

Iran ups the nuclear ante in search of Vienna negotiations advantage

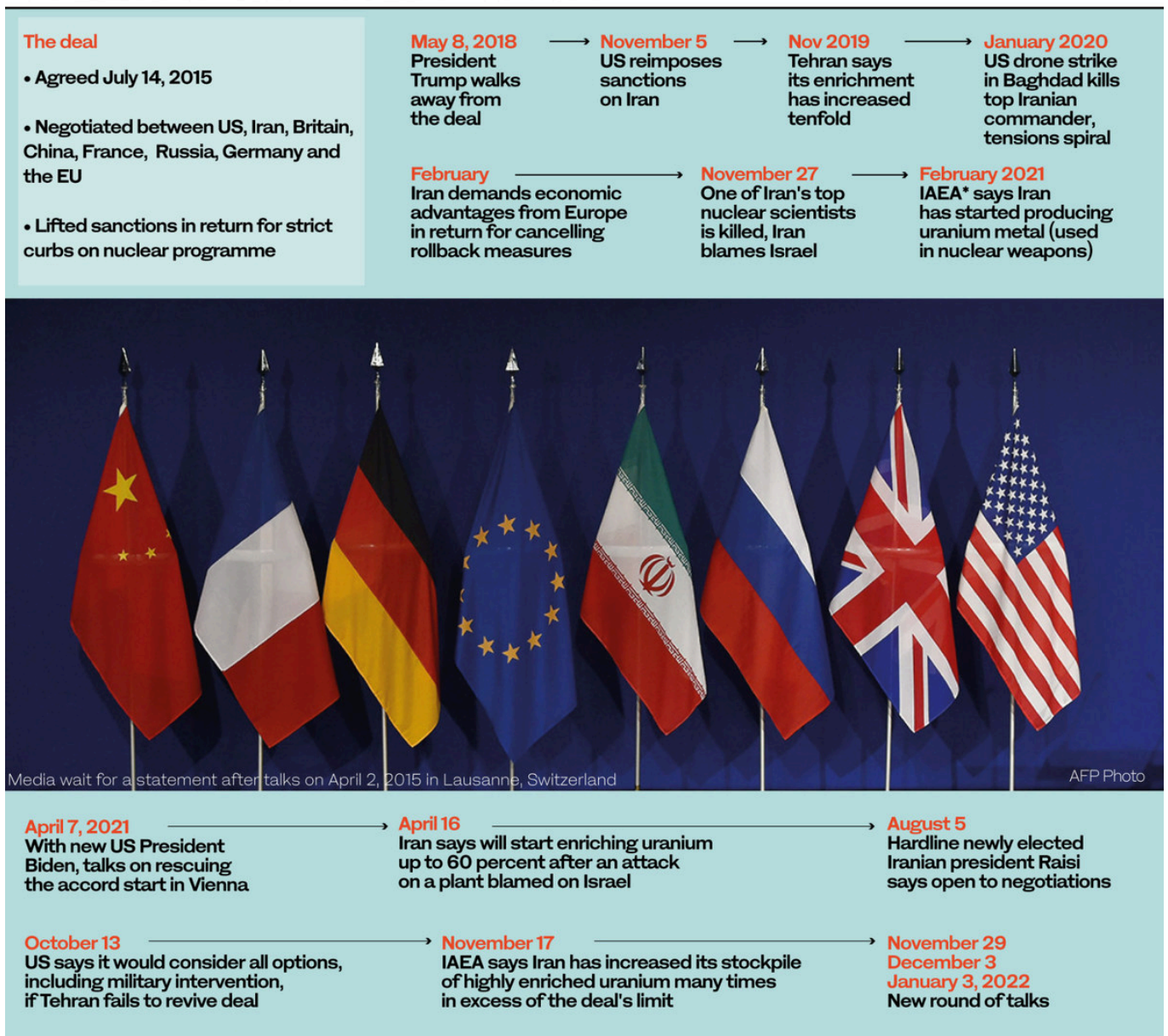
Sun, 2022-01-09 01:55

DUBAI: Tehran's proxies have been ramping up their activities on the battlefields of the Middle East in recent weeks. In Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, forces loyal to the Iranian regime have been busy, escalating attacks against US and Saudi targets.

