Israel has long accused the United Nations, and particularly the Human Rights Council, of bias.

Israel is the only country in the world whose rights record comes up for discussion at every council session. Israel has also raised concerns about the council's makeup, saying it includes countries with poor rights records or open hostility toward Israel. China, Cuba, Eritrea, Pakistan, Venezuela, and a number of Arab countries sit on the 47-member council.

Israel also has repeatedly rejected international calls for investigations into its wartime conduct and treatment of the Palestinians. The International Criminal Court in the Hague has opened an investigation into possible Israeli and Hamas war crimes -- a probe that Israel says is motivated by antisemitism and part of an international campaign to "delegitimize" it.

"This COI is sure to be yet another sorry chapter in the efforts to demonize the State of Israel," Eilon Shahaar said.

Her letter took personal aim at Pillay, who is a predecessor of Bachelet as U.N. human rights chief. It said Pillay, a former South African judge, has endorsed "the shameful libel" branding Israel an apartheid nation and backed the international Palestinian-led boycott movement against Israel.

The ambassador was responding to a Dec. 29 letter from Pillay to Israel's government, obtained by The Associated Press, asking Israel to "reconsider its position of non-cooperation" expressed after the commission was created. Pillay wrote that the commission would "need" to visit Israel and occupied Palestinian areas and requested a visit in the last week of March. She said the commission sought to travel along with six to eight staffers.

The ambassador's letter all but ensures the commission will not obtain such access or Israeli government cooperation.

Opponents of Pillay have highlighted what they allege is an anti-Israel bias shown by her. That included, for example, comments she made in 2017 to an interviewer about the definition of "apartheid" as a crime against humanity under the International Criminal Court's Rome Statute. She said that "it means the enforced segregation of people on racial lines, and that is happening in Israel."

Pillay also had said: "The government of Israel really resents a comparison between apartheid South Africa and Israel."

She has not responded publicly to allegations of anti-Israel bias that emerged since her appointment. The commission said in an e-mail to the AP on Thursday that its members "do not intend to make public statements nor publicize their communications between the concerned parties so as to preserve the integrity of the work they are carrying out."

The council president, Ambassador Federico Villegas of Argentina, defended the selection of the commission members — which also include Chris Sidoti of Australia and Miloon Kothari of India — saying the president “places the utmost importance on examining the independence and impartiality of each member in order to ensure the objectivity of the body” and considers their skills and experience in appointing its members.

A growing number of rights groups, including Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and local Israeli groups, have said that Israeli treatment of Palestinians, including its own Arab minority, amounts to apartheid. Israel vociferously rejects the label as antisemitic.

02.17.22

Ukraine urges Israel to condemn Russian aggression as Embassy moves west

02.17.22

Ukraine summons Israel envoy amid FM appeal to Russia

Foreign Ministry says conversation with Russians meant to deliver a message of de-escalation and express concern over the security of Israeli personnel; Ukraine expresses disappointment that Jerusalem neglects to condemn Russian aggression  
Itamar Eichner | Published: 02.17.22, 21:05

The Israeli ambassador to Ukraine Michael Brodsky was summoned to the Foreign Ministry in Kyiv in protest of Foreign Ministry Director General Alon Ushpiz's approach to Russia to assist in ensuring the safety of Israelis in Ukraine, should that country be invaded.

Ukraine said Israel appeared to have come to terms with a Russian invasion and expressed disappointment that Jerusalem neglected to condemn Russian aggression.

The Foreign Ministry said that the conversation had two goals: To deliver a message of de-escalation and to express concern over the security of Israeli personnel and diplomats in the country.

On Wednesday Brodsky said that a Russian invasion is still possible, and called the Israelis that are left in Ukraine to leave.

Brodsky estimated that some 3,000 Israelis left Ukraine so far, out of approximately 10,000 that live there.

"I believe that complacency is misleading and there is a real danger in according to our assessment. We can't afford to take a risk, even if there's a small chance of Russian military action or the beginning of an extensive military operation," he said. "We prefer that the Israelis return to our country and stay safe and we will deal with the problems."



Meanwhile, Israel's assessment of the likelihood of war in Ukraine has not changed - and all indications still show that there is a great concern for immediate escalation.

In consultations at the Foreign Ministry on Wednesday, officials expressed concern over the complacency of Israelis who remained in country.

