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UN rejects plot of 4-Iran leaders identified in Sept 14 attack of Saudi Oil facility

That day in May, four months before, four named,

Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Revolutionary Guards Major General Hossein Salami, advisor, Yahya Rahim-Safavi, and a deputy of Qasem Soleimani

11.25.19 – Mo -

Israeli video on Hebrew, Arabic similarities is a hit in Gulf

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Likud bill to promote direct two-party choice election within the next 6 weeks

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Belgian Europol shut malicious websites to counter Islamic State propaganda operations

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Jordan opposed relationship with Israel will not renew 25-year land lease agreement

11.27.19 – We -

Israel ceases returning dead terrorist, with violent funerals; as Gaza holds slain IDF

11.27.19

Bennett instructs security authorities to cease releasing bodies of terrorists

Defense minister issues **new directive halting release of bodies** of Palestinian **terrorists** for burial; decision to be brought for Security Cabinet's approval

Yoav Zitun| Updated: **11.27.19**, 13:22

Defense Minister Naftali Bennett **instructed security authorities on Wednesday** to halt any future release of bodies of terrorists held by Israel, **regardless of** which terrorist **organization** the person was affiliated with.

The decision was made after a round of consultations with senior security officials. According to Bennett's new directive, exceptional cases, such as the return of the bodies of minor terrorists, will only be approved at the defense minister's discretion.

The new policy **requires the approval of the Security Cabinet** and will be presented before it soon.

"The **request for a change in policy was made** by the family of [slain IDF soldier held in **Gaza** by Hamas] Hadar Goldin during their meeting with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu last week," said a senior security official. "Netanyahu expressed willingness to **change the policy** and instructed security authorities to look into the issue."

So far, **Israel only** kept holding the **bodies of Hamas militants** or other individuals affiliated with the terror group. Israel also continues to hold the bodies of terrorists who carried out serious attacks on Israeli civilians and troops.

**The rest of the bodies are returned** gradually to Palestinian hands, usually on **Friday evenings**, when public attention in Israel is not directed to it.

In the past, **Israel returned the bodies of terrorists to prevent escalations in violence**, but **terrorist funerals have become a breeding ground for violence and incitement** against Israel as mourners regularly call for vengeance on Israel.

Goldin's family lauded on Wednesday Bennett's decision to change the policy.

"We back the defense minister's decision," said the family. "It is inconceivable to continue releasing dead or living terrorists while the soldiers are held in Hamas's hands."

The release of terrorists is a prize that we cannot give Hamas while they're still holding soldiers and civilians."

"Prime Minister Netanyahu has committed to condition any agreement on the matter on the boys' return home and we expect the cessation of any economic or civilian projects in the Gaza Strip as long as the boys are still held in Gaza."

The **bodies of IDF soldiers** Goldin and Oron Shaul have **been held in the Gaza** Strip by Hamas **since 2014**.

**11.27.19 – We -**

**Defense Minister Naftali Bennett hardens policy to respond to any rockets fired**

11.27.19

### Bennett threatens to harden retaliation policy towards Hamas

Bennett warns Hamas after overnight rocket salvo on southern Israel leads to IDF retaliatory airstrikes; terror faction says Israel doesn't get to dictate new conflict rules  
Matan Tzuri, Yoav Zitun | Updated: 11.27.19, 10:54

Defense Minister Naftali Bennett warned the Gaza terror factions Wednesday morning that Israel will respond to any rockets fired at Israeli territory, whether they hit population centers or not.

"We deem a rocket that does not cause damage to be the same as a rocket that does," Naftali Bennett wrote in a tweet. "Whoever shoots – gets hit."

Hamas responded on Wednesday to the airstrikes, calling the Israeli military 'delusional' for trying to allegedly impose new conflict rules on the organization.

"The Israeli enemy is delusional if it thinks it could impose new conflict rules on Hamas," said the terror group. "Hamas and its military wing have the capabilities to prove the Israeli leadership's ignorance."

