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Netanyahu, Gantz to push for unity government & prevent third election

Netanyahu, Gantz to meet again Wednesday to push for unity government

After two-hour-long meeting between president, PM hopefuls, further discussions announced; Rivlin believes meeting was a significant step; 'a shared and equal government is possible'

Moran Azoulay and Itamar Eichner|Published: 09.23.19 , 23:22

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Blue and White Leader Benny Gantz will hold an additional round of discussions in an effort to establish a unity government, said a statement published Monday evening.

"The two discussed ways to promote Israeli unity," said the statement. "The President has invited the two for an additional meeting in his residence on Wednesday".

The statement was published after Netanyahu and Gantz finished a two-hour-long meeting, first in the presence of President Reuven Rivlin and **then in four eyes**.

Rivlin said after leaving the meeting that he believes it was a significant step in effort to establish a unity government.

"We have taken a significant step forward tonight, and now the first challenge is to establish a channel of direct communication between the sides," said Rivlin.

In the meeting, the president made it clear that at the end of his consultations with the parties, no candidate had the support of a majority of Knesset members to form a government, and therefore his discretion was even greater.

President Rivlin stressed his belief that the current situation, where Israel has an interim government, is gravely harming Israeli citizens and Israel's ability to address the challenges the country faces.

The president also urged Netanyahu and Gantz to do anything in their ability to **prevent** an unprecedented **third elections**.

"The people expect you to find a solution and to prevent further elections, even if it comes at a personal and even ideological cost. This is not the time to exclude people," said Rivlin. "A shared and equal government is possible. It can and it must express the different voices in society".

The three met without advisers, after Rivlin earlier Monday wrapped up crucial talks on forming new government as he met with the smaller parties elected in last week's vote.

Netanyahu's right-wing bloc appears to be leading Gantz's center-left bloc 55 to 54 Knesset seats after the Arab-dominated Joint List said it was withdrawing some of its members' recommendations for the Blue and White leader.

Neither party can form a coalition without the eight seats won by firebrand former Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman, who on Sunday declined to endorse either candidate for prime minister.

Lieberman has pushed Gantz and Netanyahu to agree to sit with him in a broad, secular unity government, and both have agreed in theory but disagree over who should head it.

Gantz has also vowed not to sit with Netanyahu so long as he faces a likely indictment over a number of corruption scandals.

Blue and White leader Benny Gantz met with Yisrael Beytenu leader Avigdor Liberman to discuss the coalition crisis in the wake of the September elections

Following the meeting, Avigdor Liberman said the two leaders exchanged views and will meet again should the need arise.

Neither Likud Gantz's Blue and White could muster enough Knesset seats in the September 17 elections to form a clear majority coalition.

Blue and White emerged with a slight advantage by winning 33 out of 120 seats, with Likud gaining 31 seats.

09.23.19

Israel's president wraps up talks on forming new government

People are largely united over the desire that there won't be third elections

Israel's president wraps up talks on forming new government

United Torah Judaism slams former finance minister and Blue and White leader Yair Lapid for 'critically wounding' the Haredi sector, Shaked's Yamina urge right-wing unity, while the dovish Democratic Union and the Labor-Gesher alliance back Benny Gantz

Associated Press, Ynet|Published: 09.23.19 , 11:08

Advertisement

Israel's president held his second and final day of crucial talks to find a new prime minister and way out of political deadlock, as he met with the smaller parties elected in last week's vote. Reuven Rivlin was to hear from the remaining party leaders on Monday their recommendations for his choice to head a government.

Neither Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud nor Benny Gantz's Blue and White could muster to win enough Knesset seats in the September 17 elections to form a clear majority coalition.

Blue and White emerged with a slight advantage by winning 33 out of 120 seats, with Likud gaining 31 seats.

"There is one thing that the people are largely united over and that is the desire that there won't be third elections," Rivlin said.

The talks were to kick off with a meeting with the ultra-Orthodox United Torah Judaism party, followed by Ayelet Shaked's Yamina (an alliance of right-wing to far-right parties which dissolved an hour after the elections), the Labor-Gesher electoral alliance and the

Democratic Union (an amalgamation of the left-wing Meretz, former Prime Minister Ehud Barak's newly established party and a former Labor lawmaker Stav Shaffir).

