

Newsletter Tuesday January 15, 2019

Newsletters from:

Send to a Friend

| Print

Iran ignores US and proceeds with satellite launch, which fails

Netanyahu: Iran is trying to launch an international ballistic missile, not a satellite • U.S. had warned Tehran rocket launch would violate U.N. Security Council resolution because its ballistic missile technology can be used to launch warheads.

Reuters and Israel Hayom Staff

The Payam satellite is launched in Iran, Tuesday | Photo: Reuters

Iran's bid to launch a satellite has failed, the country's Information and Communications Technology Minister Mohammad Javad Azari-Jahromi said on Tuesday, after it ignored U.S. warnings to avoid such activity.

Washington warned Tehran this month against undertaking three planned rocket launches that it said would violate a U.N. Security Council resolution because they use ballistic missile technology.

Video: Reuters

The United States is concerned that the long-range ballistic technology used to put satellites into orbit can also be used to launch warheads.

Iran has said its space vehicle launches and missile tests were not violations and would continue.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu spoke out about the failed launch at a ceremony to inaugurate the new IDF Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Aviv Kochavi in Jerusalem, Tuesday.

"Iran is lying when it says it now wants to launch a satellite into space. In practice, it is trying to launch an intercontinental missile," Netanyahu said.

Under the U.N. Security Council resolution that enshrined Iran's 2015 nuclear deal with world powers - which Washington pulled out of last spring - the country is "called upon" to refrain from work on ballistic missiles designed to deliver nuclear weapons for up to eight years.

Azari-Jahromi said that the satellite, named Payam, failed in the third stage of the launch because it "did not reach adequate speed," according to a report on the ministry's website.

The satellite was intended to be used for imaging and communications purposes and was mounted with four cameras, according to the report.

The satellite was planned to stay at an altitude of 500 km for approximately three years.

Another satellite named Doosti is waiting to be launched, Azari-Jahromi wrote in a Twitter post.

"We should not come up short or stop," Azari-Jahromi tweeted after announcing the failed launch. "It's exactly in these circumstances that we Iranians are different than other people in spirit and bravery."

On Monday, information and technology company ImageSat International published satellite images of Iran preparing for the launch of two satellites to space through the use of ballistic missiles, despite warning from the U.S. against moving forward with the launch. The satellite images also showed trucks at the site and one truck, already carrying the missile, adjacent to the launch pad. It was also revealed that a portable rocket launcher was installed at the site.

Iran launched its first domestically built satellite, the OMID ("Hope") research and telecommunications satellite in 2009, on the 30th anniversary of the country's 1979 Islamic Revolution.

Newsletter Monday January 14, 2019

Newsletters from:

Send to a Friend

| Print

[Iran exploring new uranium enrichment, nuclear chiefs say](#)

Head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran, Ali Akbar Salehi, tells state TV that preliminary work on a process to enrich uranium to the 20% level needed for civilian fuel has begun • Does appearance signal that Iran is restarting its nuclear program?

Associated Press and Israel Hayom Staff

Iranian nuclear chief Ali Akbar Salehi | Photo: AP

The head of Iran's nuclear program said Sunday that the Islamic Republic has begun "preliminary activities for [designing](#)" a modern process for 20% uranium enrichment for its 50-year-old research reactor in Tehran, signaling new danger for the nuclear deal.

Restarting enrichment at that level would mean Iran had withdrawn from the 2015 nuclear deal it struck with world powers, an accord that U.S. President Donald Trump already pulled America out of in May.

However, Ali Akbar Salehi's comments to state television appeared aimed at telling the world Iran would slowly restart its program. If it chooses, it could resume mass enrichment at its main facility in the central Iranian town of Natanz.

"Preliminary activities for designing modern 20% (enriched uranium) fuel have begun," state TV quoted Salehi as saying.

Salehi said adding the "modern fuel" will increase efficiency in the Tehran research reactor that consumes 20% enriched fuel.

"We are on the verge" of being ready, he said, without elaborating.

In June, Iran informed the U.N.'s nuclear watchdog that it will increase its nuclear enrichment capacity within the limits set by the 2015 agreement with world powers. Iran continues to comply with the terms of the deal, according to the U.N., despite the American pullout.

Salehi heads the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran, whose Tehran campus holds the nuclear research reactor given to the country by the U.S. in 1967 under the rule of the shah. But in the time since that American "Atoms for Peace" donation, Iran was convulsed by its 1979 Islamic Revolution and the subsequent takeover and hostage crisis at the U.S. Embassy in Tehran.

For decades since, Western nations have been concerned about Iran's nuclear program, accusing Tehran of seeking atomic weapons. Iran long has said its program is for peaceful purposes, but it faced years of crippling sanctions.

The 2015 nuclear deal Iran struck with world powers, including the U.S. under former President Barack Obama, was aimed at relieving those fears. Under it, Iran agreed to store its excess centrifuges at its underground Natanz enrichment facility under constant surveillance by the U.N. nuclear watchdog, the International Atomic Energy Agency. Iran can use 5,060 older-model IR-1 centrifuges at Natanz, but only to enrich uranium up to 3.67%.

