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Arabs enlist UN International Court to rule West Bank & Gaza as possible war crimes

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Petition to High Court to rule if Netanyahu can serve as PM despite indictments

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PLO & UN anti-Israel Prosecutor using diplomatic terrorism to allege & exploit Israel on Friday

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German Merkel seeks EU ban of Hezbollah political wing, to freeze funds & assets for debate Thursday

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House holds impeachment decree to study further; Trump slams 'crazy Nancy' delay

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Britain redesigns Iran Arak reactor system, & scheduled to go online in 2021
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Iran backs new Lebanon Prime Minister Diab, in economy reform to include all factions

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Amnesty revises Tehran 15 Nov death toll of fuel price protesters, up to 304

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Arabs enlist International Court to rule West Bank & Gaza as possible war crimes
Sunday

12.22.19
PM: Possible ICC investigation akin to persecution of Jews 2,000 years ago
Israel intends to enlist the assistance of other countries who share some of the same concerns over the precedence of an inquiry into a western democracy with a viable legal system.

Itamar Eichner,Nina Fuchs| Updated: 12.22.19 , 22:32

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu compared the decision by the International Criminal Court chief prosecutor to investigate possible war crimes in the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem, to the persecution of the Jews by Antiochus IV, calling the ICC decision anti-Semitic.

"We light candles in protest of historic and modern anti-Semitic decrees," said Netanyahu at a Hanukkah candle-lighting ceremony at the Western Wall in Jerusalem.

"Just like we fought against anti-Semitic decrees 2,000 years ago, we have now learned of new decrees against the Jewish people brought by the International Criminal Court, that told us we have no right to live here," Netanyahu said and vowed, "we will not bow our heads, we will fight with every means at our disposal."

An inter-ministerial team set up to deal with the ICC crisis met in the foreign ministry in Jerusalem Sunday, and included representatives of the National Security Council, justice and foreign ministries and the IDF.

Earlier on Sunday, the cabinet heard from Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit about the ICC decision and its ramifications. The cabinet then approved Netanyahu's request to prohibit the disclosure and publication of all debates involving the ICC announcement last week, and that all further debates will be held within the Security Cabinet.

Jerusalem is not expected to cooperate directly with the ICC but will likely allow Israelis in a non-official capacity to appear before the court and argue the question of ICC's authority over Israel since it has never ratified the Rome convention. They will also question the Palestinians' standing as they are not a state and should not be allowed to appeal to the court.

There is some debate among legal experts in Israel about the possibility of persuading the three-judge panel to reject Prosecutor Fatou Bensouda's recommendation after it rejected an earlier bid by the same prosecutor to investigate American war crimes in Afghanistan.

U.S. President Donald Trump had threatened to sanction the ICC if such an investigation is sanctioned.

Israel intends to enlist the assistance of other countries including the U.S., Britain, Russia, and Australia who share some of the same concerns Jerusalem has over the precedence of an inquiry into a western democracy with a viable legal system.

At the weekly cabinet meeting Sunday, Netanyahu said "While we are moving forward in new areas of hope and peace with our Arab neighbors, the ICC in The Hague has taken a step backward, it finally became a weapon in the political war against the State of Israel," said the prime minister. "The prosecutor's decision against Israel is absurd."

"Who are they accusing here?" the prime minister asked, "Iran? Turkey? Syria? No - Israel, the only democracy in the Middle East. This is terrible hypocrisy."

12.22.19

Petition to High Court to rule if Netanyahu can serve as PM despite indictments

12.22.19

High Court to debate whether Netanyahu can serve as PM despite indictments

Attorney General Mandelblit is ordered to submit his legal opinion on the matter 48 hours before a pending plenary, despite his attempts to evade the subject unless taken up by court

Yael Freidson, Tova Tzimuki | Updated: 12.22.19 , 19:57

The High Court of Justice said on Sunday it will debate whether Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu could form a government despite the incumbent being indicted in three different criminal cases.

