

Newsletter Monday December 31, 2018

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[Assad authorizes Iraqi forces to strike Islamic State in Syria](#)

Syrian leader's announcement highlights close ties between Syria and Iraq, both allies of Iran • Iraqi PM Abdul-Mahdi writes to Assad, calling for coordination in "fighting terrorism" • [Iran, Syria sign long-term strategic and economic cooperation deal](#)

Associated Press and Israel Hayom Staff

Iraqi Air Force jets take part in a military show in Baghdad, 2016 | Photo: AP

Syrian President Bashar Assad on Sunday authorized Iraqi forces to attack the Islamic State group inside Syria without waiting for permission from Damascus, state news agency SANA reported.

The announcement, which comes as the region prepares for the planned U.S. withdrawal from Syria, highlights the close relations between the two neighboring Arab countries, both of which are allied with Iran. The Islamic State group once controlled large parts of both countries and declared a caliphate there in 2014.

Iraqi warplanes and artillery have in the past pounded Islamic State positions inside Syria after receiving permission from Syrian authorities.

The extremists have been defeated in Iraq but still hold a small area in eastern Syria close to the Iraqi border.

On Saturday, Assad received a letter from Iraqi Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi calling for coordination between the two countries in "fighting terrorism."

Earlier this month, U.S. President Donald Trump made a surprise announcement that the U.S. will withdraw all its 2,000 troops from Syria. The U.S.-backed Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces have expressed concerns that the U.S. pullout could lead to the revival of Islamic State, saying that the extremists have not been defeated yet in Syria.

Meanwhile, as the war in Syria begins to wind down, Iran and Syria signed a long-term strategic and economic agreement in Tehran on Sunday.

Iran and Russia have been the main backers of Assad's government since the civil war there began nearly eight years ago, and together with some Arab countries, including the oil-rich United Arab Emirates, have helped the Assad regime regain control of large parts of the country.

SANA news agency quoted Syrian Economy and Foreign Trade Minister Mohammed Samer al-Khalil, who signed the agreement, as saying that the deal includes "full

cooperation on the financial and banking levels." He said this would allow Iranian companies to be present through investments in Syria.

The Syrian government estimates that reconstruction of the war-torn country will cost some \$200 billion and take 15 years.

Al-Khalil said that "priority in the reconstruction of Syria will be given to Iranian public and private companies," according to SANA.

SANA also reported that a technical delegation from the UAE visited Damascus International Airport to evaluate it in preparation for the resumption of flights between the UAE and Syria.

Newsletter Sunday December 30, 2018

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Let Kurdish fighters in Syria keep US weapons, US commanders say

Such a move would likely anger NATO ally Turkey, which views Kurds as main enemy •

U.S. official: Idea to retrieve weapons is "asinine" • In first public sign of modification to Trump's pullout plan, Sen. Marco Rubio says withdrawal has been "slowed."

Reuters and Israel Hayom Staff

Kurdish fighters in Raqqa, Syria, in 2017 | Photo: Reuters

U.S. commanders preparing for the withdrawal of American troops from Syria are recommending that Kurdish fighters battling the Islamic State group be allowed to keep U.S.-supplied weapons, even though such a move would likely anger NATO ally Turkey, according to four U.S. officials.

Three of the officials, speaking on condition of anonymity, said the recommendations were part of discussions on a draft plan by the U.S. military.

However, discussions are still at an early stage inside the Pentagon and no decision has been made, the officials said.

It is unclear what the Pentagon will ultimately recommend to the White House.

The plan will be presented to the White House in the coming days, with President Donald Trump making the final decision.

The Pentagon said it would be "inappropriate" and premature to comment on what will happen with the weapons.

"Planning is ongoing, and focused on executing a deliberate and controlled withdrawal of forces while taking all measures possible to ensure our troops' safety," said Pentagon spokesman Commander Sean Robertson. The White House did not comment.

Trump last week abruptly ordered the withdrawal of all U.S. troops from Syria, drawing widespread criticism and prompting Defense Secretary Jim Mattis' resignation.

The officials said Trump's announcement upset U.S. commanders, who view it as a betrayal of the Kurdish YPG militia, which has led the fight to eradicate Islamic State from northeastern Syria.

