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US envoy Hale desires Lebanon to gain access to Israel offshore reserves

04.22.21

Syria surface-to-air missile missed target - continued 125 miles into Israel

04.22.21

Gantz admits attempt to down Syrian missile was 'unsuccessful'

Defense minister says IDF has launched an investigation to determine why the interception of the SA-5 surface-to-air missile, which exploded mid-air near nuclear reactor, failed; rights group says one Syrian officer was killed in Israeli strikes  
Ynet reporters | Published: 04.22.21 , 15:46

Defense Minister Benny Gantz on Thursday admitted the attempt to shoot down a Syrian missile, which was fired hours earlier and exploded in mid-air near Israel's nuclear reactor, was "unsuccessful".

According to Israeli military, the SA-5 surface-to-air missile was fired by Syrian forces against Israeli aircraft overnight but overflowed its target to reach the Dimona area, 200 km (125 miles) south of the Syrian border. The missile did not hit the reactor, landing some 30 km (19 miles) away.

During a press conference where Gantz presented his plans to reform the rehabilitation system for IDF veterans, the defense minister was asked about the overnight missile launch.

"The IDF acted [in Syria] against assets, vital in launching a potential attack on the State of Israel," the defense minister said, adding that in response, "SA-5 anti-aircraft missile was fired and crossed the border. There was an attempt to intercept it, but it was unsuccessful".

Gantz said the military has launched an investigation to determine why the interception failed. "In most cases we see other outcomes, it's a slightly more complex story. As I said, we will investigate and move forward."

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, an opposition war monitoring group based in Britain that tracks Syria's civil war, said the chain of events began when Israeli strikes hit an air defense base belonging to the Syrian military and destroyed air defense batteries in the area. It said the Syrian military fired surface-to-air missiles in response.

In retaliation for the missile launch, Israel carried out further overnight attacks inside Syria, targeting several missile batteries, including the one that fired the SA-5.

The war monitoring group added that one Syrian officer was killed in Israeli strikes and three others have been seriously wounded.

04.22.21

Israel strikes Syria after stray missile enters Israel from Damascus

04.22.21

Israel strikes Syria after missile sets off sirens near reactor

IDF says that after traveling 300 kilometers, the missile explodes in an unpopulated area near Dimona, without causing damage or injuries; no group has taken responsibility for the launch, which appears to be Iran's revenge for Natanz incident

Associated Press| Updated: 04.22.21 , 07:23



Iranian Rocket Component

A missile launched from Syria was fired into southern Israel early Thursday, setting off air raid sirens near the country's top-secret nuclear reactor, the Israeli military said. In response, it said it attacked the missile launcher and air-defense systems in neighboring Syria.

The incident, marking some of the most serious violence between Israel and Syria in years, pointed to likely Iranian involvement. Iran, which maintains troops and proxies in Syria, has accused Israel of a series of attacks on its nuclear facilities, including sabotage at its Natanz nuclear facility on April 11, and vowed revenge. The attack also threatened to complicate U.S.-led attempts to revive the international nuclear deal with Iran.

The Israeli army said it had deployed a missile-defense system but could not confirm if the incoming missile was intercepted, though it said there had been no damage. The air raid sirens were sounded in Abu Krinat, a village just a few kilometers (miles) from Dimona, the Negev desert town where Israel's nuclear reactor is located. Explosions heard across Israel might have been the air-defense systems.

The IDF described the weapon as a surface-to-air missile, which is usually used for air defense against warplanes or other missiles, that flew off course after targeting Israeli warplanes. Dimona is some 300 kilometers (185 miles) south of Damascus.

The military spokesperson added that a missile-defense system was deployed but could not confirm if the incoming missile was intercepted, adding that there was no damage or injury caused by the projectile and that in response to the launch, it attacked several missile batteries in Syria, including the one that fired the missile.

Syria's state-run SANA news agency said four soldiers had been wounded in an Israeli strike near Damascus, which also caused some damage. The agency did not elaborate other than to claim its air defense intercepted "most of the enemy missiles," which it said were fired from the Israeli-annexed Golan Heights.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility for the missile strike or comment from Iran. But on Saturday, Iran's hard-line Kayhan newspaper published an opinion piece by Iranian analyst Sadollah Zarei suggesting Israel's Dimona facility be targeted after the attack on Natanz. Zarei cited the idea of "an eye for an eye" in his remarks.