The court announced it had received and approved a petition signed by 67 different individuals demanding a ruling on whether a Knesset member battling criminal charges can be tasked with forming a government.

Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit, who avoided addressing the issue as long as it was solely a theoretical question, has been ordered by the High Court to devise a legal opinion on the matter 48 hours before the court assembles to debate the issue. The plenary is still pending as no date has yet been decided.

On Friday, Mandelblit refused to rule on the issue, informing the court that he would only issue a legal opinion on the matter if it were to be taken up by the court.

Last month, Mandelblit ruled that Netanyahu can remain interim prime minister, just days after serving him with charges of fraud, breach of trust and bribery.

12.22.19

PLO & UN anti-Israel Prosecutor using diplomatic terrorism to allege & exploit Israel on Friday

12.22.19

Israeli officials slam ICC decision as 'diplomatic terrorism'

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu says the international tribunal in the Hague has become a 'weapon in the political war,' while Likud MK Ofir Akunis labeled the ICC prosecutor 'an anti-Semite'; Israel's UN ambassador claims the move won't help the Palestinians

Ynet | Updated: 12.22.19 , 14:31

Israeli officials on Sunday slammed the decision by the International Criminal Court to launch a probe into alleged Israeli war crimes against the Palestinians, calling it "diplomatic terrorism," and a "weapon in the political war."

The ICC Prosecutor Fatou Bensouda on Friday signaled she is preparing to open a formal probe after asking judges exactly what territory a future investigation could cover. The announcement ended five years of preliminary investigations into alleged crimes by both Israeli forces and Palestinians.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu kicked-off the criticism of the ICC's decision by going into a lengthy speech at the start of the weekly cabinet meeting.

"While we are moving forward in new areas of hope and peace with our Arab neighbors, the ICC in The Hague has taken a step backwards, it finally became a weapon in the political war against the State of Israel," said the prime minister. "The prosecutor's decision against Israel is absurd."

"Who are they accusing here? Iran? Turkey? Syria? No - Israel, the only democracy in the Middle East. This is terrible hypocrisy."

The baton of disapproval had then been picked up by Israel's outgoing ambassador to the UN, Danny Danon, whose tenure is set to expire at the end of this year.

"This is diplomatic terror that's being used instead of negotiations," said Danon in an interview with Ynet. "The Palestinians use all the tools available to them to push Israel out and this time it is the criminal court," he said.

"We will be active in the coming weeks in an effort to apply pressure to prevent this issue from developing into an indictment," he said. "The prosecutor said she did hand it over to the court to decide whether to continue with this case or not. It left us an opening that we intend to try and exploit."

Danon went on to say that the moves taken by the Palestinians on the international arena are meant to create headlines but serve little purpose. "The situation of the Palestinians has not improved in recent years as a result the steps they have taken," he said. "Will accusing Israeli soldiers of war crimes help the Palestinians? No."

Likud MK and Minister of Science, Technology and Space Ofir Akunis also chimed in on the matter, calling the ICC prosecutor "anti-Semitic."

"Israel should not cooperate with this anti-Israel thing," he said.

Saeb Erekat, a senior PLO official, welcomed the decision to launch a probe, saying the Palestinians have the right to use all the legal means "to protect ourselves."

12.19.19 –Th -

German Merkel seeks EU ban of Hezbollah political wing, to freeze funds & assets for debate Thursday

12.19.19

German governing parties seek ban of Hezbollah in Europe

Mathias Middelberg, the spokesman for Angela Merkel's conservatives in the parliament, claims that Germany has a special responsibility to keep Israel safe and calls for EU to list the political wing of the Iranian-backed groups as a terrorist organization

Associated Press| Updated: 12.19.19 , 15:44

Germany's governing parties are calling for a ban of the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah, saying it should be put on the European Union's terrorist list.