Deputy Minister of Health Yaakov Litzman from the United Torah Judaism was the first to speak, telling Rivlin his faction is backing Netanyahu "as promised."

"It's not a secret the former finance minister (Blue and White leader Yair Lapid) has critically wounded the ultra-Orthodox sector, which took us four years to fix," said Litzman.

The Yamina faction, headed by Shaked who spoke on behalf of the party, also backed Netanyahu, saying the party will do "all that's possible" to ensure the prime minister will be the one to form a new government.

"It needs to be explained to the leaders of the other parties that boycotts, whether personal and ideological, need to stop," she said, referring to the infighting within the right-wing bloc. "We wanted to form a right-wing government, but the voters decided otherwise."

When asked by the president whether the faction would be willing to negotiate with Blue and White, the former justice minister said her party is "committed to Netanyahu."

The dovish Labor-Gesher and the Democratic Union, on the other hand both sided with the Blue and White leader, pledging not to negotiate with Netanyahu's right-wing Likud.

"We really think it's time to change Israeli government," said Labor Chairman Amir Peretz. "We've pledged not to negotiate with Benjamin Netanyahu and not to join any government headed by him."

Gesher leader Orly Levy-Abekasis added their faction's recommendation "is not about replacing a person," but rather "replacing an agenda."

Meretz chairman and the Democratic Camp leader, Nitzan Horowitz, told the president they decided to form the faction "after concluding that Netanyahu's rule endangers Israeli democracy."

"He (Netanyahu) campaigns against anyone who stands in his way. Those who criticize him are considered enemies," Horowitz said. "There's no doubt that Netanyahu is not worthy of being in office and it's dangerous to give him that role."

09.22.19

Israel 40th anniversary test of two-stage thermonuclear design Sept 22nd 1979

Carter administration covered up clandestine Israeli nuclear test

It was the first report of an alleged Israeli nuclear test; no smoking gun connecting Israel to the 1979 event nor confirmation by official sources given; Carter: 'There was indication of nuclear explosion—either South Africa, Israel or nothing'

Ynet|Published: 09.22.19 , 15:35

A new report claims that the U.S. government was aware of an Israeli nuclear test conducted 40 years ago today.

On the 40th anniversary of this event, Foreign Policy Magazine has rounded up a team of scientists, academics, former government officials and nonproliferation experts to analyze data and documents that have declassified since then.

Shortly before the dawn of September 22nd, an American satellite called Vela6911 documented a double flash while orbiting over the southern Atlantic Ocean.

It was clear to the crew at the Patrick Air Force Base in Florida that this was a nuclear explosion, an occurrence that American satellites have already documented dozens of times before.

The U.S. Air Force issued an alert and President Carter rushed to call a meeting in the White House Situation Room the very next day.

The initial suspicion fell on South Africa's Apartheid regime, which was known to be working on a bomb, and even more so on Israel, which had close military ties with the South Africans.

It was the first report of an alleged Israeli nuclear test, though foreign publications had already reported that Israel possessed a nuclear arsenal.

Carter wrote in his journal on September 22: "There was indication of a nuclear explosion in the region of South Africa—either South Africa, Israel using a ship at sea, or nothing".

An expert panel, appointed by the president's science advisor, Frank Press, issued its final report in May 1980, after just three meetings. It concluded that "the September 22 signal was probably not from a nuclear explosion".

Its members dismissed all evidence that suggested otherwise. This included the Naval Research Laboratory's analysis that had located the blast's ground zero near the Prince Edward Islands, about 1,000 miles from South Africa's southern coast, using hydroacoustic (underwater sound) data, and claims regarding possible detection of radioactive iodine-131 in thyroids of Australian sheep.

Foreign Policy didn't point to a single smoking gun connecting Israel to the event and **no official source has ever publicly confirmed that Israel has carried out a nuclear test.**

However, the researchers estimated, according to the available data, that the Vela event was a detection of a hydrogen bomb test.

Israeli nuclear program

During the 1973 Yom Kippur War, Israeli leaders and their nuclear advisors recognized that the country's small nuclear arsenal was irrelevant to Israel's military situation.

That is why the **Israel Atomic Energy Commission** was carrying out a broad research and development program, with a focus on **completing the mastery of two-stage thermonuclear weapons design.**

It was in this period that Shimon Peres, the man who is credited with the birth of the Israeli nuclear program in the late 1950s, took the role of defense minister and supported that push.

