



Fires are seen following an Israeli airstrike in Gaza city, yesterday. Israeli warplanes struck a weapons manufacturing facility in the Gaza Strip early yesterday, the military said, after rocket fire against Israeli territory. No one was injured. The exchange of fire came hours after US President Joe Biden visited Israel and the occupied West Bank.

PHOTO: AFP

UK TORY LEADERSHIP RACE Contenders spar over tax in first TV debate

AFP, London

The five remaining Conservative candidates to become Britain's next prime minister clashed Friday night over tax and honesty in politics in their first TV debate, as they fight to make an eventual two-person run-off.

The 90-minute debate -- the first chance in the days-old contest for both the frontrunners and lesser-known contenders to pitch their credentials to a national television audience -- saw relatively few direct confrontations between them.

But when they did erupt, it came largely over taxation, with former finance minister Rishi Sunak, one of the frontrunners, forced to defend plans to keep rates at some of the highest levels in decades.

Sunak, who has topped the first two rounds of voting by Tory MPs this week as the race narrows towards a final pair next week, is up against several contenders vowing to cut various taxes immediately.

The wealthy and polished media performer, whose political fortunes have been damaged by his family's own tax affairs, urged both caution and patience as the UK grapples with the worst inflation in 40 years.

Foreign Secretary Truss, Tom Tugendhat, a prominent backbencher, Conservative MP Penny Mordaunt and former equalities minister Kemi Badenoch are the five candidates who are trying to replace Johnson.

Johnson last week announced his resignation as Tory leader after a cabinet insurrection led partly by Sunak, following months of controversies.

A snap poll of 1,159 viewing voters by Opinium found 36 percent thought the former army officer performed best, followed by a quarter citing Sunak. Just six percent said Truss, while Penny Mordaunt and Badenoch fared slightly better on 12 percent each.

They will participate in televised debates today and tomorrow.

A further vote and TV debate is scheduled for Tuesday. The ballots of Conservative MPs will end Wednesday, with the party's rank and file members then choosing from the two finalists following nationwide campaigning and hustings.

The winner will be announced on September 5.

COMBAT DRONES DEAL Russian officials visited Iran: US

REUTERS, Jeddah

The United States believes that Russian officials visited an airfield in Iran recently to view attack-capable drones, US national security advisor Jake Sullivan said yesterday.

The United States earlier this week said it has information that shows Iran is preparing to provide Russia with up to several hundred drones, including some that are weapons capable, and that Tehran is preparing to train Russian forces to use them.

"We assess an official Russian delegation recently received a showcase of Iranian attack-capable UAVs... To our knowledge, this is the first time a Russian delegation has visited this airfield for such a showcase," Sullivan said in a statement.

The statement included satellite imagery dated June 8 showing Iranian unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) "that the Russian government delegation saw that day". It said similar equipment was showcased for a second Russian visit to the airfield on July 5.

On Friday, Iran's Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian, in a phone call with his Ukrainian counterpart, rejected as baseless US accusations about Iranian drones being sent to Russia for use in the war against the Ukraine.

Iran, which has supplied UAVs to its allies in the Middle East, on Friday announced its first naval drone-carrying division in the Indian Ocean.

US President Joe Biden has used Iran's growing ties with Russia as a rallying cry to press Arab countries to take a harder stance on the Ukraine crisis. Gulf nations, which have energy and business ties with Moscow, have so far refused to take sides.

US won't 'walk away'

Biden tells Arab leaders, says no other powers will be allowed to fill the vacuum in Middle East

AFP, Jeddah

US President Joe Biden yesterday told Arab leaders that Washington would remain fully engaged in the Middle East and would not cede influence to other world powers.

"We will not walk away and leave a vacuum to be filled by China, Russia or Iran," Biden said during a summit in Jeddah, on the Red Sea coast of Saudi Arabia.

US ties to Gulf powers in particular have been roiled by multiple issues in recent years, notably Washington's push for a deal to curb Iran's suspect nuclear programme and its tepid response to attacks on Saudi oil facilities in 2019 claimed by Yemen's Iran-backed Huthi rebels.

The summit, the final stop of Biden's Middle East tour, brings together the six members of the Gulf Cooperation Council as well as Egypt, Jordan and Iraq.

Biden had been looking to use the trip to discuss volatile oil prices and outline his vision for Washington's role in the region.

On Friday he met Saudi King Salman and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the kingdom's de facto ruler.

Biden told the assembled Arab leaders that "the future will be won by countries that unleash the full potential of their populations... where citizens can question and criticise leaders without fear of reprisal".

Biden said the United States would commit \$1 billion in food aid to the Middle East and North Africa amid rising food insecurity induced by the war in Ukraine.



Russia's invasion of Ukraine has exposed a once unthinkable divergence between Washington and key Middle East allies Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, the oil giants that are increasingly independent on the international stage.

The wealthy Gulf nations, which host US forces and have dependably backed Washington for decades, have notably refrained from supporting the Biden administration as it tries to choke Moscow's lifelines, from energy to diplomacy.