Turkey views the YPG as an extension of a Kurdish insurgency inside Turkey, and has threatened to launch an offensive against the YPG, raising fears of a surge in violence that could harm hundreds of thousands of civilians.

One of the officials said the U.S. had told the YPG the U.S. would continue to arm it until the fight against Islamic State is completed.

"The fight isn't over. We can't simply start asking for the weapons back," the official said.

The proposal to leave U.S.-supplied weapons with the YPG, which could include anti-tank missiles, armored vehicles and mortars, would reassure the Kurdish allies that they are not being abandoned.

But Turkey wants the United States to take the weapons back, so leaving them could complicate Trump's plan to allow Turkey to finish off the fight against Islamic State inside Syria.

The Pentagon keeps records of the weapons it has supplied to the YPG and its chain of custody. But the U.S. officials said it would be nearly impossible to locate all the equipment.

"How are we going to get them back and who is going to take them back?" one official said.

The debate over whether to leave weapons with the YPG coincides with Trump's national security adviser John Bolton's visit to Turkey and Israel next week for talks on Syria.

The U.S. told Turkey it would take back the weapons after the defeat of Islamic State, which has lost all but a few slivers of territory in northeastern Syria.

"The idea that we'd be able to recover them is asinine. So we leave them where they are," an official said.

A person familiar with the discussions on the U.S. withdrawal plan, who asked not to be identified, said the White House and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan would oppose the proposal to allow the YPG to keep its U.S.-supplied weapons.

The recommendation "is a rejection of Trump's policy to withdraw from Syria," the source said.

Turkey said weapons supplied to the YPG in the past have ended up in the hands of its Kurdish separatists, and described any weapon given to the insurgents as a threat to Turkey's security.

A phone call between Trump and Erdogan two weeks ago led to the decision to withdraw all U.S. forces from Syria.

During the call, Trump had been expected to deliver a standard warning over Erdogan's plan to launch a cross-border attack targeting U.S.-backed Kurdish forces in northeastern Syria, U.S. officials said.

Instead, Trump reshaped U.S. policy in the Middle East, abandoning a quarter of Syrian territory and handing Turkey the job of finishing off Islamic State in Syria.

However, in the first public indication of any modification in Trump's plan, Sen. Marco Rubio (R., Florida) said on Friday that the U.S. withdrawal from Syria has been delayed.

"We have been able [to get] the pace of the retreat or withdrawal slowed," Rubio told a press conference in his home state, emphasizing that this was "important."

Rubio remains highly critical of any U.S. withdrawal from Syria now.

"We are outsourcing the fight against ISIS to the Turks," Rubio said, even though the Turks' "priority is to wipe out the Kurds, whom they view as a threat ... [because the Kurds] want to establish their own independent nation in northeast Syria and southern Turkey."

He said that for the past two years, the Kurds "have fought as the ground force against ISIS" and they and their families "could be slaughtered."

Rubio said the U.S. abandonment of the Kurds is "morally wrong" and could lead an entire generation of young Kurds to "grow up hating this country."

He also said that U.S. forces have a small force, "largely an anti-Hezbollah presence," in southern Syria at al-Tanf, near the Iraqi border. The U.S. presence there also protects

some 50,000 Syrians, who have taken refuge from the regime of Syrian President Bashar Assad.

Al-Tanf straddles the main highway between Damascus and Baghdad, and the U.S. base blocks a key route that Iran could use to ship weapons to Hezbollah if its ally, the Syrian regime, gains control of the area.

Rubio also noted the damage to the U.S. reputation in the region that will ensue, asking, "Who is going to partner with us in the future?"

Sen. Lindsey Graham (R., South Carolina) has also been a strong critic of Trump's surprise decision to withdraw from Syria.

Following reports on Friday that the YPG had turned to Syria to block any Turkish attack, Graham described that as a "major disaster in the making."

Newsletter Friday December 28, 2018

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[PM Netanyahu to attend presidential inauguration in Brazil after all](#)

Netanyahu leaves for Brazil with wife Sara and son Yair to attend inauguration of President-elect Jair Bolsonaro • PM had considered cutting trip, the first by an Israeli prime minister to country, shortly after elections were announced for April 9 earlier this week.

