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 Lapid & Bennett emerging as candidates after Netanyahu failed to break deadlock

05.05.21

Lapid set to receive mandate to form government as Rivlin ends consultations

Yesh Atid chair received 51 recommendations, including from Saar's New Hope, while right-wing bloc asked for the mandate to be transferred to the Knesset after Netanyahu failed to muster up a coalition; Bennett gets 7 recommendations

Moran Azulay | Updated: 05.05.21, 14:27

President Reuven Rivlin on Wednesday afternoon concluded consultations on who to task next with forming a new government, with Yesh Atid chair Yair Lapid emerging as the likely candidate.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's deadline for forming a government expired on midnight, with the country's longest-serving prime minister having failed to break more than two years of political deadlock.

Lapid appears to have 51 recommendations to be the next candidate to receive the mandate, including from Gideon Saar's New Hope party. Bennett has seven. The right-wing bloc, headed by Netanyahu, said they ask for the mandate to be transferred to the Knesset.

The round of consultations got off to a rocky start with Yamina MK Amichai Chikli saying he will "oppose a government with the left-wing", referring to a potential coalition with Lapid. Yamina in response said they "respect" Chikli's stance but are "determined" to form a government.

"Yamina is committed to doing everything in its power to form a stable and functioning government in order to prevent the deterioration into chaos of the fifth election, and it will do so."

The president earlier said party leaders must inform him of their recommended candidate to be tapped to attempt government building by 2pm on Wednesday.

"According to section 9 of the Basic Law: The Government, the president is considering summoning before him the MKs, and candidates for the position of forming government, as well as accepting the position of all the factions [on who should be the candidate], as long as they are interested," the President's Office said in a statement.

Harel Toby, who heads the President's Office, asked the heads of the parties to present their recommendations to Rivlin in writing. He added that in addition to Bennett and Lapid, "other meetings will be scheduled at the request of faction members and at the president's discretion."

The right-wing bloc said earlier they will not recommend Bennett due to Yamina leader's refusal to commit to not forming a government with the anti-Netanyahu bloc, in the event the mandate is transferred to him.

"Due to Bennett's refusal to commit to a right-wing government, which would certainly have led to the formation of a government, the prime minister returned the mandate back to the president," Likud said in a statement.

Reuters contributed to this report First published: 09:29 , 05.05.21

05.05.21

IDF besieged building in West Bank village amid terrorist manhunt for 2 hours

05.05.21

IDF besieges building in West Bank village amid terrorist manhunt

Palestinians residents of K far Akraba village say the troops told occupants of the building to leave, then hurled grenades inside and fired shots; troops reportedly left 2 hours later and it's unclear if anyone was arrested in the operation

Yoav Zitun, Elinor Levy, Elisha Ben Kimon | Published: 05.05.21 , 12:59

Palestinians reported on Wednesday morning that Israeli troops effectively besieged a building in a village near Nablus as part of the manhunt for suspects behind a deadly drive by shooting in the West Bank earlier this week.

Three Israeli 19-year-old Yeshiva students were shot and wounded at the Tapuach Junction near the settlement of Itamar on Sunday. Two of the wounded remain hospitalized in serious condition, while the third has already been released from hospital, having been lightly hurt.

According to locals, the building is located in the eastern part of the K far Akraba village, which has been the focus of IDF activity in recent days as part of the ongoing manhunt. Security forces apparently told residents of the building to leave, then hurled grenades inside the building and fired at the walls. About two hours later, shots were fired inside the building as well. The forces then folded the equipment and left the place. It's unclear if anyone was arrested during the operation.

Earlier, checkpoints were set up in the area and photos were posted on social media, showing smoke rising from the village after what appeared to be a blast. Palestinian sources told Ynet the building belongs to a Palestinian named Imad Fathallah Bani Mania, who is affiliated with Hamas. The structure is apparently used for agricultural purposes only. Bani Mania was arrested earlier this week as part of the manhunt for the terrorists.

The military said the main suspect in the attack appears to be 47-year-old Muntasir Shalabi. Several Palestinians have already been arrested on suspicion that they provided shelter and other assistance to Shalabi during the manhunt.