IDF warplanes attacked Hamas military targets in the Gaza Strip late Tuesday night after two rockets were launched at Israel from the coastal enclave controlled by the terror group.

One of the rockets was intercepted by the Iron Dome and the other landed in an open area.

The IDF Spokesperson's Unit said that some of the targets in the two waves of airstrikes included Hamas underground military facilities.

"We deem a rocket that does not cause damage to be the same as a rocket that does," Defense Minister Naftali Bennett said Wednesday morning.

Rocket alert sirens sounded in the southern city of Sderot and the Sha'ar HaNegev Regional Council at around 8:50 pm, followed shortly by two loud explosions.

### Iron Dome intercepts rockets over Sderot

The army later issued an official statement confirming the launch, which comes just two weeks after the latest cross border flare-up between Israel and the Palestinian factions in the Strip.

One woman appears to have been hurt while making her way to a bomb shelter and needed medical treatment. No other casualties or damage was reported.

On Monday the military also said a rocket launch from Gaza was detected but the projectile landed in an open area outside the Eshkol Regional Council close to the Gaza border. Rocket alert sirens did not sound prior to that.

For the past two weeks, a tenuous cease fire has been observed after yet another round of violence on the volatile border.

The latest round of fighting was triggered when Israel killed a top commander from the Iranian-backed Islamic Jihad, deeming him an imminent threat.

The IDF said the operation, dubbed "Black Belt," was a successful mission, involving personnel from across the branches of the military working together with "initiative, subterfuge and surgical precision."

11.26.19 – Tu -

Israel charges incitement to leader of Jewish group seeking to remove violent Palestinians.

11.26.19

Israel charges leader of extreme Jewish group with incitement

The indictment is a result of an 8-year battle against the leader of an anti-assimilation group, Bentzi Gopstein, known for making inflammatory remarks about Palestinians; 'Stay in your village if you want to be safe,' he urged Arabs in one interview  
Yael Freidson| Updated: 11.26.19 , 19:44

Israeli prosecutors have charged the leader of a Jewish extremist group with incitement to violence and terrorism for inflammatory remarks about Palestinians.

The indictment against Bentzi Gopstein - the leader of the Lehava organization which strictly opposes Jewish assimilation - was filed Tuesday in the Jerusalem Magistrates Court.

According to the Justice Ministry, Gopstein in the past made public calls for committing acts of violence, published racially inciting material and voiced support for Baruch Goldstein, a Jewish extremist who massacred 29 Muslim worshippers at Hebron's Ibrahimi Mosque in 1994.

The 50-year-old is also a member of the radical Otzma Yehudit party (Jewish Power), which was barred earlier this year from running in parliamentary elections over his anti-Arab racism.

Otzma Yehudit is comprised of hard-line religious nationalists who have cast themselves as successors to the outlawed Kahanist movement, which advocated the forced removal of Palestinians.

The decision to indict Gopstein came following an eight-year legal battle with the Israel Religious Action Center (IRAC).

Gopstein remained defiant in the face of the indictment, claiming the Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit and the State Prosecutor Shai Nitzan, are part of "the Jewish reform movement's grip over the judicial system."

"They've decided that the war against anti-miscegenation is a racist issue," said Gopstein. "This is a dark day for the judicial system, where its officials go against the word of the Bible. There is no doubt in my mind that were the Maccabees alive today, they would've been thrown in jail for racism."

Benzi Gopstein during a memorial service for Meir Kahane, holding in protest a picture of Arab-Israeli media personality Lucy Aharish

Benzi Gopstein during a memorial service for Meir Kahane, holding in protest a picture of Arab-Israeli media personality Lucy Aharish (Photo: Channel 7)

According to the indictment, Gopstein participated in at least five LeHava-led incidents of public incitement to racism and violence between 2012 and 2017.