A commitment to a two-stage design necessarily entails a need to test.

A high-level firing

Shalhevet Freier, the director-general of the Israel Atomic Energy Commission, was fired in 1976, and his replacement by Brig. Gen. Uzi Eilam was allegedly directly related to the preparations for the 1979 event—the implication being that the swap was due to Freier's opposition to the test.

Freier himself used to talk rather openly about his firing, stressing that it was not about “personal or moral conduct” and hinting that it was about a major policy issue about which he disagreed with his superiors, in particular Peres.

Freier even suggested that his direct boss, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, agreed with him on this classified policy issue, but for unrelated political reasons Rabin decided to defer to Peres and agreed to let Freier be fired.

A press leak from Israel

A **CBS Evening News story about the Vela event on Feb. 21, 1980**, was based on exclusive reporting from a young Tel Aviv-based American correspondent, Dan Raviv.

The report claimed that CBS had learned that the Vela event was indeed an Israeli nuclear test. Raviv filed his report from Rome in an effort to evade Israeli military censorship. As a result, Raviv lost his press credentials after a direct order from then-Defense Minister Ezer Weizman.

Decades later, Raviv said that he had an additional high-level and reliable Israeli political source who confirmed the Vela story. The late Eliyahu Speiser, a well-connected Israeli politician and member of the Knesset for the Labor Party between 1977 and 1988. Speiser was in those days close to Peres.

The MIT connection

Other documents disclose that Jack Ruina, the chairman of Carter's controversial panel and a professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, received anecdotal information from a "personal contact" at MIT relating to the "theory of Israeli involvement" in the Sept. 22 event.

The documents do not elaborate on what exactly that information was, but it is noted that Ruina considered it "significant but inappropriate for discussion on telephone".

According to Seymour Hersh's *The Samson Option* (published in 1991), Ruina's source was an unnamed Israeli missile expert, who in 1980 to 1981 was a visiting fellow at MIT in a program that Ruina directed.

That missile engineer was Yaron Anselm, as MIT records from that period indicate. Anselm was one of the founders of Israel's weapons development authority, known as Rafael.

09.22.19

Joint List backs Gantz as Blue and White puts pressure on Netanyahu
Arabs joined Gantz to topple Netanyahu ultra-Orthodox & far-right

Joint List backs Gantz as Blue and White puts pressure on Netanyahu
Rivlin kicked-off consultations with the parties that captured seats in 120-member Knesset last week, with the Arab-dominated Joint List - the third largest faction behind Netanyahu's Likud and Gantz's Blue and White – endorsing Gantz for prime minister
Ynet reporters|Published: 09.22.19, 19:27

The Joint List of Arab parties on Sunday said it backed Benny Gantz as the one to form the next government, while the former military leader's party said it was willing to let Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu attempt to put together a coalition first.

Neither Gantz's center-left bloc nor Netanyahu's right-wing bloc was able to muster the support of the 61 lawmakers they need to build a government in the 120-strong Knesset.

President Reuven Rivlin on Sunday began consultations with the party leaders in an effort to nominate a prime minister who will be tasked with forming government after no clear winner emerged following last week's elections.

In a rare occurrence in Israeli politics the Joint List of Arab parties decided they would recommend Blue and White leader Benny Gantz be tasked with forming a new government.

“Benny Gantz is not our cup of tea. We have criticism of him from here till tomorrow,” said lawmaker Ahmad Tibi. “But we promised our constituents that we would do everything to topple Netanyahu and the default here is recommending Benny Gantz.”

By supporting the candidacy of the former military chief of staff, the joint list has put the Blue and White Party on top with support from 57 of the 120 Knesset seats.

Avigdor Liberman leader of the Yisrael Beiteinu Party announced his faction will not recommend either Benjamin Netanyahu or Benny Gantz for the position of prime minister.

Liberman told his party members he is staying true to his promise to voters and will not support a Netanyahu led coalition with the ultra-Orthodox parties and the far-right, nor can he support Blue and White as they will be backed among others by the Joint List of Arab parties - whom he describes as enemies.

The president is expected to announce his choice once he has met with all the parties that captured seats in the 120-member Knesset. Under Israeli law, after consultations with the parties the president taps a legislator whom he believes has the best chance of forming a government, delegating 28 days, with a two-week extension if necessary, to complete the task.

