

Russia's defense chief arrives in Syria to review naval drills

Author:

Wed, 2022-02-16 00:51

MOSCOW/DAMASCUS: Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu traveled to Syria to inspect naval drills involving 15 warships and 30 aircraft in the eastern Mediterranean on Tuesday, the RIA news agency cited his ministry as saying. The drills are part of a surge of Russian military activity amid a standoff with the West over security in Europe. Russia said earlier it had deployed fighter jets with hypersonic missiles to its Syrian air base for the naval exercises.

Moscow announced on Jan. 20 that its navy would stage an array of exercises involving all its fleets from the Pacific to the Atlantic, drawing on 10,000 servicemen, 140 warships and dozens of planes.

Meanwhile, a bomb attached to a bus carrying Syrian troops in Damascus exploded on Tuesday morning, killing one soldier and wounding 11, state TV reported.

The blast occurred during rush hour at a customs roundabout near the capital's landmark Omayyad Square, according to the report. There was no immediate claim of responsibility.

Such attacks have occurred in Damascus in recent months amid an otherwise calm period in the capital. Regime forces captured rebel-held eastern neighborhoods of the city in 2018.

Regime forces now control much of Syria with the help of President Bashar Assad's allies Russia and Iran, while rebels are mostly cornered in the country's northwestern province of Idlib. US and Turkish troops, meanwhile, are deployed in parts of the country's north and east.

In October, two bombs attached to a bus carrying Syrian troops exploded in Damascus, killing 14. It was one of the deadliest bombings in the capital in years.

A little-known group calling itself the Qasioun Brigades claimed responsibility for the attack at the time.

In recent years, attacks in Damascus have been rare. One of the last major explosions to take place was in 2017 – when bombers hit a judicial office building and a restaurant, killing nearly 60 people.



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Two women, two children among six killed in Syria regime shelling on Idlib

[Israeli premier meets Bahrain crown prince in push to tighten ties](#)

Wed, 2022-02-16 00:37

MANAMA: Israel's prime minister met Bahrain's crown prince on Tuesday as the new allies sought to nurture closer cooperation and present a united front to their shared nemesis Iran.

Prime Minister Naftali Bennett was making a one-day visit to the Gulf island kingdom, the first by an Israeli leader, less than two years after the countries established formal diplomatic relations as part of the US-brokered "Abraham Accords."

Bennett was greeted by Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad Al-Khalifa, who also serves as the kingdom's prime minister, and a military color guard at Manama's Gudaibiya Palace. He told the crown prince that he came "with a spirit of goodwill, of cooperation, of standing together against mutual challenges."

Bennett also met several government ministers and discussed the need for greater economic cooperation.

"We must do more to get to know one another and build upon the Abraham Accords, which have been such a historic agreement," the crown prince said.

HIGHLIGHT

Israel has stepped up its naval presence in the Red Sea after a series of attacks on commercial ships with links to Israel, which it blamed on Iran.

In recent months, as tensions with Iran have soared, the two countries have intensified military cooperation.

Early this month, they signed a defense pact, and last week, Bahrain announced that an Israeli naval officer would be stationed in Manama, which is also home to the US Navy's 5th Fleet.

The Israeli military confirmed it will have a naval representative attached to the 5th fleet.

Bennett met with the fleet commander, Vice Adm. Brad Cooper, during his stop in Manama. Bennett's office said the fleet "is a significant element in maintaining regional stability in the face of various security threats."

It did not mention Iran specifically. But Israel has made no secret of its concerns about Iranian naval activities across the region.