Ariel Kahana, Associated Press and Israel Hayom Staff

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu | Photo: AP

Despite earlier reports, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu plans to attend the inauguration of Brazilian President-elect Jair Bolsonaro.

The Prime Minister's Office on Wednesday said Netanyahu would likely shorten his weeklong visit after his coalition announced the dissolution of the Knesset and moved elections up to April 9.

But officials said Netanyahu will first go to Rio de Janeiro for a meeting with Bolsonaro and then travel to Brasília for the [Jan. 1 inauguration](#).

Netanyahu will also meet with other prominent dignitaries scheduled to attend the ceremony, including U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, Chilean President Sebastián Piñera and Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernández.

Netanyahu has said he has high expectations for the visit, saying he is extremely pleased with relations between Israel and Brazil.

On Thursday, Netanyahu took off for Brazil with his wife Sara and son Yair. Upon leaving, Netanyahu said, "We will discuss **Israel's ties with the largest country in Latin America, the fifth most populous country in the world.** Brazil is a huge country with huge potential for the State of Israel, economically, diplomatically and vis-à-vis security. It is a great change that Bolsonaro has declared and I am pleased that we can begin a new era between Israel and this major power."

In a statement, the Netanyahus said Yair's travel expenses has been paid for by the family.

On Friday, he was set to meet with Bolsonaro, as well as members of the local Jewish community.

**Newsletter Thursday December 27, 2018**

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**IDF unearths 5th Hezbollah cross-border tunnel**

The latest tunnel destroyed originated in the Shiite village of Ayta ash-Shab in Lebanon and breached Israeli territory, military says • IDF stresses Operation Northern Shield will continue until grid of Hezbollah terror tunnels is fully eliminated.

News Agencies and Israel Hayom Staff

Israeli soldiers near the Lebanon border, Wednesday | Photo: IDF Spokesperson's Unit

The Israeli military on Wednesday destroyed another cross-border tunnel dug by Hezbollah along the Lebanon-Israel border. This was the fifth terror tunnel unearthed by Israel as part of a wide-scale countertunnel operation launched on Dec. 4.

The IDF said Operation Northern Shield will continue until the network of Hezbollah terror tunnels snaking under the border, is eliminated.

Video: IDF Spokesperson's Unit

The IDF said the tunnel destroyed Wednesday originated in the Shiite village of Aytash-Shab in Lebanon and crossed into Israeli territory.

The military has not said how many tunnels have been destroyed so far. But it says its forces can work at more than one location simultaneously and that all activity is taking place in Israeli territory.

Israel and the U.N. say the tunnels violate a cease-fire resolution that ended a war between Israel and Hezbollah in 2006.

"The IDF holds the Lebanese government responsible for the digging of the tunnels. This is a serious violation of Resolution 1701 and the sovereignty of the State of Israel," a military statement said.

Newsletter Wednesday December 26, 2018

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Report: Israeli strike in Syria targets Hezbollah officials

Officials from Shiite terrorist group reportedly targeted minutes after boarding a plane bound for Iran • Israeli strike reportedly also hits several weapon depots • IDF: Israeli air defenses engaged anti-aircraft missile launched from Syria at Israel.

News Agencies and Israel Hayom Staff

An Israeli airstrike in Syria | Illustration: AP

An Israeli strike in Syria early Wednesday targeted several Hezbollah leaders, U.S. magazine Newsweek reported.

The magazine quoted a U.S. Defense Department source as saying officials from the Shiite terrorist group were targeted minutes after boarding a plane bound for Iran.

The strike also reportedly targeted several Iranian ammunition depots in Damascus, which according to Newsweek housed "valuable, GPS-guided ammunition" supplied by Iran to its regional proxy.

Syrian state media quoted a military official as confirming that at least one arms depot was hit in the attack and that three soldiers were wounded.

"Our air defenses confronted hostile missiles launched by Israeli warplanes from above the Lebanese territories and downed most of them before reaching their targets," the military source said.

The IDF did not corroborate the report of a strike but did confirm that Israeli air defenses engaged an anti-aircraft missile launched from Syria at Israel.

No damage or injuries were reported by the Israeli military.

Some Arab media reports said that Israeli warplanes flying over Lebanon fired missiles at areas near Damascus. Beirut's state-run National News Agency reported that Israeli fighter jets were flying at low altitude over parts of southern Lebanon.

