

# Hamas Performs Exercises Simulating Zionist Invasion of Gaza

GAZA STRIP (Dispatches) – Palestinian resistance movement Hamas has performed a snap training exercise in the Gaza Strip that rehearsed an Israeli invasion of the enclave.

According to a announcement by Hamas’ Interior Ministry, the drills aimed “to test the readiness” of its forces “for a scenario of an extensive attempt to harm public order and stability in the Gaza Strip.” The drill involved police, intelligence units and the al-Qassam Brigades, Hamas’ paramilitary wing, the Times of Israel reported.

“The Interior and National Security Ministry is currently carrying out an emergency drill to simulate dealing with a sudden security threat,” Interior Ministry spokesperson Iyad al-Bozm wrote on Twitter. “It is taking place in the framework of examining the preparedness of the security forces and services.”

According to the Times of Israel, the drill involved suddenly raising the alert level among all security agencies across the 25-mile-long territory, which at its widest is only six miles across. Reserve personnel were mobilized, roadblocks were set up, and all land crossings and seaports were closed.

Observers noted the quick reactions by all parties. “In less than 10 minutes all troops were mobilized and the land and sea borders and the governorates and roads and the border were all closed,” an activist wrote on Twitter.

At the climax of the drill, Gazan forces “captured” an Israeli special forces team that had penetrated the territory, Haaretz noted. The drill was likely based on the very real raid last November in which a Zionist regime special forces team was discovered inside Gaza near Khan Younis. In the ensuing shootout, a Zionist trooper and



*Palestinian youth take part in military exercises during a graduation ceremony as part of a training camp run by the Palestinian resistance movement, Hamas, on January 29, 2015 in Gaza City.*

seven Gazans were killed. An internal probe by the Zionist regime revealed on Monday the trooper was felled by friendly fire.

The Zionist regime “has seen the power of the resistance in the battle in Khan Younis, whose results continue to shake the foundations of the Israeli defense establishment and military,” Hamas said in a statement, according to the Times, adding that “the resistance has additional powerful capabilities it has not yet revealed.”

The drills also come less than a week after Zionist Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said that the occupying regime was “preparing for a large-scale military operation, if necessary.”

Although the Zionist regime and Hamas previously exchanged rounds of missile attacks, the two sides arrived at a ceasefire agreement in mid-May. However, irregular attacks by methods such as incendiary balloons have continued, prompting the regime to cut off Gaza’s fuel access and restrict the limit for fishing boats to 10 nautical miles from shore.

On Tuesday, the regime’s Public Security Minister Gilad Erdan said Israel “came close in recent weeks to the possibility of a military operation in Gaza, but it very much depends on what Hamas does in the coming weeks,” Haaretz reported.

## ‘U.S.-Backed Militants in Syria Steal \$100mn From Saudi Financial Aid’

DAMASCUS (Dispatches) – The U.S.-backed so-called Syria Democratic Forces has stolen at least \$100 million from the recent financial assistance provided by the Saudi regime, media reports disclosed on Wednesday.

The Arabic-language al-Watan newspaper quoted dissident sources as saying that the SDF has stolen \$100 million from a hefty sum paid by Saudi Minister Samer al-Sahban during his recent visit to the eastern regions of Syria.

It noted that Saudi Arabia had paid the sum to buy the companionship of the tribal leaders

of eastern Syria on the pretext that it was an aid to those tribes whose farms Raqqah, Dayr al-Zawr and Hasaka had been ruined during the recent SDF war with the Daesh.

After the SDF withheld the huge sums paid by Riyadh, it also forced the administrative employees of those regions to levy tax from the local people.

The sources pointed to people’s fury over SDF’s measures, and said corruption, plundering and robbery of people’s assets in the occupied areas have considerably increased.

In a relevant development, the

SDF continued their pressures to force children into their ranks and train them in their secret military bases in Eastern Syria despite an agreement with the United Nations.

The al-Watan newspaper quoted dissident sources as saying that despite SDF’s agreement with the UN not to forcefully recruit child soldiers in Eastern Syria, it still continues to arrest and transfer the detained children to SDF’s secret military bases in eastern Dayr al-Zawr.

The source noted that the SDF is arresting boys and girls aged

under 18 years in areas under its control in Dayr al-Zawr and Raqqah and transfers them to its secret military bases, and said, “The SDF has recently arrested a 14-year-old child in the town of Ahras in Eastern Aleppo, and forced the kid to join the its ranks.”

The so-called Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) also pointed to the SDF’s forced recruitment of 130 teachers in the town of al-Darbasieh in Hasaka province, and said that the SDF’s behavior has resulted in a wave of anger by civilians there.