05.05.21

Hamas military chief warned Jews not allowed at Al Aqsa Mosque this weekend.

05.05.21

### Shadowy Hamas terror chief issues warning to Israel over Jerusalem

Mohammed Deif, who rarely makes public statements and never appears in public, says Israel will pay a "heavy price" if it continues evicting Palestinian families from the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood of the capital  
Elior Levy | Published: 05.05.21 , 10:45

The shadowy figure who heads Hamas military wing leader on Tuesday issued a rare public statement, warning Israel of retaliation if it doesn't change its East Jerusalem policy.

Mohammed Deif, the leader of the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades, said Israel will pay a "heavy price" if it doesn't stop the eviction of Palestinian families living in the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood of the capital. "This is a clear and final warning," Deif said.

Deif survived multiple Israeli assassination attempts, two of which left him seriously injured. Little is known about the military chief, who rarely makes public statements and never appears in public.

Palestinians have been clashing with police in the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood every night in the past week, after a Jerusalem court approved the removal of 58 people from homes that according to right-wing groups, belonged to Jewish residents before the 1948 War of Independence.

Three people were detained by police during clashes late on Tuesday.

Israeli security forces detain a Palestinian amid ongoing confrontations as Palestinian

Seven of the eight families facing eviction appealed the ruling to the Supreme Court which will decide the matter later this month. One family had already exhausted further legal options after the High Court of Justice ruled that their eviction was in accordance with the law.

The holiest night of Ramadan, Laylat al-Qadr, or "night of power" that marks the night when the Quran was first sent down from Heaven to the world, falls between Sunday and Monday of next week - the same day that Israel celebrates Jerusalem Day, marking the unification of the city after the 1967 Six Day War.

Security officials are concerned about potential clashes that might break out between Jews and Palestinians on the day.

The Hamas terror group has been threatening violent retaliation for any Israeli attempt to curtail Palestinian worship.

Hamas political leaders Khaled Mashal and Ismail Haniyeh both demanded that Jews must not be allowed to enter the Al Aqsa Mosque compound during Laylat al Qadr. In an orchestrated media blitz Hamas has recently been attempting to rouse emotions around Jerusalem.

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas also told supporters to protect the Muslim holy sites from Jewish demonstrators.

05.05.21

Netanyahu misses deadline, Opposition Lapid seems likely, Bennett possibility

05.05.21

Netanyahu misses deadline, political future in question

In-depth: Should Rivlin task Yair Lapid to form government next, Netanyahu set to do his utmost to prevent his opponents - united only by their animosity towards him - from agreeing on a coalition that would oust him from power

Associated Press | Published: 05.05.21 , 05:32

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Tuesday failed to meet a midnight deadline to put together a new governing coalition, raising the possibility that his Likud party could be pushed into the opposition for the first time in 12 years.

The deadline closed a four-week window granted to Netanyahu by Israel's figurehead president. The matter now bounces back to President Reuven Rivlin, who announced just after midnight that he would contact on Wednesday the 13 parties with seats in parliament to discuss "the continuation of the process of forming a government."

Rivlin is expected in the coming days to give one of Netanyahu's opponents a chance to form an alternative coalition government. He also could ask the parliament to select one of its own members as prime minister. If all else fails, the country would be forced into another election this fall — the fifth in just over two years.

The turmoil does not mean that Netanyahu will immediately be forced out as prime minister. But he now faces a serious threat to his lengthy rule just as his corruption trial is kicking into high gear. His opponents, despite deep ideological differences, already have been holding informal talks in recent weeks in hopes of forging a power-sharing agreement.

Netanyahu had struggled to secure a parliamentary majority since March 23 — when elections ended in deadlock for the fourth consecutive time in the past two years. Despite repeated meetings with many of his rivals and unprecedented outreach to the leader of a small Islamist Arab party, Netanyahu was unable to close a deal.

Rivlin gave Netanyahu the first chance to form a coalition after 52 members of parliament endorsed him as prime minister last month. That was short of a majority, but the highest number for any party leader.

Opposition leader Yair Lapid, who received the backing of 45 lawmakers, now seems to be the most likely candidate to get a chance to form a government.

