

Houthis under fire for ruining peace efforts to end war

Sun, 2022-03-20 18:42

AL-MUKALLA: The Iran-backed Houthis have been strongly criticized for striking civilian facilities in Saudi Arabia and intensifying military operations in Yemen as the UN special envoy for Yemen proposed a humanitarian truce during the holy month of Ramadan.

Yemen's government officials, human rights activists, journalists and the public have slammed the Houthis for torpedoing the current peace efforts by the UN and Gulf Cooperation Council to reach a peaceful settlement to end the war.

Last week, the Gulf bloc invited warring factions in Yemen, including the Houthis, for peace talks under its aegis in Riyadh, a step that revived hopes of finding an end to the country's aggravating humanitarian crisis.

The Houthis quickly turned down the offer, launching deadly cross-border strikes on Saudi Arabia and escalating attacks on government-controlled areas in Yemen.

Yemen's Foreign Ministry criticized the Houthis' "aggressive and terrorist behavior" and their continuing resistance to all efforts to stop hostilities in Yemen, calling the latest attacks as the militia's "response" to the GCC offer.

"[The ministry] renews the firm and supportive position of the Republic of Yemen for the sisterly Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and its solidarity in all measures it takes to confront these cowardly terrorist acts, preserve the safety of its citizens and residents and protect its vital facilities," the Foreign Ministry said in a statement carried by the official news agency SABA.

Other Yemenis argued that the escalating military operations and the cross-border attacks show that the militia is not serious about peace and is determined to thwart initiatives to end the war.

Hamdan Al-Alaly said that the Houthis refused to take part in the coming conference since they would have to face the Yemeni forces that opposed their project.

"They will find themselves small and despicable in front of all the Yemeni components that reject them," Al-Alaly said, adding that the Houthis demanded direct talks with Saudi Arabia so as to legitimize their military takeover of power.

"They are looking for regional countries' recognition of their rule by asking for talks with the coalition, not with the Yemenis."

Yemen's Minister of State Gen. Abdul Ghani Jamil said that the Houthis would do everything at their disposal to foil the peace talks in Riyadh since those talks would bring together Yemenis against their oppressive rule.

"I think the message of the Houthis tonight is crystal clear. They do not want an invitation that seeks to unify the ranks [of their opponents] under the umbrella of the older sister, Saudi Arabia," Jamil said.

Meanwhile, on the ground, fighting between the Houthis and the government flared in flashpoint sites outside the central city of Marib as the Houthis push to break months of military stalemate.

A local military official told Arab News on Sunday that the Houthis amassed huge military forces and intensified their drone and missile strikes on government-controlled areas outside the city.

"We shot down two explosives-rigged drones. They also fired a ballistic missile at a camp for displaced people in Marib city. The Houthis are preparing for a major assault," said the official, who requested anonymity, adding that army troops and allied tribal fighters pushed back the latest Houthi attacks as the coalition's warplanes hit the militia's locations and military equipment.

Fighting outside Marib and in the city of Taiz has escalated since the beginning of the year as the UN Special Envoy for Yemen Hans Grundberg engaged in extensive direct talks with Yemeni parties aimed at finding a breakthrough that could end the war.

On Sunday, Grundberg said that he discussed with the Houthi chief negotiator Mohammed Abdul Salam and Omani officials in Muscat arranging for a humanitarian truce during the holy month of Ramadan, which begins early next month.



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Fighting rages outside Yemen's Marib as UN envoy meets leaders Fighting erupts in Taiz as Yemeni troops target Houthi positions

[Egyptian minister of planning discusses ways to enhance future cooperation with Saudi Arabia](#)

Sun, 2022-03-20 18:23

CAIRO: Dr. Hala Al-Saeed, Egypt's minister of planning and economic development, discussed ways to enhance future cooperation between her country and Saudi Arabia with Dr. Majid bin Abdullah Al-Qasabi, Saudi minister of

trade, on the sidelines of the meetings of the Governance Council of the Arab-Africa Trade Bridges Program.