Action should be taken "against the nuclear facility in Dimona," he wrote. "This is because no other action is at the same level as the Natanz incident."

The Dimona reactor is widely believed to be the centerpiece of an undeclared nuclear weapons program. Israel neither confirms nor denies having a nuclear arsenal.

While Kayhan is a small circulation newspaper, its editor-in-chief, Hossein Shariatmadari, was appointed by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and has been described as an adviser to him in the past.

Zarei has demanded retaliatory strikes on Israel in the past. In November, he suggested Iran strike the Israeli port city of Haifa over Israel's suspected involvement in the killing of a scientist who founded Iran's military nuclear program decades earlier. However, Iran did not retaliate then.

Israel and Iran are arch-enemies. Israel accuses Iran of trying to develop nuclear weapons and has opposed U.S.-led efforts to revive the international nuclear deal with Iran. With Israel's encouragement, then-President Donald Trump withdrew from the deal in 2018.

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04.21.21

Bennett building a government with 50 MKs from the left and the extreme left

04.21.21

Bennett says if Netanyahu fails, he'll work to form 'unity government'

Yamina leader in a press conference accuses PM of dragging Israel into fifth elections, while Netanyahu says Bennett wants to be 'chief of staff with seven seats' and can only do so by forming a government with 'extreme left'

Moran Azulay | Published: 04.21.21 , 22:12

Yamina leader Naftali Bennett said Wednesday if Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu fails to form a coalition, he will work to form a "unity government".

Bennett has emerged as a kingmaker following March 23 elections, with his party holding seven seats that could help either bloc to form a new government. Netanyahu is the candidate currently tasked with forming a coalition but appears to lack enough partners.

During a televised press conference, Bennett told reporters that Netanyahu is dragging Israel into its fifth elections in just two years.

"My first priority is to establish a right-wing government," Bennett said. "If, however, Likud fails in its mission, I will work to form a national unity government. My condition is that there will be a good, stable and functioning government that can uphold my values, my principles and my national worldview," he added.

"I do not know if it is possible, but I promise to try my best."

Netanyahu did not wait too long to reply, issuing a statement where he claimed Bennett has made a deal with Yesh Atid chair Yair Lapid.

"You are willing to do anything to be prime minister with your seven seats," Netanyahu said, addressing Bennett. "Your only way [to become prime minister] is to head Lapid's left-wing government. You call it a national unity government but it is a transparent attempt to deceive the public.

"In practice, it will be a government with 50 MKs from the left and the extreme left, together with you as chief of staff with seven seats," he added.

"I believe the majority of the public wants me as prime minister, it is not guaranteed it will happen, but the chances are very good."

04.21.21

Israeli defense officials seek a stronger mandate for UN inspectors in Iran

04.21.21

Israel said seeking greater IAEA oversight in renewed Iran deal

Kan says Mossad director, national security adviser and IDF chief will head to U.S. next week to seek bolstered mandate for UN inspectors ; Jerusalem believes its concerns being largely ignored as Washington seeks to revive 2015 pact  
Ynet, i24NEWS | Published: 04.21.21 , 15:10

Top Israeli defense officials are reportedly set to travel to the United States next week as part of Jerusalem's efforts to push for more international oversight in the revived Iran nuclear deal.

According to Israel's public broadcaster Kan, Mossad Director Yossi Cohen, National Security Adviser Meir Ben-Shabbat and IDF Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Aviv Kohavi have been tasked with the job.

All three will head to Washington to seek a bolstered mandate for the inspectors with the United Nation's International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

Iran and world powers have been meeting in Vienna this month to discuss a possible return to the deal that effectively crumbled when then-U.S. president Donald Trump walked away in 2018 and slapped fresh sanctions on Iran.

Under the original deal, which was brokered during the presidency of Barack Obama, the IAEA was to inspect both official Iranian nuclear installations and suspected atomic sites. Iran, however, recently moved to slash UN body's capabilities through legislation.

Kan reported that Israel wants the IAEA to have more power after coming to the conclusion that the revived deal, to which the U.S. is expect to commit in the near future, will take into account hardly any of its concerns.

