

Iran nuclear agreement unlikely without release of US prisoners – Malley

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VIENNA: The United States is unlikely to strike an agreement with Iran to save the 2015 Iran nuclear deal unless Tehran releases four US citizens Washington says it is holding hostage, the lead US nuclear negotiator told Reuters on Sunday.

The official, US Special Envoy for Iran Robert Malley, repeated the long-held US position that the issue of the four people held in Iran is separate from the nuclear negotiations. He moved a step closer, however, to saying that their release was a precondition for a nuclear agreement.

“They’re separate and we’re pursuing both of them. But I will say it is very hard for us to imagine getting back into the nuclear deal while four innocent Americans are being held hostage by Iran,” Malley told Reuters in an interview.

“So even as we’re conducting talks with Iran indirectly on the nuclear file we are conducting, again indirectly, discussions with them to ensure the release of our hostages,” he said in Vienna, where talks are taking place on bringing Washington and Tehran back into full compliance with the deal.

In recent years, Iran’s elite Revolutionary Guards have arrested dozens of dual nationals and foreigners, mostly on espionage and security-related charges.

Rights groups have accused Iran of taking prisoners to gain diplomatic leverage, while Western powers have long demanded that Tehran free their citizens, who they say are political prisoners.

Tehran denies holding people for political reasons.

MESSAGE SENT

Malley was speaking in a joint interview with Barry Rosen, a 77-year-old former US diplomat who has been on hunger strike in Vienna to demand the release of US, British, French, German, Austrian and Swedish prisoners in Iran, and that no nuclear agreement be reached without their release.

Rosen was one of more than 50 US diplomats held during the 1979-1981 Iran hostage crisis.

“I’ve spoken to a number of the families of the hostages who are extraordinarily grateful for what Mr. Rosen is doing but they also are imploring him to stop his hunger strike, as I am, because the message has been sent,” Malley said.

Rosen said that after five days of not eating he was feeling weak and would heed those calls.

“With the request from Special Envoy Malley and my doctors and others, we’ve agreed (that) after this meeting I will stop my hunger strike but this does not mean that others will not take up the baton,” Rosen said.

The indirect talks between Iran and the United States on bringing both countries back into full compliance with the landmark 2015 nuclear deal are

in their eighth round. Iran refuses to hold meetings with US officials, meaning others shuttle between the two sides. The deal between Iran and major powers lifted sanctions against Tehran in exchange for restrictions on its nuclear activities that extended the time it would need to obtain enough fissile material for a nuclear bomb if it chose to. Iran denies seeking nuclear weapons. Then-President Donald Trump pulled the United States out of the deal in 2018, reimposing punishing economic sanctions against Tehran. Iran responded by breaching many of the deal's nuclear restrictions, to the point that Western powers say the deal will soon have been hollowed out completely.

LEVERAGE

Asked if Iran and the United States might negotiate directly, Malley said: "We've heard nothing to that effect. We'd welcome it."

The four US citizens include Iranian-American businessman Siamak Namazi, 50, and his father Baquer, 85, both of whom have been convicted of "collaboration with a hostile government." Namazi remains in prison. His father was released on medical grounds in 2018 and his sentence later reduced to time served. While the elder Namazi is no longer jailed, a lawyer for the family says he is effectively barred from leaving Iran.

"Senior Biden administration officials have repeatedly told us that although the potential Iranian nuclear and hostage deals are independent and must be negotiated on parallel tracks, they will not just conclude the nuclear deal by itself," said Jared Genser, pro bono counsel to the Namazi family.

"Otherwise, all leverage to get the hostages out will be lost," he added.

The others are environmentalist Morad Tahbaz, 66, who is also British, and businessman Emad Shargi, 57.