Britain-based war monitor the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said Israeli airstrikes targeted three positions south of Damascus, in an area known to be used by Hezbollah and Iranian forces.

The strike is the first since U.S. President Donald Trump announced last week that he was pulling American troops out of Syria.

Following Trump's announcement, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Israel would "continue to act against Iran's attempts to entrench itself militarily in Syria, and to the extent necessary, we will even expand our actions there."

Israel is widely believed to have been behind a series of airstrikes in the past that mainly targeted Iranian and Hezbollah forces fighting alongside the government in Syria.

**Russian** MP Aleksey Pushkov said Wednesday that "according to the number of downed missiles, our **S-300 systems has greatly improved the capabilities of the Syrian air defenses.**"

Russia delivered the S-300 air defense system to Syria in October, following the Sept. 17 downing of a Russian reconnaissance plane by Syrian forces trying to counter an Israeli airstrike.

Israel and Russia maintain a deconfliction mechanism aimed at preventing incidents. While the Sept. 17 incident stoked regional tensions, both nations have agreed to continue with their vital military cooperation in the region.



Newsletter Tuesday December 25, 2018

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| [Turkey-backed fighters prepare to replace US forces in Syria](#)

Pullout of all 2,000 U.S. troops from Syria, announced by President Trump last week, will leave the oil-rich eastern third of Syria up for grabs • Kurdish-led forces face a triple threat from the Syrian government, the Islamic State group and Turkey.

Associated Press and Israel Hayom Staff

U.S. troops based around the Syrian town of Manbij speak with residents, Sunday |

Photo: The Military Council of Manbij City via AP

Turkish-backed fighters said Monday they are preparing to move into [Kurdish-controlled eastern Syria alongside Turkish troops once U.S. forces withdraw](#). Those fighters are already massing on the front line of a town held by the Kurdish-led forces.

The U.S. pullout, announced by President Donald Trump last week, will leave the oil-rich eastern third of Syria up for grabs. It is currently controlled by Kurdish-led forces that the Americans have backed over the past four years, with multiple parties seeking to move in. The Kurds now face a triple threat from the Syrian government, Islamic State and Turkey, which views them as terrorists because of their links to a Kurdish insurgent group inside Turkey.

Youssef Hammoud, spokesman for Turkey-backed Syrian opposition groups, said they have up to 15,000 trained fighters ready to deploy alongside Turkish forces, and they are already preparing to move into Manbij, a Kurdish-administered town in northern Syria where U.S. troops are based.

Hammoud said there is "no alternative" to Turkish forces and their allies replacing U.S. troops.

"We are ready to fight Daesh [Islamic State]," Hammond said, although Islamic State militants are largely confined to a remote desert enclave hundreds of miles southeast of Manbij.

Ilham Ahmed, a Syrian Kurdish official, said the Kurdish-led forces are now reaching out for potential new allies, underscoring the dire situation the group now finds itself in.

"We will deal with whoever can protect the stability of this country," she said.

Ahmed said her forces are talking with the Russians and the Syrian government – both rivals of the United States – as well as European countries about ways to deal with the U.S. withdrawal. She did not elaborate.

Abandoned by the U.S., the Kurds are confronting the dilemma of whether to try to hold on to the 30% of Syria they wrested from Islamic State. The territory includes some of the richest oil fields in northern and eastern Syria but also is home to large Arab populations.

The Kurds could pull back to the Kurdish-majority region in the far northeast but that would leave resources and Kurdish-majority pockets in the east isolated and vulnerable.

The Kurdish militia could also negotiate with Syrian President Bashar Assad's regime, allowing a return of government forces back into the east in the hope of gaining a measure of self-rule for Kurds. The government has so far rejected the notion of such autonomy.

Syrian government forces have reportedly been massing troops in Deir el-Zour province, across the Euphrates River from Kurdish-held territory.

On Monday, Iraq said it could consider deploying troops inside Syria to protect Iraq from threats across its borders. Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi said his government is "considering all the options."

Trump has said the withdrawal of some 2,000 U.S. troops from Syria will be slow and will be coordinated with Turkey. He did not provide a timetable.

Turkey said the two countries will ensure there is no "authority vacuum" once the U.S. troops leave.

