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Gantz meets US on scenarios of Iran nuclear facilities, if diplomacy should fail

12.09.21

Gantz meets with Pentagon chief to discuss Iran, bilateral ties

Secretary of Defense Austin says U.S. 'deeply concerned' about Tehran's nuclear actions, adding that 'if current policy fails, Biden has made clear that 'we are prepared to turn to other options'

Itamar Eichner | Published: 12.09.21, 21:31

Defense Minister Benny Gantz on Thursday met with his U.S. counterpart Lloyd Austin in Washington to discuss bilateral ties between both countries and Israel's concerns regarding Iran.

At the start of the meeting in the Pentagon, Gantz said that he hopes Jerusalem and Washington will deepen their ties regarding Tehran and its nuclear program.

"I look forward to deepening our dialogue and cooperation vis-à-vis Iran, including on topics of military readiness," he said. "Iran is the biggest threat to global and regional peace and stability and building an existential threat to Israel."

"Iran is not just a threat to our physical security. Iran poses a concrete threat to our way of life and our shared values," he added.

"In its aspirations to become a hegemon, Iran seeks to destroy all traces of freedom, human dignity and peace in the Middle East and beyond. The nuclear program is a means to its hegemonic goals."

Alluding to the ongoing talks in Vienna regarding the resumption of the 2015 nuclear deal, Gantz said that "Iran is playing poker with a bad hand and it is playing on time."

Gantz was also set to meet with U.S. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken later on Thursday.

Austin said that the U.S. is "deeply concerned" about Iran's nuclear actions and the "lack of constructive diplomatic engagement."

He also said that if current policy regarding Iran fails, U.S. President Joe Biden has made clear "we are prepared to turn to other options."

Reuters, citing a senior U.S. official, exclusively reported that Thursday's U.S.-Israeli agenda was expected to include discussions about possible military exercises that would prepare for a worst-case scenario to destroy Iran's nuclear facilities should diplomacy fail and if their nations' leaders request it.

Also on Thursday, U.S. Special envoy for Iran Robert Malley told Al Jazeera TV that the United States was ready to hold direct negotiations with the Iranians on Tehran's nuclear program, calling it the best solution to such a complicated issue.

Malley added that Iran did not present constructive proposals during previous negotiations and even retracted compromises it had made before.

12.09.21

Diplomacy stutters, US & Israel discuss military drills for Iran weaponization

12.09.21

As diplomacy stutters, U.S., Israel to discuss military drills for Iran scenario

'We're in this pickle because Iran's nuclear program is advancing to a point beyond which it has any conventional rationale,' U.S. official says, while still voicing hope nuclear deal talks fructify

Reuters| Published: 12.09.21, 09:01

U.S. and Israeli defense chiefs are expected on Thursday to discuss possible military exercises that would prepare for a worst-case scenario to destroy Iran's nuclear facilities

should diplomacy fail and if their nations' leaders request it, a senior U.S. official told Reuters.

The scheduled U.S. talks with visiting Defense Minister Benny Gantz follow an Oct. 25 briefing by Pentagon leaders to White House national security adviser Jake Sullivan on the full set of military options available to ensure that Iran would not be able to produce a nuclear weapon, the official said on Wednesday, speaking on condition of anonymity.

Iran denies seeking nuclear weapons, saying it wants to master nuclear technology for peaceful purposes.

The U.S.-Israeli preparations, which have not been previously reported, underscore Western concern about difficult nuclear talks with Iran that President Joe Biden had hoped would revive a 2015 nuclear deal abandoned by his predecessor, Donald Trump. But U.S. and European officials have voiced dismay after talks last week at sweeping demands by Iran's new, hardline government, heightening suspicions in the West that Iran is playing for time while advancing its nuclear program.

The U.S. official declined to offer details on the potential military exercises.

"We're in this pickle because Iran's nuclear program is advancing to a point beyond which it has any conventional rationale," the official said, while still voicing hope for discussions.

The Israeli embassy in Washington and Iran's mission to the United Nations did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

Gantz, in a post on Twitter as he departed for the United States, said: "We will discuss possible modes of action to ensure the cessation of (Iran's) attempt to enter the nuclear sphere and broaden its activity in the region." He did not elaborate.

Nuclear negotiations will resume on Thursday, according to the European Union official chairing the talks, and the U.S. special envoy for Iran plans to join them over the weekend.

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) said last week that Iran had started the process of enriching uranium to up to 20% purity with one cascade, or cluster, of 166 advanced IR-6 machines at its Fordow plant, which is dug into a mountain, making it harder to attack.

