

Israel Hayom Friday Feb 15, 2019

14.02.2019

Kushner: Middle East peace plan expected after Israeli election

Despite long odds of forging peace between Israel and the Palestinians, U.S. senior adviser Jared Kushner reportedly tells Warsaw Middle East conference he believes "privately, people are much more flexible" than their public positions.

Associated Press and Israel Hayom Staff // published on 15/02/2019

White House Senior Adviser Jared Kushner, at the Middle East conference in Warsaw, Thursday | Photo: AP

U.S. President Donald Trump's senior Middle East adviser and son-in-law Jared Kushner said Thursday that the Trump administration would unveil its much-awaited Middle East "deal of the century" after Israeli elections are held on April 9.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Kushner briefed participants at a security conference in Poland about the anticipated plan but would not go into details for fear of it leaking. Netanyahu told reporters that he looked forward to "seeing the plan once it is presented."

Netanyahu said he heard nothing new from Kushner besides a reference to a 2002 Arab peace Initiative, which offered full Arab recognition of Israel in return for a withdrawal from territories it captured in the 1967 Six-Day War. Netanyahu said Kushner said the plan may have made sense at the time but was no longer relevant.

"It is not appropriate for today. The reality has changed," Netanyahu said.

He wouldn't comment on any concessions Israel would have to make under any U.S.-backed proposal.

A diplomat who watched Kushner's presentation quoted him as saying that Trump had given him the Israeli-Palestinian "file" to give the long-elusive goal of a peace agreement "a shot." Despite the long odds, he said he believed "privately, people are much more flexible" than their public positions, the diplomat said, speaking on condition of anonymity according to protocol.

The Palestinians have pre-emptively rejected the plan, accusing the Trump White House of being unfairly biased in favor of Israel. The apparent rejection of the Arab peace plan is likely to deepen their belief that the plan will fall far short of their longstanding goal of

establishing an independent Palestinian state in the West Bank, east Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip.

"There will be no peace and stability in the Middle East without a peaceful solution that leads to a Palestinian state, with Jerusalem as a capital," said Nabil Abu Rudeineh, a spokesman for Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas.

The Palestinians skipped Thursday's conference and asked Arab countries to boycott or downgrade their representation. Some 60 countries took part in the gathering, including five Arab foreign ministers that made a rare public appearance alongside Netanyahu.

Kushner has been working on an Israeli-Palestinian peace plan for close to two years but has yet to release any details. The release of his plan has been repeatedly delayed.

U.S. officials had said Kushner would make some comments in Warsaw about the conflict. But Netanyahu said ahead of time he didn't expect any discussion of the peace plan, with the focus of the conference on participants' shared concern over Iran and its growing influence in the region.

The diplomat quoted Netanyahu joking at some point to Kushner that "having this file" is a "tough one."

"But, if you are crazy enough, and I think you might just be, you can come up with new ideas," he quoted Netanyahu as saying.

Netanyahu also urged all interested parties, particularly the Palestinians, to wait for the plan to come out before reacting to it or rejecting it.

U.S. officials have signaled the plan will be heavily focused on Palestinian economic development. They have also refused to endorse the concept of a Palestinian state — a goal that has enjoyed wide international backing for the past two decades.

The U.S. recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital, along with the cancellation of hundreds of millions of dollars in American aid to the Palestinians, have prompted the Palestinians to cut off ties with the White House and pre-emptively reject the peace plan.

While facing Palestinian resistance, the plan could also run into Israeli opposition.

Netanyahu's governing coalition is comprised of religious and nationalist parties who oppose serious concessions to the Palestinians. With Netanyahu seeking re-election and pledging to form a similar coalition if he wins, it is unlikely that he would make any concessions, particularly before the April 9 vote.

Kushner, according to the diplomat, said the history of the Middle East had shown that "pessimists" about Israeli-Palestinian peace were "usually right." But he stressed that "it's the optimists that bring the change."

