

Israel's Lieberman 'not backing anyone for PM'

Sun, 2019-09-22 23:16

JERUSALEM: Israeli ex-Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman said on Sunday he will not endorse either Benjamin Netanyahu or Benny Gantz for prime minister following last week's deadlocked elections.

Lieberman, who could potentially play a kingmaker role, spoke to journalists as President Reuven Rivlin began consulting political parties on who they will back for prime minister. Lieberman's secular nationalist Yisrael Beiteinu party won eight seats in the 120-seat Parliament in Tuesday's election. A delegation from Lieberman's secular nationalist Yisrael Beiteinu party was due to meet Rivlin later on Sunday.

Yisrael Beiteinu won eight seats in the 120-seat Parliament in Tuesday's election.

Lieberman has insisted on a unity government between his party, Netanyahu's right-wing Likud and Gantz's centrist Blue and White. He said he could not for now back Netanyahu because he is willing to form a coalition with Israel's ultra-Orthodox Jewish parties, which he accuses of seeking to impose religious law on the secular population.

Lieberman also said he could not back Gantz for now because he may reach a deal with either the ultra-Orthodox or Israel's Arab parties, which he called "enemies."



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Israeli Arab parties back Gantz for PM in break with precedent
Israel vote deadlock confirmed by near-complete official results

[US emphasizes diplomacy in Iran despite Tehran threats](#)

Author:

Jim MANNION | AFP

ID:

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Sun, 2019-09-22 17:17

WASHINGTON: The United States said Sunday it will make its case against Iran at the United Nations this week, insisting it wants to give diplomacy "every opportunity to succeed" after a devastating attack on a vital Saudi oil complex.

Setting the stage for President Donald Trump's address to the annual UN General Assembly on Tuesday, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo put aside threats of US military retaliation against Iran for the attack.

"President Trump and I both want to give diplomacy every opportunity to succeed," Pompeo said in an interview with ABC's "This Week."

"Our administration's taking this on in a serious way and we are working diligently to see that this has a diplomatic outcome," he said.

"But make no mistake about it, if we're unsuccessful in that and Iran continues to strike out in this way, I am confident that President Trump will make the decisions necessary to achieve our objectives."

The United States has accused Tehran of carrying out the sneak air attacks that set aflame Saudi Arabia's Abqaiq plant and the Khurais oil field September 14, knocking out half the Kingdom's oil production.

Pompeo called it "one of the largest attacks on the global energy supply in history."

Trump initially said US forces were "locked and loaded," and has so far ordered stepped up sanctions against Iran, and a deployment of US troops to Saudi Arabia, primarily focused on defensive missions like air and missile defense.

On Fox News, Pompeo said the administration was "deeply aware of the risks" of a miscalculation leading to conflagration in the tinderbox region.

"It's why we want to resolve this in a way that doesn't resort to kinetic action if it's at all possible to achieve that," he said.

On Sunday, before leaving the White House on a trip to Texas, Trump once again left open the possibility of an unscheduled meeting on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly with Iranian President Hassan Rouhani.

"Nothing is ever off the table, completely, but I have no intention of meeting with Iran and that doesn't mean it doesn't happen," Trump said. "I'm a very flexible person, but we have no intention. It's not set up."

The US diplomatic offensive comes as Iran has sharpened its tone with a warning from a Revolutionary Guard Corps commander that Iran is "ready for any type of scenario."

"Whoever wants their land to become the main battlefield, go ahead," Major General Hossein Salami told a news conference in Tehran.

In a pre-recorded interview with CBS's "Face the Nation," Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif denied Iran was behind the September 14 attack, which was claimed by Iranian-back Houthi rebels in Yemen.

"I'm not confident that we can avoid a war," he said. "I'm confident that we will not start one but I'm confident that whoever starts one will not be the one who finishes it," he said.



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Sudan launches probe into protesters' deaths

Author:

Sun, 2019-09-22 21:40

CAIRO: Sudan's newly appointed prime minister has launched an independent investigation into June's deadly crackdown on protesters that killed dozens of people and threatened to crush the country's pro-democracy uprising.

Protest leaders had demanded the establishment of an international inquiry as part of a subsequent power-sharing agreement with the military, but the generals insisted on a Sudanese-led probe.

According to the protesters, at least 128 people were killed and hundreds wounded when security forces violently dispersed the protesters' main sit-in outside the military headquarters in the capital, Khartoum, on June 3. Authorities put the death toll at 87, including 17 inside the sit-in area.

The violence signaled a crackdown across Sudan that led to a breakdown in talks between the protesters and the ruling generals, who ousted leader President Omar Al-Bashir in April amid nationwide protests against his nearly 30-year rule.

Sudan's new civilian leader, Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok, said late on Saturday the investigation will be led by a seven-member committee that includes a top judge, an independent figure and two attorneys. The justice, defense and interior ministries will also be represented on the committee.

The probe, which should conclude its work within six months, could seek support from the African Union if needed, said Hamdok, who was headed to New York to attend the UN meetings.

An investigation by Sudanese prosecutors in July said the ruling generals did not order the deadly break-up, but blamed the widely condemned dispersal on paramilitary forces who exceeded their orders.

Prosecutor Fathel-Rahman Said said at the time that security forces were told only to clear a lawless area close to the protest camp, not the sit-in itself.

In the days leading up to the dispersal, the military said the lawless area near the camp had become a haven for "drug dealers and other criminals."

Troops from the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces however moved to disperse

the protest camp on their own initiative, Said added.

He said eight RSF officers, including a major general, have been accused of crimes against humanity. He did not elaborate on how the investigation would proceed against the accused officers.