The 2015 agreement gave Iran sanctions relief but imposed strict limits on its uranium enrichment activities, extending the time it would need to produce enough fissile material for a nuclear weapon, if it chose to, to at least a year from around two to three months.

Most nuclear experts say that period is now considerably shorter.

Underlining how badly eroded the deal is, that pact does not allow Iran to enrich uranium at Fordow at all, let alone with advanced centrifuges.

COMPROMISED

With the deal's nuclear benefits now badly compromised, some Western officials say there is little time left before the foundation of the deal is damaged beyond repair.

Such drills by the United States and Israel could address calls by Dennis Ross, a former senior U.S. official and Middle East expert, and others to openly signal to Iran that the United States and Israel are still serious about preventing it from obtaining a nuclear weapon.

"Biden needs to disabuse Iran of the notion that Washington will not act militarily and will stop Israel from doing so," Ross wrote last month.

Ross even suggested the United States should perhaps signal a willingness to give the Israeli's the U.S. military's bunker-busting Massive Ordnance Penetrator, a 30,000-pound bomb.

Asked about such remarks about deterrence, the senior U.S. official said: "When President Biden says Iran will never get a nuclear weapon, I mean, he means it."

Central Intelligence Agency Director Bill Burns said on Monday that the CIA does not believe Iran's supreme leader has decided to take steps to weaponize a nuclear device but noted advances in its ability to enrich uranium, one pathway to the fissile material for a bomb.

Burns cautioned that, even if Iran decided to go ahead, it would still require a lot of work to weaponize that fissile material before attaching a nuclear weapon to a missile or other delivery system.

"But they're further along in their mastery of the nuclear fuel cycle and that's the kind of knowledge that is very difficult to sanction away or make disappear, as well," he said.

U.S. officials have also long worried about America's ability to detect and destroy dispersed components of Iran's nuclear weaponization program once enough fissile material for a bomb were produced.

12.07.21

Tel Aviv protest of policies to challenge Jewish Kashrut and conversions

12.07.21

Thousands rally in Tel Aviv in protest of government policies

Holding signs and flying Israeli flags, protesters call to topple government for promoting several pieces of legislation they deem 'dangerous' to Israel's Jewish character

Korin Elbaz Alush | Published: 12.07.21, 22:43

Thousands rallied in Tel Aviv Tuesday night against government policies they deemed "dangerous" to Israel's Jewish character.

Holding signs and flying Israeli flags, the crowd called to topple the government for promoting several recent pieces of legislation aiming to challenge the Chief Rabbinate's monopoly on issues such as Kashrut and conversions to Judaism. Protesters also called to reinstall Likud Chairman and Opposition Leader Benjamin Netanyahu as prime minister.

One by one, Likud and Religious Zionist Party lawmakers and other prominent figures on Israel's political right took the stage at Habima Square and blisteringly denounced the government.

MK Itamar Ben Gvir of the hard-right Otzma Yehudit faction within the Religious Zionist Party called on protesters to "take to the streets and declare that we want a democratic country, we want a right-wing government, we want the reins of power, we want victory."

Ben Gvir also attacked left-wing legislators who took part in a conference addressing a recent surge in settler violence on Palestinians in the West Bank on the day of the funeral of Eli Kay, an Israeli gunned down by a Hamas terrorist in Jerusalem's Old City last month.

"Two weeks ago, a fine young man was murdered. He was the son of all of us, Eliyahu David Kay. On the day of the funeral, what do the crazy left do? Hold a conference on settler violence," he said as the crowd began to boo.

"A Jewish man was laid to rest and they're talking about violence. 'You should be ashamed,' I told them. 'Have you no hearts?' I yelled until I was ejected from the conference."

According to organizers, tens of thousands showed up at the rally and show their dismay at the actions of the government.

"The public has voted with its feet. Tens of thousands came here to support the cause and protest against the actions of the Israeli government," the organizers told Ynet. "The government forgets that we are a Jewish and democratic country that our forefathers fought to establish. Now it is working to erase its identity. This government has no legitimacy and we do not accept it. We shall keep fighting to keep Israel a Jewish country."

12.07.21

Shin Bet found security breach at Gantz home, and introduce hiring improvements

12.07.21

Israel's Shin Bet sanctions members for Gantz cleaner security breach

Review panel finds faults in screening process of staff with access to inner circles of officials guarded by the agency; Shin Bet chief Bar says probe offered opportunity to improve hiring process

Yoav Zitun| Updated: 12.07.21, 20:02

The Shin Bet domestic security agency decided on Monday to sanction two of the organization's operatives as part of an internal review into an attempted espionage case in which a cleaner working at Defense Ministry Benny Gantz's home tried to sell intelligence to Iranian-linked hackers.

