

## International

# Israel remains focused on Iran rivalry despite virus

## Israel targets allied Iranian forces, Hezbollah fighters

**JERUSALEM:** Comments last week from an unnamed Israeli defense official that Iran was reducing its presence in Syria sparked fierce debate about Tehran's next moves and how the Jewish state should respond. Iran policy will inevitably be a top concern for the Israeli government to be sworn in Thursday, a unity coalition agreed after more than a year of unprecedented political deadlock. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, who will be in Israel the previous day, is to discuss Iran with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and incoming defense minister Benny Gantz.

Their focus will inevitably be on Iranian nuclear ambitions, with the US pursuing a campaign of "maximum pressure", backed by Israel, to deter an Iranian weapons program. But developments in Syria have placed renewed attention on Iranian action in Israel's northern neighbor. Israel has launched hundreds of attacks in Syria since the start of the civil war in 2011 - targeting government troops, allied Iranian forces and fighters from Tehran-backed Lebanese militant group Hezbollah.

But in an apparent intensification, six air strikes attributed to Israel have been carried out on Iranian targets in Syria over the past three weeks. Israel almost never claims - or denies - such strikes, consistently telling enquiring reporters that it "does not comment on foreign reports". But following the most recent bombing last week, outgoing Israeli Defense Minister Naftali Bennett said: "Iran has nothing to do in Syria... (and) we won't stop before they leave Syria."

Bennett, who may be out of government entirely depending on last-minute coalition negotiations, accused Iran of "trying to establish itself on the border with Israel to threaten Tel Aviv, Jerusalem and Haifa".



US pursuing a 'campaign of maximum pressure'

### 'Iranians not leaving'

Since the start of the year, Iran has faced multiple crises: the US killing of top general Qasem Soleimani, the region's deadliest coronavirus outbreak with over 100,000 people infected, and tumbling oil prices slashing the state budget. All of which has some observers wondering whether Iran is trying to reduce the cost of its involvement in Syria. Such speculation was further fuelled by an Israeli defense official recently quoted in Israeli media as saying: "For the first time since (deploying forces to) Syria, Iran is reducing the number of its soldiers there and evacuating bases."

And a US diplomat said: "It would make sense at a

certain point that Iran would want to cut its losses and downsize its presence there just because it's increasingly costly to them in terms of life and property." But not everyone in Israel is convinced that Tehran is ready to abandon Syria. "The Iranians are not leaving," said Amos Yadlin, a former head of Israeli military intelligence, who suggested that Iran may instead be relying more heavily on local forces. "Still the commanders are from Hezbollah and Iran and the cheap soldiers are Shia militia and local Syrians," he said.

### Cost-cutting

A source in Jerusalem working on Iran policy agreed that Tehran remains committed to Syria and likely views its investment as a "sunk cost". "They are waiting for the revenues, they can't withdraw so fast without getting the economic fruit that they think they should get," the source said. Another source in Jerusalem claimed that Iran was attempting to divert funding for its coronavirus response towards paying its proxies in Syria. "They are using the virus as an opportunity to increase funds for destabilizing activities in the region," the source said, without giving further details. In April, sanctions-hit Iran urged the International Monetary Fund to issue a \$5 billion emergency loan to help it combat the virus.

Yoram Schweitzer, an analyst at the Institute for National Security Studies in Tel Aviv, said strikes on Syria were either a response to growing Iranian operations or a bid to weaken an enemy already burdened



**HASAKEH PROVINCE:** A displaced Syrian girl carries a pot of chickpeas at the Washukanni camp for the internally displaced in Syria's northeastern Hasakeh province during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. - AFP

by the pandemic. But Israel will need to tread carefully, warned the Yedioth Aharonot newspaper. "What Israel needs is a defence minister and an IDF (army) chief of staff who can do the necessary risk-management work together, and act to continue to degrade the Iranian military presence in Syria without creating situations that might draw the entire region into renewed conflict," the paper said. - AFP



**SAO PAULO:** Patients affected by the COVID-19 coronavirus are treated at a field hospital set up at a sports gym in Santo Andre, Sao Paulo state, Brazil. - AFP

## Virus pandemic politics costing lives in Brazil

**RIO DE JANEIRO:** Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro keeps saying coronavirus fears are overblown. Other officials at the federal, state and local levels insist the danger is all too real. Brazil is torn by a deep political divide over how to respond to the pandemic, and it is taking a heavy human toll. On Saturday, even as the death toll in Brazil crossed the threshold of 10,000, Bolsonaro continued pressing to get the country back to work. "The army of unemployed keeps growing," he tweeted. "Is chaos coming?" added the far-right leader, who has compared the virus to a "little flu" and condemned the "hysteria" surrounding it.