Rivlin told the party representatives that it is imperative for Israel to have a stable government to meet the challenges facing the country.

The president also asked both Blue and White and Likud delegates if they agree to return the mandate given their parties back to the president in the event that they fail to establish a viable coalition. Both parties agreed

The Joint List told the president they see Benny Gantz as their candidate.

“It is an interesting position, never before held by someone from the Arab population. It has a lot of influence,” Ayman Odeh, leader of the Joint List, told reporters outside his home in Haifa, a mixed Arab and Jewish city in northern Israel.

A surge in turnout gave the Arab-dominated Joint List 13 of the Knesset's 120 seats, making it the third-largest grouping behind Likud, and Blue and White.

"The assessment which emerges from the talks with Netanyahu and other right-wing parties is that Gantz can't form a government," said one Likud source. "Gantz has no other option because Liberman will not sit in government with Meretz that relies on the opinion of the Arabs."

The process is expected to last at least two days with the meetings being broadcast live for the purpose of transparency.

09.23.19 Monday

Trump at UN 3 days to face world issues as Dems slander his efforts – Israel no show

At General Assembly, Trump to face world issues with Iran at top

Iran may be the most immediate challenge for Trump who will try to convince skeptical global capitals to help build a coalition to confront Tehran after the United States blamed it for last week's strike at a Saudi Arabia oil field

Associated Press|Published: 09.23.19, 12:32

Faced with growing tumult at home and abroad, President Donald Trump heads into his three-day visit to the United Nations this week hoping to lean on strained alliances while fending off questions about whether he sought foreign help to damage a political rival.

Trump's latest U.N. trip comes after nearly three years of an "America First" foreign policy that has unsettled allies and shredded multinational pacts.

A centerpiece of this year's U.N. schedule will be a Monday session on climate change that Trump plans to skip.

Instead, he will address a meeting about the persecution of religious minorities, particularly Christians, an issue that resonates with Trump's evangelical supporters.

The president arrived in New York on Sunday against a backdrop of swirling international tensions, including questions about his relationship with Ukraine, the uncertain future of Brexit, the U.S. trade war with China, stalled nuclear negotiations with North Korea and a weakening global economy.

The most immediate challenge may be Iran.

Trump will try to convince skeptical global capitals to help build a coalition to confront Tehran after the United States blamed it for last week's strike at a Saudi Arabia oil field.

"Well, I always like a coalition," Trump said Friday, before going on to complain that under the old Iran nuclear deal, "everyone else is making money and we're not."

Trump's fulfillment of a campaign promise, to exit the Iran nuclear deal has had wide ripple effects, leading Tehran to bolster its nuclear capabilities and dismaying European capitals who worked to establish the original agreement.

French President Emmanuel Macron, in particular, has been trying to lead Trump back to a deal and has suggested that the U.S. president meet with Iranian leader Hassan Rouhani on the sidelines of the U.N. meetings.

Trump said Sunday that while "nothing is ever off the table completely" he had no intention of meeting with Rouhani.

Tensions between Washington and Tehran spiked after a Saudi Arabia oil field was partially destroyed in an attack that Secretary of State Mike Pompeo blamed on Iran and deemed "an act of war."

Now Trump will try to enlist wary world leaders in a collective effort to contain Iran.

"He needs to win over traditional allies to do what traditional allies do, to band together against common threats," said Jon Alterman of the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

"The attacks last weekend in Saudi Arabia are precisely the kind of thing that the U.N. was intended to address, to create rules for international behavior and opportunities for collective action."

Ukraine also looms large on Trump's schedule. Even one week ago, a one-on-one meeting with Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskiy would have been seen largely as an afterthought.

But Trump's meeting on Wednesday with Zelenskiy will come just days after revelations that the president urged his Ukrainian counterpart in a July phone call to investigate the activities of the son of former Vice President Joe Biden.

Trump said he was concerned about corruption; Democrats frame his actions as an effort to pressure Zelenskiy to dig up damaging material on a potential 2020 rival.

That pressure is the subject of a whistleblower's complaint that the administration has refused to turn over to members of Congress, setting up a showdown with Democrats.

Trump is defending himself against the intelligence official's complaint, asserting that it comes from a "partisan whistleblower," though the president also said he doesn't know the whistleblower's identity.