One spark for this intensification may be the second anniversary of the assassination of Qassem Soleimani, the Iranian general who set in motion much of the chaos still ravaging the region. But some analysts believe the prime reason is the Iran-US nuclear talks that have resumed in Vienna.

As the talks progress, albeit painstakingly, Iran's officials have been increasingly upbeat, believing it is on the verge of salvaging a deal that would ease crippling US sanctions on its financial institutions and political bodies.

TIMELINE OF IRAN NUCLEAR ACCORD



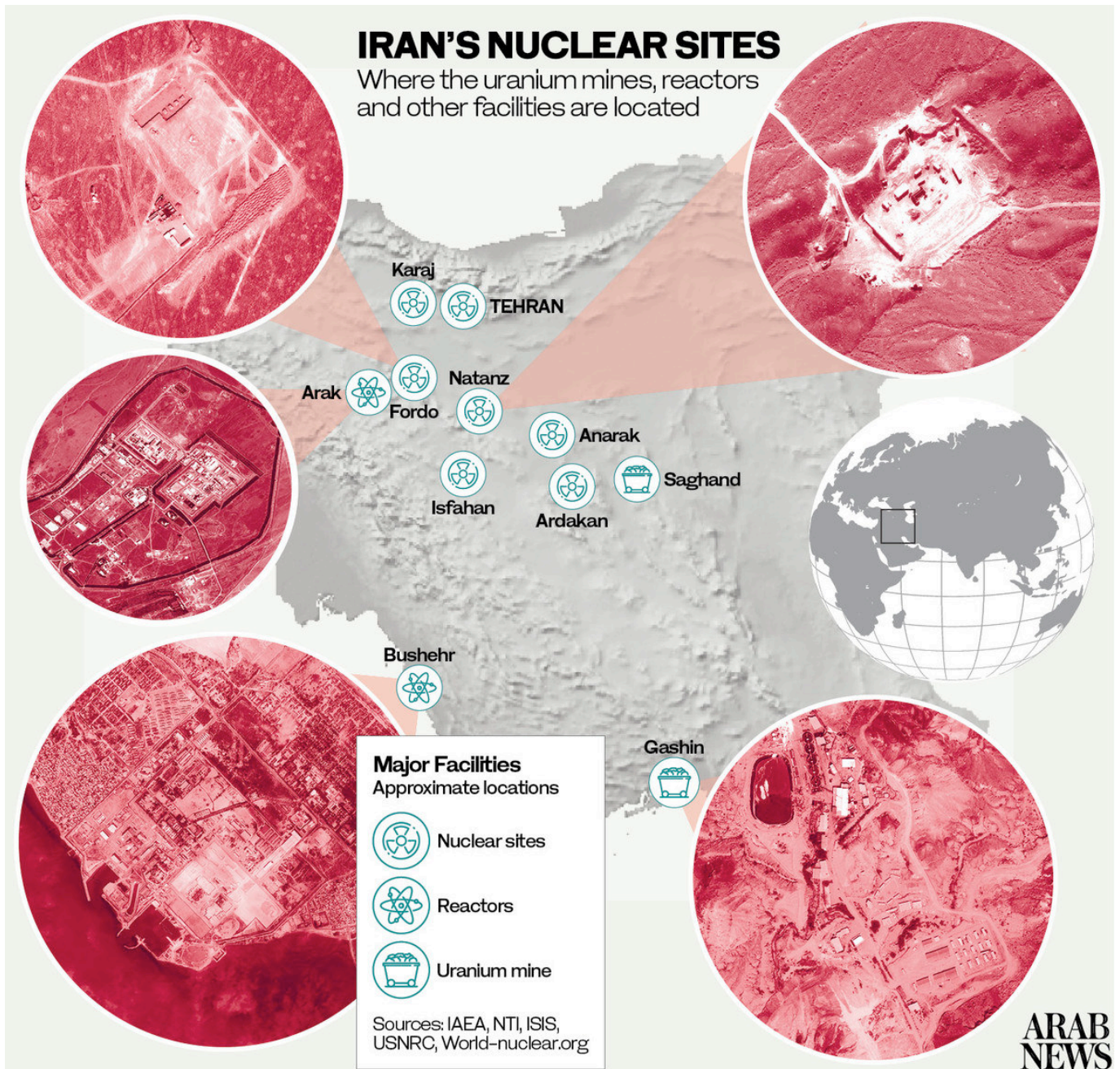
Source: *International Atomic Energy Agency