Even as Gulf Arab states have dropped some of their traditional antipathy toward Israel, it remains unlikely they will fully normalize relations with Israel without some progress on the Palestinian front.

"I never said we'd reach a peace agreement with the Arab countries before we solve the Palestinian issue. But I have said that the policy I am leading will move toward normalization," Netanyahu said. "We can wait for the Palestinians from here till tomorrow, but I don't condition that on normalization with the Arab world."

Israel Hayom Friday Feb 15, 2019

14.02.2019

15/02/2019 Warsaw summit 60 nations defended Israel's right to defend itself

Leaked video offers glimpse of emerging Israel-Arab alliance

Saudi FM: "Who is supporting Hamas and Islamic Jihad and undercutting the Palestinian Authority? Iran" • Bahraini FM: Iran is a far bigger threat to regional security than Israeli-Palestinian conflict • UAE FM: Israel justified in attacking Iran in Syria.

Ariel Kahana, News Agencies and Israel Hayom Staff // published on 15/02/2019

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu sits beside U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo at the Warsaw summit, Thursday | Photo: AP

Israel and Arab states on Thursday made strides in their joint effort to curb Iranian expansion in the region, as Arab foreign ministers attending the U.S. sponsored Mideast summit in Warsaw, Poland, sitting with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in the audience, lambasted the Islamic republic and the European countries offering it support.

The Prime Minister's Office released a 25-minute video of the closed meeting, in which senior Gulf Arab officials played down the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, defended Israel's right to defend itself, and described Iran as the greatest threat to regional peace.

The video, bearing the insignia of the Prime Minister's Office, was recorded on a mobile device and it was not clear who took it. Netanyahu's office briefly made the YouTube video available to a small group of journalists traveling with him before quickly removing it.

It was unclear whether Netanyahu intended to leak the information or distributed it mistakenly. But the decision to take the video down indicated that the Gulf officials, whose governments do not have formal diplomatic relations with Israel, had not consented to its release.

The edited, 25-minute video shows a series of comments made by officials from **Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates** on a panel discussion at the security conference. Some **60 nations participated** in the gathering, which was focused heavily on countering Iran's growing influence in the region.

Saudi Arabian Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Adel al-Jubeir accused Iran of hurting the Palestinian cause by supporting terrorist groups battling PA President Mahmoud Abbas.

"**Who is supporting Hamas and Islamic Jihad** and undercutting the Palestinian Authority?" he said. "**Iran.**"

"**We cannot stabilize the region without peace between Israel and the Palestinians.** We cannot stabilize the region without peace in **Lebanon and Syria,**" Jubeir went on to say, "[but] **wherever we go we find Iran's evil behavior.** If you want peace and stability in the Middle East, you must make it clear to the Iranians that if they want to be treated like a normal country they must behave like a normal country."

Jubeir also blasted the Iran nuclear deal, which he said allows Iran to acquire nuclear weapons and menace the region because of its so-called sunset clauses.

"When the JCPOA was signed, everyone thought everything would be fine," Jubeir said, referring to the 2015 nuclear pact by its technical name.

"Meanwhile, we in the region are in the brunt, for us 10 years is the blink of an eye. So, Iran ends up with a nuclear weapon – it is theoretically capable of doing one very quickly because no limits on enrichment – who is going to suffer? We are."

"Iran gives ballistic missiles to the Houthis [in Yemen] and Hezbollah [in Lebanon]. Who's going to suffer? We do, in the region. And so people have to be serious about how to deal with the problem of Iran."

Jubeir added: "**I wish the Iranians would change, but they aren't there yet. Any attempt to be good with them has failed.** They present two faces – a foreign minister [Mohammad Javad Zarif] who speaks nicely and [on the other hand] the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps."

He also had some harsh words for Hezbollah, saying "One of the biggest jokes is when you say Hezbollah has a political wing and a military wing. There is no such thing."