He insisted Sunday his conversation with Zelenskiy was "absolutely perfect." But Democrats believe it shows that Trump is emboldened to seek foreign help for his reelection effort.

There are plenty of other concerns in the mix during Trump's U.N. visit, including the U.S. trade war with China.

But China's Xi Jinping is not expected to attend, nor are several other prominent world leaders, including Russian President Vladimir Putin and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Among the nations whose leaders Trump plans to meet in New York: Iraq, Poland, Egypt, Pakistan, South Korea and Japan.

He will also meet with British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, clinging to power after failed attempts to steer his nation out of the European Union.

Trump's annual address to the General Assembly is scheduled for Tuesday.

Two years ago, he used the moment to deride North Korea's Kim Jong Un as "Little Rocket Man" and threaten to destroy North Korea.

A year ago, he drew laughter when he used his speech to recite his administration's accomplishments.

His theme this year, according to aides, will be to reassert America's determination to uphold its sovereignty and independence, especially on issues of national security.

But others may push a different path.

"There's an attempt to push back against the unilateralism, against the isolationism, against the populism that has affected not only the United States but other countries as well," said Jeffrey Feltman of the Brookings Institution.

"I don't know how effective this will be, but it's an example of how some of our traditional allies are organizing themselves in response to the feeling that the United States, the U.K., that other sort of major engines in the U.N. system no longer are pressing the accelerator."

09.22.19

Iran asks West to leave Persian Gulf as they bolster to control the region

Iran asks West to leave Persian Gulf as tensions heightened

Rouhani speaking at a military parade said Iran was willing to "extend the hand of friendship and brotherhood" to Persian Gulf nations and was "even ready to forgive their past mistakes"

Associated Press|Published: 09.22.19, 22:46

Iran's president called Sunday on Western powers to leave the security of the Persian Gulf to regional nations led by Tehran, criticizing a new U.S.-led coalition patrolling the region's waterways as nationwide parades showcased the Islamic Republic's military arsenal.

Hassan Rouhani separately promised to unveil a regional peace plan at this week's upcoming high-level meetings at the United Nations, which comes amid heightened Mideast tensions following a series of attacks, including a missile-and-drone assault on Saudi Arabia's oil industry.

The U.S. alleges Iran carried out the Sept. 14 attack on the world's largest oil processor in the kingdom and an oil field, which caused oil prices to spike by the biggest percentage since the 1991 Gulf War. While Yemen's Iranian-allied Houthi rebels claimed the assault, Saudi Arabia says it was "unquestionably sponsored by Iran."

For its part, Iran denies being responsible and has warned any retaliatory attack targeting it will result in an "all-out war." That's as it has begun enriching uranium beyond the terms of its 2015 nuclear deal with world powers, which the U.S. unilaterally withdrew from over a year earlier.

Rouhani spoke from a riser at the parade in Tehran, with uniformed officers from the country's military and its paramilitary Revolutionary Guard beside him.

The cleric later watched as marching soldiers carrying submachine guns and portable missile launchers drove past as part of "Holy Defense Week," which marks the start of the Iran-Iraq war in 1980.

Rouhani said Iran was willing to "extend the hand of friendship and brotherhood" to Persian Gulf nations and was "even ready to forgive their past mistakes."

"Those who want to link the region's incidents to the Islamic Republic of Iran are lying like their past lies that have been revealed," the president said. "If they are truthful and really seek security in the region, they must not send weapons, fighter jets, bombs and dangerous arms to the region."

Rouhani added that the U.S. and Western nations should "distance" themselves from the region.

"Your presence has always been a calamity for this region and the farther you go from our region and our nations, the more security would come for our region," he said.

He said Iran's plan would focus on providing security in the Persian Gulf, the Strait of Hormuz and the Gulf of Oman "with help from regional countries." Iran has boosted its naval cooperation with China, India, Oman, Pakistan, and Russia in recent years.

The U.S. maintains defense agreements across the Persian Gulf with allied Arab nations and has tens of thousands of troops stationed in the region.

Since 1980, it has viewed the region as crucial to its national security, given its energy exports. A fifth of all oil traded passes through the Strait of Hormuz, the narrow mouth of the Persian Gulf. The U.S. plans to send additional troops to the region over the tensions.