That low-level enrichment means the uranium can be used to fuel a civilian reactor but is far below the 90% needed to produce a weapon. Iran also can possess no more than 300 kilograms (660 pounds) of that uranium. That's compared to the 10,000 kilograms (22,046 pounds) of higher-enriched uranium it once had.

Trump, who campaigned on a promise to tear up the nuclear deal, said he ultimately pulled America out of the accord over Iran's ballistic missile program and its malign influence on the wider Middle East.

In an interview in September with The Associated Press, Salehi warned that Iran could begin mass production of more advanced centrifuges if the deal collapses.

"If we have to go back and withdraw from the nuclear deal, we certainly do not go back to where we were before," Salehi said at the time. "We will be standing on a much, much higher position."

Newsletter Monday January 14, 2019

Newsletters from:

Send to a Friend

| Print

Trump says US will hurt Turkey economically if it hits Kurds

U.S. President Trump tweets threat to "devastate" Turkish economy if it attacks Kurdish forces in Syria, warns Kurds not to "provoke" Turkey • Spokesman for Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan: Equating Syrian Kurds with PKK a "fatal mistake."

Associated Press and Israel Hayom Staff

Syrians on a motorcycle pass a checkpoint of the Kurdish internal security forces in Manbij, northern Syria in March of 2018 | Photo: AP

U.S. President Donald Trump warned Sunday that if Turkey attacks U.S.-backed Kurdish forces in Syria, the United States will "devastate Turkey economically."

Trump's decision to pull American troops out of Syria has left the United States' Kurdish allies vulnerable to an attack from Turkey. Ankara views the Kurdish forces as terrorists aligned with insurgents inside Turkey.

In a tweet, Trump also warned the Kurdish forces not to "provoke Turkey."

The U.S. withdrawal has begun, with shipments of military equipment, U.S. defense officials said. But in coming weeks, the contingent of about 2,000 troops is expected to depart even as the White House says it will keep up pressure on the Islamic State network.

Once the troops are gone, the U.S. will have ended three years of organizing, arming, advising and providing air cover for Syrian, Kurdish and Arab fighters in an open-ended campaign devised by the Obama administration to deal ISIS a lasting defeat.

"Starting the long overdue pullout from Syria while hitting the little remaining ISIS territorial caliphate hard, and from many directions," Trump tweeted. "Will attack again

from existing nearby base if it reforms. **Will devastate Turkey economically** if they hit Kurds."

In response to Trump's tweet, Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan's spokesman Ibrahim Kalin said on Monday that Ankara expected the U.S. to honor their strategic partnership.

On Twitter, Kalin wrote, "Mr @realDonaldTrump, it is a fatal mistake to equate Syrian Kurds with the PKK, which is on the US terrorists list, and its Syria branch PYD/YPG."

Trump's decision to leave Syria, which he initially said would be rapid but later slowed down, shocked U.S. allies and angered the Kurds in Syria. It also prompted the resignation of Defense Secretary Jim Mattis and drew criticism in Congress. Sen. Jack Reed, a Rhode Island Democrat, called the decision a "betrayal of our Kurdish partners."

Newsletter Sunday January 13, 2019

Newsletters from:

Send to a Friend

| Print

Pompeo: Good outcome possible for both Turks, Syrian Kurds

After speaking to Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo says talks between Syrian government, Syrian Kurds could be part of a broader political solution to Syria crisis • "We hope we can turn the corner."

Reuters and Israel Hayom Staff

U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo with Emirati Ambassador to the U.S. Yousef Al Otaiba in Abu Dhabi, Sunday | Photo: Reuters

U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said on Saturday he was optimistic that a "good outcome" could be reached between **Turkey and Syrian Kurdish groups**, after speaking to the Turkish foreign minister.

"We recognize the Turkish people's right to defend their country from terrorists, but we also know that those ... who are not terrorists and fighting alongside us for all this time deserve to be protected," Pompeo told reporters in Abu Dhabi, where he visited as part of a tour of the Middle East.

"There are many details to be worked out but I am optimistic we can achieve a good outcome," he said.

Relations between the two NATO allies have been strained over U.S. backing for the Kurdish YPG, which Turkey views as an extension of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) waging a decades-long insurgency on Turkish soil.

Pompeo said his phone call with Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu involved several elements of U.S.-Turkey relations, including Syria and the detention of Americans in Turkey.

He said the U.S. envoy for Syria, Jim Jeffrey, had traveled to northeast Syria this week and would soon go to Ankara for talks, including on moving forward a U.N.-led political process to end the eight-year-long conflict in Syria.

He suggested that talks between Damascus and the Syrian Kurds could be part of a broader political solution in Syria.

"We hope we can turn the corner here," Pompeo added.

Kurdish-led groups who control swathes of northern Syria fear an attack from Turkey in the wake of U.S. President Donald Trump's decision to withdraw troops from their region. Turkey sees the Kurdish YPG militia close to its border as a security threat.

Trump's decision to withdraw troops hinges on Turkey's cooperation to secure the northern border. But Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan has vowed to crush the Kurdish groups that have been effective in defeating Islamic State in Syria.