Some argue the "chaos" is already here - at least as far as the Brazilian government's response goes. Bolsonaro's criticism of stay-at-home measures to fight the virus has put him at odds with state and local authorities across Brazil, not to mention his own former health minister. The president sacked the latter, Luiz Henrique Mandetta, last month after a long series of public spat. Meanwhile, Brazil has emerged as the epicenter of the pandemic in Latin America, with 11,519 deaths so far. Experts say under-testing means the real figure is likely far higher, and that things stand to get a lot worse.

"We know from history that anytime there's such a cacophony in a situation like this, such huge disagreement on public policy among leaders, tragedy ensues," said Brazilian historian Sidney Chalhoub, a professor at Harvard University. As an example, he cited the last major cholera outbreak in Europe, in the late 19th century, that killed more than 10,000 people in Hamburg, Germany. "It was largely caused by divisions between the local political elite and dominant economic interests, which trumped public health concerns. And the result was an even bigger economic catastrophe," he said.

## Turkey turns to medical diplomacy to heal relations

**ANKARA:** Emblazoned with Turkish flags and presidential seals, crates packed with medical equipment are loaded onto planes, part of a major aid campaign by Ankara which has dispatched supplies to dozens of countries since the new coronavirus pandemic erupted. "There is hope after despair and many suns after darkness," says a message on every shipment - a line from 13th century Sufi poet Jalaluddin Rumi, which looks to better days not just in the battle against COVID-19 but also for Turkey's fraught diplomacy.

With its relations with NATO allies in Europe and the United States darkened by disputes over Russian

### Polarizing disease

Bolsonaro supporters have held a series of anti-confinement protests in recent weeks. Sometimes the president himself has joined in, hitting the street, shaking hands and giving fiery speeches, all while refusing to wear a face mask. The protests have included virulent attacks on Congress and the Supreme Court, which have moved to counter Bolsonaro's anti-confinement measures. At times, they have erupted into violence, including against journalists and even nurses.

But a recent poll by the Datafolha institute found that 67 percent of Brazilians believe stay-at-home measures are needed to contain the virus, even if they hurt the economy. Even in his own camp, Bolsonaro's support is far from universal. Another poll found that while 56 percent of those who call themselves right-wing or center-right supported the president's handling of the pandemic, 40 percent did not. "The more closely related people are to someone who has been infected or died, the more they distance themselves from Bolsonaro," said political scientist Carlos Pereira of the Getulio Vargas Foundation, who conducted the latter poll.

### 'Anti-knowledge'

Like his US counterpart Donald Trump, whom he admires, Bolsonaro has touted the medication chloroquine as a wonder drug against COVID-19. Scientists at Brazil's leading public health research institute, Fiocruz, have stated that preliminary studies do not indicate chloroquine is an effective treatment for the disease. Perceived to be attacking the president, they have received threats on social media in response.

"We're talking about a far-right, anti-democratic government," some of whose supporters have "fascist" tendencies, said sociologist Debora Messenberg, of the University of Brasilia. "We can't even talk about society being 'polarized' in the usual sense. It's not a democratic polarization. Right now, the debate is between democracy and authoritarianism," she said. Brazil, like the United States, is facing the pandemic "with a government that is anti-knowledge," said Chalhoub. The Bolsonaro administration "is depicting this as a public health catastrophe versus an economic catastrophe. But that's a harmful view that will drive us toward both," he said. - AFP

missile defenses, human rights and Western sanctions on Iran, Turkey hopes the virus crisis is an opportunity to soothe recent tensions. Despite battling one of the world's biggest coronavirus outbreaks at home - where the death toll now exceeds 3,700 - Turkey has sent medical aid to 61 countries, including the United States, Spain, Italy, France and Britain. By its own calculations, Ankara has been the world's third biggest aid distributor during the outbreak, sending face masks, protective suits, testing kits, disinfectant and respirators.

In a letter to President Donald Trump sent with one shipment, President Tayyip Erdogan said he hoped the "spirit of solidarity" Turkey had shown would help US politicians "better understand the strategic importance of our relations". Ankara faces potential US sanctions over its purchase of Russian S-400 missile defences, which it bought last year but has not yet fully deployed. Despite the threat of sanctions, it says the systems will ultimately be activated. - Reuters

## Cafes and parks reopen; Ukraine eases lockdown

**KIEV:** Mitya Yatim, the owner of a wine bar in central Kiev, opened to the public on Monday for the first time after nearly two months of lockdown that left his business reeling. He says the anti-virus restrictions introduced in Ukraine two months ago to slow the spread of the coronavirus "hit us hard". "We were not ready for it," Yatim, who runs the Malevich wine bar, told AFP on Monday as Ukraine eased its lockdown by opening outdoor areas of cafes and coffee shops. "We had to go into debt to pay rent. Our people were left without work," Yatim explained.

Ukraine in mid-March ordered all non-essential businesses to close, with only grocery stores and pharmacies permitted to remain open as part of the efforts to stop the pandemic. Public transport has been reserved for employees of essential services, including police and hospital staff. Under new government regulations which entered into force Monday, Ukrainians are now also permitted to visit beauty salons, dental clinics, and parks and public squares.