The parades and maneuvers Sunday appeared aimed at projecting Iranian strength with naval vessels, submarines and armed speedboats swarmed across the Persian Gulf and troops showed off land-to-sea missiles capable of targeting the U.S. Navy.

Commandos fast-roped down onto the deck of a ship, resembling Iran's July seizure of a British-flagged oil tanker.

Iranian ship seizures, as well as oil tanker explosions that the U.S. blames on Iran, saw America create a new coalition to protect Mideast waters. So far, Australia, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, the United Kingdom and the United Arab Emirates have agreed to join it.

Iranian parliament speaker Ali Larijani called the U.S.-led coalition a "a new means for plundering the region," according to Iran's semi-official Tasnim news agency.

"We regard the emergence of such coalitions as the start of a new game to make the region insecure," Larijani said, according to Tasnim.

Iran separately displayed its Khordad-3 surface-to-air missile that downed a U.S. military surveillance drone in the Strait of Hormuz in June.

Sunday also marked the one-year anniversary of an attack on a military parade in Ahvaz that killed 25 people.

Both separatists and the Islamic State group claimed responsibility for the assault, while Iran blamed Saudi Arabia and the UAE for allegedly supporting the attackers.

Both nations denied the claim, though a propaganda video published by a semi-official news agency in Iran close to the Guard later circulated threatening them with missile attacks.

09.16.19

Saudi attack from northwest, 19 impacts & recovered devices that missed their targets

Tehran rules out Trump talks as U.S. accuses Iran in Saudi oil strike

Drone attack on kingdom's oil infrastructure increasing already heightened fears of escalation in region, after president says U.S. is 'locked and loaded' to respond and prominent senator suggests striking Iranian oil refineries
Associated Press | Published: 09.16.19 , 18:12

Iran's President Hassan Rouhani will not meet with U.S. President Donald Trump at the United Nations General Assembly this month, Tehran said Monday, a day after the White House left open the possibility of talks but also pointed the finger at the Islamic Republic for a devastating attack on Saudi Arabia's oil industry.

"Neither is such an event on our agenda, nor will it happen. Such a meeting will not take place," Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Abbas Mousavi said in remarks carried by state-run TV.

Tensions are flaring in the Persian Gulf after Trump said Sunday that the U.S. is "locked and loaded" to respond to the weekend drone assault on Saudi Arabia's energy infrastructure that American officials blamed on Iran.

The attack, which halved the kingdom's oil production and sent crude prices spiking, led Trump to authorize the release of U.S. strategic reserves should they be necessary to stabilize markets.

Trump said the U.S. had reason to believe it knew who was behind the attack his secretary of state had blamed on Iran the previous day and said his government was waiting to consult with the Saudis as to who they believe was behind the attack and "under what terms we would proceed!"

Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump
Saudi Arabia oil supply was attacked. There is reason to believe that we know the culprit, are locked and loaded depending on verification, but are waiting to hear from the Kingdom as to who they believe was the cause of this attack, and under what terms we would proceed!

The tweets followed a National Security Council meeting at the White House and hours after U.S. officials offered what they said was proof that the attack was inconsistent with claims of responsibility by Yemen's Iran-backed Houthi rebels and instead pointed the finger directly at Tehran.

A U.S. official said all options, including a military response, were on the table, but added that no decisions had been made. The official spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss the internal deliberations.

Iran called the U.S. claims, "maximum lies" and threatened American forces in the region.

The U.S. government produced satellite photos showing what officials said were at least 19 points of impact at two Saudi energy facilities, including damage at the heart of the kingdom's crucial oil processing plant at Abqaiq.

Iraq denied that its territory was used for an attack on the kingdom. U.S. officials said a strike from there would be a violation of Iraq's sovereignty.

The U.S. officials said additional devices, which apparently didn't reach their targets, were recovered northwest of the facilities and are being jointly analyzed by Saudi and American intelligence.

The officials, who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss intelligence matters, did not address whether the drone could have been fired from Yemen, then taken a round-about path, but did not explicitly rule it out.

The attacks and recriminations are increasing already heightened fears of an escalation in the region, after a prominent U.S. senator suggested striking Iranian oil refineries in response to the assault, and Iran warned of the potential of more violence.