Naftali Bennett, head of the small religious, nationalist Yamina party, is also a possibility. Bennett, a former Netanyahu ally turned rival, controls just seven seats in parliament, but he has emerged as a kingmaker of sorts and appears to carry the votes that Lapid would need to secure a parliamentary majority.

Lapid already has said he is ready to share the prime minister's job with Bennett, with Bennett serving first in a rotation. So far, they have not reached any firm agreements. In a brief statement, Netanyahu's Likud party blamed Bennett for the prime minister's failure.

“Because of Bennett's refusal to commit to a right-wing government, something that would have certainly led to the formation of a government along with other members of Knesset, Prime Minister Netanyahu returned the mandate to the president,” the statement said.

Defense Minister Benny Gantz, leader of the centrist Blue and White party, called on Netanyahu's opponents to line up behind Lapid.

“The Israeli people have taken one blow after another: a pandemic, unemployment, ugly politics, loss of faith in leadership, and deep polarization,” he said. “We can work everything out within a matter of hours. It is our duty to form a government as swiftly as possible for the sake of the state of Israel and all of its citizens.”

Netanyahu has become a divisive figure in Israeli politics, with the last four elections all seen as a referendum on his rule. He has been desperate to remain in office while he stands trial, using his position to lash out at prosecutors and seek possible immunity from prosecution.

Most of his struggles stemmed from obstacles created by former allies in his own religious and nationalist base.

The New Hope party, led by a former Netanyahu aide, refused to serve under the prime minister because of deep personal differences. Religious Zionism, a far-right party that espouses an openly racist platform, supported Netanyahu but ruled out serving in a government with the Arab partners he has courted.

Bennett, who has had a strained relationship with Netanyahu, was unable to reach any agreements with his former mentor.

Looming over Netanyahu has been his corruption trial. Netanyahu has been charged with fraud, breach of trust and bribery in a series of scandals. The trial has moved into the witness phase, with embarrassing testimony accusing him of trading favors with a powerful media mogul. Netanyahu denies the charges.

In recent weeks, Netanyahu had appeared increasingly frustrated, coddling potential partners one day and then lashing out at them with vitriol the next.

Last week's deadly stampede at a religious festival, in which 45 ultra-Orthodox Jews were killed, only complicated his task by creating an unwelcome diversion and calls for an official investigation into possible negligence on his watch.

Netanyahu has also suffered a series of embarrassing — and uncharacteristic — defeats in parliament. On Tuesday, Likud failed to push ahead a proposal calling for direct election of the prime minister. Opponents had panned the measure as a desperate attempt by Netanyahu to find a new way to hold on to power.

Despite all of Netanyahu's vulnerabilities, it remains unclear whether his opponents can form an alternative government.

The opposition includes a vast spectrum of parties that have little in common except for their animosity toward Netanyahu. He is expected to do his utmost in the coming weeks to prevent his opponents from finalizing a deal.

If they fail, he would remain in office until the next election. That would give him several months to battle his corruption charges from the perch of the prime minister's office and grant him yet another chance to win a new term, along with possible immunity.

05.04.21

Police closes Temple Mount to Jews until Jerusalem Day, 15 May next week

05.04.21

Police closes Temple Mount to Jews indefinitely

Holy Jerusalem site reportedly to open for Jerusalem Day next week; move comes following tense weeks in the capital and around its Old City as Muslims celebrate holy month of Ramadan

i24NEWS| Published: 05.04.21 , 21:42

Israel Police Tuesday banned Jewish visitors from visiting the Temple Mount until further notice as tensions rise in the Old City of the Israeli capital.

Police were said to have informed Jewish groups organizing Temple Mount visits of the moratorium.

The purported move is designed to ward off further tensions after clashes and riots in East Jerusalem amid the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. Jews, however, will be allowed to enter the area on Jerusalem Day next week.

Tensions in Jerusalem, specifically around the Old City, reached a boiling point last month after police prevented people from congregating outside Damascus Gate at the beginning of Ramadan, which Arabs said was an inflammatory move that obstructed a long-held tradition of gathering at the site during the Muslim holy month. Authorities later canceled the policy.

Amid the unrest in the area, Gaza terrorist groups launched several rocket salvos at Israel's south, prompting the Jewish state to temporarily shut off the Palestinian enclave's fishing zone.