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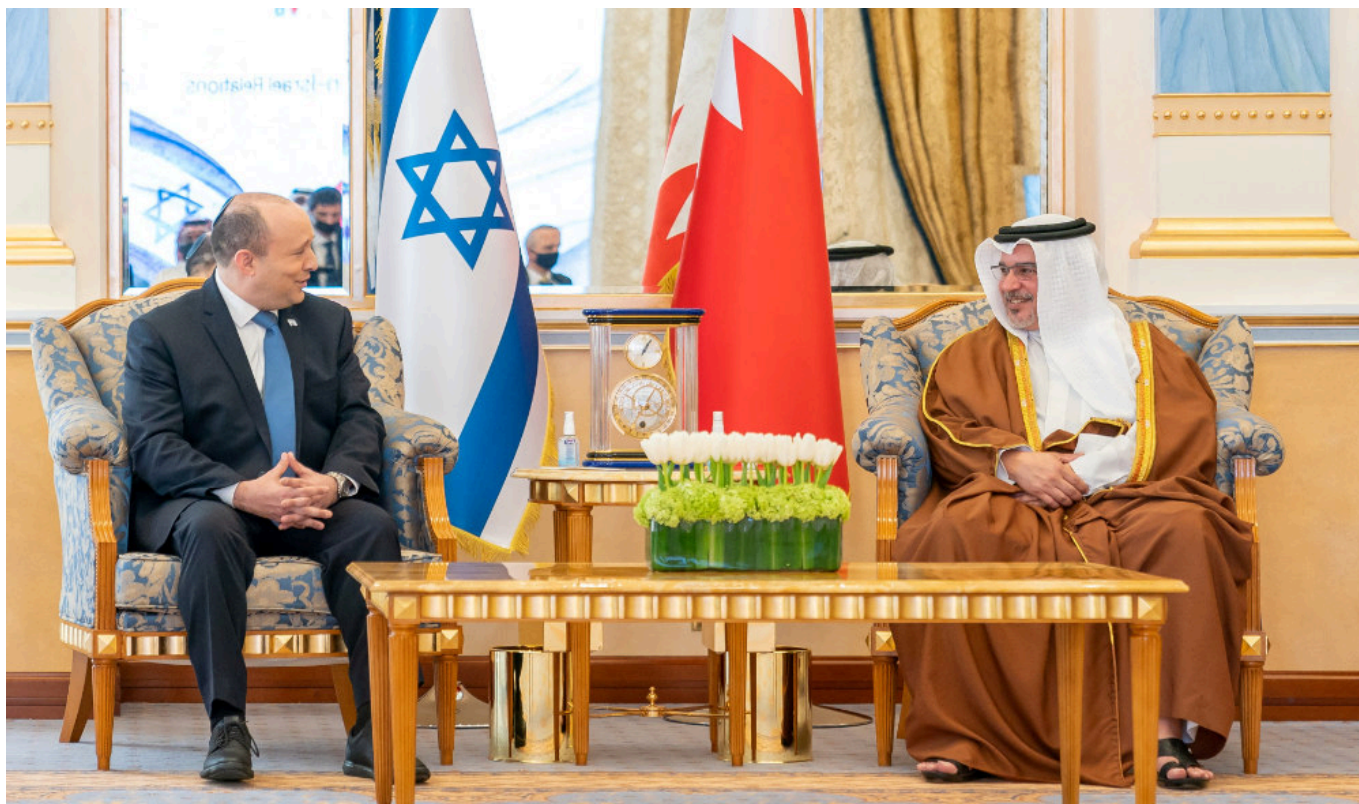
Earlier this month Israeli ships took part in a massive naval exercise in the Gulf. Israeli warships also participated in US-led naval drills with the UAE and Bahrain in the Red Sea in November.

Israel and Bahrain established formal diplomatic ties after years of clandestine security cooperation over their shared enmity of Bahrain's neighbor, Iran.

Israel and Bahrain have exchanged ambassadors and signed trade and defense agreements since they signed a normalization agreement on the White House lawn, alongside the UAE, Sudan and Morocco, in September 2020.

Bennett's visit came as negotiations between world powers and Iran to reach an international agreement to curb Tehran's nuclear program continued in Vienna.

Israel has said it would not be bound by any such agreement and that it would take whatever action necessary, including a military strike, to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear arms.



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Israeli prime minister lands in Bahrain in first visit
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[Over 100 Sudanese detainees, including high-profile politicians, start hunger strike](#)

Author:

Wed, 2022-02-16 00:24

KHARTOUM: More than 100 Sudanese detainees, including high-profile politicians, began a hunger strike on Tuesday, allied lawyers and doctors said.

The detainees are part of the protest movement against an Oct. 25 army coup that ended a civilian-military power-sharing arrangement that followed the overthrow of long-ruling autocrat President Omar Bashir in 2019.

The coup prompted mass protests during which 81 people have been killed, most

recently two on Monday, and more than 2,000 injured, according to the Central Committee of Sudanese Doctors.

“More than 100 unlawful detainees in Soba prison entered today in an open hunger strike due to their unjustified and illegal detention,” the Defense Committee for the Unlawfully Detained and Martyrs of Arbitrary Killings said in a statement.

The group said separately that one suspect in the killing of a police brigadier general had been tortured while another was in solitary confinement.

Civilian politicians Khalid Omer Yousif and Wagdi Salih were taking part in the hunger strike, said Abdelqayom Awad, a member of Yousif’s Sudanese Congress Party.

Along with former Sovereign Council member Mohamed Al-Faki Suleiman who was arrested on Sunday, the men face corruption charges apparently stemming from their work on a taskforce dismantling the network of Bashir.

The Sovereign Council was a body of civilian politicians and military men set up after Bashir’s overthrow to lead a transition to democracy.

It was dissolved after the October coup, setting back those plans.

Military leaders say the coup was necessary due to political infighting and for the country’s security, but they say they are still committed to elections in mid-2023.

Military leader Gen. Abdel Fattah Al-Burhan said in an interview on Saturday he was not involved in the arrests of Yousif and Salih – who were also detained temporarily in the coup – but that their work on the committee had diverged from its aims.

On Monday, thousands rallied in the capital Khartoum and its twin city of Omdurman, while protests also took place in the eastern city of Port Sudan and in the western Darfur region, according to witnesses.

In Khartoum, protests had begun with crowds waving national flags and carrying red balloons, as the rallies coincided with Valentine’s Day.

“Today is the nation’s love day,” one banner read.