Charges filed to the Lod District Court last month revealed that 37-year-old Omri Goren Gorochofsky — who was employed at the Gantz residence for three years — contacted the Black Shadow **hacker group** that is believed to have **ties to Iran** and offered to install malware on the defense minister's personal computer in exchange for money.

Security authorities say they were notified of the cleaner's attempts before he was able to cause any harm to national security.

The Shin Bet probe looked into recruitment processes and offered several **steps to prevent similar security breaches** in the future.

The review panel featured three former senior Shin Bet officials who found that in addition to the **agency's failure to properly vet** Goren upon recruitment, it **failed** to do so **again in later inspections**.

Shin Bet chief Ronen Bar lauded his colleagues for **detecting the security breach** and taking swift action after Goren made **initial contact with the Black Shadow**.

"Our quick response notwithstanding, we **failed in identifying the risk** posed by the cleaner **employed by the Gantz family**," Bar said. "This **allowed us the opportunity to review our hiring process and introduce improvements** to our methods of securing officials under our protection."

12.07.21

Israel announces completion of 40 mile underground Gaza border barrier

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Israel announces completion of underground Gaza border barrier

Chief of staff says barrier, which includes **hundreds of cameras, radars and other sensors** is a game changer; Gantz tells Hamas reality in Strip can change after calm and the return of Israelis held by terror group

Ynet, Reuters | Updated: **12.07.21**, 17:14

Israel on Tuesday announced the **completion** of a **sensor-equipped underground wall** on its side of the **Gaza border**, a counter-measure developed after Hamas militants used tunnels to blindside its troops in a 2014 war.

Israel went public with the project, which also **includes an above-ground fence**, a naval barrier, **radar systems** and command and control rooms, in 2016.

"The barrier, which is an **innovative and technologically advanced** project, **deprives Hamas** of one of the capabilities it tried to develop," Defense Minister Benny **Gantz** said.

"(It) places an 'iron wall', sensors and concrete between the terror organization and the residents of Israel's south," he said of the project, which beefs up an existing border fence.

Chief of Military Staff Aviv Kochavi said the wall was a key part of Israel's defense conception on land, air and sea. "The barrier is a game changer," he said. "We have responded with force to any minor violation along the border and will continue to do so. We are bolstering our defenses on all fronts... including against Iran," Kochavi said.

The ministry said the barrier, which includes hundreds of cameras, radars and other sensors, spans 65 kilometers (40 miles) and that 140,000 tons of iron and steel were used in its construction, which took 3.5 years to complete.

It said the project's "smart fence" is more than 6 meters (20 feet) high and its maritime barrier includes means to detect infiltration by sea and a remote-controlled weapons system. The ministry did not disclose the depth of the underground wall. Israel is expected to begin a similar project along its border with Lebanon early next year in order to defend against aggression from the Iran backed Hezbollah terror group, although due to the funding allocated, it will be less advanced.

Gaza also has a 14-kilometre-(8.7-mile)-long border with Egypt, which has also clamped down on crossings, citing security concerns. Since 2013, Egyptian forces have demolished smuggling tunnels while Hamas, on its side, has stepped up patrols. Israel and Hamas have fought four wars since the Islamist group seized control the coastal Gaza Strip in 2007 from forces loyal to Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas. "In order to change the reality in Gaza there are simple steps that must be taken including ending Hamas's military build up, a long period of calm along the frontier and the return of Israelis held by the terror group in Gaza," Gantz said in a news conference.

In the latest conflict, last May, Hamas and other militant groups fired more than 4,300 rockets at Israel, which deployed Iron Dome interceptors against them and carried out extensive air strikes in Gaza.

12.07.21

Five explosions at Syria's main shipping port blamed on Israeli 'aggression'

12.07.21

Syria says fires put out at Latakia's port after Israeli 'aggression'

Syrian state television says 5 explosions rocked the port's container yard; port is main harbor through which food and crucial supplies flow into the war-torn country, and is close to Russia's main airbase of Hmeimim

News agencies| Published: 12.07.21, 08:03

Fires caused by Israeli "aggression" at Syria's port of Latakia on Tuesday have been extinguished, although they left material damage and the status of any casualties was unclear, state media said.

Five explosions rocked the city after the Israeli "aggression" hit the port's container yard, sending fire trucks racing to the site, Syrian state television said. Images posted by SANA showed flames and smoke in the container area and a fire truck at the scene.