"Because of the tension and sensitive situation, our region is like a powder keg," said Iranian Brig. Gen. Amir Ali Hajizadeh. "When these contacts come too close, when forces come into contact with one another, it is possible a conflict happens because of a misunderstanding."

Actions on any side could break into the open a twilight war that's been raging just below the surface of the wider Persian Gulf in recent months. Already, there have been mysterious attacks on oil tankers that America blames on Tehran, at least one suspected Israeli strike on Shiite forces in Iraq, and Iran shooting down a U.S. military surveillance drone.

The attack Saturday on Saudi Arabia's Abqaiq plant and its Khurais oil field led to the interruption of an estimated 5.7 million barrels of the kingdom's crude oil production per day, equivalent to more than 5% of the world's daily supply.

It remains unclear how King Salman and his assertive son, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, will respond to an attack targeting the heart of the Saudi oil industry.

Crude oil futures shot up 9.5% to \$60 as trading opened Sunday evening in New York, a dramatic increase.

Saudi Arabia has promised to fill in the cut in production with its reserves but has not said how long it will take to repair the damage. The Wall Street Journal cited Saudi officials as saying a third of output would be restored on Monday, but a return to full production may take weeks.

In Washington, Trump said he had approved the release of U.S. strategic petroleum reserves "if needed" to stabilize energy markets. The president said the final amount of the release, if any, would be "sufficient to keep the markets well-supplied."

He later credited himself for expanding U.S. energy exports in a Monday morning tweet, writing: "We don't need Middle Eastern Oil & Gas, & in fact have very few tankers there, but will help our Allies!"

Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Abbas Mousavi dismissed the U.S. allegation of responsibility as "blind and futile comments."

"The Americans adopted the 'maximum pressure' policy against Iran, which, due to its failure, is leaning toward 'maximum lies,'" Mousavi said in a statement.

Houthi leader Muhammad al-Bukhaiti reiterated his group's claim of responsibility, telling The Associated Press it exploited "vulnerabilities" in Saudi air defenses to strike the targets. He did not elaborate.

Iran, meanwhile, kept up its own threats. Hajizadeh, the brigadier general who leads the Iranian aerospace program, said in an interview published across the country's media Sunday that Revolutionary Guard forces were ready for a counterattack if America responded.

He named the Al-Udeid Air Base in Qatar and Al-Dhafra Air Base near Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates as immediate targets, as well as U.S. Navy ships in the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea.

"Wherever they are, it only takes one spark and we hit their vessels, their air bases, their troops," he said in a video published online with English subtitles.

Trump insisted that unspecified conditions must be met before he would sit down with the Iranian leader, apparently rejecting the comments of two top advisers.

"The Fake News is saying that I am willing to meet with Iran, 'No Conditions.' That is an incorrect statement (as usual!)."

In fact, U.S. Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin said last week that, "the president has said that he is prepared to meet with no conditions."

And Pompeo had told reporters days earlier that, "the president has made clear he is happy to take a meeting with no preconditions."

Iran has said it was unwilling to meet with Trump while crushing sanctions the American leader imposed on Tehran after unilaterally withdrawing from the 2015 nuclear accord over a year ago remain in place.

09.15.19

Iran declared: US bases & aircraft carriers within range of our missiles

Iran: U.S. bases, aircraft carriers within range of our missiles

Threat by senior Revolutionary Guard commander comes after Pompeo says Tehran behind attacks on two plants at the heart of Saudi Arabia's oil industry and rejects Houthi claim of responsibility

Reuters|Published: 09.15.19, 11:49

An Iranian Revolutionary Guards commander said on Sunday that U.S. bases and aircraft carriers in the region were within range of Iranian missiles after the U.S. accused Iran of leading attacks on Saudi oil plants, raising tensions in the Middle East.

Yemen's Iran-aligned Houthi group said it attacked two Saudi Aramco oil plants on Saturday at the heart of Saudi Arabia's oil industry, knocking out more than half the Kingdom's output.

U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo accused Iran of being behind the attacks, ruling out Yemeni involvement and denouncing Tehran for engaging in false diplomacy.

Pompeo, said on Twitter on Saturday that there was no evidence the attacks came from Yemen.

"Everybody should know that all American bases and their aircraft carriers in a distance of up to 2,000 kilometers (1250 miles) around Iran are within the range of our missiles," the head of Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps Aerospace Force Amirali Hajizadeh said on Sunday.