Bahrain's foreign minister, Khalid AlKhalifa, made some of the toughest comments, saying that Iran is a far bigger threat to regional security than the long-running Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

"We grew up talking about the Palestine-Israel dispute as the most important issue," he said in the video. "But then at a later stage, we saw a bigger challenge. We saw a more toxic one, in fact the most toxic in our modern history, which came from the Islamic Republic, from Iran."

He went on to denounce the "neo-fascist regime" in Tehran, accusing it of plotting attacks in his country and destabilizing Yemen, Syria and Iraq. He also said that "toxic money, guns and foot soldiers of the Islamic republic" have hindered progress in Israeli-Palestinian peace efforts.

Bahrain, an island nation off Saudi Arabia that's home to the U.S. Navy's 5th Fleet, long has had tense relations with Iran.

If it wasn't for Iran's regional aggression," Khalifa continued, "we would have been much closer today in solving this issue with Israel. But this is a serious challenge that is preventing us now from moving forward anywhere, be it Syria, be it Yemen, be it Iraq, be it anywhere. So this is the challenge we have to face in order to deal with other challenges," he said, referring to Iran.

While the Gulf Arab countries' animosity toward Iran is well known, it is generally taboo for Arab leaders to make such comments about the Palestinians in high-profile public settings.

In the clip, the foreign minister of the United Arab Emirates, Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed AlNahyan, also indicated that Israel was justified in attacking Iranian targets in Syria.

"Every nation has the right to defend itself, when it's challenged by another nation, yes," he answered in response to a question by the panel's moderator, former U.S. Middle East peace negotiator Dennis Ross, about Israeli strikes intended to prevent Iran from entrenching itself militarily in Syria.

Ross later tweeted of the event: "Same room, same views of Iran's aggressive, threatening posture in the Middle East, and unmistakable convergence of what should be done to counter it."

Netanyahu did not participate on the panel, but is seen sitting in the audience. Speaking to reporters early Thursday, Netanyahu cryptically hinted at what he called the

"unfathomable" friendly atmosphere at the conference. But he did not disclose any details or say whom he had met.

Hatnua party leader Tzipi Livni, a political rival, accused Netanyahu of violating standard protocol and leaking the video to boost his campaign ahead of April 9 elections. She called for "external diplomacy, not internal politics."

Israel Hayom Thursday Feb 14, 2019

14.02.2019

Report: Secret US program sabotages Iranian missiles

White House has accelerated a secret program to sabotage Iran's ballistic missile projects, current and former administration officials tell New York Times • Program reportedly seeks to slip faulty parts and materials into Iran's aerospace supply chains.

Eli Leon and Israel Hayom Staff // published on 14/02/2019

Over the past 11 years. 67% of Iranian orbital launches have reportedly failed | Photo: AP

The Trump White House has accelerated a secret program to sabotage Iran's ballistic missile and rocket projects, the New York Times reported Wednesday, quoting current and former administration officials.

The officials said the operation was part of an expanding campaign by the United States to weaken the Iranian military and isolate its economy.

Officials told the New York Times it was impossible to precisely quantify the success of the classified program, but that in the past month alone, two Iranian attempts to launch satellites failed within minutes.

Those two rocket launch failures – on Jan. 15 and another unacknowledged attempt on Feb. 5 – were part of a pattern over the past 11 years. In that time, 67% of Iranian orbital launches have failed, an exceedingly high number compared to the 5% failure rate worldwide for similar space launches.

Hours after the Jan. 15 attempt, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said Iran's satellite launchers had technologies "virtually identical and interchangeable with those used in ballistic missiles."

The setbacks have not deterred the ayatollah regime, however, and earlier this week Iranian President Hassan Rouhani vowed to "continue our path and our military power."

The Trump administration, similar to Israel, maintains that Iran's space program is a cover for its efforts to develop intercontinental ballistic missiles capable of carrying nuclear warheads.

The American officials who spoke to the New York Times described a far-reaching effort, created under former President George W. Bush, to slip faulty parts and materials into Iran's aerospace supply chains. The program was active early in the Obama administration but was reinvigorated in 2017, when Pompeo took over as the director of the CIA and provided it with new resources.