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US hopes to build on Iran nuclear talk progress this week
US detains Iranian smuggling ship, UK seizes drugs in Mideast waters

[Palestinian minister says holds first meet with Israel's Lapid](#)

Author:

Mon, 2022-01-24 01:37

JERUSALEM: Israel's top diplomat held an official meeting Sunday evening with a Palestinian minister, the latter said, the first such encounter between the Jewish state's current foreign minister and a Palestinian official.

"I met this evening with Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid and we discussed several political and bilateral issues," Palestinian civil affairs minister Hussein Al-Sheikh said on Twitter.

"I have highlighted the need for a political horizon between the two parties based on international legitimacy," he added, without saying where the encounter took place.

The Israeli foreign ministry declined to comment to AFP but did not deny that the meeting took place.

In late December, Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz hosted talks with Mahmud Abbas on the Palestinian president's first visit to Israel for an official meeting since 2010.

At that time, Israel's defense ministry announced "confidence-building measures" with the Palestinian Authority.

These included a \$32 million (100 million shekel) advance payment to the PA in taxes collected on its behalf by Israel, and the granting of 600 extra permits allowing Palestinian businessmen to cross into Israel.

It also announced the regularization of 6,000 more Palestinians living in the occupied West Bank, which has been under Israeli control since the Six-Day War of 1967.

Sheikh had welcomed Abbas' meeting with Gantz, saying at the time that it had been a "serious and courageous effort" toward a "political" solution.

After Israel's coalition government led by Prime Minister Naftali Bennett was formed in June, Gantz visited the PA's headquarters in the West Bank city of Ramallah in August for talks with Abbas, the first official meeting at such a level for several years.

Right-winger Bennett leads a motley coalition of parties ranging from the Jewish nationalist right to the center and left, and includes an Israeli Arab party for the first time.

After those talks, hawkish Bennett, the former head of a settler lobby group who opposes Palestinian statehood, underlined that there was no peace process under way with the Palestinians, "and there won't be one."



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Israel releases Palestinians held after eviction Israeli general turned
lawmaker emerges as settler critic

[Iran rights defender sentenced to 8 years jail](#)

Author:

Sun, 2022-01-23 23:28

PARIS: An Iranian court has sentenced leading human rights campaigner Narges Mohammadi to eight years in prison and over 70 lashes, her husband announced on Sunday, following her sudden arrest in November last year.

Her husband Taghi Rahmani, who is based in France, wrote on Twitter that the sentence was handed out after a hearing that lasted only five minutes.

The details of both the verdict and the case against her remain unclear.

A colleague of Nobel Peace Prize-winning campaigner Shirin Ebadi, who now lives outside Iran, Mohammadi has been repeatedly jailed by the Iranian

authorities over the last years.

She was released from prison in October 2020 but then suddenly arrested in November 2021 in Karaj outside Tehran while attending a memorial for a man killed during nationwide protests in November 2019.

Amnesty International at the time condemned Mohammadi's arrest as "arbitrary" and described her as a "prisoner of conscience targeted solely for her peaceful human rights activities."

BACKGROUND

A colleague of Nobel Peace Prize-winning campaigner Shirin Ebadi, who now lives outside Iran, Narges Mohammadi has been repeatedly jailed by the Iranian authorities over the last years.

Mohammadi, who has long campaigned against the use of the death penalty in Iran, had before her latest arrest been working with families seeking justice for loved ones who they say were killed by security forces in the 2019 protests.

Even while out of prison, she had in May 2021 been handed a sentence of 80 lashes and 30 months in jail on charges of "propaganda" against Iran's Islamic system.

Activists have decried what they see as increased repression in Iran over the last months, including the jailing of campaigners and greater use of the death penalty.

Prominent detainees have also died in prison, such as the well-known poet Baktash Abtin.

Another top rights defender serving a lengthy sentence in Iran is prize-winning lawyer Nasrin Sotoudeh who defended women arrested for protesting against the requirement for Iranian women to wear the hijab.

While she is currently believed to be out of jail on medical leave, supporters fear she is at risk of being imminently returned to prison.