The concerns voiced by Israel and other regional states center on Iran's missile program and its support for terrorist groups and Shiite proxies that are destabilizing the region.

The Vienna talks are making headway, a senior European Union official said Tuesday, with meetings to resume next week after consultations in respective capitals. Iranian President Hassan Rouhani also said Tuesday that 60-70% percent of the issues in the talks have been resolved.

04.20.21

Israel diplomats indicate possible targeting of emissaries instigated by Iran.

04.20.21

Fearing Iran attacks, Israel boosts security for diplomats abroad

Foreign Ministry DG tells emissaries to be more vigilant, says country making every efforts to ensure their safety and that of their families; senior officials say Iran taking advantage of U.S. desire to revive nuclear deal

Itamar Eichner | Published: 04.20.21 , 14:10

Officials at the Foreign Ministry in Jerusalem said Tuesday that special precautions were being put in place to protect Israeli diplomats around the world from possible terror attacks instigated by Iran.

Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi and Shin Bet head Nadav Argaman discussed the increased concerns in a meeting Monday.

In January, a bomb exploded in front of Israel's embassy in Delhi, causing damage to vehicles but no injuries.

Indian security officials said after the blast that they believed a Iranian-backed organization was behind the attack.

"We are seeing increased intelligence indicating possible targeting of Israeli emissaries abroad," Foreign Ministry Director-General Alon Ushpiz said in a message to Israeli diplomats Tuesday.

"We take this information seriously and are concerned for the safety of our emissaries and their families and are taking all possible precautions," he wrote, calling on the diplomats to be vigilant as they carry out their duties.

"We would like to stress the need for your cooperation in adhering to the security regulations," Ushpiz said.

04.19.21

Former PM Olmert TV interview claims PM and family suffer from mental illness

04.19.21

Netanyahu threatens defamation suit against predecessor

Netanyahu spokesman confirms family's attorney sent former PM Ehud Olmert letter of warning in advance of a possible defamation suit after saying Likud leader, family 'suffer from mental illness'

Associated Press, Ynet | Published: 04.19.21 , 22:00

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is threatening to sue his predecessor, Ehud Olmert, if he does not apologize for saying the Likud leader and his family suffer from mental illness.

A spokesman for the Netanyahu family confirmed Monday that the Netanyahus' attorney sent Olmert the letter of warning in advance of a possible defamation suit.

In an interview last week with Israeli news site Democrat TV, Olmert leveled criticism at Netanyahu and said that "what is irreparable is the mental illness of the prime minister, his wife and his son [Yair]."

In 2017, the incumbent premier's eldest son and viral right-wing provocateur Yair pushed unsubstantiated claims alleging that one of Olmert's sons was having a homosexual affair with a Palestinian man in Paris.

According to Channel 12 TV, a Netanyahu family attorney demanded that Olmert apologize within a week and pay 1 million shekels (\$306,000) in damages or face a libel lawsuit.

Olmert showed no signs of backing down Monday, telling Channel 13 TV: "The time has come to tell this family: that is enough."

Olmert preceded Netanyahu as Israel's prime minister but resigned in 2008 before he was formally indicted on corruption charges. He was convicted of fraud in 2014 and served most of a 27-month prison sentence.

Netanyahu is currently on trial for fraud, breach of trust and accepting bribes, but denies any wrongdoing. He has refused to step down from office while under indictment.

04.19.21

Netanyahu lost Knesset Arrangements Committee that controls the agenda

04.19.21

Netanyahu defeated in bid to control critical Knesset committee

Likud's motion to head Arrangements Committee, which controls the legislative agenda and the balance of power on all other parliamentary committees, foiled by Islamist Ra'am party after backing Yesh Atid

Moran Azulay | Published: 04.19.21 , 20:26

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud party on Monday lost control of Knesset's critical Arrangements Committee which will now have a majority of members from the opposition.

Knesset voted against a Likud motion to lead the committee and accepted an opposing bill tabled by the centrist Yesh Atid party.

The Arrangements Committee is the first parliamentary committee to be formed after an election and controls the legislative agenda in the new parliament until the formation of a new government including determining what other parliamentary committees will be formed and their composition.