Pompeo said the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Syria was a "tactical change" but the mission to destroy Islamic State and counter Iran's influence remained the same.

Newsletter Sunday January 13, 2019

Newsletters from:

Send to a Friend

| Print

Nasrallah suffers heart attack, stroke, Lebanese media reports

Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah is hospitalized in serious condition in Beirut, Lebanese outlets report, adding that he has also been fighting cancer • Reports have not been confirmed by any official sources; similar rumors have surfaced in the past.

Daniel Siryoti, Neta Bar and Israel Hayom Staff

Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah | Photo: Reuters

Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah has been hospitalized in serious condition in Beirut after apparently suffering a heart attack, Lebanese media outlets reported on Saturday. Another report said he also suffered a stroke, and that he has been fighting cancer.

The reports were not confirmed by any official sources. The Lebanese media reports also noted that Nasrallah had not been seen or heard publicly for several weeks, ever since the IDF launched Operation Northern Shield to eradicate the terrorist organization's cross-border underground tunnels.

A senior Iranian official refuted the reports on Sunday.

Hossein Amir Abdollahian, the Special Assistant to the Speaker of the Iranian Parliament for International Affairs, who has served as a liaison between the Iranian government and Hezbollah, called the reports "Zionist lies."

Abdollahian wrote in a tweet Sunday that the "Zionist claims about Nasrallah's illness and heart attack are the biggest lie of the year. One day Nasrallah and the leaders of the Palestinian resistance will pray at the Dome of the Rock [on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem]. The Zionists will cease to exist."

Lebanese journalist Jerry Maher tweeted over the weekend that "an intelligence source confirmed that a senior figure in Hezbollah was hospitalized today [Saturday] at a hospital in the capital Beirut. Other sources confirmed it is Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah, who has been fighting cancer for years."

Nasrallah, 58, took over the terrorist organization in 1992 after his predecessor was assassinated in an Israeli airstrike. Ever since the Second Lebanon War in 2006, Nasrallah's location and physical condition have been a well-guarded secret, due to concerns that Israel would try targeting him.

There have been numerous rumors in the past about Nasrallah's failing health, some even claiming he had succumbed to cancer. To refute these rumors, the terrorist organization has always released video footage of Nasrallah discussing current events.

Newsletter Friday January 11, 2019

Newsletters from:

Send to a Friend

| Print

| US launches global initiative against Iranian funds to Hezbollah

Measures to focus on compelling Iran to meet international rules for the prevention of money laundering, stem the flow of funds to terrorist groups • U.S. is willing to invest considerable resources to expose Iran's illicit economic activities in Europe.

Ariel Kahana, News Agencies and Israel Hayom Staff

U.S. President Donald Trump | Photo: AP

The administration of U.S. President Donald Trump is initiating a global initiative to fight illegal Iranian economic activity around the world, which will focus primarily on the transfer of funds to terrorist organizations, Israel Hayom has learned.

The United States also intends to intensify pressure on Iran in international bodies, chief among them the Financial Action Task Force. The FATF is an intergovernmental organization founded by G7 countries to combat money laundering.

The American initiative will focus on compelling Iran to meet international rules for the prevention of money laundering and, as stated, stem the flow of funds to terrorist groups. Iran, it has been well documented, gives vast sums of money to the Lebanese Shiite terrorist organization Hezbollah, and to Palestinian terrorist groups Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad.

The White House intends to expose Iran's illicit behavior and bring to bear legal and public pressure to force the Islamic republic to change its ways.

Aside from its own direct measures, the U.S. has also asked various European governments to help target Iran's economic activities on the continent. American officials have told their European counterparts that the administration was prepared to invest considerable resources to expose Iran's financial operations, and would share its information with European authorities to help them indict the perpetrators. The administration is still waiting for the European response.

Iran is aware of the international pressure against it on the money laundering front. On Saturday, a powerful Iranian council approved an anti-money laundering bill in a step toward reforms to bring the country in line with global norms.

Foreign businesses say Iran's compliance with FATF standards and its removal from the organization's blacklist are essential if they are to increase investment, especially after re-imposition of the U.S. sanctions on Tehran.

However, Iranian hardliners have opposed passing legislation toward compliance with the FATF, arguing it could hamper Iranian financial support for its terrorist allies such as Hezbollah.

Iran's parliament last year passed the anti-money laundering bill, one of four amendments Iran needs to implement to meet FATF requirements, but the Guardian Council, a vetting body, rejected it, saying it was against Islam and the constitution.

On Saturday, the Expediency Council, a body intended to resolve disputes between parliament and the Guardian Council, approved the bill with some changes, Iran's state news agency IRNA said, quoting a member of the council.

Seven months after his harsh dismissal of parliamentary efforts to adapt to FATF guidelines and other international conventions on money laundering, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei seems to have warmed to the reforms, a reversal that experts say is aimed at preventing Iran's economic collapse.

In recent months, cities have been rocked by demonstrations as factory workers, teachers, truck drivers and farmers protested against economic hardship. The sanctions have depressed the value of Iran's rial currency and aggravated annual inflation fourfold to nearly 40% in November.