Tehran had grown suspicious even before U.S. President Donald Trump withdrew last May from the 2015 nuclear accord. Brig. Gen. Amir Ali Hajizadeh, the head of Iran's missile program, accused American and allied intelligence agencies of turning their campaigns of "infiltration and sabotage" to Iran's missile complex from its atomic infrastructure.

"They want to repeat their nuclear sabotage in the missile area," he told Iranian state television in 2016, vowing the program will never stop "under any circumstance."

The CIA declined to comment on the report, while administration officials asked the New York Times to withhold some details of its reporting, mostly involving the identities of specific suppliers to the Iranian program, because the effort is ongoing.

Israel Hayom Thursday Feb 14, 2019

14.02.2019

Armed factions in Gaza: Blockade has region on verge of explosion

Blaming Israel for violence, Gaza factions warn: We will not allow attacks on border protesters to continue • Armed groups say they are "shocked by Arab world's silence," call on international, Islamic institutions to put an end to "Zionist crimes."

Daniel Siryoti // published on 14/02/2019

Armed Palestinian factions in the Gaza Strip warned the region is a powder keg, Wednesday | Illustration: Reuters

Armed Palestinian factions in the Gaza Strip warned on Wednesday that the situation in the region was on the verge of exploding.

Following an emergency meeting in a situation room in Gaza, the factions issued a joint statement blaming Israel for the escalation in Gaza.

"The Zionist enemy carries the responsibility for the escalation in Gaza, and we will not allow the continued attack on activists in the marches of return. All signs indicate that the situation is on the verge of exploding as a result of the blockade, and we will not agree to the people in Gaza dying of starvation," the statement read.

"The Zionist occupier's continued evasion from the understandings necessitates the Arab and international representatives pressure the occupying Zionist government and demand it adhere to the understandings for calm," the factions continued.

The groups also came out against the Palestinian Authority, saying, "The continued sanctions imposed on the strip by Abu Mazen [Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas] and his people position the region on a powder keg that will explode first in the face of the Zionist enemy that allows for the non-payment of salaries."

In their statement, the Palestinian factions said they were "shocked by the Arab world's silence in light of the Zionist enemy's crimes against the Palestinian people and the Islamic holy sites.

"We call on the international and Islamic institutions to take responsibility as far as concerns the Zionist crimes and stop them. We will not abandon our brothers in the Zionist occupier's prisons and we will forever remember the blood of the martyrs, which has not been spilled in vain," they said.

Israel Hayom Wednesday Feb 13, 2019

14.02.2019

Abbas proves once again he is not a partner for peace
PA President meets with Arab leaders in effort to ensure they either support Palestinian demands on core issues of the conflict, like the establishment of a Palestinian state with its capital in east Jerusalem, or refuse to endorse U.S. peace plan.

Daniel Siryoti // published on 13/02/2019

Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas meets with Saudi Arabia's King Salman in Riyadh, Tuesday | Photo: Reuters

The Palestinians are hoping to keep the U.S. from presenting its Middle East peace plan. To this end, Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas has embarked on a tour of Arab states, to try and keep them from supporting the so-called "deal of the century" and to ensure the Arab leaders stick to their promise to support Palestinian demands on the core issues of the conflict, chief among them the recognition of east Jerusalem as the capital of an independent Palestinian state.

Israel Hayom learned of U.S. President Donald Trump's plans to consolidate a regional peace plan in collaboration with the moderate Arab states, in lieu of the two-state solution following a meeting between U.S. President Donald Trump and Abbas in Bethlehem in which the American president said he intends to cut the "deal of the century." Trump noted the deal had earned the support of the moderate Arab states.