Likud's bid to head the committee was foiled by the Islamist Ra'am party which voted against the motion and threw its support behind Yesh Atid.

Netanyahu has been courting on Ra'am, expecting its leader Mansour Abbas would back the move and a new government under his leadership. Abbas declared he was willing to back any government that would address the urgent needs of Israel's Arab community.

But according to sources, Yair Lapid secured Abbas' support by promising him a seat in the coveted finance committee.



The far-right Religious Zionist party chief Bezael Smotrich said Netanyahu was wrong to rely on the backing of "supporters of terrorism." Smotrich has persisted in his refusal to allow Netanyahu to form a government backed by Ra'am, thus leaving Netanyahu unable to form a coalition government.

Yesh Atik MK Meir Cohen said it was time to turn Knesset's attention away from political bickering and address the needs of the Israeli public.

The bloc of parties opposed to a Netanyahu-led government will now turn its sights on the position of Knesset speaker to solidify its hold over the parliament.

04.19.21

Netanyahu inner circle pushed for PM to forward requests to Walla news website

04.19.21

Netanyahu inner circle pushed for PM ally to buy news website'

Evidentiary stage of prime minister's corruption trial continues with former Walla CEO testifying that Australian billionaire James Packer allegedly came under pressure from PM to purchase the website despite owner's objections

Gilad Morag,Nina Fox| Published: 04.19.21 , 18:18

Benjamin Netanyahu's inner circle wanted someone close to his family to buy the Walla news website, former Walla CEO Ilan Yeshua alleged Monday as the prime minister's corruption trial resumed in Jerusalem District Court.

Monday marked the sixth day of the trial's evidentiary stage, which is currently focused on Case 4000 - the first and most serious of three cases against Netanyahu.

In the case, the prime minister is accused of conspiring with Shaul Elovitch, who at the time owned both Walla and Israeli telecoms giant Bezeq, to provide Netanyahu with positive news coverage in return for favorable legislation that would be profitable for Elovitch.

Both Elovitch and his wife Iris are defendants in the case.

According to Yeshua, a witness for the prosecution, the potential buyers allegedly considered included Australian billionaire businessman James Packer.

Monday's trial proceedings dealt mainly with the alleged pressure exerted by Netanyahu's inner circle over the potential sale of Walla.

"Elovitch told me that [Netanyahu] talked to Packer about the possibility of him buying Walla," Yeshua told the court. "Shaul was not interested and neither was Packer, but the prime minister was pressuring him to buy it."

The hearing also focused on a series of requests that allegedly preceded Israel's 2013 elections, in which Ze'ev Rubinstein, another close associate of Netanyahu, allegedly forwarded requests to Walla for reportage that the prime minister's political rivals including Naftali Bennett from the right and Tzipi Livni and Shelly Yachimovich on the center-left.

"I got document files and instructions," said Yeshua, who according to evidence submitted by the prosecution transferred the files to then-Walla editor Yinon Magal and his deputy Liron Meroz and then-head of news Aviram Elad.

Yeshua wrote to the three in a message accompanying the files: "This is material sent to me anonymously about Bennett... If there is anything journalistic here then use it. Check it thoroughly and if there is no public interest in it then throw it in the trash."

The hearing later shifted to 2014, when Netanyahu signed off on the purchase of the Yad2 online sales website, which belonged to a Walla subsidiary, by a German communications corporation for NIS 800 million. The money from the sale was transferred to the Bezeq Group's coffers, controlled at the time by Elovitch.

"It was a phenomenal deal, there was a profit of NIS 700 million," Yeshua testified.

Last week, Yeshua told the court that he had been under heavy pressure from the Elovitches to provide better coverage for the prime minister and his family.

Netanyahu says he is innocent of all charges and claims to be the victim of a witch hunt and attempted coup.

04.19.21

Netanyahu backs MK Deri proposal on direct election for PM, scrapped in 2001

04.19.21

Netanyahu backs direct election for PM to end Israel's 'political mess'

Prime minister says 'huge majority' of Israeli public supports measure previously scrapped after 2001 vote; premier urges Naftali Bennett to join his next coalition, calling it a 'moment of truth' for far-right Yamina leader

Moran Azulay | Published: 04.19.21 , 16:41

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Monday expressed support for a direct election for the premier as a way of ending Israel's two-year cycle of inconclusive elections and to prevent a potential fifth national vote since April 2019.

