

Palestinian president, Israeli defense minister hold rare talks

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RAMALLAH, Palestinian Territories: Israel's defense minister has met Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas for a rare high-level meeting, but a source close to Prime Minister Naftali Bennett insisted Monday his government had no plans to reboot peace talks.

Defense Minister Benny Gantz met Abbas in Ramallah for what were reportedly the first direct talks between an Israeli cabinet member and the 86-year-old Palestinian leader in several years.

The meeting, which Gantz's office said focused on "security policy, civilian and economic issues," came just hours after Bennett returned from Washington where he met US President Joe Biden.

Biden said he would urge Bennett to find ways "to advance peace and security and prosperity for Israelis and Palestinians."

According to a defense ministry statement, Gantz told Abbas that Israel "seeks to take measures that will strengthen the PA's economy."

"They also discussed shaping the security and economic situations in the West Bank and in Gaza," and agreed to "continue communicating further," it added.

A source close to Bennett said the meeting that he had approved focused on "issues between the defense establishment and the Palestinian Authority."

"There is no peace process with the Palestinians nor will there be," under Bennett's leadership, said the source who requested anonymity.

The Gantz-Abbas meeting included the head of the Israeli military branch responsible for civil affairs in the Palestinian territories, Ghasan Alyan, senior PA official Hussein Al Sheikh and Palestinian intelligence chief Majid Faraj.

Gantz's office said he and Abbas had held "a one-on-one meeting" after the broader talks.

Al Sheikh confirmed the meeting on Twitter but the PA was not immediately available to comment on its substance.

Bennett, 49, took office in June as head of an eclectic coalition in which his hawkish party holds only a handful of seats.

He is a long-standing opponent of Palestinian statehood and the former head of a council that lobbies for Jewish settlers in the West Bank, a territory occupied by Israel since 1967.

Jewish settlements in the West Bank are considered illegal under international law.

But despite Bennett's personal views, his government has sought to warm ties with the PA, which had effectively collapsed under former prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu, in power from 2009 until June this year.

Netanyahu, also a pro-settlement right-winger long reviled by Palestinians, further alienated Abbas through his tight embrace of former US president

Donald Trump, accused of extreme pro-Israel bias.

Bennett's government has indicated a desire to boost the PA amid concern over a fresh conflict with Hamas Islamists who control Israeli-blockaded Gaza and are rivals of Abbas's Fatah secular Fatah movement.

An 11-day conflict in May between Israel and Palestinian militants in Gaza marked the worst hostilities in the area since 2014 and unrest has persisted despite an Egypt-brokered cease-fire.

Hamas condemned the Abbas-Gantz meeting, charging that it "deepens Palestinian political division."

Abbas has tightened his hold over the PA since his election in 2006.

He canceled elections set for May and July that would have been the first Palestinian polls in 15 years.

The veteran leader cited Israel's refusal to allow voting in annexed east Jerusalem, which Palestinians see as their future capital.

But some Palestinian experts said Abbas balked when it seemed clear Hamas was poised to rout Fatah at the polls.

Abbas's PA has also come under mounting global criticism over an alleged crackdown on internal opposition following the death in Palestinian custody of a prominent activist.

The United Nations and European Union last week expressed alarm over a spate of arrests targeting leading critics of Abbas and the PA.



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Rocket fired from Gaza toward Israel after 4 Palestinians killed in West Bank clashes

[Oil spill from power station spreads along Syria's coast](#)

Author:

AP

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Wed, 2021-08-25 12:07

DAMASCUS: A massive oil spill caused by leakage from a power plant inside one of Syria's oil refineries is spreading along the coast of the Mediterranean country, Syria's state news agency said and satellite photos showed Wednesday.

SANA said the spill reached the coastal town of Jableh, about 20 kilometers north of the refinery in the town of Baniyas, adding that Syria's environment department and the municipality of the coastal province of Latakia have placed all concerned departments on alert. It said work is underway to clean the coast in the rocky areas.