Al-Saeed stressed her keenness to consolidate relations between the Egyptian and Saudi business communities, and to strengthen economic relations between the two countries in various fields, especially the commercial, industrial and investment fields.

During the meeting, she referred to the recent signing of a draft agreement between the two countries regarding the Saudi Public Investment Fund investing in Egypt. She stressed the importance of that agreement in supporting relations between the two countries, and expediting the completion of procedures related to investment in Egypt through the PIF.

Al-Saeed reviewed the most prominent opportunities and areas for developing relations, and mechanisms for converting obstacles into investment opportunities in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and its economic repercussions.

She pointed to what has been done in recent years to issue a package of laws and institutional reforms in Egypt to simplify the procedures for setting up projects and encouraging the private sector and local and foreign investment.

Al-Qasabi said that Egypt and Saudi Arabia have historical relations and are united by brotherhood, proximity and Arabism, adding that during his visit to Egypt he witnessed an unprecedented development movement, saying that this approach reflects a culture of interaction and hope for investors.



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Egypt to celebrate opening of first walkway along banks of Nile Corniche in Cairo

General: Iran, Israel missile strikes put US troops at risk

Sun, 2022-03-20 00:15

WASHINGTON: The exchange of missile strikes by Iran and Israel in Iraq and Syria puts US forces at risk, the top US commander for the Middle East said, just days after an Iranian missile barrage struck near the US Consulate complex in northern Iraq.

Marine Gen. Frank McKenzie told Pentagon reporters that over the past six months Iran has attacked US forces and facilities a number of times, but "very good action on the part of commanders on the ground" had thwarted any US casualties.

"Had US casualties occurred, I think we might be in a very different place right now," said McKenzie.

McKenzie and other US officials said this week the missile strikes on Sunday that hit close to the consulate were not aimed at the US. And Iran's powerful Revolutionary Guard said on its website that it had attacked what it described as an Israeli spy center in Irbil.

The attack came several days after Iran said it would retaliate for an Israeli strike near Damascus that killed two members of its Revolutionary Guard.

"I think it's obvious that Israel is going to take steps to defend itself when it's confronted with with Iranian actions. And of course, Iran is dedicated to the destruction of Israel," McKenzie said.

I think it's obvious that Israel is going to take steps to defend itself when it's confronted with with Iranian actions.

Marine Gen. Frank McKenzie, Top US commander for the Middle East

"I do worry about these exchanges between Iran and Israel, because many times our forces are at risk, whether in Iraq or in Syria. So that, in fact, does concern me."

McKenzie, who is retiring after about three years as head of US Central Command, was speaking at what was expected to be his final press briefing. He

said that as he prepares to turn over the job to incoming Army Gen. Erik Kurilla, his message to his successor is that Iran continues to be his biggest challenge.

"My central problem in my three years of command was Iran," said McKenzie, who also oversaw the chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan and commando raids to kill Daesh leaders.

"There were other problems, other huge problems, but the headquarters as a whole ... focused on the Iranian problem and everything attendant to that." The US presence in Iraq has long been a flash point for Tehran, but tensions spiked after a January 2020 US drone strike near the Baghdad airport killed a top Iranian general. In retaliation, Iran launched a barrage of missiles at Al-Asad air base, where US troops were stationed. More than 100 service members suffered traumatic brain injuries in the blasts.

More recently, Iranian proxies are believed responsible for an assassination attempt late last year on Iraq's Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhimi. And officials have said they believe Iran was behind the October drone attack at the military outpost in southern Syria where American troops are based. No US personnel were killed or injured in the attack.

Last year, US forces in Iraq shifted to a non-combat role, but Iran and its proxies still want all American troops to leave the country.

McKenzie said the Iranian leaders believe that they can launch a certain level of attacks against the US without affecting the ongoing negotiations over Tehran's nuclear program.

Diplomats trying to salvage the 2015 Iran nuclear deal appear to be near the cusp of an agreement that would bring the US back into the accord and bring Iran back into compliance with limits on its nuclear program.