The ministry also established a temporary office in Levov, Western Ukraine, and its goal is to provide an emergency consular response, and in case the embassy in Kyiv, will have to be evacuated.

02.17.22

IDF downed Hezbollah areal surveillance UAV breaching border from Lebanon

02.17.22

Israel downs Hezbollah drone over northern Galilee

UAV taken down after breaching border into northern Israel, by electronic means while on what IDF perceives as an intelligence gathering operation using areal photography;

Yoav Zitun| Updated: 02.17.22, 18:47

The IDF on Thursday, downed a Hezbollah UAV over northern Israel after it crossed the border from Lebanon, the military spokesperson said.

"The drone was detected and under observation of forces during the entire incident," the IDF said adding Israel will continue to operate in order to prevent "any attempt to violate Israeli sovereignty."

Initial investigation revealed the drone belonged to the Hezbollah special forces unit that is expected to take part in infiltrations into Israeli territory should fighting break out. It was taken down using electronic warfare while on what the IDF believes was an intelligence gathering mission using aerial photography.

On Wednesday, the leader of the Iran backed Hezbollah group, Hassan Nasrallah, in a televised speech to followers, said that his organization had been producing UAV's for a long time and that they were available for sale.

Nasrallah also said the Hezbollah group was able to transform standard rockets into precision missiles with the cooperation of "experts from the Islamic Republic of Iran".

Such production, he said was spurred by arch-foe Israel's increased use of drone technology, he said.

There was no immediate Israeli response to Nasrallah's statements.

While the Israeli military outguns Hezbollah guerrillas, Israel worries that in a future war they could use precision-guided missiles to knock out parts of its national infrastructure like ports or power stations.

02.15.22

Navy examines Israeli robot boats for US fleet, while hosting Bennett in Bahrain

02.15.22

U.S. Navy eyes Israeli robot boats as Bennett visits Bahrain, official says  
American official says the Fifth Fleet is examining dozens of unmanned vessels, with an interest in Israeli-made surface drones, for its Gulf-based exercises, a move which may expand Israel's involvement in military operations in the region  
Reuters| Published: 02.15.22, 13:01

The U.S. Navy is considering adding unmanned Israeli boats to its Middle East operations, a U.S. official said, a move that could deepen Israel's growing role in regional military arrangements as it normalizes ties with former foes in the Gulf.

Bahrain, home to the U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet and several international naval task forces, is hosting a visit by Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, the first by an Israeli leader following the 2020 normalization of ties between the two states.

Israel is due to become the 29th country to post an attache to the fleet's Manama headquarters, officials said, adding the as-yet unnamed envoy would likely be of navy captain or commander rank.

"It's about keeping the lines of communication open" bilaterally between Israel and the fleet, a U.S. official said, referring to the plan to station the envoy in the Gulf kingdom. Israel has not formally confirmed the appointment. Fleet chief Vice Admiral Brad Cooper met Bennett on Tuesday, with Bennett telling Cooper he expected "the cooperation among the region's countries and powerful ally the United States will keep getting closer", Bennett's office said.

The U.S. official said the fleet was examining dozens of unmanned vessels as part of current Gulf exercises, and it was interested in Israeli-made surface drones as possible complements to flying and underwater drones.

"The Israelis are definitely vested in leveraging this technology," the official said, adding that a fleet commander had in recent weeks visited Haifa in Israel to study the surface drones.

An Israeli military spokeswoman had no immediate comment.

In November, forces from the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Israel and the Bahrain-based U.S. Naval Forces Central Command (NAVCENT) took part in a security exercise in the Red Sea, the first publicly acknowledged naval exercise between the United States, Israel and the two Gulf countries.

Bennett described his two-day Manama trip as a chance to forge a common stand against Iran and its allies like Yemen's Houthis, whose attacks on the UAE this year have jarred the oil-producing region.

Sunni-ruled Bahrain accuses Sh'ite Iran of stoking unrest in Bahrain, a charge Tehran denies. Bennett is due to meet Bahrain's King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa and other officials to discuss bilateral relations on Tuesday.

Earlier this month, Israel and Bahrain signed a security cooperation agreement, Israel's first with a Gulf nation.

"Israel and Bahrain are dealing with major security challenges stemming from the same source; the Islamic Republic of Iran," Bennett told Bahraini newspaper Alayam on Tuesday.