One of the charges involves a video posted on the right-wing news outlet Channel 7, where Gopstein remarked on an incident in Jerusalem where three Jewish teenagers attacked three Arab youths, resulting in one of the victims being hurt badly and needing medical attention.

In the video, Gopstein is heard describing how "the police and the media are lynching these Jewish boys for no reason."

"Every day Jewish girls are assaulted by Arabs and have no one to turn to, the police don't care," he said. "These boys fought for the disgraced dignity of the Jewish people. If these Arabs want to get girls, they should do it in their villages. Don't come to Jerusalem, don't come to the mall", he said.

In other media appearances, Gopstein was noted for saying racist and violent statements, such as, "I'm not a pacifist ... Some Arabs deserve to be treated violently," and "I don't go to weddings where there are Palestinians."

When asked by an interviewer what would happen if he came across one at a wedding, Gopstein responded, saying, "I'll go look for the nearest hospital."

Rabbi Noa Sattath, the director of the Israel Religious Action Center, said in response: "The attempt by the LeHava leader to present his racist and violent doctrine as Judaism failed. The IRAC will keep tracking the racist agitation by his group and other such extremist leaders."

Itamar Ben-Gvir, leader of the Otzma Yehudit party and an attorney representing Gopstein called the indictment "an attempt to silence and persecute."

"What is not done to radical left and Arab leaders, is done to Gopstein," he said. "This trial is political persecution against a man who fought for the women of Israel and the good of the Jewish people."

11.26.19 – Tu -

Clashes erupt on Palestinians 'Day of Rage' over U.S. reversal on settlements

11.26.19

Clashes erupt on Palestinians 'Day of Rage' over U.S. reversal on settlements

Demonstrations backed by PA turn violent at several West Bank locations, including Abu Dis, Rachel's Tomb, Ramallah, Hebron and Tulkarem; IDF uses non-lethal measures to disperse riots

Elior Levy | Updated: 11.26.19 , 14:28

Palestinians in the West Bank on Tuesday embarked on “a Day of Rage” in protest over the United States decision to soften its position on Israeli settlements in the area.

The demonstrations backed by the Palestinian Authority turned violent in several locations throughout the West Bank.

In the city of Hebron, several rioters threw stones at security forces who were prepared for a violent escalation in the area. Tires were also set alight by youths in the city of Bethlehem.

Five primary points of contention have been reported, with hundreds of Palestinian rioters present in each location: the village of Abu Dis; Rachel's Tomb near Bethlehem; Judea and Samaria junction near the city of Ramallah; in the city of Hebron and the city of Tulkarem.

Security forces were prepared for an escalation into violence, using non-lethal crowd dispersal countermeasures.

The Israeli authorities were bracing for the protests to escalate following the death of a Palestinian security prisoner of cancer earlier in the day.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo last week repudiated a 1978 State Department legal opinion that held that civilian settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories are “inconsistent with international law.”

The move angered Palestinians and immediately put the U.S. at odds with other nations working to end the conflict.

The demonstrations were being held under the leadership of veteran Fatah leader Mahmoud al-Aloul, with the knowledge and consent of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas.

The protests are part of the “popular resistance” doctrine, characterized by riots which include throwing stones and burning tires.

"It is believed that it will be a very violent day in the West Bank," a senior PA source told Ynet on Monday. "If these protests result in fatalities on the Palestinian side, it could lead to a security escalation."

The biggest demonstrations were expected to take place at Huwara military checkpoint at one of the four main exits of Nablus, several locations in Hebron and the Focus checkpoint at the entrance to Ramallah.

In addition, some labor unions in the West Bank said they intend to end the workday in the afternoon hours in order to encourage people to participate in the demonstrations.

The Trump administration's move was heavily criticized by many European countries, prompting the U.N. human rights office to issue statement rejecting the U.S. position that it now backed them.

"We continue to follow the long-standing position of the UN that Israeli settlements are in breach of international law," UN human rights spokesman Rupert Colville said.