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Sudan PM Hamdok arrives in Juba on first official trip

[Israeli Arab parties back Gantz for PM in break with precedent](#)

Author:

AFP

ID:

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Sun, 2019-09-22 15:50

JERUSALEM: Israel's Arab-dominated Joint List party moved on Sunday to back

the centre-left bloc of Benny Gantz, who is challenging Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's right-wing alliance, to form a new government. With final results all but in, neither Gantz nor Netanyahu command a majority in parliament, so the Arab List's decision to end its usual policy of withholding support for any candidate in the wake of elections could nudge President Reuven Rivlin to ask Gantz to form a government.

Rivlin, who began consulting with party leaders on Sunday to discuss who should lead the country after no clear victor emerged from Tuesday's election, suggested Gantz and Netanyahu join forces, though it is uncertain who would be the senior partner.

Netanyahu's right-wing Likud failed, for the second time in five months, to secure a clear election victory. The centrist Blue and White party led by ex-armed forces chief Gantz has a slight lead with nearly all votes counted. No party drawn from the 21% Arab minority has ever been part of an Israeli government. But an increased turnout saw the Joint List win 13 seats, making it the third largest grouping.

This would provide an outlet to voice Arab complaints of discrimination in Israeli society and give a bigger platform to Arab parties which differ markedly with those drawn from the country's Jewish majority on many political issues.

"We want to bring an end to the era of Netanyahu, so we recommend that Benny Gantz be the one to form the next government," party head Ayman Odeh told Rivlin on Sunday as part of consultations to form a new government coalition. Joint List's support does not mean it will sit in the governing coalition, but its backing gives Gantz's centre-left bloc 57 seats, compared to Netanyahu's right-wing bloc of 55.

Netanyahu denounced the Arab party support of Gantz. He said it meant only two choices – "a minority government that leans on those that reject Israel as a Jewish, democratic state," or a "broad national government".

Gantz has so far rebuffed Netanyahu's calls to join a unity government. Near-final results show Blue and White will be the largest single party in the new parliament with 33 of the 120 seats, while Likud has won 31 seats, three less than it had before.

In a meeting with Likud party leaders on Sunday, Rivlin said it was up to the "two biggest parties, the first and second that are almost equal in size, to join forces ... so that you together manage and establish a system that brings a stable government."

"This is what the people want. None of us can ignore that," he said.

The president's role is largely ceremonial, but it includes consulting with factions and choosing which party leader has the best chance at forming a coalition.

There were only narrow differences in the two main parties' campaigns on many important issues during the campaign. An end to the Netanyahu era would be unlikely to bring significant changes in policy on relations with the United States, the regional struggle against Iran, or the Palestinian conflict.

Netanyahu and Gantz are now seeking other potential coalition allies, prominent among whom is the far-right former defence minister Avigdor Lieberman. He secured eight seats for his Yisrael Beiteinu party, making him a potential kingmaker.

Lieberman on Sunday reiterated his call for a unity government and said he would not recommend either candidate in his meeting with Rivlin.



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Israeli president Reuven Rivlin begins talks to form new government
Syria 'captures' drone near Israeli-occupied Golan Heights

[Syria 'captures' drone near Israeli-occupied Golan Heights](#)

Author:

Sat, 2019-09-21 22:53

DAMASCUS, ISTANBUL: Syrian authorities captured and dismantled on Saturday a drone rigged with cluster bombs near the border with the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights, state news agency SANA said.

SANA gave no further details about the drone but posted several photos of the unmanned aerial vehicle.

Israel frequently conducts airstrikes and missile attacks inside war-torn Syria but rarely confirms them. Israel says it targets mostly bases of Iranian forces and the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah in Syria.

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, an opposition war monitor, said it was not clear if Syrian troops or members of Lebanon's Hezbollah controlled the drone. Hezbollah has fighters in different parts of Syria where they are fighting on the side of Bashar Assad's forces.

The incident came two days after another drone was destroyed over the Damascus suburb of Aqraba, where an Israeli airstrike killed two Hezbollah operatives last month.

No one claimed responsibility for the drones on Saturday.

In neighboring Lebanon, a government investigation concluded on Thursday that two Israeli drones were on an attack mission when they crashed in the capital last month, one of them armed with 4.5 kilo of explosives.

Erdogan frustrated

Meanwhile in neighboring Turkey, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on Saturday expressed frustration with what he said was the US' continued support for Syrian Kurdish militants.

Speaking to reporters before his departure for the UN meetings in New York, Erdogan reiterated that Turkey had completed all preparations for a possible unilateral military operation in northeast Syria, along the Turkish border east of the Euphrates River.

Last month, Turkey and the US agreed to take steps toward establishing a so-called "safe zone" in the area that would keep US-backed Syrian Kurdish forces away from Turkey's border.

Turkey has, however, warned that it will not allow the US to delay the establishment of the safe zone and has threatened to launch an operation on its own within two weeks.

Ankara considers the Syrian Kurdish fighters to be "terrorists" due to their links to Kurdish rebels in Turkey.

"We have no wish of confronting the United States," Erdogan said. "However, we don't have the luxury of ignoring the support that the United States is giving terrorist organizations in an area where it was not invited to be."

Erdogan said he would discuss the issue during a possible meeting with US President Donald Trump in New York.

The YPG-led Syrian Democratic Forces has said they will pull back up to 14 km in some areas. Turkey says the US had agreed that the "safe zone" should extend 32 km into Syria.

Erdogan reiterated complaints over US support for the Kurdish fighters,

saying Washington was providing them with arms.

His comments about border preparations came a day after two security sources said doctors have been stationed in southern Turkish provinces to prepare for a possible incursion into Syria.



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Syrian state media says drone destroyed over Damascus countrysideLebanon concludes Israeli drones were on attack mission