"This day has come because most of us adhered to the rules," Ukraine's health ministry said Monday. "However, this doesn't mean we can neglect security measures. About 500 new coronavirus infections are confirmed in Ukraine every day," the ministry added. The country has so far confirmed 15,648 coronavirus cases and 408 deaths. The ex-Soviet nation with a population of 40 million is one of the poorest countries in Europe and the economic fallout from the pandemic threatens to make matters worse.

### Disposable plates

Georgiy Museliani, owns the Khachapuri House cafe which serves Georgian food but shut its doors two months ago. His kitchen continued providing takeaway meals during the lockdown, but on Monday he reopened the outdoor seating area, with live music and free ice cream for children. The food is served on disposable plates and customers are not permitted to even touch the menus, Museliani told AFP, citing new rules.

Tables must be placed one and a half metres apart and only two people can sit together. Everyone is required to wear a face mask, not ideal for diners. "How will this mask save us? It won't! It's like putting a T-shirt on a hedgehog so that he doesn't freeze," Museliani says. However he told AFP he is glad to see the lockdown eased and life begin to return to normal, saying he was sceptical of the government's lockdown, which forced him to cut salaries and reduce the number of working days to "survive". "They just locked everyone at home!" the 45-year-old said. - AFP



**ISTANBUL:** A barber wearing a protective mask cuts a man's hair in his barber shop in Istanbul, on the first day of shops reopening following a closure since March 21, 2020 due to the pandemic. - AFP

## Greek migrant hotel ransacked in latest tensions

**ARNISSA:** When plans were leaked last week to move dozens of asylum seekers from an island camp to a hotel in the northern Greek village of Arnissa, there was a swift and violent response. Around 250 people burned and looted the empty hotel to prevent the transfer, according to eyewitnesses, in the latest tensions over the relocation of migrants in Greece. "It was really scary. They threw stones, lit fires and ransacked the entire hotel," said a young woman who declined to give her name. "My father who is old and lives near the hotel hasn't slept for two days because of his fear," she told AFP. The Greek government has promised to transfer more than 2,000 asylum seekers from islands to the mainland to ease pressure on camps.

But fed up with shouldering the burden of Europe's snail-paced asylum system, locals have protested against the presence of migrants in their towns. Government spokesman Stelios Petsas on Monday attributed the May 5 incident to "misinformation" and misplaced fear among locals that refugees will spread the coronavirus. "Where there are pockets of opposition it's usually due to misinformation... not everyone has understood that we have taken very specific measures since the start of the health crisis," he told reporters.

Police have opened an investigation into the attack which left the hotel in ruins, but no arrests have been made. Windows were broken, furniture was smashed and the rooms were strewn with rocks and charred debris. The owners requested anonymity for fear of further reprisals. Meanwhile, some residents stressed that the asylum-seekers were not welcome. "Nothing happened here. We just chased away the illegal migrants," one irate villager said.

### 'Refugees chasing refugees'

Attempts to move elderly refugees or families with children from overcrowded island camps to the mainland have run into opposition before. The same refugees that were going to stay in Arnissa - whose nationalities were not disclosed - were previously living in the dismal Moria camp on the island of Lesbos, and had earlier been denied entry into another village in northern Greece.

In October, a hotel owner in the town of Vrasna near Thessaloniki said she had received arson threats after agreeing to temporarily host a group of asylum-seekers. In the days before the Arnissa hotel was destroyed, rumours were circulating that authorities were bringing people to the village who were "presented as monsters", said Dimitris, a 68-year-old resident. Dimitris said he believed some of last week's attackers are themselves descended from ethnic Greek refugees uprooted from Turkey decades earlier. "Refugees chasing refugees. This is unbelievable to me," he said.

Another villager, 36-year-old Panagiotis, said that some locals had posted footage of the attack on their social media accounts. "Now that the police are investigating, they deleted these posts and are hiding," he said. The mayor of nearby Edessa, the largest town in the area, has questioned the logic of the transfer in the middle of the coronavirus pandemic. More than 150 people have died from COVID-19 in Greece. Migrant camps have been placed under lockdown until May 21. There have been confirmed cases in two camps and at a hotel on the mainland - although none in migrant facilities on islands such as Lesbos.

"Now that we are wary about the course of the coronavirus contagion... they decided to transfer migrants," Edessa mayor Dimitris Yannou wrote on Facebook days before the hotel attack. "Edessa is too full of refugees and migrants," he added. The asylum-seekers from Lesbos were eventually transferred in secret to a hotel near Thessaloniki by the International Organization for Migration (IOM). "These people remain in quarantine for 14 days as is prescribed," said an IOM representative in charge of their transfer. "They are safe and healthy. We support them and they want to forget what happened." - AFP