"A change in the policy position of one state does not modify existing international law nor its interpretation by the International Court of Justice and the Security Council," he said.

On Monday, Arab League foreign ministers have denounced the Trump administration's announcement in an emergency meeting in Cairo where Secretary General Ahmed Aboul Gheit called the decision "unfairly biased and unacceptable." adding that the U.S. has forfeited its role as a neutral arbiter between Israel and the Palestinians.

11.25.19 – Mo -

Israeli video on Hebrew, Arabic similarities is a hit in Gulf

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Israeli video on Hebrew, Arabic similarities is a hit in Gulf

Clip of two young women discussing shared traits of the two languages gets 3 million views on social media accounts of Foreign Ministry, even being shared by senior UAE officials

Itamar Eichner| Updated: 11.25.19 , 20:11

A video produced by the Foreign Ministry in Jerusalem showing two young Israeli women explaining the similarities between Hebrew and Arabic has proved popular with social media influencers in the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

The video, which has garnered up to 3 million views on social media on various Foreign Ministry pages in Arabic, was shared on the account of Dr. Ali Bin Tamim, a senior official of the UAE.

Bin Tamim is a close confidant of the UAE President, Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan, and was until recently a senior adviser to the Emirate's Department of Culture and Tourism. Bin Tamim has about 187,000 followers on Twitter.

Today he serves as the Chairman of the Board of Directors of Abu Dhabi Arabic Language Authority and as the chief editor of the local "24" news site, giving the video a form of approval for its content.

The video, which was produced by the Arabic Digital Diplomacy Department of the Foreign Ministry, shows Sapir Levi and Tamar Schwarzbard presenting the similar pronunciation between words in Arab and Hebrew such as ear, brain, fly, dog, strawberry and more.

Bin Tamim is not the only UAE official to share content with the department. It was also shared by Hamad al-Mazrouei, whose Twitter account has hundreds of thousands of followers. He is described by the Arabic-language media as a close friend of Abu Dhabi crown prince, Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan.

Israel and UAE don't have official diplomatic relations, but the two nations do conduct economic ties.

Israelis may enter the Emirates with a foreign passport, and an Israeli one after receiving a special entry permit.

The Foreign Ministry's Arabic social media accounts have millions of followers, including many Twitter followers from the UAE.

Israeli athletes attending international competitions in the Emirates have recently started using the state symbol'ss, including the flag and the national anthem.

Israel is expected to participate at the International Expo planned to be held next year in Abu Dhabi.

Yonatan Gonen, head of the Arabic Wing of the Digital Diplomacy Department, said: "In the past year we have seen a steady rise in state and media personalities from all over the Gulf region sharing our posts and material in Arabic, [offering] them new perspectives about the State of Israel, its people, culture and language."

He added: "Having the videos shared by influential persons is no less important than having the videos watched by millions of regular people. Many influencers in the Arab world are afraid to share our content for fear of hostile responses from their audience. Therefore, it is hugely important that everyone does share them, especially influential figures."

First published: 20:11 , 11.2

11.25.19 – Mo -

Likud bill to promote direct two-party choice election within the next 6 weeks

11.25.19

Likud to promote bill for direct prime-ministerial election

MK Shlomo Kari says he received 'a green light' from Netanyahu to finalize the legislation ahead of a possible third election in 12 months; move comes a day after the ruling party announced it is to hold leadership primaries within the next 6 weeks

Moran Azulay|Published: 11.25.19 , 10:04



Israel appears to be edging toward a direct leadership vote in the event the country goes to the polls for an unprecedented third time in 12 months, a senior Likud official said Monday.

MK Shlomo Kari said he'd received a "green light" from Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to promote legislation that would see Israelis choose between the heads of the two most popular political parties in Israel, which currently appears to be the ruling Likud and Benny Gantz's Blue and White party.