The Temple Mount is the holiest site in Judaism, as it was once home to the Jewish Temples, and the third holiest for Muslims. Captured from Jordan by Israel in 1967, the Temple Mount's religious sites are under the custody of the Waqf, or Islamic Council, with Jews banned from praying on the site.

05.04.21

Likud pushes through right-wing bills in bid to cause rift between PM rivals

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Knesset panel fast-tracks bills to authorize illegal West Bank settlement outposts, allow parliamentary majority to override Supreme Court; committee chair blocks vote on direct premiership elections after failing to muster majority to back motion  
Moran Azulay | Published: 05.04.21 , 20:18

The Knesset Arrangements Committee convenes to vote on several legislations pushed by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud faction hours before his mandate to form a government expires at midnight Tuesday.

With the loss of the Mandate, Netanyahu will also lose control over the Arrangements Committee and his political opponents will then be able to promote laws that would block him from future bids to be the prime minister.

Meanwhile, the panel voted to fast-track a bill to authorize illegal settlement outposts in the West Bank. The legislation will be presented before the Knesset plenum vote Wednesday.

The committee also approved fast-tracking a bill that would allow a majority of lawmakers to override Supreme Court rulings.

The bill passed 17 to 15 after Gideon Saar's New Hope party said they will support the proposal.

Likud Whip MK Miki Zohar, who remains at the head of the Knesset committee until midnight, postponed a vote to fast-track an amendment to the elections law so that a vote could be held separately on the identity of the next prime minister in case a new election is called after failing to must a majority to back the motion. Such a law could have significantly increased Netanyahu's chances of re-election.

Zohar also said he would also be advancing the death penalty for terrorists, a law which former Likud ally and Yisrael Beytenu leader Avigdor Liberman tabled four years ago but had not made it out of committee because of Likud's opposition.

The efforts by Likud to advance the bills are seen as an attempt to cause rifts between the parties attempting to present an alternative coalition to Netanyahu's right-wing and religious bloc.

The so-called "coalition for change" was made up of Knesset factions that disagree on ideology but are united on the need to oust Netanyahu.

Likud chose to advance the legislation through the Arrangements Committee and not by tabling them in the plenum in order to expedite the legislative procedure.

Netanyahu was concentrating his efforts to prevent Bennett from joining his opponent's coalition should one be possible. The Yamina leader has consistently negotiated with Likud and the opposing camp and refused to commit himself to either side, despite publicly stating he prefers to see a right-wing government established.



Opposition leader Yair **Lapid**, from the Yesh Atid Party, said he **hoped that he will be tapped** by President Reuven Rivlin to attempt to form a coalition if Netanyahu fails to do so by the midnight deadline.

**Bennett is also vying for the mandate** claiming more members of Knesset including the Likud and the ultra-Orthodox parties would support his efforts, but political observers say Rivlin is unlikely to grant the Yamina leader's wish because his party controls only seven seats in the parliament.

05.04.21

**Likud in rush to advance legislation ahead of mandate expiration deadline**

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**Likud in rush to advance legislation ahead of mandate expiration deadline**

Legislative rush seen as Likud attempt to cause rifts among factions that make up so called coalition for change that have differences in their ideologies but are united in their desire to oust Netanyahu

Moran Azulay | Published: **05.04.21** , 14:48

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud faction launched efforts to **advance legislation hours before his mandate to form a government expires** on midnight Tuesday.

**With the loss of the Mandate**, Netanyahu will also lose control over the Arrangements Committee and his political **opponents will then be able to promote laws that would block him from future bids to be the prime minister.**

MK Miki Zohar (Likud) who remains at the head of the Knesset committee until midnight, said he would be tabling a **change to the elections law** so that a **vote** could be held **for prime minister only** should new elections be called. **If such a law passes, Netanyahu's chances of re-election will be high.**

Zohar also said he would be **advancing the death penalty for terrorists**, a law which former Likud ally and Yisrael Beytenu leader Avigdor Liberman tabled four years ago but had not made it out of committee because of Likud's opposition.

Additional bills were on the status of illegal outposts and other matters that Yamina leader Naftali Bennett had promised to pass during his election campaign including laws to limit the authority of the Supreme Court.