Mathias Middelberg, the spokesman for Chancellor Angela Merkel's conservatives in parliament, said a joint resolution with the junior coalition Social Democrats would be introduced for debate Thursday.

"It is unacceptable that Hezbollah is waging a terrorist fight against Israel in the Middle East, which is being financed through worldwide criminal activities, among other things," he said in a statement. "In view of Germany's special responsibility toward Israel, we call on the government to ban all activities for Hezbollah in Germany."

At the moment, the EU lists Iran-backed Hezbollah's military wing as a banned terrorist group, but not its political wing, which has been part of Lebanese governments in recent years.

"The separation between a political and a military arm should be abandoned, and Hezbollah as a whole should be placed on the EU terrorist list," Middelberg said. "This could freeze Hezbollah's funds and assets in Europe more extensively than before." It was not immediately clear whether the resolution would prompt the government to pursue a full ban, but with the governing parties and most opposition on board, such action seemed likely.

German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas acknowledged that with Hezbollah's ties to Lebanese government "the political reality in Lebanon is complex," but he said "this should not prevent us from exhausting the legal possibilities in Germany to tackle Hezbollah's criminal and terrorist activities."

"Hezbollah denies Israel's right to exist, threatens violence and terror, and continues to massively increase its arsenal of missiles," Maas said.

In Lebanon, Hezbollah was part of caretaker Prime Minister Saad Hariri's unity Cabinet, which resigned Oct. 29 in response to mass anti-government protests amid a worsening economic crisis.

Israel and Hezbollah fought a month-long war in 2006 that ended in a U.N.-brokered cease-fire, and while direct fighting has been rare since then, there has been occasional violence, most recently on Sept. 1 when Hezbollah fired a barrage of anti-tank missiles into Israel and Israel responded with artillery fire.

The barrage was fired in retaliation to an Israeli airstrike inside Syria which Hezbollah said killed two of its members. It also followed an incident in which two Israeli drones crashed in a Hezbollah stronghold in south Beirut.

Israel maintains Hezbollah has amassed an arsenal of some 130,000 rockets and missiles capable of striking virtually anywhere in Israel. More recently, it has accused the group of trying to import or develop guided missiles.

Last December, Israel announced that it had uncovered a network of tunnels that it said Hezbollah was building with the aim of infiltrating and carrying out attacks. Israel said it systematically destroyed the structures.

12.22.19 – Su -

House holds impeachment decree to study further; Trump slams 'crazy Nancy' delay

12.22.19

Trump slams 'crazy Nancy' for impeachment delay

Speaking days after his formal impeachment, the president says 'it's so unfair' the House has decided to hold off sending the impeachment package to the GOP-dominated Senate for a trial, where Trump is likely to be acquitted of obstructing Congress and abusing power

Reuters| Updated: 12.22.19 , 08:48

President Donald Trump on Saturday criticized House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi for holding off on sending the articles of impeachment against him to the Senate, calling her "crazy Nancy."

"It's so unfair," Trump said, days after he was impeached by the House, during a speech to conservative student group Turning Point USA, saying that Pelosi adopted the strategy because she has "no case."

"They are violating the Constitution," Trump said.

The Democratic-controlled House voted on Dec. 18 to impeach Trump, setting the stage for a trial in the Senate. Trump is very unlikely to be convicted and removed from office by the upper chamber of Congress because it is controlled by his Republican Party. A two-thirds majority vote in the Senate is needed for a conviction on impeachment charges. Republicans and Democrats are at loggerheads over how the trial will play out. Pelosi and other Democrats want to call top Trump aides as witnesses and are seeking assurances that the trial will be held on terms they consider fair.

Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell has said he is working in tandem with the White House on trial preparations, drawing accusations from Democrats that he is ignoring his duty to consider the evidence in an impartial manner.

Pelosi has not yet sent the impeachment package to the Senate in a bid to increase pressure on Republicans there. Pelosi has also not yet announced the managers, or prosecutors, who will present evidence in the trial.