President Reuven Rivlin last week handed the mandate to establish a government to the Knesset after both Netanyahu and Gantz failed to form a coalition. The move effectively started a 21-day period where 61 MKs could recommend any member to begin forming a government before the next elections are called.

"The idea is that if we fail to realize the will of the voter, we'll get back to the voter in order to ask which narrow government it prefers," said Kari.

According to Kari's proposal the initial round of elections would be held in the same format as before, with voters choosing between several political parties in the running.

However, if after the initial round, no clear winner capable of forming a coalition has emerged, a second round of elections would take place - directly between the heads of the two most dominant factions.

The winner of the second round would receive an additional 10 percent of the vote, which translates roughly into 12 additional MKs, which would allow for a coalition to be formed and avoid a political crisis.

The legislation, originally drafted by Shas Chairman Aryeh Deri, calls for a change in the Basic Law (the constitutional laws of the State of Israel) with a majority of at least 61 MKs.

The move comes a day after the Likud Central Committee announced the party will hold a leadership contest within the next six weeks.

11.23.19 – Sa -

Jordan opposed relationship with Israel will not renew 25-year land lease agreement

11.23.19

Jordan's King Abdullah: Relationship with Israel 'at its worst state'

Citing the political gridlock in Israel and decision to indict Netanyahu, monarch expresses 'hope that Israel will be able to determine its future, either in the coming weeks or in the coming months'

i24NEWS| Updated: 11.23.19 , 00:32

Jordan's relations with Israel have sunk to their "worst state" in years due to the ongoing political turmoil currently paralyzing Jerusalem, the country's ruler King Abdullah said Friday.

Speaking at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy in New York, Abdullah said that he was not ready to forego the peace that his father King Hussein "and Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin achieved as a symbol of hope and opportunity for Palestinians, Jordanians and Israelis."

Given the criminal charges filed against Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and continuing deadlock immobilizing the country's political system, the king added that, "we hope that Israel will be able to determine its future, either in the coming weeks or in the coming months."

Abdullah also addressed US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's statement last week that Israel's settlements in the West Bank did not violate international law, noting Washington's vital importance in achieving an equitable solution to Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

"Anyone who says that peace can be established between Israel and Palestinians without US involvement, does not know the Middle East. We all need the United States to play an integral role between the parties," he said.

Tensions flared between Israel and Jordan in recent weeks after Amman announced that it would not renew a 25-year land lease agreement reached during peace negotiations in 1994.

Earlier this month, the Jordanian areas of Naharayim and Tzofar - known as Baqura and Ghamr in Arabic- were placed back under the full sovereignty of the Hashemite kingdom.

The lands have been privately owned by Israeli entities for decades, but the 1994 deal saw the kingdom retain sovereignty there.

Opinion polls have repeatedly found that the peace treaty with Israel is overwhelmingly opposed by Jordanians, more than half of whom are of Palestinian origin.

11.28.19 – Th -

Italy searches of 19 properties; uncovers plot to create new Nazi party

11.28.19

Italy uncovers plot to create new Nazi party

In end of large-scale investigation, Italian police arrest multiple far-right activists and seize large amounts of weaponry; group believed to be linked with extremist groups abroad

Reuters| Updated: 11.28.19 , 17:56

Italian police said on Thursday they uncovered a plot to form a new Nazi party and seized a cache of weapons during searches across the country.

Police in 16 towns and cities from the Mediterranean island of Sicily to the Alps in northern Italy took part in the investigation, which was launched two years ago.

The probe revealed a "huge and varied array of subjects, residents in different places, united by the same ideological fanaticism and willing to create an openly pro-Nazi, xenophobic and anti-Semitic movement", a police statement said.

Police did not say how many people joined the group or how many arrests were made.

Defense of fascism and efforts to revive fascist parties are considered a crime in Italy.

The new party was called the Italian National Socialist Party of Workers and police showed off a range of Nazi paraphernalia, including swastikas and pictures of Adolf Hitler seized during searches of 19 properties.