Analysts say the new position reveals a turning point in Gulf relations with the US, long the region's protector against neighbour Iran.

But yesterday's meet brought some conciliatory gestures, with Biden inviting his Emirati counterpart, Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, to visit the White House before the year is up.

And in his remarks at the summit, Saudi Prince Mohammed said he hoped it would "establish a new era

of joint cooperation to deepen the strategic partnership between our countries and the United States of America, to serve our common interests and enhance security and development in this vital region for the whole world."

Riyadh and Washington on Friday signed 18 agreements on areas including energy, space, health and investment, including developing 5G and 6G technology, said a Saudi statement.

However, Prince Mohammed yesterday warned that "unrealistic policies" to curb emissions could fuel inflation.

Washington wants Riyadh to open the oil floodgates to bring down soaring gasoline prices, which threaten Democratic chances in November mid-term elections in the United States.

After meeting with Saudi leaders Friday, Biden said he was "doing all I can" to increase the oil supply but added that concrete results would not be seen "for another couple weeks".

CRITICISM OVER KHASHOGGI KILLING

MbS hits back at Biden

Says 'such an incident occurs anywhere in the world', highlights similar US mistakes

AGENCIES

Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman told President Joe Biden that Saudi Arabia had acted to prevent a repeat of mistakes like the killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi and that the United States had also made mistakes, including in Iraq, a Saudi minister said.

Biden said on Friday he told Prince Mohammed he held him responsible for the 2018 murder of Washington Post journalist Khashoggi at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, shortly after exchanging a fist bump with the kingdom's de facto ruler.

"The President raised the issue... And the crown prince responded that this was a painful episode for Saudi Arabia and that it was a terrible mistake," the kingdom's Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Adel al-Jubeir said.

Prince Mohammed also pointed out that "such an incident occurs anywhere in the world", highlighting "a number of mistakes" made by Washington such as torturing detainees at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, he added.

US intelligence agencies believe the crown prince ordered Khashoggi's killing, which he denies.

Jubeir, talking to Reuters about Friday's conversation between the two leaders, said



the crown prince had made the case that trying to impose values by force on other countries could backfire.

"It has not worked when the US tried to impose values on Afghanistan and Iraq. In fact, it backfired. It does not work when people try to impose values by force on other countries," Jubeir quoted the prince, known as MbS, as telling Biden.

Biden had promised to make Saudi Arabia a "pariah" on the global stage over the 2018 murder of Khashoggi, but ultimately decided US interests dictated improving relations with the world's top oil exporter and Arab powerhouse.

Washington has softened its stance on Saudi Arabia since Russia invaded Ukraine earlier this year, triggering one of the world's worst energy supply crises.

Russia to step up operations

Rockets pound Ukraine

REUTERS, Kyiv

Russia yesterday said its forces would step up military operations in Ukraine in "all operational areas" as Moscow's rockets and missiles pounded cities in strikes that Kyiv says have killed dozens in recent days.

Rockets hit the northeastern town of Chuhiv in Kharkiv region overnight, killing three people including a 70-year-old woman and wounding three others, regional governor Oleh Synchubov said.

To the south, more than 50 Russian Grad rockets pounded the city of Nikopol, on the Dnipro River, killing two people who were found in the rubble, the region's governor Valentyn Reznichenko said.

Ukraine says at least 40 people have been killed in such attacks on urban areas in the last three days. Russia says it has been hitting military targets.

Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu ordered military units to intensify their operations to prevent Ukrainian strikes on eastern Ukraine and other areas held by Russia, where he said Kyiv could hit civilian infrastructure or residents.

His remarks appeared to be a direct response to what Kyiv says is a string of successful strikes carried out on 30 Russian logistics and ammunition hubs using several multiple launch rocket systems recently supplied by the West.

Ukraine's defence ministry spokesperson said on Friday that the strikes were causing havoc with Russian supply lines and had significantly reduced Russia's offensive capability.

Despite the bloodshed, both Russia and Ukraine described progress towards an agreement to lift a blockade restricting exports of Ukrainian grain in recent talks. Mediator Turkey has said a deal could be signed next week.



A firefighter helicopter flies over a wildfire near Bustelo village in Amarante, north of Portugal, yesterday. Wildfires raged in southwestern France and Spain yesterday, forcing thousands of people to be evacuated from their homes as blistering summer temperatures put authorities on alert in parts of Europe.

PHOTO: AFP

China Covid outbreak grows

AFP, Beijing

China yesterday reported its highest number of coronavirus cases since May, with millions in lockdown this weekend as authorities persist with their zero-Covid policy.

Using snap lockdowns, long quarantines and mass testing, China is the last major economy still pursuing the goal of eliminating outbreaks, even as the strategy takes a heavy toll on the economy.

China reported 450 local infections yesterday, up from 432 a day earlier. Most cases were asymptomatic.

Lanzhou, the capital of northwestern Gansu province, ordered its 4.4 million residents to stay home starting Wednesday, and a county in Anhui province went into lockdown from Friday.

Beihai in the southern Guangxi region also yesterday announced lockdowns in parts of two districts that are home to more than 800,000 people.