Congressional opponents of the deal peppered McKenzie with questions this week about the impact of an agreement on Iranian aggression and whether sanctions relief will only provide Iran funding for other malign behavior. McKenzie said the US has gotten better at countering potential strikes by Iranian drones and other defensive measures, which contributed to the lack of American casualties. But he and others have noted that the Iranian ballistic missile strikes have gotten more precise.

"We don't want Iran to have a nuclear weapon, and the best way to get to that is probably through a negotiated solution," he said, adding that such a deal won't likely solve other problems, such as Iranian conventional attacks in the region.

"I don't think anybody in the United States government is blind to that fact, but ... if you can take nuclear weapons off the table, that's a powerful capability that you don't have to worry about."

Once that is done, he said, then the US could move on and deal with other problems, including Iran's increasing ballistic missile and drone threats.

"What you'd like to do is negotiate that, but if you can negotiate that, that's where US Central Command comes in. It's our job to demonstrate to Iran the concept of deterrence – that the things they want to pursue are too painful for them to achieve. We work at that every day."



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[Iraqi Kurdish oil tycoon's home in ruins after Iran strike](#)

Author:

Sun, 2022-03-20 00:36

IRBIL: Once a lavish mansion, the sprawling home of an Iraqi Kurdish oil tycoon was laid to waste in a barrage of missiles that struck near a US Consulate complex in the northern Iraqi city of Irbil earlier this week. Iran's powerful Revolutionary Guard said it launched the attack last Sunday, firing off 12 cruise missiles at what it described as a "strategic center" of

the Israeli spy agency Mossad – in retaliation for an Israeli strike in Syria that killed two of the Iranian paramilitary force's members the previous week.

Baz Karim Barzinji, CEO of the Iraqi Kurdish oil company KAR group, denies any links to Mossad.

The missiles gutted his beautiful home but he says he is grateful his family was unharmed.

The consulate was undamaged and no injuries were reported in the attack.

The US said it did not believe it was the target.

But the barrage marked a significant escalation between the US and Iran.

Hostility between the foes has often played out in Iraq, whose government is allied with both countries.

Barzinji pointed to a large crater where once his home office stood as he took The Associated Press on a tour of the ruins on Friday. The tycoon, his wife and two teenage children were visiting a nearby farm when the attack took place, he said.

BACKGROUND

Tycoon Baz Karim Barzinji, his wife and two teenage children were visiting a nearby farm when the attack took place.

Once plush sitting rooms, where government officials rubbed shoulders with diplomats and other figures of influence, are now strewn with glass, pieces of concrete and piles of debris. The windows and the roof are gone, remnants of the mansion walls barely stand, and floors are covered with rubble.

"This is my family house, all the photos and our belongings" were here, he said. "It was horrifying."

His daughter, Ban Karim, recounts how she huddled in the garden with the family dogs as the thundering missiles whizzed overhead. "We do not know if they can see us, we do not know if they are drones, we do not know anything about ballistics, what is going to happen right now," she said, speaking in English.

Observers speculate the timing of the attack was significant as the world's focus is on Russia's war in Ukraine.

Iraq's northern semi-autonomous Kurdish region maintains discreet links to Israel through the selling of its oil. Barzinji's KAR group built and operates the export pipeline to Ceyhan in Turkey through a joint venture with Russia's Rosneft.

"It is clearly nonsense, what the Iranians are talking about. This can be anything but an Israeli base," Hiwa Osman, an Iraqi Kurdish political analyst, said of Barzanji's villa.

An Iraqi intelligence official, speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss the attack, also rejected claims the house was an Israeli spy center, adding it was a place where diplomats often held social gatherings.

The attack was Iran's first assault on Iraqi soil since the January 2020 missile strike on Ain Al-Assad air base housing US forces, which was in retaliation for the US drone strikes that killed a Iranian warlord, Qassem

Soleimani, outside the Baghdad airport.