## ‘UN, Syria Close to Agreeing Constitutional Committee’

BEIRUT (Dispatches) – The United Nations is close to agreement with Syria on establishing a constitutional committee, the UN Secretary General’s Syria envoy Geir Pedersen told reporters on Wednesday.

The UN wants to convene the committee as a next step in efforts to find a political solution to end the war in Syria, but there has been no agreement so far on who should be on it.

The Norwegian diplomat took over from Staffan de Mistura in January.

In February, he senior UN official said his main goal was to negotiate an agreement between the two parties involved in the conflict.

“To be able to get to a situation, where you can say that we have been able to put eight years of conflict behind us and that we as Syrians agree

that we will begin the process of creating a future for coming Syrians, that... would be the definition that we have been successful,” Pedersen commented.

He underlined that he saw the constitutional committee as “a potential door opener” for the political process to the crisis.

Pedersen said work was also needed on other issues, expressing hope to secure more cooperation from both the incumbent Syrian government led by President Bashar al-Assad as well as the Saudi-backed Syrian National Coalition (SNC).

The UN envoy for Syria also hoped to see more prisoner exchanges, and clarity on missing persons in the wake of a swap between the government and terrorist groups in the northwestern city of al-Bab.

## French Prosecutors Seek Suspended Prison Sentence for Saudi Princess

PARIS (Dispatches) – French prosecutors said on Tuesday they were pushing for a six-month suspended prison sentence for the king of Saudi Arabia’s daughter, as she went on trial in absentia in a case involving the beating of a workman in her luxury flat in Paris.

Princess Hassa bint Salman is being tried on charges of complicity to violence with a weapon and complicity to kidnap an Egyptian-born artisan who was carrying out repairs at her father’s residence on the exclusive Avenue Foch in September 2016.

According to the indictment, seen by Reuters, workman Ashraf Eid told police the princess’ bodyguard bound his hands, punched and kicked him and forced him to kiss the princess’ feet after she accused him of filming her on his cell phone.

The French prosecutor in the case asked that the bodyguard receive an eight-month suspended prison sentence, and that both he and the princess pay a 5,000 euro (\$5,602) fine.

The princess, the sister of Crown Prince

Mohammed bin Salman, has denied any wrongdoing. An international arrest warrant against her was issued in November 2017.

The Saudi royal family has faced legal problems in France before.

In 2013, a court in France ordered the French assets of Saudi Princess Maha al-Sudairi, wife of former Interior Minister Prince Nayef bin Abdul Aziz, to be seized over unpaid bills at a luxury hotel totaling almost 6.7 million dollars.

## Lebanon... (Continued From Page One)

Lebanese Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri said on Wednesday the U.S. sanctions targeting Hezbollah MPs moved in a “new direction” from existing measures, but would not affect government work.

“It is a new matter that we will deal with as we see fit ... The important thing is to preserve the banking sector and the Lebanese economy and, God willing, this crisis will pass sooner or later,” he said.

Hezbollah’s political clout in Lebanon has widened since an election last year yielded a parliamentary majority for the movement and its political allies.

President Michel Aoun said the country “regrets” the measures and will follow up with U.S. authorities.

Hezbollah has not issued a formal statement about the latest sanctions. Hezbollah MP Ali Ammar told Lebanese broadcaster LBC on Wednesday the sanctions were a “medal of honor”.

“The American action is an attack on national sovereignty and it is a government duty to defend this sovereignty and protect it,” he said.

Lebanon has one of the world’s heaviest public debt burdens. The government aims to avert a financial crisis with long-delayed reforms to put state finances on a sustainable path.

## Iranians... (Continued From Page One)

“For the time being we are in the deal and we invite others to stay in the deal,” he said. But Iran would move to the “third phase” of its stepped-up uranium enrichment program unless the Europeans kept promises to uphold the economic benefits of the accord.

“Apparently, besides the U.S. the Europeans have not been up to the job and have not honored all their commitments up to now,” he said.

The Europeans have tried to do so with a transaction channel that would allow continued trade with Iran despite U.S. sanctions. But it’s only recently been activated, and companies are reluctant to take the risk of U.S. retaliation.

Takht-Ravanchi said reports that Iran may dramatically raise levels of uranium enrichment to 20% purity in “phase 3” were hypothetical.

“We have said we are not going to honor the cap of 3.67%,” the ambassador said. “What will happen in the third phase we have not said it yet, but if we reach to that point, definitely we will announce beforehand.”

Shortly before the interview, an IRGC commander warned that U.S. military bases and aircraft carriers were within range of the country’s missiles, and would be destroyed if America made any “mistakes”.