Newsletter Thursday January 10, 2019

Newsletters from:

Send to a Friend

Print

Brits mull aid cut to Palestinians: 'We won't fund incitement'

The Palestinian Authority's education system fails to meet international standards of peace and tolerance, new bill says • Legislation, which is unlikely to pass, calls for the British government to deduct tens of millions of pounds from aid budget.

Ariel Kahana

Palestinian school children burn an Israeli flag | Archives: Reuters

Britain's Parliament on Tuesday approved in a first hearing a bill that could significantly cut aid funds to the Palestinian Authority.

The bill was drafted by Labour lawmakers Joan Ryan and Dame Louise Ellman, who head the Labour Friends of Israel parliamentary group.

If passed, the legislation would deduct tens of millions of pounds earmarked for the PA school system from the money the British Department for International Development, which distributes the kingdom's aid funds internationally, gives to the Palestinians

Authority. The bill argues that the PA school system fails to meet the standards set by UNESCO, the United Nation's educational, scientific and cultural agency. The bill calls for a budget cut of tens of millions of pounds.

The bill also stipulates that the British government will be required to publish an annual report examining whether Palestinian textbooks meet international standards of peace and tolerance.

"The [PA's textbooks] contain no suggestion or desire for peace with Israel," Ellman said as she introduced the bill to her parliament. "All mention of peace agreements with Israel has been erased. In their first lesson, five-year-old children are taught they should become shahids (martyrs) and that jihad (holy war) is the most important thing in life."

Ellman and Ryan predicated their bill on reports published by the Institute for Monitoring Peace and Cultural Tolerance in School Education (IMPACT-se) at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, which has examined 173 official Palestinian textbooks in recent years. According to its findings, the textbooks do not educate the next generation of Palestinians toward peace, but hatred and extremism.

CEO of IMPACT-se Marcus Sheff said: "There's nothing in our reports that the British government doesn't already know. The bill was born because the British government was briefed on the subject, but its answers were unsatisfactory."

It should be noted that a similar initiative is currently underway on Capitol Hill in Washington.

Speaking to Israel Hayom, Ellman said the goal of the bill was to "pressure the Palestinian Authority to stop teaching hatred. I'm in favor of education, not incitement.

"Because this is a private bill, it will be complicated to complete the process, but I hope that just discussing the law proposal will apply the necessary pressure on the government to change its approach," Ellman said.

Since introducing the bill, Ellman and Ryan have been threatened by radical elements within Labour.

Ellman said: "I speak out against anti-Semitism and criticize the positions of the party when I don't agree with them and I will continue to do so. It's important to say that the Labour Friends of Israel group gives me a great deal of strength."

The legislation process is expected to conclude by the end of March.

Newsletter Wednesday January 9, 2019

Newsletters from:

Send to a Friend

| Print

[Egypt limits access from Gaza after PA quits border crossing](#)

Accusing Hamas of undermining its operations, detaining some of its workers, PA announces pullout from Rafah border crossing between Egypt, Gaza Strip • Egypt blocks Palestinians from entering country from Gaza after Hamas workers take place of PA staff

Reuters and Israel Hayom Staff

Hamas-hired police officers at the Rafah border crossing with Egypt in the southern Gaza Strip, Tuesday | Photo: Reuters

Egypt blocked Palestinians from entering the country from the Gaza Strip on Tuesday after Palestinian Authority personnel pulled out of the Rafah border crossing and Hamas officers took their place.

The dispute over the border stems from a rift between the Western-backed PA and Hamas terrorists who took control of Gaza more than a decade ago in a brief civil war.

Human rights groups say Rafah has been the [sole exit point from Gaza for an estimated 95% of its population of 2 million](#). Citing security concerns, Israel maintains tight restrictions on Palestinian movement at its border crossings.

PA employees were deployed to Gaza's border crossings with Israel and Egypt in 2017, a move that largely opened up Rafah for two-way traffic, after Egyptian mediation led to a Palestinian reconciliation deal, which has since faltered.

On Sunday, the PA announced its pullout from Rafah, accusing Hamas of undermining its operations and detaining some of its workers. Since May, the crossing has been operating daily after sporadic openings for many years.

Upon arriving in Gaza, Hani Abu Sharekh told Reuters he hoped Egypt would soon resume full operation of the facility to allow passengers out of the coastal enclave.

"There is no alternative to [the] Rafah crossing. It is the only window for most of our people to travel and to seek treatment and education," Abu Sharekh, 48, said after returning from a trip to Cairo where his wife had received medical treatment.

Hamas said PA President Mahmoud Abbas, who has imposed a series of economic sanctions on Gaza to press the group to cede power, was destroying prospects for unity.

A Palestinian official who maintains close contacts with Egypt said Cairo had decided to open the Rafah crossing only to Palestinians returning to Gaza, after the PA personnel withdrew.

Egypt's restriction, the official said, showed its "disappointment at the faltering of the 2017 reconciliation agreement." But an Egyptian official in Cairo said he did not expect Rafah to be shut completely.

"Egypt recognizes the importance of the humanitarian situation in Gaza and the Rafah crossing is an important access point for Palestinians," the official said, adding that his country would not abandon its mediation efforts.