Now, senior government officials in Egypt, Jordan and the PA have confirmed to Israel Hayom that Abbas was recently informed by senior officials in Washington that Trump's peace team is in the final stages of consolidating the plan. Once Trump approves it, senior U.S. adviser and son-in-law Jared Kushner and U.S. Special Representative for International Negotiations Jason Greenblatt will visit the moderate Persian Gulf Arab states to present them with the details of the plan. Ramallah's assessment is that the Trump administration will try to earn the support of the Arab states in order to execute the plan following the Israeli elections and once a new government has been formed in Jerusalem.

A senior Arab diplomat told Israel Hayom that the regional peace plan was largely expected to include economic incentives, to be integrated within the main points of the Arab peace plan. The plan's framework would lead to a peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians and a normalization of ties between Israel and the Persian Gulf Arab states.

A senior Palestinian official told Israel Hayom that Abbas was interested in keeping the influential Arab states – Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the Persian Gulf Arab states – from endorsing the plan.

According to the official, "Later on, the [Palestinian] Authority chairman is expected to demand an emergency meeting of the Arab League countries, with the aim of blocking the attempts by the American president and his advisers Kushner and Greenblatt to enlist the support of the moderate Arab states for the peace plan."

The senior Palestinian official added that Abbas' attempts to convene an emergency meeting of the Arab League states have failed until now, although the league may convene at the Palestinians' request in the coming days.

As part of these efforts, Abbas met with Saudi King Salman in the royal palace in Riyadh. Following their Tuesday meeting, the Saudis issued a statement saying that "it was made clear to the PA chairman that Saudi Arabia continues to support its Palestinian brothers in the building of their independent state, with its capital in east Jerusalem."

The Riyadh meeting appears to serve as a joint Saudi-Fatah response to Qatar's continued economic support for Hamas, of which Abbas disapproves. Salman and Abbas discussed programs that would see Saudi Arabia provide economic support for the Palestinians. Given the fact that Hamas, which rules the Gaza Strip, has avoided sharing the Qatari funds with Fatah, Saudi Arabia is set to invest its efforts solely in the West Bank, in the hope of tightening the economic stranglehold on Gaza.

Nevertheless, senior officials in Ramallah, as well as Arab diplomats involved in Abbas' efforts to thwart the American peace plan, emphasized that Saudi Arabia had merely issued a declaration of support.

They noted, "Talks between the axis of moderate Sunni states and the Persian Gulf states and Trump's people on the issue of support for the deal of the century have gone into high gear in recent days."

A senior Egyptian official involved in talks with the Trump administration on the regional peace plan told Israel Hayom that the "moderate Arab states look set to demand significant corrections to the American peace plan, in order for it to suit the interests of the Arab states, but not necessarily the interests of the Palestinians. They [the Palestinians] will be forced to accept the plan, that or Trump will implement the plan with the support of the moderate Arab states, bypassing Abu Mazen [Abbas]."

A senior Palestinian official told Israel Hayom: "The way it looks, all that remains for Abu Mazen to do is to try and minimize the damage as far as concerns Trump's deal of the century and hope for the American plan to clash unexpectedly with Israel's interests."

Meanwhile, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov spoke out against the upcoming peace plan.

"The deal of the century is not enough to ensure a Palestinian state on the '67 borders and will not include a Palestinian state with its capital in east Jerusalem. The U.S. is proposing, or preferring, to impose new approaches on the solution to the problem," he said.

12.02.2019

PM dismisses Iranian threat on Tel Aviv: I am not intimidated

Iran's Revolutionary Guards: U.S. lacks courage to fire a single bullet but if they attack us, "we will raze Tel Aviv and Haifa to the ground" • "I do not ignore the threats of the Iranian regime but neither am I intimidated by them," Netanyahu says.

Reuters and Israel Hayom Staff // published on 12/02/2019

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu | Photo: Oren Ben Hakoon

Iran would demolish cities in Israel if the United States attacked, an official representative of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards threatened, Monday.

"The United States does not have the courage to fire a single bullet at us despite all its defensive and military assets. But if they attack us, we will raze Tel Aviv and Haifa to the ground," Yadollah Javani, the Iranian Revolutionary Guards' deputy head for political affairs, told the state-run Islamic Republic News Agency.