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Jailed British-Iranian man begins hunger strike US detains Iranian smuggling ship, UK seizes drugs in Mideast waters

[Kuwait FM: Lebanon 'should not be platform for aggression'](#)

Author:

Sun, 2022-01-23 21:52

BEIRUT: Lebanon is a “place of hope” and “should not be a platform for aggression,” visiting Kuwait Foreign Minister Sheikh Ahmad Nasser Al-Mohammed Al-Sabah said on Sunday in Beirut.

On the second day of his visit to the capital, the minister renewed a commitment during separate meetings with Lebanese officials to a “Kuwaiti, Gulf, Arab and international message for Lebanon to not be a platform for any aggression, and for all borders to be controlled by the state.”

The minister met on Sunday with President Michel Aoun, Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri and Interior Minister Bassam Mawlawi.

After his talks with the Kuwaiti minister, Aoun stressed Lebanon's "firm keenness to preserve the best relations with the Arab countries."

The Kuwaiti minister held talks with Prime Minister Najib Mikati on Saturday night.

He also met Foreign Minister Abdullah Bou Habib, who is expected to visit Kuwait on Saturday.

Kuwait currently chairs the ministerial council of the Arab League.

Al-Sabah said that the visit was among various international efforts aimed at rebuilding confidence between Lebanon and the international arena.

The Kuwaiti minister's statements had three central themes.

The first was a message of "sympathy, solidarity, synergy and love for the brotherly Lebanese people."

Secondly, Al-Sabah urged Lebanese officials to adopt a position of neutrality and ensure that the country "will not be a platform for any aggression, while refraining from interfering in the internal affairs of Arab countries in general, and the Gulf in particular."

His third message stressed a regional desire "to see a stable, secure and strong Lebanon by implementing international and Arab resolutions."

Al-Sabah said that Lebanon "will review the messages I have conveyed to the Lebanese officials and ... we will soon receive a response."

Lebanon's ties with Gulf states plunged into a new crisis in October after comments by former Lebanese information minister George Kordahi criticizing the conflict in Yemen.

Kuwait was one of several members of the Gulf Cooperation Council, including Saudi Arabia, that responded to Kordahi's remarks by expelling the Lebanese ambassador and recalling its envoy to Beirut.

Aoun said in a tweet on Sunday that Lebanon was keen on maintaining "the best relations" with the Gulf states and that the Kuwaiti proposals would be discussed before an appropriate position was announced.

Some linked Al-Sabah's visit to the return of former Prime Minister Saad Hariri to Lebanon, but the Kuwaiti minister denied such a link.

He stressed: "The visit has nothing to do with internal Lebanese affairs. We do not interfere in Lebanese affairs."

Hariri will announce on Monday his final decision on whether or not he will run in upcoming parliamentary elections.

His media office said that the former premier will deliver a speech at 4 p.m. on Monday from his residence.

For the second day in a row, hundreds of Hariri supporters flocked outside his home in the capital, demanding that he run in the election.

Addressing his supporters, Hariri said: "I have listened to you today and I want you to listen to me tomorrow.

"I assure you that my blood is yours, and this house's doors will always be open to receive you all."

He told journalists: "Sometimes one has to take a step back in order to move forward."

Supporters carried pictures of Hariri along with the Lebanese and Future Movement flags, chanting slogans in support of the former prime minister.

They calling on Hariri to rescind his decision to refrain from running for elections, asking him not to abandon his supporters.

"Hariri and the Future Movement are among the country's main political symbols, and we will not accept their abandonment," one supporter said.

His decision is expected to have profound repercussions on the electoral process and Lebanese politics at large.

In his Sunday sermon, Maronite Patriarch Bechara Boutros Al-Rahi reiterated the importance of Lebanon's neutrality.

"However, it's unfortunate that this concept is completely absent from the speeches of officials and Lebanon thus remains hostage to regional axes," Al-Rahi added.