Bahrain, a small island state striving to fix its heavily indebted finances, is a close ally of Saudi Arabia - with whom Israel has no formal relationship.

02.15.22

Philippine police foil Hamas recruiting Malaysia & Filipino terrorists to kill Israelis

02.15.22

Philippines police foil alleged Hamas plot targeting Israelis

East Asian country's law enforcement body says Palestinian terrorist group attempted to 'establish a foothold in the Philippines' in order to groom locals to carry out attacks against Israelis

Ynet| Published: 02.15.22, 12:07

The Philippine National Police (PNP) on Tuesday uncovered an alleged Hamas plot to "establish a foothold" in the East Asian country by inciting violence against Israelis there.

The report, which was published in the Philippine Daily Inquirer, said that the plot was unveiled through a piece of information revealed by a local contact of a Palestinian-based group in the country.

The PNP, citing a report made by Intelligence Group Director Police Brigadier General Neil Alinsangan said: "Our Filipino source identified the Hamas operative as 'Bashir' who was reportedly attempting to establish a foothold in the Philippines with pledges of financial support to some local terrorist groups, including militant extremists with links to the international terrorist organizations.

Coordination and information sharing with foreign and local counterparts disclosed that Bashir's real name is Fares Al Shikli, who allegedly heads Hamas's Foreign Liaison Section. He has also an Interpol Red Notice and is charged with an Offense of Terrorism Logistic Support."

The PNP also revealed that the Filipino source made several trips to Malaysia between 2016 and 2018, where he met "Bashir" to discuss the possibility of staging attacks against Israelis in the country in exchange for financial assistance from Hamas.

“It was in 2016 that Fares Al Shikli started grooming him as a local contact in the Philippines and introduced him to theoretical bomb-making training in one of their meetings in Malaysia. In late 2017, Fares Al Shikli expressed his intention with the source to recruit Filipinos with links to local threat groups that will be utilized to kill Jews present in the country, conduct rallies at selected embassies, and spread video propaganda in exchange for financial support,” the PNP said.

02.15.22

Israel refuses Iron Dome sale to Ukraine; congress may deliver the US arsenal

02.15.22

Israel refuses sale of Iron Dome missile defense system to Ukraine

Sale of sought after technology to Kyiv places Israel in confrontation with Moscow; in unofficial talks with Israeli officials, Washington convinced by Jerusalem's argument Nadav Eyal | Updated: 02.15.22, 08:54

In an effort to avoid at all cost, Israeli involvement in the crisis between Russia and Ukraine, Israel refused to sell the Iron Dome missile defense system to Kyiv in order not to annoy the Russians.

Israeli efforts over the summer, took the possible sale of the advanced technology off the table to the disappointment of Kyiv.

The matter demonstrates the predicament Jerusalem finds itself in, since Russian deployment in Syria means the two countries in fact share a border.

The government believes the Biden administration and congressional leaders understand the need for Israel to tread lightly, and exhibit a "responsible and sensitive" behavior, when it comes to supplying its defensive weapon, according to sources.

The Iron Dome missile defense system was developed jointly by Israel with the Pentagon. The agreement between the two nations does not allow for the sale of the technology to third parties without mutual consent.

Its popularity in the wake of the May 2021 military conflict with Hamas, led Ukraine, among others, to desire its purchase.

Kyiv began a pressure campaign on law makers in Washington to facilitate a deal. The Ukrainians also officially requested the U.S. to deploy American patriot missile systems and the Iron Dome in their territory last spring, before a Russian invasion of the country became a real possibility.

The Biden administration and members of Congress from both parties, were inclined to adopt a more aggressive position over Russia's continued aggressions in eastern Ukraine. But some in Congress, wanting to exert more pressure on Biden, have included an amendment attached to the 2022 defense bill that would pressure the White House to sell or transfer air and missile defense systems to Ukraine, including the Iron Dome.

“Given the desire and bipartisan recognition that more needs to be done on the integrated air defense front for the Ukrainians, and given some of the administration's policy decisions towards Ukraine recently, there's a **desire to** try and **do more** to help them **than what the Biden team is doing**,” said the staffer, who spoke on condition of anonymity, Politico reported last September.