Video: Reuters

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu dismissed the threat in a statement, Monday.

"I do not ignore the threats of the Iranian regime but neither am I intimidated by them," he said.

"If this regime makes the awful mistake of trying to destroy Tel Aviv and Haifa, it will not succeed. However, this would be the last anniversary of the revolution that they celebrate. They should take this into account."

Hundreds of thousands of Iranians marched and some burned U.S. flags to mark the revolution's 40th anniversary on Monday, as Tehran showed off ballistic missiles in defiance of U.S. efforts to curb its military power.

Soldiers, students, clerics and black-clad women holding small children thronged streets across Iran, many with portraits of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the Shiite cleric who led an Islamic uprising that toppled the Shah.

State television showed crowds carrying Iranian flags, shouting, "Death to Israel, Death to America" – trademark chants of the revolution.

The Islamic republic has vowed to increase its military strength despite mounting pressure from Western countries to curtail its ballistic missile program.

Those capabilities were on display during the march, including the Qadr F, a ground-to-ground missile with a 1,950-kilometer (1,210-mile) range, Tasnim news agency said.

"We have not asked and will not ask for permission to develop different types of ... missiles and will continue our path and our military power," President Hassan Rouhani said in a speech at Tehran's Azadi Square.

Today, the United States, its Arab allies and Israel are trying to counter Tehran's growing influence in the Middle East, where it has proxies in Syria, Lebanon and Yemen.

U.S. President Donald Trump tweeted on Monday that the Iranian government had let its people down.

"Forty years of corruption. Forty years of repression. Forty years of terror. The regime in Iran has produced only #40YearsofFailure. The long-suffering Iranian people deserve a much brighter future," he posted in both English and Farsi.

Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif also responded on Twitter.

"#40YearsofFailure to accept that Iranians will never return to submission. #40YearsofFailure to adjust US policy to reality. #40YearsofFailure to destabilize Iran through blood & treasure. After forty years of wrong choices, time for @realDonaldTrump to rethink failed US policy," he wrote.

Iranians face mounting economic hardships many blame on the country's clerical leaders, and pictures on social media showed some people also demonstrating against corruption, unemployment and high prices.

"Our presence in the 40th anniversary of the revolution is to show our support for the Islamic republic," said one sign held by a protester. "But it does not mean we support corruption of some officials and their betrayal of the oppressed people."

Reuters could not independently verify the pictures.

Last year, Iran cracked down on protests over poor living standards that posed the most serious challenge to its clerical elite since a 2009 uprising over disputed elections.

Prices of basic foodstuffs have soared since Trump withdrew Washington from the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran last year and reimposed sanctions on Tehran.

In January, Rouhani said **Iran was dealing with its worst economic crisis since the Shah** was toppled.

But he remained defiant on Monday as Iranians recalled the end of a monarch who catered to the rich. "The Iranian people have and will have some economic difficulties, but we will overcome the problems by helping each other," he said.

Iran also has vast clout in Iraq, where Maj. Gen. Qassem Soleimani, commander of the Quds Force, the overseas arm of the Revolutionary Guards, was frequently photographed guiding Shiite militias in the war against Sunni Islamic State terrorists.

11.02.2019

In first, prime minister vows to deduct PA's terrorist payments

"Next Sunday I will convene **the cabinet** and we **will pass the necessary decision to deduct the funds**. The funds will be deducted, let there be no doubt about that,"

Netanyahu says • Brutal murder of Ori Ansbacher was a terrorist attack, Shin Bet says.

Ariel Kahana, News Agencies and Israel Hayom Staff // published **on 11/02/2019**

PM Netanyahu at the weekly cabinet meeting in Jerusalem, Sunday | Photo: Reuters

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Sunday vowed for the first time to enact the "terrorist salaries law" – and even outlined a timetable for its implementation.