During his joint press conference on Sunday with the Lebanese interior minister, Al-Sabah said: "We discussed the issue of drug smuggling from Lebanon, and we appreciate what Lebanon is doing."

He added: "We demanded mechanisms to ensure that shipments do not reach Kuwait and the rest of the region, and that Lebanese authorities should do this to restore confidence.

"There is a general desire for all Lebanese borders and outlets to be controlled by the state and for Lebanon to become more secure and stable."

Mawlawi, Lebanon's interior minister, said: "I reiterate the position of Lebanon and the Interior Ministry that rejects any verbal abuse of Kuwait. We discussed all issues related to border control and drug smuggling."

A government source told Arab News: "The messages that Al-Sabah conveyed are the outcome of contact between France, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, and they go in line with the principles contained in the Mikati government's ministerial statement."

The source added: "These messages will be discussed, and the Lebanese foreign minister will deliver Lebanon's response during his visit to Kuwait."

The source also commented on the possibility of Hezbollah ignoring these principles – as it has repeatedly done by insulting Gulf countries.

They said that the Lebanese government’s position “is the only one that matters, because it represents all of Lebanon.”

The government position is based on the ministerial statement that stresses Lebanon’s neutrality and insists on friendly relations with Arab and Gulf countries, the source added.



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Lebanon to start virtual talks with IMF next week
Lebanon’s PM to meet Kuwaiti foreign minister in Beirut

[Standoff near Syrian prison holding Daesh militants continues](#)

Author:

By SARAH EL DEEB | AP

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Sun, 2022-01-23 17:11

JEDDAH: Daesh militants launched a new wave of attacks on a jail in northern Syria on Sunday as the death toll from four days of fighting rose to 136.

More than 100 terrorists first attacked the Kurdish-run Ghwayran jail in Hasakeh city on Thursday to free hundreds of Daesh members, including prominent leaders, in the most significant operation since its "caliphate" was defeated in Syria nearly three years ago

Amid intense fighting since then, the militants have freed prisoners and seized weapons stored at the jail, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, the monitoring group based in Britain.

"At least 84 Daesh members and 45 Kurdish fighters, including internal security forces, prison guards and counter-terrorism forces, have been killed," the Observatory said. Seven civilians had also died in fighting in the city, the largest in northeastern Syria, it said.

The battles continued on Sunday as the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, backed by US-led coalition airstrikes, closed in on Daesh targets inside and outside the jail.

Kurdish forces said the militants staged a new attack on the prison in an attempt to break the SDF security cordon and support prisoners who were still in control of some parts of the jail.

FASTFACT

The battles continued on Sunday as the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, backed by US-led coalition airstrikes, closed in on Daesh targets inside and outside the jail.

The SDF said its forces had sealed off the area around the prison and "Daesh fighters located within the gates ... can no longer escape." The Observatory said the SDF had secured most of the area and much of the jail itself, apart from some cell blocks where militants had yet to surrender.

Hundreds of civilians fled the area. Daesh fighters were "entering homes and killing people," said one man fleeing on foot carrying a child wrapped in a blanket. "It was a miracle we made it out. The situation is still very bad. After four days, violent clashes are still ongoing."

Hamsha Sweidan, 80, who had been trapped in her home near the jail, said civilians were left without bread or water as the battle raged. "We have been dying of hunger and thirst," she said as she crossed into SDF-held areas in Hasakeh city. "Now, we don't know where to go."

Ghwayran is the largest prison in Syria holding Daesh militants, housing up

to 3,500, including over 600 under the age of 18. Daesh claimed their attack on Thursday had freed 800. The SDF said they had recaptured about 100 escaped prisoners, leaving hundreds still on the loose.

However, the anti-Daesh coalition insisted the prison attack would leave Daesh weaker because many militants involved in the fighting had been killed.

“The coalition is confident in its assessment that the recent Daesh escape attempt will not pose a significant threat,” it said. “While Daesh remains a threat, it is clearly no longer the force it once was.”



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