The amendment required the **Pentagon** to submit a report to Congress outlining options for the **potential sale or transfer of “existing systems” to Ukraine**.

According to Politico, the U.S. **purchased two** batteries from the Rafael Defense Industries, that are currently being prepared **to be operational next year**.

The system is not integrated into the U.S. anti-missile defenses, military sources said in the report.

This placed **Israel** in a complicated position. It **could refuse the U.S.** request to **supply** Ukraine with the technology, or risk confrontation with Russia.

**Israel informed the administration** in unofficial talks, that it **could not agree to such a move** given its relationship with Moscow.

Ukraine then approached the Bennett government directly. Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba told Kan Public Broadcasting in an interview earlier this month of his governments' desire to purchase the defensive system as well as their request from the U.S. to receive a Patriot Missile battery.

Washington was convinced by Israel's arguments and **the possible sale was taken off the table**.

**02.17.22**

**Russia provoking Ukraine to battle, firing shells across the ceasefire line**

**02.17.22**

**U.S. says Russia inching troops closer to Ukraine, stocking up on blood supplies**  
**Moscow denies it is planning to invade** its neighbor and said this week it was pulling back some troops but private U.S. company **satellite** images **show** new **Russian hardware** **arrives at border area**

Reuters| Published: **02.17.22**, 16:03

The United States has seen **Russia stocking up** on blood supplies, inching troops closer to Ukraine's borders and flying in more combat aircraft, U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said on Thursday, dismissing Moscow claims of withdrawal.

"I was a soldier myself not that long ago. I know firsthand that you don't do these sorts of things for no reason," said Austin, a retired Army general. "And you certainly don't do them if you're getting ready to pack up and go home."

Moscow denies it is planning to invade its neighbor and said this week it was pulling back some troops. Russia's defense ministry released video it said showed more departing units.

Maxar Technologies, a private U.S. company that has been tracking the build-up, said satellite images showed that while Russia has pulled back some military equipment from near Ukraine, other hardware has arrived.

"We see them fly in more combat and support aircraft. We see them sharpen their readiness in the Black Sea," Austin said. "We even see them stocking up their blood supplies."

Reuters was first to report that Russia had moved blood supplies toward Ukraine's borders, and Austin's remarks appeared to be the first public confirmation of that intelligence.

World powers are engaged in one of the deepest crises in East-West relations for decades, jostling over post-Cold War influence and energy supplies as Moscow wants to stop Ukraine from ever joining the NATO military alliance.

Russian-backed rebels and Ukrainian forces traded accusations on Thursday of firing shells across the ceasefire line in eastern Ukraine, and Kyiv said the incidents looked like a "provocation" at a time when Russia has troops massed on the frontier.

Austin, speaking at NATO headquarters in Brussels, said the reports of shelling were concerning.

"We are still gathering details but we have said for some time that the Russians might do something like this in order to justify a military conflict," he told a news conference. He said the alliance would explore ways to increase its military readiness since Moscow's deployment "brings Russian troops right up to NATO's doorstep".

He also renewed U.S. warnings about potential false-flag operations by Russia to justify an attack, "a play we've seen them run in the past".

"So, we and our allies will stay vigilant," Austin said.

Austin is set to travel next to Poland, where he will meet U.S. troops. He noted Bulgaria agreed on Thursday to host a U.S. Army Stryker company for joint training.

02.17.22

US-Iran Draft deal enrichment 3.67%, unfreeze \$7 billion, release prisoners

02.17.22

Draft nuclear deal: Uranium enrichment cap of 5%, no waivers on sanctions - diplomats  
The draft text of the agreement includes release of Iranian funds held under U.S. sanctions in South Korea and release of Western prisoners held in Iran before further steps

Reuters| Published: 02.17.22, 21:14

A U.S.-Iranian deal taking shape to revive Iran's 2015 nuclear agreement with world powers lays out phases of mutual steps to bring both sides back into full compliance, and the first does not include waivers on oil sanctions, diplomats say.

Envoys from Iran, Russia, China, Britain, France, Germany, the European Union and the United States are still negotiating details of the draft accord amid Western warnings that time is running out before the original deal becomes obsolete. Delegates say much of the text is settled but some thorny issues remain.

The broad objective is to return to the original bargain of lifting sanctions against Iran, including ones that have slashed its crucial oil sales, in exchange for restrictions on its nuclear activities that extend the time it would need to produce enough enriched uranium for an atomic bomb if it chose to.