A Pentagon spokesman, Navy Cmdr. Sean Robertson, said the executive order for withdrawal has been signed, but provided no further details.

Turkish presidential spokesman Ibrahim Kalin said a U.S. military delegation is expected in Turkey this week.

Turkey says it and its Syrian Arab allies can replace the U.S. in preventing a resurgence of Islamic State.

Kalin said there will be no "step back, weakness, halting or a slowing down" of the fight against Islamic State. Turkey has made clear it will not tolerate a contiguous Kurdish-held enclave along its border with Syria.

Hammoud said the Turkey-backed Syrian opposition forces had fighters and weapons deploying on the front line with Manbij, and are preparing to take it first, he said.

Manbij was at the center of an agreement the U.S. and Turkey reached in June under which Kurdish forces were to withdraw. In recent weeks Turkey said the U.S. was

dragging its feet in implementing the deal and vowed to launch a new offensive against the Kurds.

Those threats and a phone call with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan last week appear to have triggered Trump's decision to withdraw the U.S. forces based in Syria.

Kurdish forces in Manbij "have taken measures to fend off any attack," said the spokesman for the Kurdish-led Manbij Military Council, Sharfan Darwish.

Trump has claimed to have defeated Islamic State, but the Kurdish fighters are still battling the extremists in the remote town of Hajin near the Iraqi border. The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said the fighting displaced nearly 1,000 civilians on Sunday alone.

Ahmed, the senior Syrian Kurdish official, had just returned from a trip to France in which she called on Paris to play a larger role in Syria following the U.S. withdrawal.

"I urge Trump to go back on his decision inciting Erdogan against the Syrian people in general and the Kurdish people in specific," she said.

In the fight against Islamic State, hundreds of Kurdish fighters were killed.

"I call on him [Trump] to return the favor," she said.

**Newsletter Monday December 24, 2018**

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**Report: Egypt steps in to curb Gaza border violence**

Hamas and other terrorist groups in Gaza issue statement threatening to "test" Israel this Friday • "The resistance will not stand idly by" in the face of "criminal acts by the Zionist occupation," they say • Israel not interested in security escalation.

Daniel Siryoti and Israel Hayom Staff

Palestinian rioters near the Gaza-Israel border | Photo: AFP

Egypt is taking steps to prevent another security escalation on the Israel-Gaza Strip border following last week's violent demonstrations, Lebanon's al-Akhbar newspaper reported Monday.

Hamas and other terrorist groups in the Gaza Strip threatened on Sunday to "test" Israel, hinting at potential aggression this Friday at the weekly border demonstration.

Hamas has been orchestrating weekly border protests, dubbed the March of Return, since late March. Many have turned into riots, and the Palestinians say over 150 people have been killed and at least 10,000 have been injured since the demonstrations began.

On Friday, 8,000 Palestinians took part in the weekly protest. Although most demonstrators kept their distance from the border, several did clash with Israeli security forces. Gaza's Health Ministry said four Palestinians were killed and 25 others were wounded.

The IDF said the protesters burned tires and hurled stones and explosive devices at the troops, who responded with crowd control measures and sporadic live fire.

Hamas, Islamic Jihad and several other terrorist factions in Gaza issued a joint statement Sunday saying, "The cowardly Zionist enemy has committed another crime against our people.

"Last Friday, enemy snipers shot unarmed demonstrators on the border, murdering four and injuring dozens. All the shahids [martyrs] were shot from a distance of 300 to 600 meters [985 to 1,970 feet] from the border fence, confirming that the Zionist snipers deliberately fired at the shahids and the wounded, even though they posed no threat to the occupation's soldiers.

"The criminal acts of the Zionist occupation against our people have crossed the line and the resistance will not stand idly by. Next Friday will be a decisive day and we will test the intentions and conduct of the Zionist enemy," the statement said.

According to al-Akhbar's report, Egyptian intelligence officials have asked the Palestinian groups to provide them with proof that the IDF indeed targeted protesters who did not pose a threat to Israeli troops.

Cairo has relayed an Israeli message to Hamas saying Israel has no interest in a security escalation, and that it remains committed to recent understandings that have resulted in a dramatic decline in the border violence.