ARABNEWS

An informed source has told Arab News that the nuts and bolts of a new arrangement between Washington and Tehran are now primarily in place.

One remaining obstacle is a demand by Iran that the next US president should not walk out of any new deal. Whether the US could honor such a pledge remains unclear. In 2018, US President Donald Trump scorned and abandoned the "one-sided deal." Iran responded by ceasing its cooperation with international inspectors that kept tabs on its nuclear infrastructure and ramping up its enrichment efforts.

The current president, Joe Biden, has staked much of his first term foreign policy legacy on reinstating the deal, formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action with Iran. This has earned the opprobrium of regional allies as his officials persist with talks with Iranian hardliners.



Entifadh Qanbar, a former Iraqi spokesperson, said: “Iranians like to twist arms in negotiations. Robert Malley seems to be trying hard to appease the Iranians and, unfortunately, has the upper hand in the Biden administration when it comes to the negotiations. The Biden administration is coming off weak, especially in light of the chaos in Afghanistan after the US withdrawal.”

Dr. Ras Zimmt, an expert on Iran at the Institute for National Security Studies in Israel, said: “Looking at the recent attacks on Syria and Iraq, one of the main reasons it happened, I believe, is the second anniversary of the killing of Qassem Soleimani.” He said this hung a pall over the negotiations from the Iranian side.

Washington’s response to the attacks on US forces has been a far cry from Trump’s reaction as Iran-backed rioters approached the US embassy in Baghdad two years ago, when he sanctioned the assassination of Soleimani.



Iran's President Ebrahim Raisi (R), accompanied by chief of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran Mohammad Eslami, speaks to the media during a visit to the Bushehr Nuclear Power Plant, southeast of Tehran. (Photo by Iranian Presidency / AFP)

Iranian president Ebrahim Raisi spoke on the anniversary of Soleimani's death at a ceremony in a large prayer hall in Tehran. The president vowed revenge on Donald Trump, calling him the primary "aggressor and assassin."

The Iranian general and his ally, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, who was also killed in the drone strike in January 2020, had been masters of the art of wielding powerful proxy forces in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen and also of bombing the US into concessions with low intensity – but high political impact – rocket fire.



Gen. Hossein Salami (C), head of Iran's Quds Force, attending military exercises dubbed Payambar-e-Azadm held in three provinces last December. (SEPAH NEWS handout photo via AFP)

On Wednesday, an armed pro-Iranian militia called Gasseem Al-Jabarayn claimed responsibility for Iraq's drone and rocket attacks, which caused no casualties. The group posted online that they vow to maintain their attacks until there was a complete US withdrawal from Iraq. This group is believed to be a cover for one of the main Iranian proxies, whose influence in Iraq remains extensive as the central government continues to struggle to assert control.

Analysts in the region say the frequency of attacks in Iraq and Syria tends to increase whenever a weighty political decision draws near. Few such decisions have carried more consequences than whether to re-engage with Iran – an actor widely distrusted by the GCC and the rest of the Middle East.