Iran has breached many of those restrictions and pushed well beyond them in response to the U.S. withdrawal from the deal in 2018 and its re-imposition of sanctions under then-President Donald Trump. While the 2015 deal capped uranium enrichment at 3.67% fissile purity, Iran is now enriching to up to 60%, close to weapons-grade. Iran insists its aims are wholly peaceful and that it wants to master nuclear technology for civil uses. But Western powers say no other state has enriched to such a high level without developing nuclear weapons and Iran's advances since the U.S. walkout mean the 2015 deal will soon be totally hollowed out.

The draft text of the agreement, which is more than 20 pages long, stipulates a sequence of steps to be implemented once it has been approved by the remaining parties to the deal, starting with a phase including Iran suspending enrichment above 5% purity, three diplomats familiar with negotiations said.

The text also alludes to other measures that diplomats say include unfreezing some \$7 billion in Iranian funds stuck in South Korean banks under U.S. sanctions, as well as the release of Western prisoners held in Iran, which U.S. lead negotiator Robert Malley has suggested is a requirement for a deal.

Only once that initial wave of measures has been taken and confirmed would the main phase of sanctions-lifting begin, culminating in what many diplomats call Re-Implementation Day - a nod to the original deal's Implementation Day, when the last nuclear and sanctions-related measures fell into place.

The duration of these phases has not yet been agreed upon, and the text includes an X for the number of days between the milestone days such as Re-Implementation Day, diplomats say. Various officials have estimated the time from an agreement until Re-Implementation Day at between one and three months.

Iran will return to core nuclear limits like the 3.67% cap on enrichment purity, diplomats said.

As in the original deal, officially called the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the new agreement entails the United States granting waivers to sanctions on Iran's

lifeline **oil sector** rather than lifting them outright. That requires **renewing** the **waivers every few months**.

"On oil exports, under the deal, (former U.S. President Barack) Obama and Trump used to issue 90- to 120-day waivers and renewed them consistently until Trump stopped after exiting the pact. Those waivers have been agreed to be issued again," a Middle Eastern diplomat briefed on the talks said.

Diplomats involved in the **talks**, which **began 10 months ago**, have said it remains unclear whether an agreement will indeed be reached, citing the now **hackneyed principle that nothing is agreed until everything is agreed**.

French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian said on Wednesday **Iran must decide** within a matter of days whether **to take the leap**, and other officials have said the **next couple of days will be crucial**.

Stubborn **issues** that **remain** include **Iran's demand** that the United States **guarantee it will not withdraw again**. Western **officials say** this is impossible to give an iron-clad assurance on given the difficulty in **binding future governments**.

The Middle Eastern diplomat and an Iranian official indicated, however, that **Tehran** was prepared to accept a lesser measure - **that in the event of a U.S. violation** of the pact, **Iran** would be allowed to enrich to up to 60% purity again.

The Islamic Republic and Western powers have previously clashed over whether the U.S. withdrawal gave Iran the right to breach the deal under the original text, as Tehran did, as well as over what constitutes a breach.

The **lifting** of some particularly sensitive **sanctions** could also **require Iranian and U.S. officials to meet directly**, several diplomats have said. **Iran has so far refused face-to-face meetings**. Any such move would happen at the end of negotiations, the Iranian and Middle Eastern officials said.

02.14.22

**King & 200 Jordanians demand probe into hacking by NSO Pegasus spyware**

02.14.22

**Jordanian official demands probe into hacking using Israeli spyware**

**Calls for investigation follow reports some 200 Jordanians' phones hacked**, including royal **court members and activists**; top lawmaker says Jordan never purchased NSO's spyware, alleges **source of hacking outside kingdom**

Daoud Kuttab/The Media Line| Published: 02.14.22, 17:19

A senior Jordanian official has called on his government to create a committee to investigate the phone hacking of nearly 200 Jordanian activists, journalists, human rights activists, and even government officials — believed to have been carried out **using Israeli-developed spyware**.



Senator Mustafa Hamarneh, a member of Jordan's elite upper house — often called the King's Council — and a former director of the University of Jordan's Center for Strategic Studies, said Monday that the hacking **attack is worrisome and answers are needed.**

“What is needed is an investigative commission that can find ways to defend our basic human rights and our privacy, which is guaranteed by the constitution, the official said.