Netanyahu is also two weeks into a four-week window to form a coalition government in the wake of Israel's March 23 elections, a mission that has proven to be elusive.

He has just two more weeks to cobble together a government before President Reuven Rivlin hands the task to another lawmaker - and is struggling to unite his allies into a 61-MK majority.

"There is a solution to the political mess and a huge majority of the public supports it," Netanyahu told a meeting of his Likud party's Knesset faction.

"Instead of forming absurd governments, for example with a prime minister who received only seven seats in the election, there will be direct elections for prime minister," he said, alluding to Naftali Bennett, who is said to be mulling a rotation agreement with Opposition Leader Yair Lapid.

Bennett's far-right Yamina party won just seven seats in the March vote, while Lapid's Yesh Atid pulled in 17 seats.

While Likud's 30 Knesset seats makes it the largest party, Netanyahu is still unable to secure the 61 seats he needs for a majority government. And on Monday he appeared to be focusing on cajoling Bennett, with whom he has had several meetings about joining a new Netanyahu government.

"Today is also a moment of truth for Naftali Bennett," Netanyahu said in televised remarks.

He pledged not to sit under Lapid with [left-wing parties] Meretz and Labor, with the support of the [predominantly Arab] Joint List. Therefore, he must stop this gallop towards a left-wing government together with Lapid, Meretz and Labor," the prime minister said.

The proposal for a direct election for prime minister came from Netanyahu ally Aryeh Deri, the head of the ultra-Orthodox Shas party. Israel has in the past held a handful of direct votes for the prime minister, but scrapped the measure after Ariel Sharon was elected in 2001.

Deri on Monday urged MKs to support the proposal, saying that he sees "no other solution."

"We are headed towards a fifth election that will also end in a deadlock," Deri told his party's Knesset faction. "This proposal does not change the state or the rules. It only helps in finding a solution to the impasse."

04.18.21

Biden blames Israel for Iran enrichment increase by attack on nuclear facility

04.18.21

U.S. to Israel: Iran attacks interfering with nuclear deal efforts

Biden administration said to be unhappy with Israeli 'boasting' about incidents that Tehran says prompted it to increase uranium enrichment; Mossad chief, national security adviser to head to U.S. in coming weeks for talks on issue

Itamar Eichner | Published: 04.18.21 , 12:26

Washington has informed Jerusalem of its displeasure over recent attacks against Iranian targets attributed to Israel, as well as what it called "boasting" by Israel regarding these incidents, sources said.

The Biden administration believes that the recent attack on the Iranian nuclear facility at Natanz, which was attributed to Israel, and Iran's retaliatory decision to enrich uranium up to 60% could torpedo ongoing negotiations aimed at restoring the 2015 pact to curb Tehran's nuclear aspirations.

The talks, which are being held in Vienna, involve the major world powers trying to salvage the agreement abandoned by then-U.S. president Donald Trump three years ago.

Mossad Director Yossi Cohen and National Security Adviser Meir Ben-Shabbat are due to head to the U.S. in the coming weeks to hold talks on the situation.

Israel and the United States have already held two strategic dialogues on the issue, involving U.S. National Security Adviser Jack Sullivan and Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin.

Austin was in Israel last week for talks with Defense Minister Benny Gantz and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Meanwhile, the Security Cabinet was set to convene at 4pm Sunday for the first time since February to discuss the recent escalations with Iran.

The meeting led by Netanyahu was set to focus on multiple reports - including within the Israeli media - that Israel was behind the attack on the Natanz facility and Tehran's subsequent decision to step up uranium enrichment.

The cabinet was also set to discuss the alleged Israeli attacks on Iranian ships and the alleged sabotage of Israeli-owned vessels by Iran.

04.18.21

Israel, Greece sign defense deal for Hellenic Airforce training center

04.18.21

Israel, Greece sign biggest ever defense deal

Deal set to upgrade capabilities and strengthen economies of both countries, Defense Minister says of the 1.65 billion dollar contract for Hellenic Airforce training center that will be established and maintained for 22 years

Reuters| Updated: 04.18.21 , 11:54

Israel and Greece have signed their biggest ever defense procurement deal, which Israel said on Sunday would strengthen political and economic ties between the countries.