"Until the House gets a clearer picture of what a Senate trial will look like, the Speaker will not be in the position to appoint managers and take the next steps in holding this President accountable and ensuring the Senate fulfills its constitutional duty," Pelosi's office said in a statement on Saturday.

Pelosi's office said senators have a constitutional obligation to conduct a "fair process that provides both the Senators, who will act as jurors, and the public with the opportunity to understand the full extent of President Trump's abuse of power."

Trump is accused of abusing his power by holding back \$391 million in security aid to Ukraine in an effort to get Kiev to announce a corruption investigation of former Vice

President Joe Biden, a leading candidate for the Democratic nomination to face Trump in the November 2020 election.

The president is also charged with obstruction of Congress for directing administration officials and agencies not to cooperate with the impeachment inquiry.

12.23.19 – Mo -

Britain redesigns Iran Arak reactor system, & scheduled to go online in 2021

Monday

12.23.19

Iran starts new operations at heavy water reactor

Britain is helping Iran redesign the Arak reactor to limit the amount of plutonium it produces after London began filling the role left by the U.S.

Associated Press| Updated: 12.23.19 , 18:50

Iran began new operations on Monday at a heavy-water nuclear reactor, the head of the country's nuclear agency said.

The move was designed to intensify pressure on Europe to find an effective way around U.S. sanctions that block Tehran's oil sales abroad.

Starting up the Arak heavy water reactor's secondary circuit doesn't violate Iran's 2015 nuclear deal with world powers. But it does inch Tehran's program closer toward weapons-grade levels.

Ali Akbar Salehi explained to state TV that the secondary circuit transfers heat to the reactor's cooling system. He said the entire reactor system will go online in 2021.

Heavy water helps cool reactors, producing plutonium as a byproduct that can potentially be used in nuclear weapons. Iran insists its nuclear program is for peaceful purposes. Britain is helping Iran redesign the Arak reactor to limit the amount of plutonium it produces. London has filled the role left after the U.S. unilaterally withdrew from the nuclear deal last year.

Tehran has slowly stepped up violations of the nuclear deal to pressure world powers to provide more incentives to make up for the U.S. withdrawal from the deal. American economic sanctions are having a crushing effect on Iran's economy.

On Sunday, Adm. Ali Shamkhani of Iran's Supreme National Security Council warned that his country will take another step in "lowering its commitment to the deal if Europe does not implement its commitments."

The International Atomic Energy Agency, the U.N.'s nuclear watchdog, said last month that Iran breached another limit of the nuclear deal by stockpiling more heavy water than the accord allowed.

12.19.19

Iran backs new Lebanon PM Diab, in economy reform to include all factions

12.19.19

Hezbollah-backed professor to form new Lebanese government

Former Education Minister Hassan Diab gains attention after caretaker PM Hariri withdraws candidacy; 'hope he succeeds in his national duties,' says Hezbollah spokesperson

Associated Press| Updated: 12.19.19 , 19:42

Lebanese President Michel Aoun Thursday asked a university professor and former education minister supported by the Hezbollah group to form a new government, breaking a weeks-long impasse amid nationwide mass protests against the country's political elite.

But prime minister-designate Hassan Diab's efforts to form a government will almost certainly hit snags in a deeply divided country facing the worst economic and financial crisis since the 1975-90 civil war.

Aoun named Diab as prime minister after a day of consultations with lawmakers in which he gained a simple majority of the 128-member parliament. Sixty-nine lawmakers, including the parliamentary bloc of the Shiite Hezbollah and Amal movements as well as lawmakers affiliated with the president gave him their votes.

In his first public address, Diab said he would work quickly to form a government that represents a wide array of people following consultations with political parties as well as representatives of the protest movement. He said he is committed to a reform plan and described the current situation as "critical and sensitive" and requiring exceptional efforts and collaboration.