The legislation allows the government to deduct the amount the Palestinian Authority pays to terrorists and their families from the taxes Israel collects on the PA's behalf. The law also requires the Defense Ministry to provide the cabinet with data on the amount the PA pays terrorists and their families. The Finance Ministry will then withhold that amount from the tax funds.

Netanyahu's announcement came after the Shin Bet security agency said Sunday that the brutal slaying of 19-year-old Ori Ansbacher by a Palestinian near Jerusalem last week was a "nationalistic" terrorist attack.

Speaking at the start of the weekly cabinet meeting, Netanyahu said: "By the end of the week we will finish the necessary administrative work to enact the terrorist salaries law. Next Sunday I will convene the cabinet and we will pass the necessary decision to deduct the funds. The funds will be deducted, let there be no doubt about that."

The prime minister's comments came following local media reports that in January Israel transferred the PA the entire sum of taxes it collects on its behalf. This was done despite that fact that in January the cabinet, as stipulated by the new legislation, was supposed to have deducted the sum of PA terrorist salaries from those taxes.

New Right party leader Naftali Bennett assailed Netanyahu after it was revealed that the entire amount had been transferred, saying that terrorists are no longer afraid because they know they will have secured lifetime economic benefits for them and their families.

"The prime minister must enact the terrorist salaries law that was passed but hasn't been implemented yet," he said.

The Choosing Life forum, which united dozens of families victimized by terror, also demanded that Netanyahu implement the law.

"Even though the deduction law was passed half a year ago, the prime minister and defense minister [Netanyahu is also the acting defense minister] insists on continuing to pay salaries to terrorists," the group said in a statement. "Do we concede that Ori Ansbacher's murderer will receive 12,000 shekels [\$3,300] every month under the patronage of the State of Israel?!"

The law was spearheaded by MKs Avi Dichter (Likud) and Elazar Stern (Yesh Atid), who also sent a letter to Netanyahu demanding the payment deduction.

"The funds act as an incentive for the next terrorist attack," Stern wrote.

Israel Hayom has learned, meanwhile, that the Defense Ministry's initial draft of its report on the scope of PA terrorist salaries places the amount at about 250 million shekels (\$69 million) per year.

However, officials in the National Security Council in the Prime Minister's Office believe the amount is higher and requested additional inquiries into the matter. As stated, Netanyahu requested that the report be completed by the next cabinet meeting next Sunday ahead of the first deduction.

Earlier on Sunday, the IDF said it had surveyed the family home in Hebron of Arafat Irfaiya, suspected in the murder of Ansbacher, "in order to examine the possibility of its demolition."

11.02.2019

Withdrawal of US forces in Syria likely to start in 'weeks'

Removal of U.S. forces "will all be driven by the situation on the ground," says U.S. Army Gen. Joseph Votel, head of the U.S. Central Command • Votel says he does not believe the U.S. will broadly increase overall troop numbers in neighboring Iraq.

Reuters and Israel Hayom Staff // published on 11/02/2019

U.S. soldiers on patrol in Manbij, Syria, in November 1, 2018 | Photo: Reuters

The United States is likely just weeks away from starting the withdrawal of ground troops from Syria ordered by President Donald Trump, the top U.S. commander overseeing American forces in the Middle East said on Sunday.

U.S. Army Gen. Joseph Votel, head of the U.S. Central Command, cautioned that the exact timing would depend on the situation in Syria, where U.S.-backed fighters have launched a final assault against Islamic State enclaves near the Iraqi border.

The U.S. military has already started withdrawing equipment from Syria. Asked whether the withdrawal of America's more than 2,000 troops would begin in days or weeks, Votel said: "Probably weeks. But again, it will all be driven by the situation on the ground."

"In terms of the withdrawal ... I think we're right on track with where we wanted to be," Votel told reporters traveling with him during a trip to the Middle East.

"Moving people is easier than moving equipment and so what we're trying to do right now is again [to] kind of clear out those materials, that equipment that we do not need."