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Bennett is also vying for the mandate claiming more members of Knesset including the Likud and the ultra-Orthodox parties would support his efforts, but political observers say Rivlin is unlikely to grant the Yamina leader's wish because his party controls only seven seats in the parliament.

05.04.21

Two arrested at protest over Jerusalem evictions of Palestinian families

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Two arrested at protest over Jerusalem evictions of Palestinian families

Palestinians protested the eviction of 58 Palestinians from homes in the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood in East Jerusalem after right-wing group petitioned court to return property belonging to Jews before the 1948 war of Independence

AFP, Ynet | Published: 05.04.21 , 13:42

Two Palestinians were arrested and 10 people injured in clashes in east Jerusalem late on Monday, according to police and the Palestine Red Crescent.

The confrontations came as Palestinian families face eviction, part of an ongoing effort by right-wing organizations to take control of homes in the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood.

Israeli police forces arrived at a protest of dozens of demonstrators, "who disturbed the order", a police statement said, adding that rioters threw stones and bottles at security forces and blocked traffic.

Police said they gave protesters "reasonable time" to leave the "unlawful protest" before they dispersed the demonstration.

Officers used riot control methods including troops on horse back and foul-smelling water.

The Red Crescent said three of the injured were hospitalized.

Sheikh Jarrah is in east Jerusalem, which Israel conquered in 1967 Six Day War and annexed in a move not recognized by most of the international community.

Israeli right-wing settlers, by courts have taken over houses in Sheikh Jarrah on the grounds that Jewish families lived there before fleeing in Israel's 1948 war for independence.

Now, Jewish claimants seek to evict 58 Palestinians, according to the watchdog group Peace Now.

Israel's Supreme Court is set to announce a decision regarding the eviction of four of those families on Thursday.

Jordan intervened, saying that when it administered the area from 1948 to 1967, it built the houses in dispute for refugees who fled their homes in what became Israel.

Opponents of the evictions have been gathering regularly in the neighborhood, including an Israeli lawmaker who last month was filmed being beaten by police.

Sheikh Jarrah is a short walk from the Old City's Damascus Gate, a plaza popular with Palestinians, especially during the fasting month of Ramadan.

The latest protests follow days of clashes after Israeli police blocked the plaza and prevented congregation on the site.

The barricades have since been removed by the police.

05.04.21

Lebanon, Israel, US & UN talk over north maritime border & exploration rights

05.04.21

Lebanon, Israel talks resume over maritime border

The fifth round of talks, between countries still technically at war, kicked off at the UN base in the town of Naqura in Southern Lebanon across the border with Israel with the mediation of the United States

AFP | Published: 05.04.21 , 13:08

Lebanon and Israel resumed US-mediated negotiations over their disputed maritime border on Tuesday after a months-long hiatus, in efforts to clear the way for offshore oil and gas exploration.

The fifth round of talks, between countries still technically at war, kicked off at the UN base in the town of Naqura in southern Lebanon, the National News Agency said.

Washington said Friday they were to be brokered by US diplomat John Desrocher, and called the resumption of talks "a positive step towards a long-awaited resolution".