Newsletter Tuesday January 8, 2019

Newsletters from:

Send to a Friend

Print

Senate GOP uses Israel bill as wedge issue to split Democrats

Middle East package, which includes support for Israel, has bipartisan support • Some Democrats oppose addition of an act that confirms state, local governments can take steps to counter Israel boycotts • Opponents: BDS protected by First Amendment.

Associated Press and Israel Hayom Staff

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell arrives on Capitol Hill in Washington, as the 116th Congress begins. | Photo: AP

Senate Republicans' first bill of the new Congress aims to insert the legislative branch into U.S. President Donald Trump's Middle East policy – but also tries to drive a wedge between centrist and liberal Democrats over attitudes toward Israel.

The bipartisan package backed by Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Kentucky) had initially drawn widespread support ahead of Tuesday's vote. It includes measures supporting Israel and Jordan and slapping sanctions on Syrians involved in war crimes. But Democrats are split over the addition of Republican Sen. Marco Rubio's "Combatting BDS Act," which seeks to counter the global boycott, divestment and sanctions movement against Israel.

Rubio's bill would affirm the legal authority of state and local governments to restrict contracts and take other actions against those "engaged in BDS conduct." Several states are facing lawsuits after taking action against workers supporting BDS boycotts of Israel.

For now, the package will almost certainly stall. The bill comes amid the partial government shutdown, and Democrats say they will block it until the government is reopened.

Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer will oppose proceeding to the legislation, according to a senior aide who was unauthorized to speak publicly about the vote and spoke on condition of anonymity. Other Democratic senators who also support the bills will likely follow suit.

Sen. Ben Cardin (D-Maryland) tweeted that the Senate "should not take up any bills unrelated to reopening the government" until the shutdown is resolved.

But Republicans see an opening to focus on newly elected House Democrats, including the country's first Palestinian American woman in Congress, Michigan Rep. Rashida Tlaib, who has spoken about the rights of Americans to support the BDS issue.

"This is the U.S. where boycotting is a right & part of our historical fight for freedom & equality," Tlaib said in a weekend tweet. "Maybe a refresher on our U.S. Constitution is in order, then get back to opening up our government instead of taking our rights away."

Opponents say Rubio's measure infringes on free speech. Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vermont) tweeted, "It's absurd that the first bill during the shutdown is legislation which punishes Americans who exercise their constitutional right to engage in political activity. Democrats must block consideration of any bills that don't reopen the government. Let's get our priorities right."

But Rubio's office says the bill allows state and local governments "to counter economic warfare against Israel."

Rubio, a Florida senator, said Monday in a series of tweets, including one pointed at Sanders and Tlaib: "The shutdown is not the reason Senate Democrats don't want to move to Middle East Security Bill... A significant # of Senate Democrats now support #BDS & Dem leaders want to avoid a floor vote that reveals that."

Both sides are squaring off ahead of Tuesday's votes. A coalition of civil liberties and liberal Jewish groups, including the American Civil Liberties Union and J Street, is working to defeat the legislation, while the influential pro-Israel AIPAC supports it.

"Any contention that the bill infringes upon First Amendment rights is simply wrong," said AIPAC's Marshall Wittman by email. "It ensures Israel has the means necessary to defend itself-by itself- against growing threats and helps protect the right of states to counter boycotts against Israel."

J Street's President Jeremy Ben-Ami said in a statement: "While millions of Americans suffer from the effects of the ongoing government shutdown, it's outrageous that Senate Republican leaders are prioritizing legislation that tramples on the First Amendment and advances the interests of the Israeli settlement movement. Not a single Democrat should vote to enable this farce."

Newsletter Tuesday January 8, 2019

Newsletters from:

Send to a Friend

| Print

| [Turkish leader skips meeting with Trump aide over Syria remarks](#)

In Israel on Sunday, National Security Adviser [John Bolton](#) told Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu that U.S. withdrawal from Syria was contingent upon total defeat of ISIS and an assurance that U.S.-allied [Kurdish fighters, whom Turkey sees as terrorists](#), remain safe.

Associated Press and Israel Hayom Staff

National Security Adviser John Bolton attends a meeting with U.S. President Donald Trump and senior military leadership in Iraq | Photo: AP

U.S. National Security Adviser John Bolton is set to depart Turkey without meeting with President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, in an apparent snub over disagreements about Kurdish fighters in Syria.

A U.S. official had said over the weekend that the two were expected to have consultations on Tuesday about the fate of Kurds allied with the United States in Syria as part of discussions about U.S. President Donald Trump's troop draw-down from the country.

Bolton visited Israel on Sunday and met with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Bolton told Netanyahu that U.S. military withdrawal from northeastern Syria is conditioned on defeating the remnants of the Islamic State group, and Turkey assuring the safety of Kurdish fighters allied with the United States.

National Security Council spokesman Garrett Marquis said U.S. officials were told Erdoğan cited local election season and a speech to parliament for not meeting with Bolton.

In the speech to parliament Tuesday, Erdoğan criticized the U.S. position that the Kurds must be protected, reiterating his government's position that the Syrian Kurdish Peoples Protection Units, or YPG, is a terrorist group.