“It should investigate this issue now that it has become **public knowledge.** The **government can ask Apple for the list** and what they know about this hacking. These are questions that need to be answered,” he said.

Hamarnah appears to dismiss any domestic role in the hacking.

“I am told that the Jordanian government has never bought this Pegasus software and the fact that the **royal court and the Olympic committee's phones were hacked** means that this is most likely an outside effort that probably **even included His Majesty's phone,**” Hamarneh said, referring to the **Israeli cybersecurity company NSO's Pegasus** spyware that reportedly **has been used by certain governments around the world** to spy on human rights activists, politicians and journalists.

The Jordanian public has been abuzz with the story after the popular website Ammon News revealed that among the **80,000 phones** that were **hacked by Pegasus were 200 Jordanian phones.**

Samir Hiari, the publisher of Ammon News said that his journalists began looking into the issue after being contacted by an investigative journalist from a major international news agency.

He said that his team was able to determine from sources that “a little bit less than 200 — among them royal court and Olympic committee members and activists — were victims of the hacking, which included scrapping everything on their phones, including WhatsApp content, messages, photos, videos, and text messages.”

Hamarnah added that **he ignored a warning** that came to him **from Apple** about a potential security breach **last November** but **paid attention** to the breach **when contacted by a Reuters journalist** who was doing a report on the subject.

“I received a note from Apple on November 11, 2021, and I **didn't pay attention** because I have always known that I may be listened to. Then I got a call from an investigative reporter and he **said** that my **phone has been consistently hacked** and that they took my photos and WhatsApp and contact list by **operating my mic and camera,**” he said.

Hamarnah said that the reporter informed him that couldn't find a pattern in which Jordanian officials were hacked. “He said ‘you are the only one that is a prominent politician’ and that the list included a handful of human rights lawyers, bank officials, owners of companies, the Olympic committee, and even the royal court,” Hamarnah said. Deema Alam Farraj, a social media activist who goes by the handle **@deema22** and has **419,000 followers on Twitter,** said she was **also contacted by Apple** about a potential security breach and paid little attention to **the alert** at the time.

“I received the warnings from Apple and I didn’t pay attention to it. They told us that there was a problem and asked to reset the phone completely. Later Reuters called me and they said ‘your name is listed’ and this is what was shocking. What was strange is that I never thought someone would waste time, money and effort to hack my phone,” she said.

Farraj complained that what upset her the most is the broad amount of information that was taken from her phone “My privacy was broken. I have nothing dangerous, but my personal issues, photos, videos and contacts were all hacked,” she said. “My rights were violated and I don’t know what to do. I don’t want people I talk to getting in trouble. This act of hacking my phone is totally unethical.”

The social media activist said that the reason she announced that she was hacked is to protect herself even though she does not know who is behind it.

“I hope that the government of Jordan defends me and all other citizens of our country. It was an unethical act and if you have a problem with anyone this is not the way to settle your differences. My biggest problem is that I don’t know who did this and who is against me. If I knew I would be at comfort and would know who is my enemy and would deal with it,” she said.

02.14.22

Egypt steps up rebuilding Gaza role, to force Hamas' conformity from violence

02.14.22

Egypt steps up Gaza role after brokering last year's truce

With Egyptian flags and billboards praising Cairo adorning Gaza's ruined streets, Egypt hopes to present itself as a Mideast peacemaker, and blunt efforts by the U.S. to hold the country accountable for human rights abuses

Associated Press | Published: 02.14.22, 10:35

After years of working behind-the-scenes to aid and ensure stability in the Gaza Strip, Egypt announced is going public.

Since mediating a cease-fire between Israel and Gaza's ruling Hamas militant group, Egypt has sent crews to clear rubble and is promising to build vast new apartment complexes. Egyptian flags and billboards praising President Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi have sprung up across the Palestinian territory.

It is a new look for the Egyptians, who have spent years working quietly to encourage Israel-Hamas truce talks and reconciliation between rival Palestinian factions.

The shift could help prevent -- or at least delay -- another round of violence. By presenting itself as a Mideast peacemaker, Egypt could also blunt efforts by the Biden

administration and some U.S. lawmakers to hold the country accountable for human rights abuses.