The Israeli military does not comment on foreign reports, a military spokesman said. Ismail Hilal, the governor of Latakia, said fire fighters had put out the flames and were working to cool the site, SANA reported.

Latakia city, on Syria's Mediterranean coast, is its main port. Russia, which has been Assad's most powerful ally during the war, operates an air base some 20 km (12 miles) away at Hmeimim in Latakia province.

Israel has mounted frequent attacks against what it has described as Iranian targets in Syria, where Tehran-backed forces, including Lebanon's Hezbollah, have deployed over the last decade to support President Bashar al-Assad.

Israel has said repeatedly it will not allow neighboring Syria to become a launchpad for its foe Iran.

On November 24, an alleged Israeli missile strike in the west of Homs province killed five people, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

In two separate alleged Israeli attacks in October, five pro-Iranian militiamen were killed near the Syrian capital Damascus while nine pro-government fighters were killed near the T4 airbase east of Palmyra in central Syria, the Britain-based war monitor said.

The Mediterranean port of Latakia is the main port through which food and other crucial supplies flow into war-torn Syria, and is close to Russia's main airbase of Hmeimim.

12.06.21

Hamas factions issue Israel & Egypt ultimatum to meet demands by the end of 2021

12.06.21

Hamas threatens renewed violence against Israel, slams Egypt on Gaza mediation
 Terror group source says Gaza factions 'will not allow the current situation to continue,'
 claims Cairo failed to follow through on promises to 'rehabilitate the Gaza Strip' after
 May war with Israel and ease blockade on Palestinian enclave
 Elior Levy | Published: 12.06.21, 22:00

A senior Hamas source said on Monday that the Palestinian terror outfit was weighing escalating violence against Israel after weeks of relative calm while launching an unusual attack against Egypt for its mediation between the parties.

In an interview with Al-Jazeera, the source claimed that Cairo did not keep its promise to rehabilitate the Gaza Strip after the May war with Israel and ease the blockade on the Palestinian enclave, and continues to put hurdles for Gazans who wish to leave the territory through the Rafah border crossing.

"The Egyptian behavior violates its promises to oblige Israel to fulfill all its obligations in exchange for the opposition being bound to calm down," the source said. "We express great dissatisfaction with the conduct of the Egyptian mediators and their withdrawal from their promises to the Gaza Strip. We will not allow the current situation to continue, and we will prove the credibility of our words.

"We are examining the possibilities for escalation with Israel against the background of the continuation of the blockade and the delay in the reconstruction of the Gaza Strip. The Israeli attacks on al-Aqsa Mosque and on [Palestinian] prisoners will lead to a renewed explosion of the situation."

Shortly after, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) also issued its own threat, warning of delays in lifting the siege on the Strip, in what appears to be a planned media campaign.

"The resistance will not allow the blockade on the Palestinians to continue," said Ahmed al-Mudalal, a senior PIJ official in the Gaza Strip, calling to open all border crossings. Al-Mudalal called on the Egyptian mediators to apply pressure on Israel to follow through with the terms of the ceasefire agreed upon in May.

The Lebanese al-Mayadin network quoted sources as saying that Hamas and other Gaza Strip factions had issued an ultimatum to meet their demands by the end of 2021.

According to the sources, Gaza militants are set to begin to gradually put pressure on Israel starting next week. They stated that also Egypt did not respond to a Hamas situation assessment the group's leadership recently submitted to it.

The sources reiterated the claim that Egypt failed to follow through on its promises about the reconstruction of the Gaza Strip and easing the blockade on the enclave.

The threats come after long weeks of calm in the Gaza Strip, which stem from the progress in Egyptian-mediated negotiations between Israel and Gaza factions and the import of goods into the Gaza Strip through the Kerem Shalom border crossing.

In addition, Israel has significantly increased the number of work permits it issues to Palestinian traders, which are used in effect for Palestinians to work in Israeli agriculture and construction, to ten thousand permits — a record number since Hamas took over the Gaza Strip in 2007.

The threats come ahead of Foreign Minister Yair Lapid's visit to Egypt this week for discussions with several top Egyptian officials regarding the Palestinians and the Gaza Strip and are expected to focus particularly on the issue of prisoners and missing persons. The Egyptian parties did not confirm whether Lapid will meet with President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi during his visit.

Egypt has historically played an important role in negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians and helped mediate an agreement on the release of Gilad Shalit, an Israeli soldier who was held captive by Hamas in Gaza for five years until his release in 2011.