While in Israel, Bolton had been scheduled to tour the Golan Heights but the visit was canceled due to inclement weather. Israel is pressing the U.S. administration to recognize Israeli sovereignty on the Golan Heights.

"When you're there, you'll be able to understand perfectly why we'll never leave the Golan Heights and why it's important that all countries recognize Israel's sovereignty over the Golan Heights," Netanyahu told the U.S. envoy.

Bolton did not respond directly to Netanyahu's remarks.

Newsletter Monday January 7, 2019

Newsletters from:

Send to a Friend

Print

With US leaving, rival powers seek to move into Syria's east

A third of Syria is up for grabs • Controlling east would help seal Assad's victory in civil war • Turkey and allied Syrian rebels are poised to launch anti-Kurd offensive • Increased Israeli airstrikes against suspected Iranian-linked targets likely.

Associated Press and Israel Hayom Staff

A U.S. soldier near the tense front line between the U.S-backed Syrian Manbij Military Council and the Turkish-backed fighters, in Manbij, Syria, April 4, 2018 | Photo: AP

The planned U.S. troop withdrawal opens up a void in the north and east of Syria, and the conflicts and rivalries among all the powers in the Middle East are converging to fill it.

The American decision to pull out its 2,000 troops has forced a reassessment of old alliances and partnerships. The Syrian government, the Kurds, Russia, Iran, Israel and Turkey have all had a hand in the country's nearly eight-year war – each in a way, fighting its own war for its own reasons within Syria. Now all of those conflicts play out in the territory being abandoned by the Americans, creating new tensions, potential chaos and bloodshed.

To reassure jittery allies, Washington sent national security adviser John Bolton to Israel on Sunday, where he said U.S. troops will not leave northeastern Syria until IS militants are defeated and American-allied Kurdish fighters are protected. The comments put the brakes on a withdrawal abruptly announced last month and initially expected to be completed within weeks. The announcement upset regional allies and Pentagon officials who disagreed with the assessment that IS was defeated.

"We're going to be removing our troops. I never said we're doing it that quickly," Trump told reporters in Washington Sunday.

Here is a look at what's at stake.

THE TERRITORY

The area up for grabs is around a third of Syria, forming a rough triangle. To the north is the border with Turkey, to the east the border with Iraq, and the third side is the Euphrates River. This was the heart of the Islamic State group's foothold in Syria until the United States partnered with a Kurdish militia, creating a force of some 60,000 fighters – including some Syrian Arabs and Christian Assyrians – that wrested it away from the militants.

The territory is strategically important. For the Syrian government of President Bashar Assad and its allies Russia and Iran, regaining it means re-establishing sovereignty. The territory was once the source of Syria's wheat and barley, its dams generated electricity and it holds some of Syria's richest oil resources. Without it, Assad will have a harder time with reconstruction and operating long term. For the same reasons, it's been a source of income for the Kurdish militia.

For the Kurds, their hold gave weight to their long-sought goal of autonomy. For the U.S., the troop presence ensured American influence. Turkey sees Kurdish autonomy on its border as an existential threat and has vowed to prevent this, accusing the U.S. of empowering the militia Ankara says is linked to Kurdish insurgents in Turkey.

ASSAD and RUSSIA

Without the Americans, the door opens for Assad and his Russian backers to move in.

"The only obstacle preventing Assad from gaining control of the east was the U.S. presence and the cover that it provided to the (Kurdish militia). With that gone ... there is simply no real challenge that would prevent the regime from re-establishing control over those areas," said Ayham Kamel, of the Eurasia group.

Abandoned by the U.S., the Kurdish fighters are forced to move toward Russia and Assad for protection against their more feared enemy, Turkey. Their force, armed and equipped by the U.S.-led coalition, is unlikely to disappear. Instead, it is seeking an arrangement with Assad to continue operating as the government extends control over the territory.

Syrian officials boast that the withdrawal is a defeat to America. Controlling the east would help seal Assad's victory in the civil war. The American move also accelerates a trend by Arab states to normalize relations with Assad, whom they shunned for years. The United Arab Emirates, a close U.S. and Saudi ally, recently reopened its embassy in Damascus.

TURKEY vs. KURDS, RUSSIA and ASSAD

Turkey's military, along with some 15,000 allied Syrian rebel fighters, is poised to launch an offensive in the east to break Kurdish control over the border.

But an offensive risks creating friction with Russia. In particular, it could wreck a cease-fire agreement the two reached over Idlib, the northwestern province held by rebels and Islamic militants where Turkey has influence – enabling a Syrian government assault on the province. Russian and Turkish officials have been holding talks, trying to avert tensions.

"A massive Turkish operation is not in Russia's interest. It destabilizes the situation, risks undermining Idlib agreements and talks on reconstruction. Plus, if Turkey decides to capture all of the Kurdish areas it will inevitably clash with Russia and Iran," said Yury Barmin, a Russia analyst.

Turkey is equally concerned over the prospect of Syrian government control over the east. In the past, Damascus has used the Kurdish militia as leverage against Ankara and could do so again. For nearly 20 years, Syria hosted the main Kurdish leader until he was captured in 1998, now imprisoned in Turkey.