The semi-official Tasnim news agency also quoted him saying that "Iran has always been ready for a 'full-fledged' war," without mentioning Saturday's attacks in Saudi Arabia.

One of the plants attacked is the world's biggest petroleum processing facility.

U.S. President Donald Trump told Saudi de facto ruler Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman that Washington was ready to work with the kingdom to guarantee its security, according to the White House.

Yemen's Iran-aligned Houthi group claimed credit for the attacks on two plants at the heart of Saudi Arabia's oil industry, including the world's biggest petroleum processing facility.

Pompeo, however, said on Twitter that there was no evidence the attacks came from Yemen.

"Tehran is behind nearly 100 attacks on Saudi Arabia while Rouhani and Zarif pretend to engage in diplomacy," Pompeo said, referring to Iran's President Hassan Rouhani and Foreign Minister Mohammed Javad Zarif.

"Amid all the calls for de-escalation, Iran has now launched an unprecedented attack on the world's energy supply," he added. The State Department declined to provide any evidence to bolster Pompeo's claim.

"We call on all nations to publicly and unequivocally condemn Iran's attacks," Pompeo said, warning that the Trump administration would work with its allies to make sure Iran was "held accountable for its aggression."

Secretary Pompeo @ SecPompeo

Tehran is behind nearly 100 attacks on Saudi Arabia while Rouhani and Zarif pretend to engage in diplomacy. Amid all the calls for de-escalation, Iran has now launched an unprecedented attack on the world's energy supply. There is no evidence the attacks came from Yemen.

The tweets signaled a more hawkish stance in Washington towards Tehran, following signs of a possible thaw in relations between the two nations after months of escalation.

Trump last year withdrew the United States from a 2015 pact that aimed to keep a lid on Tehran's nuclear ambitions and he has imposed a series of sanctions that have crippled Iran's economy.

But in recent weeks, Trump has said he would be open to meeting with Rouhani, perhaps on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly in New York later this month. Pompeo has said such talks could take place without any preconditions.

Rouhani, for his part, has said that Tehran, which denies seeking nuclear weapons, would not talk to the United States until Washington lifts the sanctions.

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Trump on meeting Rouhani of Iran: 'We'll see what happens'

Trump on meeting Rouhani: 'We'll see what happens'

US president arrives in New York for General Debate at the UN. Meeting with Iranian leader unlikely due to increased tension in region and the conditions set by Tehran.

by Reuters , Israel Hayom Staff Published on 2019-09-23 19:24 Last modified: 2019-09-23 19:29

Trump, world leaders invited to Jerusalem to mark 75 years since Auschwitz liberation
President Donald Trump walks across the South Lawn as he arrives at the White House in Washington | Photo: AP/Andrew Harnik

Arriving at the United Nations General Assembly on Monday, US President Donald Trump did not rule out a meeting with Iranian President Hassan Rouhani.

"We'll see what happens," Trump told reporters in New York, a day before the General Debate of the 74th Session of the UN General Assembly was set to begin.

Last week Trump said that he would prefer not to meet Rouhani at the UN, despite his previous statements saying he was open to meeting the Iranian leader without preconditions.

Trump also imposed heavy sanctions on the Islamic republic over the weekend after an attack launched from Iranian soil hit Saudi oil installations and disrupted exports from Riyadh and caused temporary jitters in the global energy market.

France and Britain were at odds on Monday over who to blame for an attack on Saudi Arabia's oil facilities, potentially complicating efforts to defuse tensions between the United States and Iran at the UN General Assembly.

France has led a European push to try to defuse tensions between Washington and Tehran and sees the annual gathering of global leaders as an opportunity to revive diplomacy.

But those efforts have stalled, with Iran reducing its commitments to a 2015 nuclear deal with world powers, from which Washington withdrew last year, and the United States refusing to ease sanctions that have strangled its oil exports, a mainstay of the Iranian economy.

Hopes at the end of August that Trump and Iranian Rouhani could meet at the United Nations now seem slim.

"We haven't received any requests this time, yet, for a meeting and we have made it clear a request alone will not do the job," Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif told reporters in New York. "A negotiation has to be for a reason, for an outcome, not just for a handshake."

He said there were prerequisites for a meeting and then there could be a meeting between Iran, the United States, France, Britain, Germany, Russia and China.