The agreement includes a \$1.65 billion contract for the establishment and operation of a training center for the Hellenic Air Force by Israeli defense contractor Elbit Systems over a 22-year period, Israel's defense ministry said.

"The deal is the result of the strong and long-lasting relations between Israel and Greece, Defense Minister Benny Gantz said on Sunday thanking his Greek counterpart for his efforts to facilitate the transaction.

"I am certain that (this program) will upgrade the capabilities and strengthen the economies of Israel and Greece and thus the partnership between our two countries will deepen on the defense, economic and political levels," Gantz said

The training center will be modeled on Israel's own flight academy and will be equipped with 10 M-346 training aircraft produced by Italian company Leonardo, the ministry said.

Elbit will supply kits to upgrade and operate Greece's T-6 aircraft and also provide training, simulators and logistical support.

The announcement came following a meeting in Cyprus on Friday between the UAE, Greek, Cypriot and Israeli foreign ministers, who agreed to deepen cooperation between their countries.

"The evolving web of regional cooperation is creating a new narrative, one that is cracking the glass ceiling of the prevailing (one) of our neighbourhood as a region of turmoil, conflict and crisis," said Cypriot Foreign Minister and host Nikos Christodoulides.

Friday's meeting on the east Mediterranean island was attended by Anwar Gargash, a former UAE foreign minister who worked on the historic normalization of relations with Israel last year. He was there in his capacity as diplomatic advisor to UAE President Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed.

"The Abrahamic accords were mainly driven by the necessity of an alternative strategic view of the region based on stability, prosperity and opportunity," Gargash said of the forging of diplomatic relations between the UAE and Bahrain, signed last September at the White House.

Discussions in Cyprus, he said, focused on ways to enhance joint action in facing the fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic, medical research and the distribution of vaccines, as well as energy security in the region.

"This meeting is one of the results of the changes that have taken place in the Middle East over the past year, thanks to a brave and bold decision by leaders," Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi said on Friday.

04.15.21

Gaza fires rocket on their Independence Day & IDF attacked Hamas in Gaza

04.15.21

Hours after Independence Day, Gaza militants fire rocket into south

Israeli military confirms one rocket, fired toward the city of Sderot, landed in open area near the border fence; no damage or casualties reported; earlier, a rocket alert siren sounded in the city and surrounding areas

Matan Tzuri | Published: 04.15.21 , 21:56

Hours after Independence Day celebrations came to a close, militants in the Gaza Strip fired a rocket into southern Israel.

Israeli military confirmed that one rocket was fired late Thursday toward the city of Sderot and landed in an open area close to Israel's side of the border fence.

No damage or casualties were reported.

Earlier, a rocket alert siren was sounded in the city and surrounding areas.

The city's municipality also confirmed the rocket launch. "Not long ago, 'Red Code' alert was sounded in the city. One rocket was fired from the Strip and landed in an open area," said the statement.

This is the **first rocket launch from Gaza in the past three weeks**. The last rocket attack occurred days before Election Day when Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu visited the city of Be'er Sheva as part of his campaign.

A medium-range rocket was detected by IDF radars, but rocket alert was not activated or sounded since the rocket was aimed at an open area outside the city, where it ultimately exploded. A few **hours later, Israel Air Force attacked Hamas positions in Gaza** in retaliation.

**04.15.21**

**Vienna lifting Iran sanctions as IR-6 centrifuges reaching 60% enrichment**

**04.15.21**

**Timeline of Iran-Israel tensions since Natanz incident**

April 11 blast at the nuclear site, which Tehran blames on Israel, prompted the Iranians to start enriching uranium with up to 60 percent purity, 20 times higher than what it had committed to in 2015 deal, which the West is trying to revive

AFP, Ynet | Published: **04.15.21** , 16:44

Earlier this week a mysterious incident lead to a major blackout at Iran's Natanz uranium enrichment plant, which Iranian official claim was perpetrated by Israeli agents.

The incident, reportedly triggered by a blast, allegedly caused major damage to the infrastructure at the underground plant. Tehran for its part, vowed to take revenge on the "Zionists".