Some shouted slogans demanding the authorities release activists who had been arrested, while others carried pictures of protesters killed.

“We are demanding the release of resistance committee members and politicians who were unjustly arrested, and some of whom are facing fabricated charges,” protester Khaled Mohamed said.

But as crowds tried to approach the presidential palace, security forces fired volleys of tear gas canisters.

One protester was killed after he was shot in “the neck and chest by live rounds by coup forces” in Khartoum, the independent Central Committee of Sudan Doctors said.

Another protester was later killed in Omdurman after being struck by “live bullets to the left shoulder which penetrated the chest,” the committee said.

Sudanese police said in a statement that at least 102 police were “severely wounded” while one suffered “a gunshot to the foot.”

It also noted that protesters have “smashed the front” of the parliament building, set a fire near an adjacent gas station, and damaged several vehicles and a mosque in Omdurman.

Damage was also reported to several parts of the Ministry of Youth and Sports in the city, and items belonging to security guards were looted, it said, adding that police only “exercised the reasonable legitimate force” in response.

The authorities have also arrested scores of activists accused of belonging to the “resistance committees” that have been instrumental in organizing protests.

“The number of people detained arbitrarily and without criminal charges has exceeded 100,” the Sudanese Professionals Association said Monday.

On Sunday, authorities arrested Mohamed Al-Fekki, a civilian former member of the ruling Sovereign Council, which led the country under the now stalled 2019 power-sharing agreement.

Last week, authorities arrested ex-minister Khaled Omar Youssef and Wagdi Saleh, the spokesman of Sudan’s main civilian bloc, the Forces for Freedom and Change.

Those arrests came just a day after they joined an FFC delegation for talks with UN special representative Volker Perthes, as part of efforts to resolve Sudan’s deepening crisis.

The October military power grab, the latest coup in Sudan since its independence, has sparked widespread international condemnation and punitive measures – but authorities have shown little inclination to compromise.



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Ex-Sudan official detained as 2 killed in anti-coup protests Sudan rejects Western criticism of arrests as 'blatant interference'

[US officials meet Tunisians civil society members](#)

Wed, 2022-02-16 00:16

TUNIS: US officials have met with Tunisian civil society representatives amid Washington's concern over the dissolution of the Supreme Judicial Council, the US Embassy in Tunisia said on Tuesday, escalating international pressure on President Kais Saied.

Saied last week dissolved the council, one of the remaining institutions in Tunisia that was able to work independently of him, in the latest of a series of moves his opponents have described as being part of a coup.

US Deputy Assistant Secretaries Karen Sasahara and Christopher Le Mon met with Tunisian civil society representatives to discuss recent political and judicial developments, the US Embassy said in a statement.

“We are concerned by Tunisian President Saied’s decree. Last week, we joined like-minded partners in emphasizing that an independent judiciary is a core element of an effective and transparent democracy,” State Department spokesman Ned Price had said a day earlier.

Tunisia’s president cemented his grip over the judiciary on Sunday with a decree that lets him dismiss judges or block their promotion, helping consolidate his power after he seized executive authority last summer.

Saied outraged his opponents and alarmed democratic foreign allies with his announcement about the judicial body.

Saied, meanwhile, relieved the temporary head of national radio, Chokri Cheniti, from his position, the presidency announced in a statement.

Saied had appointed Cheniti as the temporary head of the national radio, Radio Tunisienne, in September. He did not name a replacement for Cheniti.



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[UN special envoy for Yemen condemns Houthi attacks on UAE](#)

Tue, 2022-02-15 23:13

LONDON: The UN special envoy for Yemen Hans Grundberg echoed the Secretary-General's condemnation of recent Houthi attacks on the UAE on Tuesday.

Speaking at a Security Council meeting, Grundberg said that following Houthi attacks on the UAE last month, including a drone attack in Abu Dhabi that killed three people, "it should be obvious to everyone just how high the stakes have become."

He continued: "The Secretary-General has condemned these attacks and I echo that condemnation."

He added that Houthi attacks on Saudi Arabia and the UAE "indicate how this conflict risks spiralling out of control unless serious efforts are urgently made by the Yemeni parties, the region, and the international community to end this conflict."

The Yemen envoy added that ending the war in Yemen is a choice and is possible despite the challenges.

"There is a way out of this war, allowing the war to continue is a choice, and so is ending it," he told the council.

"We all know that ending it will not be easy, but I firmly believe that it is possible," he added.

He said that dialogue and compromise are required if Yemenis are not to be left suffering until parties to the war are tired of fighting.

"A political process under UN auspices is our best way forward," he said.

Grundberg said that he is developing a framework that will set out his plan to move towards an inclusive political settlement, including the establishment of a multi-track process.

"Through this process, the warring sides' interests can be addressed within the context of a broader Yemeni agenda along the three tracks of political, security, and economic matters," he explained.



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Dozens of Houthis killed in raging battles outside Marib in Yemen
Houthis 'primary obstacle to peace efforts' in Yemen: US special envoy