To do so could be the biggest gamble of Biden's presidency, potentially destabilizing bedrock security arrangements with core US allies, who remain averse to such a move without stringent restrictions to prevent even clandestine efforts to build nuclear weapons.

URANIUM ENRICHMENT

The concentration levels required for civil and military purposes

- Nuclear energy produced from uranium 235, which represents only 0.7% of natural uranium; the rest is uranium 238



Civil use: majority in nuclear power stations using uranium enriched with U-235 to 3.5 to 5%

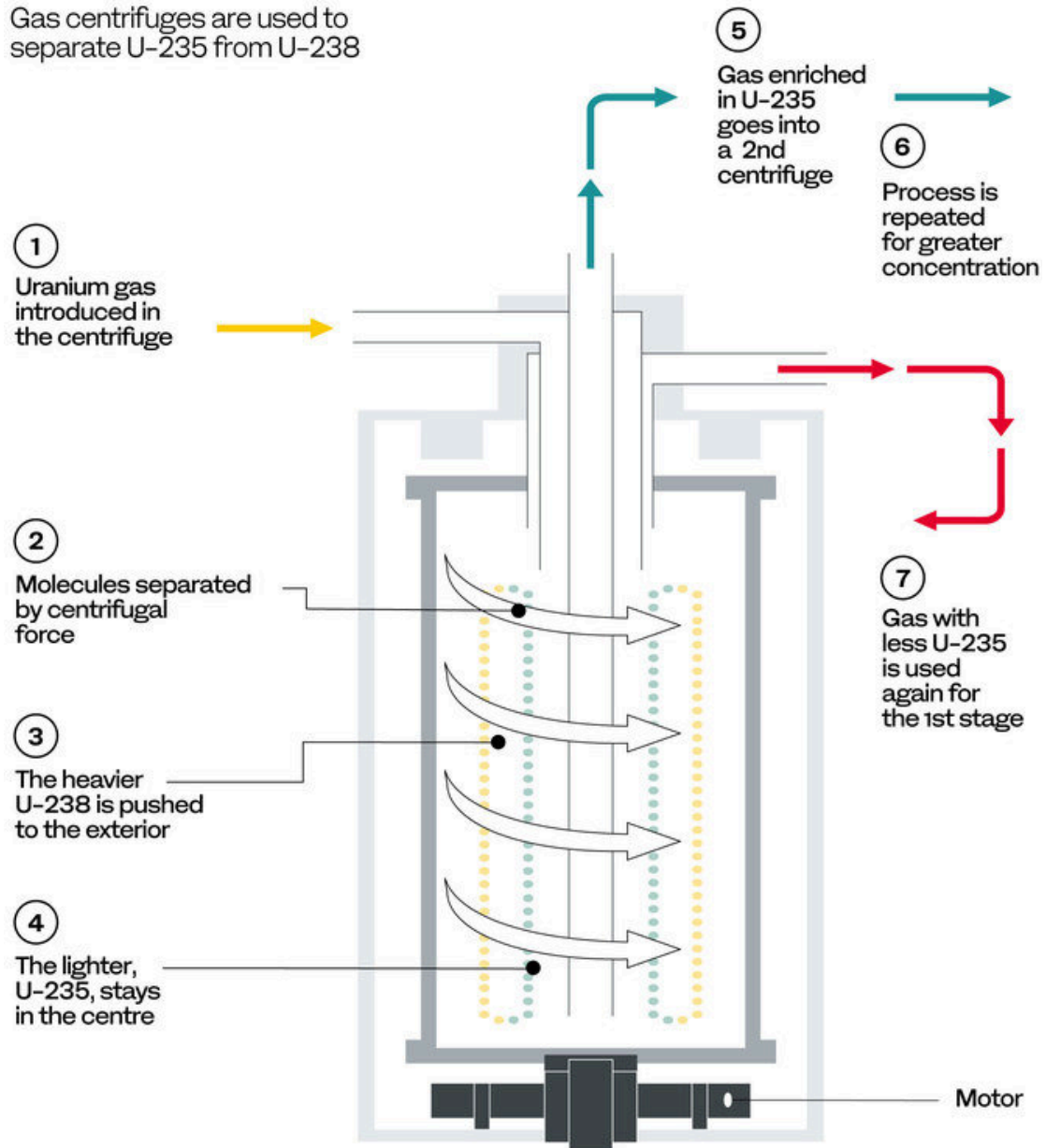
- The enrichment process increases the proportion of U-235 by separating it from U-238