They also found a large number of weapons, including pistols, hunting rifles and crossbows.

The group had forged links with extremist groups abroad, including Portugal, Britain and France, police said.

Police found in July a large stash of weapons, including an air-to-air missile, linked to far-right extremists, while in November two men connected to another group of Nazi sympathizers were arrested on suspicion of planning to attack a mosque.

First published: 17:56 , 11.28.19

11.25.19 – Mo -

Belgian Europol shut malicious websites to counter Islamic State propaganda operations

11.25.19

Europol hits IS servers in blow to jihadist publicity

Europe police agency says it has been working with nine of the largest Internet platforms to counter Islamic State propaganda operations, including Google, Twitter, Instagram and Telegram

Reuters| Updated: 11.25.19 , 22:20

Belgian prosecutors have knocked out several internet servers used by Islamic State, shutting a large number of accounts and websites run by its news arm, in an operation led by Europe's police agency, the Belga press agency reported on Monday.

Europol, the European police agency, said it would release details of the initiative at a news conference later on Monday.

"We were able to shut down a large number of accounts and a series of websites," Belga quoted prosecution spokesman Eric Van Der Sypt as saying.

Europol said in a statement it has been working with nine of the largest Internet platforms to counter Islamic State propaganda operations, including Google, Twitter, Instagram and Telegram.

Europol said on its website it had examined "propaganda videos, publications and social media accounts supporting terrorism and violent extremism" over the course of two days last week.

"Telegram was the online service provider" where most offending material was found, Europol said.

"As a result, a significant portion of key actors within the IS network on Telegram was pushed away from the platform."

It praised Telegram's assistance and said the company was helping Europol to "root out ... malicious content."

11.26.19 – Tu -

UN rejects plot of 4-Iran leaders identified in Sept 14 attack of Saudi Oil facility

That day in May, four months before, four named;

Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Revolutionary Guards Major General Hossein Salami, advisor, Yahya Rahim-Safavi, and a deputy of Qasem Soleimani

11.26.19

Inside Iran's plot to attack Saudi Arabia

The decision to target Saudi's Aramco facility at Abqaiq was made in order to inflict damage on an enemy without raising the ire of the United States and risking all-out war as a result of civilian or American fatalities

Reuters| Updated: 11.26.19 , 11:22

Four months before a swarm of drones and missiles crippled the world's biggest oil processing facility in Saudi Arabia, Iranian security officials gathered at a heavily fortified compound in Tehran.

The group included the top echelons of the **Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps**, an elite branch of the Iranian military whose portfolio includes missile development and covert operations.

**The main topic that day in May:** How to punish the United States for pulling out of a landmark nuclear treaty and re-imposing economic sanctions on Iran, moves that have hit the Islamic Republic hard.

With **Major General Hossein Salami**, leader of the Revolutionary Guards, looking on, a senior commander took the floor.

“It is time to take out our swords and teach them a lesson,” the commander said, according to four people familiar with the meeting.

Hard-liners in the meeting talked of attacking high-value targets, including American military bases.

Yet, what ultimately emerged was a plan that stopped short of direct confrontation that could trigger a devastating U.S. response.

Iran opted instead to target oil installations of America’s ally, Saudi Arabia, a proposal discussed by top Iranian military officials in that May meeting and at least four that followed.

This account, **described to Reuters by three officials familiar with the meetings and a fourth close to Iran’s decision making**, is the first to describe the role of **Iran’s leaders in plotting the Sept. 14 attack on Saudi Aramco**, Saudi Arabia’s state-controlled oil company.

These people said **Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei approved the operation**, but **with strict conditions: Iranian forces must avoid hitting any civilians or Americans**.

**Reuters was unable to confirm their version of events** with Iran’s leadership. A Revolutionary Guards spokesman declined to comment. Tehran has steadfastly denied involvement.