Here is a recap of the main developments since Sunday's explosion at Natanz:

Explosion

The Iran Atomic Energy Organization (IAEO) says on April 11 that an "accident" has caused a power failure at its uranium enrichment Natanz plant.

The incident comes a day after the Islamic republic said it had started up advanced uranium enrichment centrifuges at the site, in a breach of its commitments under a troubled 2015 deal with world powers.

No one was injured in the blast and there was no radioactive release, the official Fars news agency reports, citing an IAEO spokesman.

Act of 'terrorism'

Hours later the IAEO says the facility was hit by a terrorist act.

Ali Akbar Salehi, the head of the IAEO, condemns a "futile" act, while urging the international community to "confront this anti-nuclear terrorism", in a statement carried by state television.

The next day Iran's foreign ministry says Israel was "of course" behind the attack and vows "revenge".

Israel has not claimed responsibility for the incident, but unsourced media reports in the country attributes it to a "cyber operation" by the Israeli security services.

The New York Times, quoting unnamed U.S. and Israeli intelligence officials, also says there was "an Israeli role" in the attack.

Ramping up uranium enrichment

On April 12 Iran warns it will start enriching uranium up to 60 percent purity.

Such a move would bring Iran closer to the 90 percent purity threshold for military use. Under the nuclear deal, Iran had committed to keep enrichment to 3.67 percent.

The announcement casts a shadow over ongoing multinational talks in Vienna aimed at salvaging the 2015 nuclear deal.

The White House says it remains committed to nuclear negotiations with Iran despite Tehran's "provocative" statement on uranium enrichment.

Media in Israel reports that an Israeli-operated ship has been attacked off the UAE opposite the Iranian coast. Since March, several attacks on Iranian ships have been blamed on Israel and vice versa.

Nuclear terrorism

Iran's President Hassan Rouhani says on April 14 that the decision to boost uranium enrichment was a response to Israel's "nuclear terrorism" against its Natanz facility.

European powers express "grave concern" over Iran's move.

Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei warns against protracted talks on the country's atomic programme on the eve of another round of negotiations in Vienna aimed at reviving the 2015 deal.

Seeking to allay Western concerns over the latest move, Rouhani insists the Islamic republic's nuclear programme is "peaceful".

04.15.21

US envoy Hale desires Lebanon to gain access to Israel offshore reserves

04.15.21

U.S. envoy: Maritime border talks with Israel will help crisis-hit Lebanon

In Beirut, American diplomat David Hale says resolving border dispute would 'have potential to unlock significant economic benefits'; stalled negotiations holding up offshore exploration

Reuters| Published: 04.15.21 , 11:55

The United States stands ready to facilitate maritime border talks between Lebanon and Israel that will have benefits for the crisis-hit Lebanese economy, a U.S. envoy said on Thursday.

While pledging not to abandon U.S. interests in Lebanon, On a visit to Beirut, Under Secretary of State David Hale said on a visit to Beirut that resolving the maritime border dispute with Israel would "have potential to unlock significant economic benefits for Lebanon."

An Israeli naval vessel near the disputed maritime border with Lebanon (Photo: Archive)  
The two neighboring enemies launched negotiations last year, a culmination of years of U.S. diplomacy, which have since stalled.  
The dispute has held up offshore exploration in the eastern Mediterranean. While Israel pumps gas from offshore fields, Lebanon has yet to find commercial reserves.

Hale also blamed Lebanese leaders for failing to end a deadlock in cabinet talks to tackle the collapse, which has crashed the currency.  
He warned that "those who continue to obstruct" progress open themselves up to punitive actions, without naming individuals.

As part of its pressure campaign on Tehran, Washington escalated sanctions last year against Lebanese allies of Hezbollah, hitting former ministers on charges of corruption and ties to the Iran-backed group, which it classifies as terrorist.  
Hale accused Hezbollah and Iran of undermining the state after meeting on Thursday with Lebanese President Michel Aoun, a political ally of the group whose son-in-law became a target of U.S. sanctions.

Hale said that talks with Iran on reviving a 2015 nuclear deal could foster regional stability but "would only be the beginning of our work" as the United States addresses "the other elements of Iran's destabilizing behavior".