IRAN and ISRAEL

A Syrian government move east means the spread of Iran as well. It will dramatically widen the land corridor where Iran enjoys free rein for its allied fighters, weapons and supplies across Iraq and Syria to Lebanon. Already, Iranian-backed militias have expanded control over areas near Syria's border with Iraq and freely cross back and forth.

That has alarmed Israel. The likely result will be increased Israeli airstrikes against suspected Iranian-linked targets in Syria.

THE U.S., TURKEY and the ISLAMIC STATE GROUP

President Donald Trump dismissed the idea that the U.S. needs influence in the conflict, saying Syria was nothing but "sand and death." He claims the U.S. mission there – to fight IS – has largely been completed. But IS still holds pockets and U.S.-led coalition officials warn it could surge again.

Bolton told reporters in Jerusalem that the conditions for a U.S. troop withdrawal include the defeat of remnants of IS in Syria, and protections for Kurdish militias who have fought alongside U.S. troops against the extremist group.

There has also been growing unrest among Arab tribes in the east, disgruntled by the Kurdish-led administration. They too are likely to be a source of tension and may be leveraged by the different players for their own advantages.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan told Trump his forces could take over fighting IS. In two previous offensives, Turkish forces and their Syrian allies retook territory in

the northwest from IS and Kurdish fighters. But their track record of abuses, forced displacement of Kurds and lawlessness raises concern over whether they can exercise authority in the east.

"The force that Erdoğan has to offer Trump to replace the (Kurdish militia) in eastern Syria is not large enough, locally legitimate enough, and quite frankly not vettable enough, for the standards of the U.S. military," said Nick Heras, a Syria expert with the Center for a New American Security.

Newsletter Monday January 7, 2019

Newsletters from:

Send to a Friend | Print |

For Bolton, the main issue is China

China was most likely the focus of the talks between U.S. National Security Adviser John Bolton and PM Benjamin Netanyahu. Israel's embrace of Beijing, by granting access to the new port in Haifa, could threaten U.S. naval vessels the region.

Amnon Lord

U.S. National Security Adviser John Bolton | Photo: AFP

The meetings between Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and U.S. National Security Adviser John Bolton most likely focused not on Syria but on China.

Sure, Syria was up there on the agenda, and perhaps they spent most of the time talking about that country. But the "main course" was China. Syria is mainly an Israeli problem. The U.S. only plays a supporting role and backs Israel's conduct in that theater to counter the Iranian threat.

But China is something else entirely. Israel's policy toward China has over the past year undermined U.S. interests. In March this year, it was reported that a Chinese firm will be awarded a bid to operate the new port being built in Haifa. Israeli policymakers apparently made this decision purely on economic grounds without looking into the strategic and security ramifications.

In recent months, the U.S. and China have locked horns on various matters, and Taiwan may become the trigger for a conflagration. Israel, which has faced strategic isolation over the past several years, has relied on the U.S. support, as well as alliances with Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Cyprus.

The bottom line is that that the U.S. is retreating from the region despite Bolton's reassurances. Former U.S. President Barack Obama began this process when he explicitly said he wanted to withdraw from the region, in what was an attempt to bolster ties with the Arab-Muslim world at Israel's expense. Trump continued this process, justifying the withdrawal as part of his America First neo-isolationist motto.

Over the past several years, Russia has tried to become the regional hegemon, and the U.S. has not provided a counterweight. The nuclear deal in 2015 paved the way for Russia's massive show of force, as well as allowed Iran and Hezbollah to become more dominant on Israel's north. Likewise, Turkey has bought an island in the Red Sea.

The U.S. 6th Fleet, which operates in the Mediterranean Sea, lacks an aircraft carrier. If Israel lets the Chinese run the new port, it means that vessels from that fleet will no longer make port calls in Haifa.

The fact that Israelis are generally unaware of the radical changes in the region underscores Netanyahu's political acumen. Netanyahu, unlike the Israeli defense establishment who see themselves as America's lackeys, has long realized that Israel must tap the potential of Asian giants and the regional powers.

He has realized that Israel can no longer outsource its national security to the U.S. with the hope that it takes care of the conflict with the Palestinians. Netanyahu believes China is the future and that its international influence far exceeds that of Russia. Netanyahu's positive attitude toward China was clearly on display in February, when the Chinese vice president visited Israel. The pictures captured a strong bond between the two.

Netanyahu also knows how to make a point of not being close to someone, as is clearly on display when he is with German Chancellor Angela Merkel. But despite the warm ties with China, Israel must not ignore the fact that its overarching goal is to become a global hegemon through the One Belt, One Road initiative. China also has vested interests in Iran and has no regard for other countries' sovereignty.

Chinese President Xi Jinping recently said that China should seize new opportunities that have not been around 100 years ago. As far as Israel is concerned, perhaps it should rethink its decision to grant China control of the new port if it gets something in return from the U.S.