A day earlier, Syria's government said that maintenance teams at Baniyas Thermal Station had brought a fuel leakage from one of the tanks under control.

Satellite images from Planet Labs Inc. on Wednesday showed what appeared to be a massive oil spill stretching out over 25.5 square kilometers. An image from Monday showed no sign of the slick, suggesting whatever happened to cause the spill happened later.

The head of the Electricity Workers Syndicate at Tartous Workers Union, Dawoud Darwish, blamed cracks in one of the fuel tanks at the thermal station. He pointed out that the tank was filled with 15,000 tons of fuel. Syria's oil resources are mostly outside of government controlled areas but its two refineries are under government control and operating. This makes Damascus reliant on Iran for fuel, but US Treasury sanctions have hindered the supply network, which spans Syria, Iran and Russia.

There has been a series of mysterious attacks on vessels in Mideast waters, including off Syria's coast, for over a year. They have come amid rising tensions in the region between Iran, Israel and the United States.

In May, Syria's foreign minister blamed Israel for mysterious attacks targeting oil tankers heading to Syria, saying they violate international law and will not go unpunished.



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Iran fuel tanker attacked off Syria: Monitor

[Iran Parliament approves most of president Ibrahim Raisi's new ministers](#)

Author:

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Wed, 2021-08-25 19:05

TEHRAN: Iran's hard-liner dominated Parliament on Wednesday voted to approve most of the ministers proposed by newly elected President Ibrahim Raisi,

state TV reported.

Lawmakers voted in favor of 18 of 19 ministers proposed by Raisi after five days of hearings and discussions.

They did not approve Hossein Baghgoli, nominated for education minister, whose experience was disputed during hearings. He received 76 votes out of 286 present lawmakers. The chamber has 290 seats.

Raisi had appealed to lawmakers to vote quickly to approve his nominees so the government can get to work dealing with the pandemic and economic

situation in the country suffering from years of sanctions by the US

Raisi has said his foreign policy will focus on engagement with all nations and the removal of sanctions. New Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian, who received 270 votes from lawmakers, said his ministry "would not run away from the negotiating table" and will do its best to remove all sanctions against the country.

Amirabdollahian, 56, has served in a range of administrations over the decades. He was deputy foreign minister for Arab and African Affairs under former populist hard-line President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, known in the West for his Holocaust denial and disputed re-election in 2009.

When relative moderate President Hassan Rouhani entered office in 2013, Amirabdollahian kept his job before leaving to become an international affairs adviser to the former Parliament speaker. Rouhani struck the nuclear deal with world powers that granted Iran sanctions relief in exchange for curbs on its nuclear program.

In a hearing in Parliament on Sunday, Amirabdollahian said negotiations must guarantee the rights of the Iranian people. The diplomat also welcomed friendship with neighboring countries, especially with Iran's regional rival Saudi Arabia "for the benefit of the whole region."

Former foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif congratulated Amirabdollahian on his confirmation. "Wishing him, the ministry and its officials, and the new administration, all success in international relations," Zarif said in a tweet.

Javad Owji, 54, a career technocrat and long-time official in the country's vital oil and gas sector, received 198 votes to work as oil minister.

Exporting crude is a major foreign source of revenue for the nation.

During the Parliament hearing, Owji promised to apply an "active attitude for bypassing sanctions" and use of the private sector in "exporting crude."

The Cabinet list included no women, few surprises and several officials from Iran's paramilitary Revolutionary Guard. The supreme leader also typically weighs in on picking officials for the most sensitive positions, such as foreign minister.

The parties to the nuclear accord have met in Vienna for months to try to revive the deal. The last round of talks ended in June with no date set for their resumption. Raisi has promised his administration will focus on lifting sanctions that have clobbered Iran's already ailing economy.

Meanwhile, Gen. Ahmad Vahidi was confirmed Wednesday as the interior minister with 266 votes.