The understandings were reached following a flare-up in November - the worst clash between Israeli forces and Hamas since 2014.

Egyptian defense officials were expected to meet with Hamas officials in Gaza on Monday.

Newsletter Sunday December 23, 2018

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| IDF chief: Let's not make too much of Trump's Syria withdrawal

IDF Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Gadi Eizenkot says U.S. president's surprise announcement on troop withdrawal is "significant" but will not compromise Israel's capabilities in Syria

• "The IDF has been operating independently the entire time," he explains.

IDF Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Gadi Eizenkot | Photo: IDF Spokesperson's Unit

IDF Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Gadi Eizenkot is sounding the all clear days after U.S. President Donald Trump's surprise announcement that he plans to withdraw U.S. troops from Syria, saying that while the move is "significant, let's not make too much of it."

On Wednesday, Trump announced that the Islamic State terrorist group had been defeated in Syria and that he planned to pull all U.S. forces from there, triggering panic among U.S. allies and eliciting criticism and resignations from his own staff as well as fellow Republicans.

Speaking at an event honoring the late IDF chief Lt. Gen. Amnon Lipkin Shahak in Herzliya Sunday, Eizenkot said that the IDF's ability to operate deep within Syrian territory has not been compromised by the withdrawal of American forces.

"The IDF has been operating independently the entire time," Eizenkot said. "The Americans are making this decision at a time when the cooperation between our respective militaries is at an all-time high."

"The Russian presence in Syria has created a new reality, and it has profoundly influenced the way we operated our forces there," Eizenkot continued. "Our planning allowed us to effectively defend Israel's security interests. The Israeli contribution to the defeat of Islamic State is far greater than the public knows. They were on the border and they were hurt far more than the media reported. They were hurt by the Zionist arm far more than was made public."

Touching on another enemy, Iran, Eizenkot noted that "the IDF's main effort over the last four years has been to combat Iran's aspirations to export its capabilities from Iran to Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. This was a threat that remained hidden from the public eye in Israel, but as a military, we invested enormous intelligence, aerial and covert resources into this endeavor. We succeeded in preventing Iran from realizing its vision as planned, but the desire and aspirations remain."

Turning to another burning topic, the recently discovered Hezbollah attack tunnels jutting from Lebanon into Israel, Eizenkot remarked that "it isn't difficult to imagine what would have happened had the incident with Hezbollah begun with hundreds of Hezbollah fighters infiltrating Israel in an underground tunnel. We identified this threat in advance and secretly prepared to neutralize it. In the coming future, we will complete this mission. We were successful in preventing the organization from acquiring the precision capabilities it had tried to gain as well as against its effort to establish a presence on the Golan front."

He also spoke about the tensions on Israel's southern border, saying that "there was a bitter debate on whether or not Israel should launch a large-scale operation in Gaza. Whether to prepare the military for a broad campaign and simultaneously prepare a separate operation to prevent Hamas achievements. Their aim has been to infiltrate [Israeli] communities and to abduct soldiers, and that has failed. We chose a reality of balance between cost and benefit. This reality came with victories, but it also came with a cost – particularly the way it affected Israel's image, in the way that it was reflected in Israeli deterrence."

"I ask myself what the right thing to do would have been, for Israel's sake. Over the last decade, we have engaged in three wars. I keep hearing that Israel's deterrence has collapsed, but the reality is far more complex. Deterrence isn't built in a day and doesn't collapse in a day. It's a tricky term," he said.

"The situation in Gaza is very difficult, in terms of infrastructure and the humanitarian reality," he continued. "Electricity, water, employment, sewage – part of it is the basic reality in Gaza and part of it they do to themselves because they don't want to agree to prisoner exchanges or to return soldiers' bodies. I view bringing the Israeli soldiers to burial in Israel and returning our two [captive] civilians home as a top priority."

"I'm not trying to tell you that the reality in the Israeli communities adjacent to the Gaza border is excellent. Far from it. But with that, when I ask myself what happened there, I can say that over the last four years, not a single Israeli civilian has been killed. Three Israeli civilians were moderately wounded, and 20 mainly suffered from shock. Two soldiers were killed in combat and 16 were wounded, five of them seriously or moderately."

"Meanwhile, they paid a very steep price. Instead of getting money from the Palestinian Authority, they are getting it from Qatar. That's not protection."