Trump's surprise announcement in December that he was withdrawing American troops from Syria helped trigger the resignation of his defense secretary, Jim Mattis, and sent U.S. military officials scrambling to construct a withdrawal plan that preserves as many gains as possible.

Hundreds of additional troops have been sent to Syria to facilitate the withdrawal.

U.S. officials have long estimated that the Syria pullout could take until sometime in March or April to execute fully, but have been reluctant to set an exact timeline given hard-to-predict battlefield conditions.

Votel did not speculate about when the withdrawal would be completed.

One big question has been whether some U.S. forces in Syria might move to neighboring Iraq, where the United States has more than 5,000 troops helping Baghdad fight Islamic State and prevent the group's resurgence.

Votel said he did not believe the United States would broadly increase overall troop numbers in Iraq. He did leave open the possibility of changing the composition of forces to help the United States keep pressure on the terrorist group.

Referring to future U.S. troop levels in Iraq, Votel said: "I think it's going to remain more or less steady."

"This isn't just wholesale – 'Everybody in Syria move over to Iraq.' That doesn't make sense," Votel said.

Votel is one of many current and former U.S. officials who have warned of the risk of resurgence by Islamic State unless the United States and its allies can keep pressure on the group following the U.S. withdrawal. They say Islamic State still has enough leaders, fighters, facilitators and financial resources to fuel a menacing insurgency.

But a clear U.S. plan on how to keep up the pressure has yet to be articulated. It is also unclear whether the United States will be able to satisfy the security concerns in Syria of its NATO ally Turkey without sacrificing the interests of U.S.-backed Kurdish fighters there.

Washington views the Kurdish militia as loyal partners in the fight against Islamic State, whose help will likely continue to be needed to prevent the group's resurgence.

The Pentagon's own internal watchdog released a report last week warning about the risks still posed by Islamic State. It cautioned that, absent sustained pressure, the group would likely resurge in Syria within six to 12 months and retake some limited territory.

A U.N. report seen by Reuters last week estimated there are up to 18,000 Islamic State fighters in Iraq and Syria, including up to 3,000 foreign fighters. It warned the group was interested in attacking aviation and using chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear materials.

Newsletter Sunday February 10, 2019

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US pushing Lebanon toward war with Israel, Russian envoy says

Moscow's envoy to Lebanon Alexander Zasytkin says U.S. efforts against Iran,

Hezbollah fomenting violence in region that could result in another Israel-Lebanon war • Zasytkin: Hezbollah contributes "great deal to stability, security and peace in Lebanon."

Dean Shmuel Elmas

Russian Ambassador to Lebanon Alexander Zasytkin | Photo: AP

Russia's Ambassador to Lebanon Alexander Zasytkin has warned the next war between Israel and Lebanon would be the result of "U.S. activity in the region and their campaign against Iran and Hezbollah."

In an interview with Russia's Sputnik news agency, Friday, Zasytkin said, "As for the Israeli-Lebanese situation, it is difficult to assess what will be because the entire region is at a crossroads." He said, "The citizens expect a resolution to the problems, a return to peaceful lives and the development of cooperation." But he said the Americans could spark new conflicts and that numerous other countries and ethnic groups could become involved in the fighting.

Zasytkin also said that instead of there being a give and take relationship with the Russians, the U.S. has chosen "to embark on a campaign against Iran and Hezbollah that makes the atmosphere in the region even more violent."

Russia's Beirut envoy said he sees Hezbollah's involvement in the Syrian civil war as a positive factor.

"They played an important part in the destruction of the terrorist cells. Hezbollah sided with the legitimate government in Syria from the outset of the war, as did Russia and Iran," he said.

Zasytkin also lauded the Shiite terrorist group for being "a strong political party that is very active in parliament. They contribute a great deal to stability, security and peace in Lebanon." He further called Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah "a unifying force in the country."

Iran-backed Hezbollah has assumed control of three ministries in the government led by the Western-backed Prime Minister Saad Hariri, the largest number of portfolios it has ever held.