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US, Israel and Gulf States discuss anti-Iran alliance as nuclear talks set to restart in Qatar

Top military leaders from the US, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, Jordan and Egypt met in the Egyptian resort of Sharm el-Sheikh last March to discuss defence coordination against Iran.

The *Wall Street Journal* reported the meeting. It was the first time Israel, which has no formal relations with either Saudi Arabia or Qatar, took part in such a meeting and signifies the ever-closer relations between Washington's two key regional allies: Tel Aviv and Riyadh.

The hitherto secret summit is part of Washington's efforts to bolster its reactionary allies in the region, all of whom sit atop social and political power kegs. While Egypt and Jordan face threats from Sunni extremist groups linked to Al-Qaeda and Islamic State, the Gulf States with sizeable Shia minorities fear Iran's growing political influence at home and in the region, including in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Gaza.

At the same time, the Biden administration is determined to counter China's economic presence and political influence in the energy-rich Middle East as part of its broader preparations for war with Russia and China, with whom Tehran has forged increasingly close relations.

The WSJ wrote "At the high-level Sharm El Sheikh talks, the participants reached agreement in principle on procedures for rapid notification when aerial threats are

detected... Officials also discussed how decisions might be made on which nation's forces would intercept aerial threats.”

This would involve sharing intelligence, anti-aircraft and anti-drone capabilities, advanced radar deployment and both offensive and defensive cyberwarfare technology to be supplied by Washington, and to a minor degree Tel Aviv. Saudi Arabia has already bought 22 US Patriot antimissile batteries and is about to acquire the THAAD antimissile system, which the UAE has already purchased and used to shoot down a missile fired at Abu Dhabi by Yemen's Houthi rebels last January.



Blinken (third right) at the Negev Summit (Source: Secretary Antony Blinken Twitter)

The talks in Sharm el-Sheikh were preceded by a hastily arranged meeting of Arab foreign ministers from Bahrain, UAE, Morocco and Egypt March 28 at Sde Boker in Israel's Negev desert, billed by Israeli officials as a “get to know you better” meeting. Israel's Foreign Minister and Prime Minister designate Yair Lapid had arranged the meeting after US Secretary of State Antony Blinken confirmed his visit to Israel as part of a wider tour of the Middle East and North Africa at the end of March.

The meeting focused on Iran, with discussions on “a regional security architecture” against aerial and naval threats, a reference to Israel's covert war on Iran, centering on aerial attacks on the facilities of Iran and its allies in Syria and the covert maritime war mostly in the Red Sea and eastern Mediterranean that has seen Israel carry out at least a dozen attacks on Iranian vessels between 2019 and 2021. It followed the visit by Israel's Prime

Minister Naftali Bennett to Sharm el-Sheikh where he met the leaders of Egypt and the UAE.

Israel's Defence Minister Benny Gantz described the emerging arrangements as the "Middle East Air Defence Alliance." He claimed the air defence initiative had already enabled "the successful interception of Iranian attempts to attack Israel and other countries" in the region. Israeli officials declined to provide details, saying, "It's still a work in progress."

These talks took place in the run up to the announcement that US President Joe Biden will visit the Middle East July 13-16, where he will meet Lapid and President Isaac Herzog in Israel and the Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas in Ramallah before going on to Jeddah for talks with Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman, UAE, Bahrain, Qatar, Jordan, Egypt and Iraq.

Biden's visit is aimed at patching up relations with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who was initially treated as a persona non grata because of his role in the murder of dissident journalist Jamal Ahmad Khashoggi and other gross violations of human rights. He will discuss "national security" issues with Bin Salman, along with climate change, increasing Saudi energy exports to ease global oil prices, Iran's nuclear program and the war in Yemen.

The timing of the WSJ's report of a meeting held three months ago suggests that factions in the US opposed to any deal with Iran are trying to scupper the talks, or at least bully Iran into making further concessions that will curb its influence in the region.

Negotiations will restart this week, beginning with indirect talks between Tehran and Washington, on a US return to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), unilaterally abandoned in 2018 by President Donald Trump. The Trump administration reimposed the sanctions lifted under the 2015 agreement and introduced even more draconian sanctions targeting Iran's economy, including its key oil and gas exports and banking system.

Biden hopes to use a revived agreement to bring about a thaw in US-Iranian relations and prise Iran away from Russia and China's orbit. But this has not stopped his administration

from carrying out numerous provocations against Iran, directly or indirectly via its regional attack dog Israel, including the imposition just two weeks ago of new sanctions aimed at hurting a network of Iranian petrochemical producers.

On June 25, European Union foreign policy chief Josep Borell flew to Tehran to meet Iran's foreign minister Hossein Amirabdollahian. The EU is anxious to restore the deal to access Iran's oil. The two ministers announced their agreement to resume nuclear negotiations in "the coming days" in Qatar, which maintains ties with both Washington and Tehran. Qatar's foreign minister had made several visits to Tehran since the talks in Vienna stalled in March, mainly over Iran's demand that the US remove the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) from its list of Foreign Terrorist Organizations—a demand Tehran now says is not central to the talks. If successful, all sides would go back to Vienna for a ministerial meeting and final discussions.

Borell's visit follows that of Russia's foreign minister Sergei Lavrov, who said that Moscow supported the revival of the deal. According to a report on Israeli website *Ynet*, several Israeli generals, including the chief of Military Intelligence, as well as Defence Minister Gantz, support a return to the JCPOA, believing a bad deal preferable to no deal as it gives Israel time to prepare militarily.

Iran's clergy-led bourgeois nationalist regime is desperate to escape the strictures of Washington's ever tighter economic blockade that has limited oil exports, decimated the value of its currency against the dollar—now worth one tenth of its value at the time of the 2015 nuclear deal—and deepened the poverty of the Iranian masses.

In the last months, there have been almost weekly anti-government protests over poverty, rents that have risen by more than a third, low and unpaid wages, the soaring cost of living as inflation reaches 40 per cent, with food prices jumping by more than 82 percent, and high unemployment—nearly 21 percent of all 15–24-year-olds were out of work in March according to official figures.

As revenues collapsed—the budget deficit is believed to be about 50 percent amid widespread corruption and mismanagement—the government cut subsidies and ended the subsidised lower exchange rate used for the import of basic food staples in May, fueling sharp rises in the price of vegetable oil, eggs, chicken and dairy products. While the

government also announced higher monthly cash payments to most Iranians, this will not take effect till the autumn. Further stoking mass outrage was the May 23 collapse of a high-rise building in Abadan that killed more than 30 people.

Teachers have held protests demanding the release of 18 educators arrested during protests in recent months, while public sector workers have rallied to demand unpaid wages. They have been joined by truckers and bus drivers in Tehran and bazaar merchants in several cities. Bazaar strikes played a major role in the 1979 revolution against the monarchy.

Pensioners have taken to the streets in more than a dozen cities over now worthless pensions, chanting “Death to Raisi” (the president) and “Death to the inefficient government.”

The government has responded to the recent demonstrations with tightened security, the deployment of riot police to attack and teargas protesters, mass arrests and intimidation and accommodation with imperialist foes abroad.

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