Alireza **Miryousefi**, spokesman for the Iranian Mission to the **United Nations** in New York, **rejected the version of events the four people** described to Reuters.

He said Iran played no part in the strikes, that no meetings of senior security officials took place to discuss such an operation, **and that Khamenei did not authorize any attack**.

“No, no, no, no, no, and no,” Miryousefi said to detailed questions from Reuters on the alleged gatherings and Khamenei’s purported role.

The Saudi government communications office did not respond to a request for comment.

The U.S. Central Intelligence Agency and Pentagon declined to comment.

A senior Trump administration official did not directly comment on Reuters’ findings but said Tehran’s “behavior and its decades-long history of destructive attacks and support for terrorism are why Iran’s economy is in shambles.”

Yemen’s Iran-aligned Houthi rebels, at the center of a civil war against Saudi-backed forces, claimed responsibility for the assault on Saudi oil facilities.

That declaration was rebuffed by U.S. and Saudi officials, who said the sophistication of the offensive pointed to Iran.

Saudi Arabia was a strategic target.

The kingdom is Iran's principal regional rival and a petroleum giant whose production is crucial to the world economy.

It is an important U.S. security partner. But its war on Yemen, which has killed thousands of civilians, and the brutal murder of Washington-based journalist Jamal Khashoggi by Saudi agents last year, have strained its relations with U.S. lawmakers.

There was no groundswell of support in Congress for military intervention to aid the Saudis after the attack.

The 17-minute strike on two Aramco installations by 18 drones and three low-flying missiles revealed the vulnerability of the Saudi oil company, despite billions spent by the kingdom on security.

Fires erupted at the company's Khurais oil installation and at the Abqaiq oil processing facility, the world's largest.

The attack temporarily halved Saudi Arabia's oil production and knocked out 5% of the world's oil supply. Global crude prices spiked.

The assault prompted U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to accuse Iran of an "act of war."

In the aftermath, Tehran was hit with additional U.S. sanctions. The United States also launched cyberattacks against Iran, U.S. officials told Reuters.

The plan by Iranian military leaders to strike Saudi oil installations developed over several months, according to the official close to Iran's decision making.

"Details were discussed thoroughly in at least five meetings and the final go-ahead was given" by early September, the official said.

All of those meetings took place at a secure location inside the southern Tehran compound, three of the officials told Reuters. They said Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei attended one of the gatherings at his residence, which is also inside that complex.

Other attendees at some of those meetings included Khamenei's top military advisor, Yahya Rahim-Safavi, and a deputy of Qasem Soleimani, who heads the Revolutionary Guards' foreign military and clandestine operations, the three officials said. Rahim-Safavi could not be reached for comment.

Among the possible targets initially discussed were a seaport in Saudi Arabia, an airport and U.S. military bases, the official close to Iran's decision making said. The person would not provide additional details.

Those ideas were ultimately dismissed over concerns about mass casualties that could provoke fierce retaliation by the United States and embolden Israel, potentially pushing the region into war, the four people said.

The official close to Iran's decision making said the group settled on the plan to attack Saudi Arabia's oil installations because it could grab big headlines, inflict economic pain on an adversary and still deliver a strong message to Washington.

"Agreement on Aramco was almost reached unanimously," the official said. "The idea was to display Iran's deep access and military capabilities."

The attack was the worst on Middle East oil facilities since Saddam Hussein, the late Iraqi strongman, torched Kuwait's oil fields during the 1991 Gulf crisis.

U.S. Senator Martha McSally, an Air Force combat veteran and Republican lawmaker who was briefed by U.S. and Saudi officials, and who visited Aramco's Abqaiq facility days after the attack, said **the perpetrators knew precisely where to strike to create as much damage as possible.**

"It showed somebody who had a sophisticated understanding of facility operations like theirs, instead of just hitting things off of satellite photos," she told Reuters. The drones and missiles, she added, "came from Iranian soil, from an Iranian base."