The ambassador said this was not a threat, but a signal that the Iranians would not “sit on their hands” if attacked.

He also denied that the Iranian oil tanker seized by the British was headed to Syria in breach of EU sanctions as alleged, calling the move a “clear case of piracy and violation of international law”.

“It is better for the British government to release this ship as soon as possible otherwise there will be consequences,” he said.

Takht-Ravanchi said he did not think U.S. President Donald Trump wanted a war with Iran but believed his National Security Adviser John Bolton did. Bolton openly called for regime change in Tehran before taking office in the White House.

The ambassador said negotiations with the U.S. could not take place unless the Trump administration lifted sanctions “at the least”.

And he also dismissed as an “absurd assumption” any suggestion that Iran’s severely depleted oil exports would lead to an economic collapse.

“We have managed under different situations worse than we have today, and I am sure we can manage again,” he said, invoking the Iran-Iraq war which lasted eight years.

## U.S. Intel... (Continued From Page 2)

seizing approximately 807 tons of different types of narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances, he said.

“We are determined to continue our efforts in combating terrorists and drug traffickers. However, to ensure the continuity and effectiveness of our efforts, the international community must assist Iran, of course without precondition, discrimination or politicization,” he

said.

Takht-Ravanchi touched on “unlawful sanctions” on Iran, saying countries imposing them “have to be reminded that their sanction policy seriously weakens the effectiveness of counter-narcotic efforts of transit countries”.

## U.S. Calls... (Continued From Page 2)

Still, tensions continue to mount between American and Iranian officials.

On Tuesday, a commander in Iran’s Islamic Revolution Guards Cops (IRGC) said on Tuesday that U.S. regional bases and its aircraft carriers in the Persian Gulf are within the range of Iranian missiles, the Tasnim news agency reported.

“American bases are within the range of our missiles ... Our missiles will destroy their aircraft carriers if they make a mistake,” said Hussein Nejat. “Americans are very well aware of the consequences of a military confrontation with Iran.”

## Trump ... (Continued From Page One)

American companies. “They are investing very heavily in our country,” Trump said. “They’re creating lots of jobs. They’re buying tremendous amounts of military equipment, including planes.”

Five commercial agreements were signed. Qatar Airways is buying five Boeing 777 Freighters and large-cabin aircraft from Gulfstream Aerospace and plans to use General Electric Co. jet engines to power its Boeing aircraft.

The White House also said the Qatari defense ministry will buy a missile defense system from Raytheon. In addition, Chevron Phillips Chemical and Qatar Petroleum have agreed to jointly develop an \$8 billion petrochemical plant on the U.S. Gulf Coast.

The price tags on the other deals — including some that have been previously announced — were not disclosed, but those familiar with the transactions said they totaled tens of billions of dollars.

The emir’s visit comes at a time when Trump is facing critical decisions in the Mideast.

Four Arab nations that are friendly with the United States — Bahrain, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates — have boycotted Qatar, claiming it supports extremist groups in the region. The countries have stopped Qatar Airways flights from using their airspace, closed off the small country’s sole land border with Saudi Arabia and blocked its ships from using their ports.

In the past, Trump also has accused Doha of funding terror groups. Qatar denies the charges and at a Monday night dinner for the Qatari delegation, Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin praised the emir for his help in combating terrorist financing.

The four Arab nations aligned against Qatar also have pointed to Doha’s close relationship with Iran. Qatar restored full diplomatic ties to Iran amid the dispute.

Efforts by the U.S. and Western powers to mend the split largely have gone nowhere.

Finding ways to counter Iran was to be a priority when Secretary of State Mike Pompeo met with the emir on Wednesday.

Qatar is home to the forward headquarters of the U.S. military’s Central Command. The sprawling Al Udeid Air Base is home to some 10,000 American troops. Last month, nearly a dozen Air Force F-22 stealth fighters were deployed there in response to intelligence reports of unspecified Iranian threats against American forces in the region. The F-22 Raptors were sent to the base, which is a hub for U.S. air operations in the Middle East.

“They built one of the great military bases I would say anywhere in the world,” Trump said. “It’s just been expanded with runways and everything else.”

Qatar, which has one of the world’s highest per capita incomes due to its natural gas reserves, has worked to open up other avenues of income to offset the impact of the boycott.

“We have a lot of investments in the U.S.,” the emir said. “We trust the economy here. We do a lot on infrastructure and we’re planning to do more investment.”

Qatar also has paid millions of dollars to Washington lobbyists to help burnish its image and makes lavish gifts to top U.S. universities, including Georgetown University and Texas A&M. The Education Department is investigating the gifts.