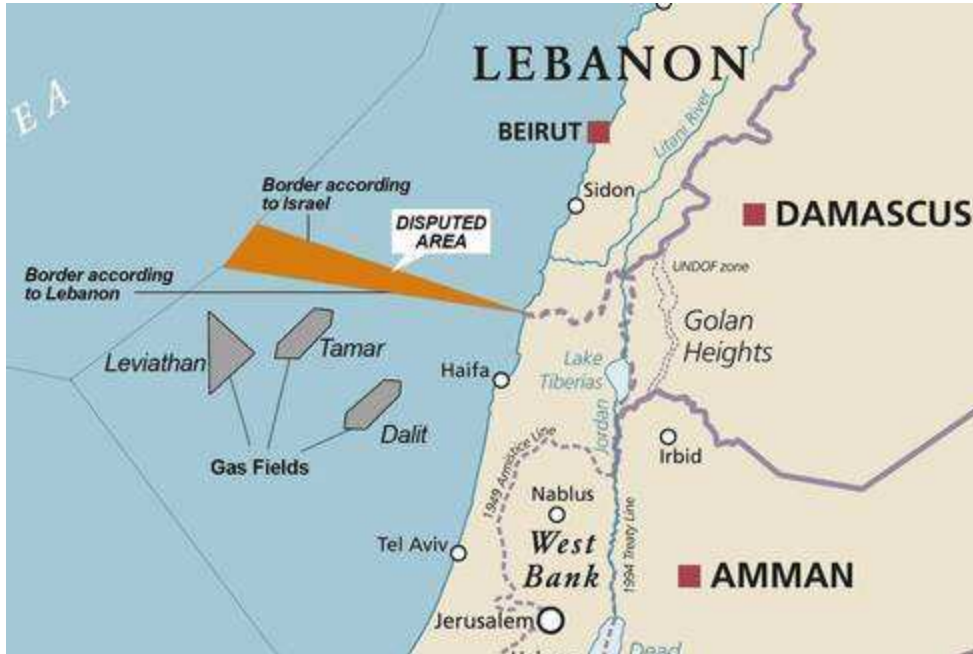
Lebanon and Israel last year took part in indirect US-brokered talks to discuss demarcation.

But those talks stalled after Lebanon demanded a larger area, including part of the Karish gas field, where Israel has given exploration rights to a Greek firm.

The talks last year were supposed to discuss a Lebanese demand for 860 square kilometers (330 square miles) of territory in the disputed maritime area, according to a map sent to the United Nations in 2011.

But Lebanon then said the map was based on erroneous calculations and demanded 1,430 square kilometers (552 square miles) more territory further south, including part of Karish.

A map showing the territorial maritime dispute between Israel and Lebanon



"The discussion will start from where we left it off," a source at the Lebanese presidency told AFP on Tuesday.

He said both Israel and Lebanon had demanded a different demarcation line.

"We don't accept the line they've proposed, and they don't accept ours, so we'll see what the mediator suggests."

Last month, President Michel Aoun Thursday demanded Israel halt all exploration in Karish until the dispute was settled.

In February 2018, Lebanon signed its first contract for offshore drilling for oil and gas in blocks 4 and 9, with a consortium comprising energy giants Total, ENI and Novatek.

Lebanon in April said initial drilling in Block 4 had shown traces of gas but no commercially viable reserves.

Lebanon's government stepped down after a massive blast at Beirut's port in August 2020, but deeply divided politicians have been unable to form a new cabinet ever since.

Lebanese politicians hope that commercially viable hydrocarbon resources off Lebanon's coast could help lift the debt-ridden country out of its worst economic crisis in decades.

05.04.21

IDF detained those providing assistance to terror, torching vehicle before examination

05.04.21

Security forces detain suspects for assisting West Bank terror squad

IDF estimates assailants who perpetrated drive by shooting attack on Sunday, receiving shelter and assistance by local Palestinian residents while two of the three Israelis injured in the attack remain in serious and critical condition in hospitals

Yoav Zitun, Elinor Levy | Published: 05.04.21 , 10:01

IDF soldiers detained several Palestinians from the West Bank village of Aqraba near Nablus on Monday night, suspecting them of providing assistance to assailants who shot and injured three in a drive-by attack near the settlement of Itamar on Sunday.

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Three 19-year-old students from the Itamar Yeshiva were injured in the attack. Two of them remain hospitalized in serious and critical condition.

The third victim, who was slightly injured in the attack, was released from the hospital on Monday.

Palestinian security forces located an abandoned car that the IDF believes was used in the attack, with its rear window punctured by bullets, in Aqraba on Monday. The vehicle was torched by Palestinians, before its could be taken by the IDF for examination.

The manhunt for the terror squad continued on Tuesday with the assistance of the Shin Bet Security Agency focusing on intelligence gathering.

Security officials say they believe local Palestinian residents were assisting the suspected terrorists who were evading capture.

On Monday, Chief of Staff Aviv Kochavi visited the site of the attack.

"The IDF will reinforce its forces and expand its operational activities in the West Bank in the coming weeks," Kochavi said.

No one has claimed responsibility for the attack but Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Monday, vowed there would be a harsh response.