Military use: concentration of at least 90% U-235 necessary to produce nuclear weapons

GAS CENTRIFUGE

Gas centrifuges are used to separate U-235 from U-238



However, other commentators have played down the impact of the attacks on the Vienna talks.

Mohanad Hage Ali, director of communications and fellow of Carnegie Middle East Center, said: "These attacks are directed to serve an internal (Iranian) purpose and have little military significance given the absence of serious casualties. They are more useful in justifying the lack of reprisals for major attacks against Iranian forces and their militias.

"I see them as ineffective in pushing for a change in Vienna as compared to the actual progress in Iran's nuclear program."

Rasha Al-Aqeedi, an Iraqi researcher on militancy and ideology, said: "The recent attacks are unlikely to achieve concessions given their marginal impact on US personnel and facilities."



Iraqi troops inspect an un-fired Katyusha rocket during a rocket attack on a military base hosting US forces near Baghdad's international airport on Jan. 5, 2022. (Iraqi Media Security Cell/Handout via REUTERS)

Pentagon press secretary John Kirby blamed the attacks combine on the

hostility toward Washington's continued presence in Iraq and the anniversary of Soleimani's death.

Whether the rocket fire improves Iran's hand is open to contention. However, even the perception Iran aims to create of being able to bomb itself into a better bargaining position acts as a fillip to the country's negotiators, who have long touted the virtues of "strategic patience" over the capriciousness of US policy.

As the latest round of talks resumed, the US Special Envoy for Iran was in Saudi Arabia this week to talk with senior officials. Gulf countries retain a skeptical line on Iran, despite having embarked on a series of regional discussions at an intelligence level last year.

Central to Saudi concerns is that Iran has refused to use the Vienna talks to discuss its ballistic missile program or its interventions across a region still reeling from decades of war and insurrection – much of it Iranian-led.

"If the US does not maintain a tough hand, the region will sink further," said a senior Iraqi official, "This is not a time for weak hearts."





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Iran displays missiles amid nuclear talks with world powers
How Iran's Ahwazi Arabs, betrayed, fell victim to oppression that continues to this day

[Turkish defense minister warns Athens not to test Ankara's patience](#)

Sun, 2022-01-09 02:10

ANKARA: Greece should refrain from testing Turkey's patience with provocations, including with a threat to extend its territorial waters in the Aegean, Turkey's defense minister warned on Saturday.

Speaking to a group of journalists in Ankara, Hulusi Akar also said Turkey wanted to resolve disputes with neighbor and fellow NATO member Greece through dialogue and turn the Aegean into a "sea of friendship" but accused Athens of pressing ahead with what he said were provocative actions, including militarizing islands close to mainland Turkey, in breach of international agreements.

"They (Greece) should not miscalculate and think it's the right time (to extend the territorial waters to) 12 miles," Akar said. "They should not test us in any way, and should not embark on such an adventure. I hope they don't make such a mistake."

He added: "Let the two sides benefit from the riches, let both the Turkish people and the Greek people live happily and prosperously."

Greece and Turkey have long been at odds over a series of disputes, including territorial rights in the Aegean Sea and energy exploration rights in the eastern Mediterranean. Tensions flared in the summer of 2020 over exploratory drilling rights in areas in the Mediterranean where Greece and Cyprus claim their own exclusive economic zone.