A Middle East source, who was briefed by a country investigating the attack, said the **launch site was the Ahvaz airbase in southwest Iran.** That account matched those of three U.S. officials and two other people who spoke to Reuters: a Western intelligence official and a Western source based in the Middle East.

**Rather than fly directly from Iran to Saudi Arabia over the Gulf, the missiles and drones took different, circuitous paths to the oil installations,** part of Iran's effort to mask its involvement, the people said.

Some of the craft **flew over Iraq and Kuwait before landing in Saudi Arabia,** according to the Western intelligence source, who said that trajectory provided Iran with plausible deniability.

"That wouldn't have been the case if missiles and drones had been seen or heard flying into Saudi Arabia over the Gulf from a south flight path" from Iran, the person said.

Revolutionary Guards commanders briefed the supreme leader on the successful operation hours after the attack, according to the official close to the country's decision making.

Images of fires raging at the Saudi facilities were broadcast worldwide. The country's stock market swooned. Global oil prices initially surged by 20%. Officials at Saudi Aramco gathered in what was referred to internally as the "emergency management room" at the company's headquarters.

One of the officials who spoke with Reuters said Tehran was delighted with the outcome of the operation: Iran had landed a painful blow on Saudi Arabia and thumbed its nose at the United States.

The Revolutionary Guards and other branches of the **Iranian military all ultimately report to Khamenei.** The supreme leader has been defiant in response to Trump's abandonment last year of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, commonly called the Iran nuclear deal.

That 2015 accord with five permanent members of the U.S. Security Council – the United States, Russia, France, China, and the United Kingdom – as well as Germany, removed billions of dollars' worth of sanctions on Iran in exchange for Tehran's curbing its nuclear program.

Trump's demand for a better deal has seen Iran launch a **two-pronged strategy** to win relief from **sweeping sanctions reimposed by the United States,** penalties that have **crippled its oil exports** and all **but shut it out of the international banking** system.

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani has signaled a willingness to meet with American officials on condition that all sanctions be lifted. Simultaneously, Iran is flaunting its military and technical prowess.

In recent months, Iran has shot down a U.S. surveillance drone and seized a British oil tanker in the Strait of Hormuz, the narrow channel through which about a fifth of the world's oil moves.

And it has announced **it has amassed stockpiles of enriched uranium** in violation of the U.N agreement, part of its vow **to restart its nuclear program**.

The Aramco attacks were an escalation that came as Trump had been pursuing his long-stated goal of extricating American forces from the Middle East.

Just days after announcing an abrupt pullout of U.S. troops in northern Syria, the Trump administration on Oct. 11 said it would send fighter jets, missile-defense weaponry, and 2,800 more troops to Saudi Arabia to bolster the kingdom's defenses.

**"Do not strike another sovereign state, do not threaten American interests, American forces, or we will respond,"** U.S. Defense Secretary Mark Esper **warned Tehran** during a press briefing.

Still, **Iran** appears to have **calculated that the Trump administration would not risk** an all-out assault that could destabilize the region in the service of protecting Saudi oil, said Ali Vaez, director of the Iran Project at the International Crisis Group, a nonprofit working to end global conflict.

In Iran, "hard-liners have come to believe that Trump is a Twitter tiger," Vaez said. "As such, there is little diplomatic or military cost associated with pushing back."

The senior Trump administration official disputed the suggestion that Iran's operation has strengthened its hand in working out a deal for sanctions relief from the United States.

**"Iran knows exactly what it needs to do to see sanctions lifted,"** the official said.

The administration has said Iran must **end support for terrorist groups** in the Middle East and **submit** to tougher **terms that would permanently snuff its nuclear ambitions**. Iran has said it has no ties to terrorist groups.

Whether Tehran accedes to U.S. demands remains to be seen.

In one of the final meetings held ahead of the Saudi oil attack, another Revolutionary Guards commander was already looking ahead, according to the official close to Iran's decision making who was briefed on that gathering.