"We will not allow terrorism to raise its head and we will strike our enemies with force," he said.

05.04.21

Saudi Arabia to reopen Damascus Syria embassy, seeking thaw with Iran issues

05.04.21

Report: Saudi Arabia to reopen Damascus embassy, seeking thaw with Syria

Saudi officials said to meet with Syrian leadership during Monday trip to Damascus in first contact since nations severed ties in 2012 during peak of Syrian civil war

i24NEWS | Published: 05.04.21 , 17:25

Saudi Arabia has decided to reopen its embassy in Damascus as it seeks a rapprochement with Syria, Jordanian newspaper Rai el Youm reported on Tuesday.

According to the report, a Saudi delegation arrived in Damascus on Monday in a diplomatic visit.

Riyadh's messengers reportedly liaised with several senior Syria officials, including President Bashar al-Assad and his senior advisor and close confidante Ali Mamlouk. Riyadh is said to be looking to restore its ties with Syria, an ally and client state for Iran — Saudi Arabia's regional arch-nemesis.

The two countries severed ties in 2012 as Syria's civil war escalated and Assad turned to help for Iran, while Riyadh supported the anti-regime forces.

Saudi and Iranian officials held direct Iraqi-mediated talks this month in a bid to ease tensions between the two foes, a senior Iranian official and two regional sources said, as Washington works to revive a 2015 nuclear pact with Tehran and end the Yemen war.

The regional source said the meeting focused on Yemen, where a military coalition led by Saudi Arabia has been battling the Iran-aligned Houthi group since March 2015. The talks were the first significant contact between the two countries, which cut their ties in 2016 after Riyadh executed 47 people, including a prominent Shi'ite cleric Nimr al-Nimr.

Later on, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman said in an interview that Saudi Arabia would want better ties with Iran, but had issues with its nuclear ambitions, missile program and support of regional armed groups.

05.04.21

Egypt to purchase 30 French Dassault fighter jets, changing boycotts to dialogue

05.04.21

Egypt to purchase of fighter Jets from France

French president also ruled out making France's deepening defense and trade ties with Egypt conditional on the issue of rights after bilateral relationship under Sisi improved as countries share interests in the Middle East

AFP| Updated: 05.04.21 , 11:29

France has agreed to sell 30 more Rafale fighter jets to Egypt, a source close to the contract said on Monday, confirming an online report of a secret mega-defense deal.

An news investigative site Disclosed the deal on Tuesday, citing confidential documents it had obtained, that showed the contract was signed on April 26 at the behest of Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sissi as part of defense contracts worth almost four billion euros (\$4.8 billion).

It said that the deal consisted of three distinct contracts, by far the biggest being the 3.75-billion-euro (\$5.52 billion) purchase of 30 Rafale fighter jets from French producer Dassault.

A source close to the contract, who asked not to be named, confirmed that Egypt had ordered 30 more fighter jets but did not give details on the cost.

The French defense ministry and Dassault declined to comment, but a government source, who asked not to be named, said: “Very advanced discussions have taken place with Egypt and the announcements could come very soon.”

The financial portion of the agreement was being inked on Monday, with Egypt getting a loan guaranteed by France to make the purchases.

France regards Egypt as a key client of its defense industry. Egypt was the first foreign country to purchase the Rafale jets in 2015, buying 24 planes. Purchases by Qatar, India and Greece have turned the plane into one of France’s main defense industry successes. The deal came in the wake of a hugely contentious state visit to Paris by Sissi in December hosted by President Emmanuel Macron.

Egypt and France have enjoyed an increasingly close relationship under the secular rule of former army general Sissi, with common interests in the Middle East and a shared suspicion of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

Macron decorated Sisi with France’s highest honor, the Grand Cross of the Legion of Honor, during the visit. That enraged activists who had asked him not to roll out the red carpet but instead to raise concern over the estimated 60,000 political prisoners languishing in Egyptian prisons.

The French president also ruled out making France’s deepening defense and trade ties with Egypt conditional on the issue of rights.

“I think it is more effective to have a policy of dialogue than a policy of boycott which would reduce the effectiveness of one of our partners in the fight against terrorism and for regional stability,” Macron said.

First published: 11:26 , 05.04.21