Newsletters from:

Send to a Friend

| Print

Iran says despite US sanctions, it has found new 'potential' oil buyers

Iranian deputy oil minister: All countries that were granted waivers from the U.S. to continue importing Iranian oil are complying with sanctions • Still, "the number of potential buyers of Iranian oil has significantly increased," says deputy minister.

Reuters and Israel Hayom Staff

Oil tankers pass through the Strait of Hormuz, December 21, 2018 | Photo: Reuters

All countries that were granted waivers from the United States to continue buying a certain amount of Iranian oil imports are complying with U.S. sanctions, a senior Iranian energy official said, noting that Tehran was hopeful to find new buyers.

The United States withdrew from a nuclear deal with Iran last year and snapped sanctions in place to choke Iran's oil and banking industries, while temporarily allowing eight customers to keep buying crude from the Islamic republic.

"China, India, Japan, South Korea and other countries that were granted waivers from America to import Iranian oil are not willing to buy even one barrel more from Iran," Amir Hossein Zamaninia, Iran's deputy oil minister for trade and international affairs, was quoted as saying by the Oil Ministry's news agency SHANA.

However, without giving details, Zamaninia said: "Despite U.S. pressures on Iranian oil market, the number of potential buyers of Iranian oil has significantly increased due to a competitive market, greed and pursuit of more profit."

The 180-day exemptions were also granted to Italy, Greece, Taiwan and Turkey.

Washington seeks to bring Iranian oil exports to zero in order to curb Tehran's missile and nuclear programs and counter its growing military and political influence in the Middle East.

Iran has urged European countries, which are still committed to the nuclear deal, to oppose the sanctions by creating a financial mechanism that facilitates payments of Iranian oil sales.

Zamaninia said the mechanism, known as SPV (Special Purpose Vehicle for trade), would be "helpful but could not resolve the problems since U.S. influence will affect any European action."

Newsletter Friday January 4, 2019

Newsletters from:

Send to a Friend

| Print

[US warns Iran against space launches, ballistic missiles](#)

Tests incorporate technology "virtually identical" to intercontinental ballistic missiles and violate U.N. Resolution 2231, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo says • U.S. "will not stand by" as Iran "places international stability and security at risk."

Reuters and Israel Hayom Staff

U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo | Archives: AP

The United States issued a preemptive warning to Iran on Thursday against pursuing three planned space rocket launches that it said would violate a U.N. Security Council resolution because they use ballistic missile technology.

Iran rejected the warning, issued by U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, saying its space vehicle launches and missile tests were not violations.

Pompeo said Iran planned to launch in the coming months three rockets, called Space Launch Vehicles, which he said incorporate technology "virtually identical" to what is used in intercontinental ballistic missiles.

"The United States will not stand by and watch the Iranian regime's destructive policies place international stability and security at risk," Pompeo said in a statement.

"We advise the regime to reconsider these provocative launches and cease all activities related to ballistic missiles in order to avoid deeper economic and diplomatic isolation."

Pompeo said the rocket launches would violate U.N. Security Council Resolution 2231, which endorsed a 2015 nuclear deal between Iran and world powers. It calls upon Iran not to undertake activities related to ballistic missiles capable of delivering nuclear weapons, but does not explicitly bar such activity.

Iran has repeatedly rejected U.S. accusations about its ballistic missile tests, including the firing of space launchers.

"Iran's launch of space vehicles – and missile tests – are NOT in violation of [Resolution] 2231. The US is in material breach of same, and as such it is in no position to lecture anyone on it," Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said Thursday. "Threats engender threats, while civility begets civility."

Tehran denies it has missiles designed to carry nuclear warheads.

Pompeo said Iran has launched ballistic missiles numerous times since the U.N. resolution was adopted. He said it test-fired a medium-range ballistic missile capable of carrying multiple warheads on Dec. 1.

U.S. President Donald Trump decided in May to pull out of the Iran nuclear deal.

In late November, Iranian Deputy Defense Minister General Qassem Taqizadeh was quoted by Iranian media as saying that Iran would soon launch into space three satellites made by domestic experts.

In July 2017, Iran launched a Simorgh ("Phoenix") rocket it said could deliver a satellite into space, an act the U.S. State Department called provocative. Earlier that month, the United States imposed new economic sanctions on Iran over its ballistic missile program.

Iran's Amirkabir University of Technology said on Tuesday that it was putting the final touches to the Payam ("Message") satellite, which it said was equipped with four cameras and could be used for agricultural, forestry and other peaceful purposes, the semi-official Fars news agency reported.

The satellite, weighing about 100 kilograms (220 pounds), is to be launched by a state-run space center into an orbit of 500 kilometers (300 miles) with a Simorgh, the ISNA news agency reported.

Iranian media reports said the Payam launch may coincide with celebrations in early February marking the 40th anniversary of Iran's Islamic Revolution that toppled the U.S.-backed shah.

In December, a senior Iranian military commander confirmed that Tehran had recently carried out a ballistic missile test.

"We will continue our missile tests and this recent action was an important test," Guards Aerospace Division chief Brig. Gen. Amirali Hajizadeh was quoted as saying by the semi-official Fars news agency.

"The reaction of the Americans shows that this test was very important for them and that's why they were shouting," he added, without specifying what type of missile had been tested.