Newsletter Friday December 21, 2018

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Israel, Jordan, Saudi Arabia join forces against Iran in Syria

Secret talks reach understandings with Russia that will enable Israel to retain freedom to attack Iranian and Hezbollah targets in Syria • Egypt, Israeli cabinet reportedly not informed of U.S. President Trump's surprise decision to withdraw from Syria.

Daniel Siryoti, Yoni Hersch, Ariel Kahana, Eldad Beck, Erez Linn and Israel Hayom Staff

U.S. troops in northern Syria look toward the border with Turkey, an Iranian ally | Photo: AP

The Russian forces currently in Syria will take action to restrain Hezbollah and Iranian activity there, according to understandings reached by Israel, the United States, Jordan and Saudi Arabia with Russian President Vladimir Putin, a Jordanian official confirmed to Israel Hayom.

The understandings are the product of behind-the-scenes diplomatic talks that were underway prior to U.S. President Donald Trump's decision this week to withdraw American forces from Syria.

According to the terms of the understanding, Russia will continue to give Israel the freedom to strike Hezbollah and Iranian targets and weaponry that threaten the "balance of power" in Syria. According to the Jordanian official, it was these understandings between Trump and Putin that paved the way for the U.S. decision to pull its forces from Syria.

Other high-ranking Jordanian officials have confirmed that Jordan, Israel, and Saudi Arabia are working together to contain the threat posed by Iran and Hezbollah's presence in Syria. Several of them emphasized that U.S. officials had made it clear that U.S. intelligence agencies would increase cooperation with Israel, Jordan and Saudi Arabia, particularly on sharing intelligence, in a joint attempt to counter Iran's attempt to create a contiguous Shiite corridor from Tehran to Beirut.

Senior Egyptian intelligence officials say that, unlike Jordan, Israel, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, Egypt was not advised ahead of time that the U.S. was pulling out of Syria.

On Thursday, in a meeting with Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsiras and Cypriot President Nicos Anastasiades in Beersheba, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu decried the "Iranian web of aggression in the Middle East, which also terrorizes Europe and the entire world."

"Israel launched a campaign to expose and neutralize cross-border terror tunnels on our northern border with Lebanon. These tunnels were built by Hezbollah with direct support

and funding from Iran. ... Israel will continue to act in Syria to prevent Iran's effort to militarily entrench itself against us. We are not going to reduce our efforts; we're going to increase our efforts," Netanyahu said.

Behind closed doors, **Israeli officials were critical of Trump's decision**. One senior minister called it a "horrifying moral and a bad diplomatic step."

"The move does not serve Israel's interests, harms the Kurds, strengthens [Turkish President Recep Tayyip] Erdogan, and will give Iran additional routes through which to send weapons to Syria," the minister said.

Cabinet ministers and diplomatic officials have also confirmed to Israel Hayom that while Netanyahu said earlier this week that Trump had advised him on Monday that he was pulling U.S. troops out of Syria, and that U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo had discussed the matter with him on Tuesday, the information was never shared with Israel's National Security Council or the cabinet.

One minister told Israel Hayom that he thought Netanyahu might have been worried that cabinet officials would vocally criticize the American move. Netanyahu's office declined to comment.

**Newsletter Thursday December 20, 2018**

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**UN stalls as Israel urges condemning Hezbollah over terror tunnels**

PM Netanyahu says grid of terror tunnels snaking under Israel-Lebanon border "is not merely an act of aggression. This is an act of war" • Israeli envoy: Lebanese army officials working for Hezbollah, while UNIFIL is not working to fulfill its mandate.

Ariel Kahana, Associated Press and Israel Hayom Staff

Israeli Ambassador to the U.N. Danny Danon, Wednesday

Israel on Wednesday urged a special session of the U.N. Security Council to condemn the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah and designate it a terrorist organization following the discovery of cross-border tunnels stretching into Israel.



Following a stormy session, the council took no action on the Israeli request, though several members sided with Israel and expressed concerns over Hezbollah's violation of a U.N. Security Council Resolution 1701 that ended a 2006 war between the bitter enemies.