"This is a message (by Iran) to their base, their people. They needed to boost their morale because they have been humiliated for a long time," said Hamdi Malik, an associate fellow with the Washington Institute who specializes in Shiite militias.

Malik believes Sunday's attack was carefully plotted to minimize casualties and cause no direct harm to US interests – but also sent a message to the Americans amid stalled nuclear talks between Iran and world powers in Vienna: next time could be bigger, and more dangerous,

The attack also served to remind Baghdad, where talks on forming a government are languishing and where Moqtada Sadr, the winner of Iraq's 2021 parliamentary election, is threatened to exclude Iran-backed parties by forming an alliance with the Kurds and Sunnis.

Iran's "message to Iraqi partners is that no matter who wins the election Iraq is our backyard and we can do what we want, whenever we want," Malik said.



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Rockets fell in Iraq's Balad air base leaving no damage Surprise ruling threatens wedge between Iraq and Kurdish govts

Ukrainian women immigrants in Israel pose moral dilemma, security challenge

Sat, 2022-03-19 21:58

RAMALLAH: Concerns have increased in Israel since the outbreak of war in Ukraine over claims in the media that some women refugees from the Eastern European country were being exploited by human trafficking networks.

Leaflets – including preventive information and emergency phone numbers – are expected to be distributed among Ukrainian refugee women upon arrival at the airport as part of measures to counter the threat.

A moral dilemma has arisen – as Israel has begun to receive hundreds of Ukrainians fleeing war – amid fears that some of the arriving women were being lured into prostitution, according to Israeli media reports.

The reports detailed how Israeli human trafficking and criminal networks lure Ukrainian refugees into prostitution upon their arrival to Israel, with the concern being used as an excuse for Israeli immigration officials to deny entry to dozens of refugees during the past two weeks.

According to a TV report aired on Thursday on Israeli Channel 12, the Israeli Ministry of Social Welfare and the Anti-Trafficking Unit in the Ministry of Justice received information on attempts to lure Ukrainian female refugees in Israel into prostitution.

The attempts to lure refugee women did not begin only after arriving in Israel.

The report indicated that about 100 Ukrainian refugees spoke during their interrogation at Ben Gurion Airport about a person who offered them money to help them escape from the war zones in Ukraine, cross the border and board a plane bound for Israel.

The refugee women added that after they arrived in Israel, the same person told them that they had to provide “sexual or domestic services” to pay back the money.

The Israeli Population and Immigration Authority has received information and details on the person in question, and the suspicion is that a network – rather than a single person – was trying to lure refugee women into prostitution.

FASTFACT

247 Ukrainians were refused entry out of the nearly 10,000 refugees who have

tried to enter Israel since the outbreak of the war three weeks ago.

The testimonies of refugee women will be communicated to the police to open an investigation.

During deliberations in the Knesset on March 14, Population and Immigration Authority Director-General Tomir Moskowitz justified his refusal to allow some Ukrainian refugees to enter Israel, claiming that "they have come to work (in) prostitution."

Moskowitz said: "Just as they came before the war, they come now too. Some of them are victims of (human trafficking) ... and some are interested in bringing them or inviting them here."

According to data reviewed by Moskowitz, 247 Ukrainian refugees were refused entry out of the nearly 10,000 refugees who have tried to enter Israel since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine three weeks ago.

Luring Ukrainian and Russian immigrant women into prostitution is not a new issue in Israel.

Dozens of those who immigrated to Israel in the early 1990s following the collapse of the former Soviet Union were reportedly recruited to work in prostitution for years.

Meanwhile, an Israeli source related to the institutes receiving Ukrainian immigrant women confirmed to Arab News that human trafficking was indeed occurring, adding that this was the case not only in Israel but in Europe as well.

"I heard that someone came to those Ukrainian women and gave them a telephone number. Yes, it happened," said the source, who requested anonymity.



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Israeli forces kill two Palestinians in West Bank violence
Palestinians decry EU suspension of aid on Israel's behest