Vahidi is a former defense minister blacklisted by the US in 2010 and wanted by Interpol over his alleged role in the 1994 bombing of a Jewish cultural center in Buenos Aires. The attack killed 85 people and wounded hundreds. Vahidi also served as commander of Iran's expeditionary Quds Force in the late 1980s, responsible for Tehran's proxies across the Middle East.

Later in the day, Raisi expressed gratitude to parliamentarians for their votes.



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Raisi says economy, COVID-19 response 'does not benefit' Iran
Iran's new president Raisi names anti-Western hardliner as foreign minister

[Syrian army bombards rebels in birthplace of uprising](#)

Author:

Reuters

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Sun, 2021-08-29 15:34

AMMAN: Syria's military bombarded the last rebel enclave in the southern city of Daraa on Sunday, killing at least six people in one of the deadliest attacks in its siege of the birthplace of the country's uprising, residents

said.

The army declined to comment on the reports but said in a statement it was losing patience with what it called "armed groups and terrorists" in the neighborhood.

An elite division of the army, backed by Iranian militias, has been blocking food and fuel deliveries to Daraa al Balad to press rebels to surrender three years after government forces retook the rest of the area near the border with Jordan.

"They are using so-called elephant rockets indiscriminately," Abu Jihad al Horani, a local official told Reuters, referring to improvised missiles. Explosions could be heard in the background.

Residents said bodies of six people were pulled out of bombarded houses in the center of the Daraa neighborhood which saw the first peaceful protests against the rule of President Bashar Assad in 2011.

The Syrian military's pro-Iranian Fourth Division, the main force in the southern province, backed by Tehran-financed local militias, have encircled the bastion for two months.

Local officials, residents and some army officials, speaking on condition of anonymity, have said the offensive is an attempt to undermine Russian efforts to resolve the standoff without an all-out assault.

Russian generals holding talks with local figures and army commanders announced a plan on Aug. 14 that would allow the army to enter but giving guarantees to residents against reprisals and offering safe passage to former rebels to leave for other opposition areas in northwest Syria.

In 2018, the Syrian army, aided by Russian air power and Iranian militias, retook control of the southern province which also borders Israel's Golan Heights.

Moscow gave guarantees to Israel and Washington at the time that it would prevent Iranian-backed militias from expanding their influence in the area. That deal forced thousands of Western-backed rebels to hand over heavy weapons but kept the army from entering Daraa al Balad, whose administration remained in rebel hands.

"We hold Russia responsible for any child who gets injured This war is being imposed on us by Iran and the Russians are watching," Abu Yusef al Masalmeh, an elder said.

Washington and major Western powers have expressed concern about Assad forces' military campaign in Daraa, which they say tests Russia's pledges to maintain stability and rein in Iranian-militias in the border area.



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[Egypt issues instructions to remove books on extremism from mosques](#)

Author:

Sun, 2021-08-29 23:22

CAIRO: The Egyptian Ministry of Endowments has decided to prevent the entry of books on extremism and the Muslim Brotherhood to all mosques in Egypt and to remove those already there within the coming 15 days.

Mohammed Mokhtar Gomaa, minister of endowments, said that committees will be formed to re-examine mosque libraries and the books, magazines and publications in them and remove any publications that adopt extremist ideology or belong to any extremist group.

In an urgent statement, the minister directed the punishment of any official neglecting these orders.

There was also an urgent warning that all imams take a pledge to not allow any books to be included in mosque libraries without permission from the General Administration of Religious Guidance in the Ministry's general office.

The minister also directed the removal of any violating posters inside or outside the mosque.

Hisham Abdel Aziz, who is in charge of running the work of the head of the religious sector at the Ministry of Endowments, issued a poster alerting all directorates to quickly form committees to re-examine any libraries, books, magazines or publications in mosques, and purify them of any publications that adopt an extremist ideology or belong to any extremist group or the Brotherhood.

Those negligent will be referred for investigation, he said.

The ministry called on imams to complete these tasks no later than 15 days from the date of this decision.

Violating of these directives was a severe negligence and a breach of duty that deserved disciplinary accountability, the ministry warned.



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