Israel has previously urged the U.N.'s most powerful body to condemn Hezbollah, but has never succeeded because of divisions in the council, and there was no move Wednesday to circulate a draft resolution on the tunnels. A key reason for the lack of council action is that some members would insist that Israeli violations of the 2006 resolution also be included in a resolution.

Early this month, Israel announced the discovery of what it said was a network of cross-border Hezbollah terror tunnels and launched an open-ended military operation to destroy them. It so far has exposed four tunnels that it says were to be used to infiltrate and attack Israeli towns and abduct Israeli civilians.

Ahead of Wednesday's debate, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu urged the council to condemn Hezbollah.

"This is not merely an act of aggression. This is an act of war," Netanyahu said. "The people of Lebanon have to understand that Hezbollah is putting them in jeopardy and we expect Lebanon to take action against this."

Though it appeared the Lebanese army was unaware of the Hezbollah tunnels, Netanyahu said, they know about it now and must neutralize them for their own country's sake. Israel holds the Lebanese government responsible for the actions of Hezbollah.

"The fact that the Lebanese army is doing nothing means that they are either unable or unwilling or both to do anything about this. But it doesn't absolve Lebanon's culpability," he said. "My message is: Hezbollah is putting you in great jeopardy."

At the United Nations, Israeli Ambassador Danny Danon showed an aerial photograph of what Israel called a "private compound" near the border that concealed a tunnel. He also presented an aerial photo showing what he said were weapons-storage sites concealed in a border village.

#### IDF Spokesperson's Unit

He said Israel had given the U.N. peacekeeping mission, known as UNIFIL, "precise information" about the tunnels that was shared with the Lebanese army. He accused the Lebanese army of then relaying the information to Hezbollah, allowing it to try to conceal the tunnels.

"Lebanese army officials are working for Hezbollah, while UNIFIL is not working to fulfill its mandate in the region in the necessary manner," Danon said, further warning that Hezbollah is building "terror centers" on the border with Israel.

The U.N.'s peacekeeping chief, Jean-Pierre Lacroix, said UNIFIL had confirmed four tunnels, including two that cross the frontier into Israel.

Calling them a "serious violation" of the 2006 cease-fire resolution, Lacroix said UNIFIL is "acting judiciously" to complete its investigation and to work with both sides to disable all tunnels that cross the border.

"This is a matter of serious concern," he said.

Lebanese Ambassador Amal Mudallali said her country took the matter seriously and remains committed to the cease-fire resolution.

"This commitment is not rhetoric, and these are not mere words, because this commitment is in the interest of my country and my people," she said, adding that the Lebanese army is "deployed heavily" in the south to make sure the cease-fire is honored.

But she also accused Israel of repeatedly violating the resolution by having its air force routinely fly through Lebanese skies.

"If we were to call for a Security Council meeting every time Israel had violated Lebanon's sovereignty since 2006, you will be in a 24/7 shift to address them," she said.

Several council members joined Israel in condemning the tunnels.

Sweden said Hezbollah's military capabilities pose a "clear risk" to regional stability. The Netherlands strongly condemned the tunnel activities as a "flagrant violation" of Israeli sovereignty and international law.

Russia's deputy U.N. ambassador, Vladimir Safronkov, stressed Moscow's "historically friendly relations" with Israel and Lebanon in his speech to the council. Like many other council members, he called for calm and dialogue as well as an end to "emotional polemics."

Safronkov said Russia takes note of UNIFIL's preliminary conclusion on the violation of the 2006 resolution over the tunnels. But he quickly referred to Israeli violations as well.

"We see that all violations of the provisions in this Security Council resolution should cease, from either side – all violations," Safronkov said. "We cannot have a selective approach to implementation of the resolution."

He said Israel has a right to prevent illegal incursions into its territory but expressed hope its activities "will not go against the grain" of the 2006 resolution.

Israel also accuses Hezbollah of using private homes to store weapons or other military activity. Netanyahu called these actions a "double war crime" since it threatened to harm Israeli civilians and put Lebanese civilians in danger as well.

On Wednesday, the Israeli military escorted reporters along the Israel-Lebanon border to the site of one of the tunnels found in recent weeks near the town of Metula. Heavy mist and rain nearly obscured the Lebanese villas perched on the mountains overlooking Israeli army bulldozers and tractors trundling through the mud.