The 11-day Gaza war last May "allowed Egypt to once again market itself as an indispensable security partner for Israel in the region" which it is "which in turn makes it an indispensable security partner for the U.S.," said Hafsa Halawa, an expert on Egypt at the Middle East Institute, a Washington think tank.

"Gaza is a reminder to everybody, effectively, that you can't really do anything without Egypt," she said.

The expanded aid, along with its control over Rafah -- the only Gaza border crossing that bypasses Israel -- gives Egypt leverage over Hamas, the Islamic militant group that has ruled Gaza since driving out forces loyal to the internationally recognized Palestinian Authority in 2007.

After negotiating the informal cease-fire that ended the Gaza war, Egypt pledged \$500 million to rebuild the territory and sent work crews to remove rubble.

While it remains unclear how much of that money has been delivered, Egypt is now subsidizing the construction of three towns that are to house some 300,000 residents, according to Naji Sarhan, the deputy director of the Hamas-run Housing Ministry. Work is also under way to upgrade Gaza's main coastal road. Sarhan said the projects will take a year and a half to complete.

"We hope there will be large bundles of projects in the near future, especially the towers that were destroyed in the war," he said.

Israel leveled four high-rises during the fighting, saying they housed Hamas military infrastructure. It has not publicly released evidence backing up the claims, which Hamas denies. The construction materials will be shipped through Rafah.

Alaa al-Araj, of the Palestinian contractors' union, said nine Palestinian companies will take part in the Egyptian projects, which would generate some 16,000 much-needed jobs in the impoverished territory.

The Egyptian presence is palpable. Nearly every week, Egyptian delegations visit Gaza to inspect the work. They have also opened an office at a Gaza City hotel for permanent technical representatives.

Egyptian flags and banners of Egyptian companies flutter atop bulldozers, trucks and utility poles. Dozens of Egyptian workers have arrived, sleeping at a makeshift hostel in a Gaza City school.

Suhail Saqqa, a Gaza contractor involved in the reconstruction, said the steady flow of Egyptian materials is critical.

"The goods are not restricted by Israeli crossings, and this makes them momentous," Saqqa said.

The projects are part of a broader realignment after years in which Gaza was caught in a tug-of-war among Arab states following the upheaval of the 2011 Arab Spring protests. The Egyptian leader el-Sissi initially adopted a hard-line stance against Hamas, Egypt is now cooperating with Qatar to deliver aid that helps the Hamas government pay its civil servants.

The growing Egyptian role gives Cairo a powerful tool to enforce Hamas' compliance with the truce. It can close Rafah whenever it wants, making it nearly impossible for anyone to travel into or out of Gaza, which is home to more than 2 million Palestinians. Egypt "can suffocate Gaza in a moment" if its demands are not met, said Maged Mandour, an Egyptian political analyst.

That might be enough to prevent another outbreak of hostilities in the near term. But it doesn't address the underlying conflict that has fueled four wars between Israel and Hamas and countless skirmishes over the last 15 years.

"Egypt wants understandings or even pressure on Hamas so the situation won't explode," said Talal Oukal, a Gaza-based political analyst.

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Ynet-News, Feb 14, 2022 – Monday

02.14.22 – Mo- - - News

Israelis mount COVID 'Freedom Convoy' over mask & vaccination mandates

02.14.22 – Mo- - - News      Placed in Feb 16 spot – Wednesday

Nancy Pelosi set to visit Israel on Wednesday

02.13.22 – Su- - - News      Placed in Feb 15 spot – Tuesday

Hamas factions using social networks to ignite all PA over East Jerusalem evictions

02.13.22 – Su- - - News

Lapid to Israelis in Ukraine: Get out before the situation gets complicated

02.13.22 – Su- - - News      Placed in Feb 14 spot – Monday

NSO "audit log" database not a full response to court, as classified numbers are omitted

02.13.22 – Su- - - News

Hamas warns; East Jerusalem evictions next month may lead to violence

02.13.22 – Su- - - News

Sudan top general met with Israel, sharing intelligence on militants in his country

02.12.22 – Sa- - - News

Report: Putin decided to invade Ukraine, Biden tells NATO, EU

02.13.22 – Su- - - News      Placed in Feb 13 spot – Sunday

Riots after MK opens makeshift police office in Jewish neighborhood of PA violence