Diab, 60, faces the daunting task of forming a government to tackle the crippling financial crisis in one of the world's most indebted countries. While gaining the majority of the votes, he failed to get the support of the country's major Sunni leaders, including former Prime Minister Saad Hariri, which will make it difficult for him to form a new government.

Support from the Iran-backed group guarantees a thorny path for any candidate, potentially inviting push back from Western and Gulf nations that had supported the outgoing Hariri.

Diab arrived at Baabda Palace later Thursday to meet with Aoun, who summoned him for the appointment.

It was not immediately clear whether the appointment would satisfy people on the streets who have been protesting for over two months, calling for a technocratic government of specialists.

The leaderless protest movement has differing views on the criteria for the next prime minister. The protests have recently taken a violent turn, with frequent clashes between security forces and protesters.

Supporters of Hezbollah and Amal have also attacked the protest campsite in Beirut on several occasions.

Diab, who served as education minister in 2011, gained attention after caretaker prime minister Hariri withdrew his name from consideration following weeks of haggling and deep divisions between the various factions over naming him again.

Hariri resigned Oct. 29 in response to unprecedented mass protests against the entire political class while an already dire economic crisis was quickly deteriorating.

Since then, efforts to agree on a new prime minister and the shape of government have kept hitting a dead end.

Hariri, who is aligned with the West and Gulf countries, has insisted he would head a Cabinet made up of specialists to deal with the economic and financial crisis - a key demand of the protest movement - while the Iran-backed Hezbollah, which initially backed him, has demanded a government that includes all major political factions.

On Thursday, Hezbollah said it backed Diab for prime minister. Mohammed Raad, the spokesman for the group's parliamentary bloc, said he hoped Diab receives enough votes and for him to "succeed in his national duties," and vowed to cooperate in tackling the current crisis.

Binding consultations between President Michel Aoun and representatives of the 128-member parliament were delayed twice as Lebanon saw some of the worst violence since protests erupted in mid-October.

The clashes have involved security forces and anti-government protesters, as well as supporters of Lebanon's two main Shiite groups, Hezbollah and Amal.

12.16.19

Amnesty revises Tehran 15 Nov death toll of fuel price protesters, up to 304

12.16.19

Amnesty revises up Iran protest crackdown death toll to 304

Rights watchdog describes brutal campaign to kill protesters and mass arrests to intimidate; official account from Tehran confirms only five deaths, including four security forces personnel

AFP| Updated: 12.16.19 , 09:28

LONDON — At least 304 people were killed in Iran during a three-day crackdown against protests across the country in November, according to a new Amnesty International toll published Monday.

The rights group had earlier estimated 208 deaths, including two youths aged 15 and 17.

Iran has dismissed such figures as “utter lies.”

Amnesty said it collected “harrowing testimony” suggesting that after authorities “massacred” protesters, they orchestrated a “wide-scale clampdown” to cover up the deaths.

“Iran’s authorities are carrying out a vicious crackdown following the outbreak of nationwide protests on 15 November,” the London-based rights watchdog said in a statement.

“Thousands of protesters as well as journalists, human rights defenders and students” were arrested, Amnesty said, “to stop them from speaking out about Iran’s ruthless repression.”

The nationwide demonstrations were triggered by a shock fuel price hike.

Authorities restored order within days, but so far have confirmed just five deaths, including four members of the security forces killed by “rioters”.

An official death-toll based on figures from the national forensic institute is awaited.

Independent sources told Amnesty that a month after the unrest, “security forces are still carrying out raids across the country to arrest people in their homes and places of work.”

Adolescents as young as 15 have been “detained alongside adults”, Amnesty said.

With dozens held in “incommunicado detention” and others in “conditions amounting to enforced disappearance”, some detention centers face “severe overcrowding”, Amnesty claimed.

The organization called on Tehran to “urgently and unconditionally release all those who have been arbitrarily detained.