Greece says it maintains its right to extend its territorial waters from the current six to 12 nautical miles around its Aegean islands. Turkey has long said it would consider the move – which would block its own access to the Aegean – as a cause for war. Last year, the Greek parliament voted to extend its waters along its western coastline, on the other side of the country, to 12 miles.

Athens has recently called on Turkey to revoke the decision to consider an extension of the territorial waters as a cause for war if it wants to normalize ties. It has also urged Ankara to end what it also terms as provocations in the Aegean and the eastern Mediterranean.

Commenting on the NATO alliance, meanwhile, Akar lamented what he said was an "open or covert" arms embargo by some NATO allies on Turkey. He said those countries were "weakening" the alliance by not selling defense components to Turkey.

The US slapped sanctions on some Turkish defense officials and expelled Turkey from the US-led F-35 fighter jet program after Turkey purchased Russia's advanced S-400 long-range missile defense system, over concerns that the Russian technology would put the safety of the fighter jets at risk. Canada canceled export licenses for drone technology to Turkey in April last year after finding the equipment had been used by Turkey's ally Azerbaijan in the conflict with Armenian forces in Nagorno-Karabakh five months earlier. Arms control advocates had claimed the UAVs were using imaging and targeting systems produced by a Canadian company.



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Turkey pursues new mechanism with US to consolidate ties Saudi Arabia, Greece discuss Iran, Middle East security

[Lebanese PM betting on 2022 budget to restore crippled Cabinet](#)

Sun, 2022-01-09 00:45

BEIRUT: The dispute between Lebanese President Michel Aoun and Parliament

Speaker Nabih Berri has disappointed those who hoped their row would subside and that Cabinet would convene, as sources close to the prime minister said that this year's budget was ready and the government should take action.

Hezbollah and its ally the Amal Movement have been refusing to allow the Cabinet to meet since Oct. 12, demanding the removal of a judge who is investigating 2020's devastating explosion at Beirut Port.

With Parliament expected to convene in an extraordinary session starting Monday, politicians appeared to mourn the Aoun-Berri settlement, which they felt was "stillborn."

MP Ali Darwish said that Prime Minister Najib Mikati was counting "on the sense of patriotism of those boycotting Cabinet sessions to attend."

Darwish is a member of the Independent Center bloc headed by Mikati.

"The discussion of the budget is a constitutional right that cannot be avoided," Darwish told Arab News. When Mikati received the budget from the Ministry of Finance, he would call for a Cabinet session to study it and refer it to Parliament, the lawmaker said.

"I think that attending the Cabinet session is necessary. Discussing the budget is a crucial constitutional duty to meet people's needs and approve spending policy," he added.

Sources close to Mikati said that the budget was ready and the government should take action, which necessitates a Cabinet session and opening an extraordinary session of Parliament since legislation is required to keep pace with the work of the government.

The country's election law has entered into force, and the Ministry of Interior has decided that elections will be held mid-May.

The Lebanese people and the international community are counting on these elections to bring about change in the ruling authority.

That Aoun requested to include an item related to the election law on the agenda of parliament's extraordinary session has raised questions about the possibility of disrupting these elections under the pretext of making new amendments.

"The election law is now in effect and any amendment cannot be related to the date of holding the elections," said Darwish.

Darwish said the fact that the Constitutional Council failed to accept Aoun's appeal challenging the amendments to the election law meant it had approved the law as it was and Parliament would therefore not allow any amendment that would delay holding the elections.

The head of the Lebanese Forces party Samir Geagea announced on Saturday "a comprehensive partisan mobilization in order to fight the next electoral battle."

In a partisan meeting, he called "to unleash campaigning efforts and to transform all party bodies into a mobilized electoral machine, since the electoral process is the only means to achieve national salvation."

The Lebanese Forces party is the first political party to openly launch its electoral battle in the country.

"It is a battle that the Lebanese need to win to get rid of the dire reality that the alliance between Hezbollah and the Free Patriotic Movement has brought upon the country," Geagea said. "The chances of success are very great as public opinion has significantly shifted."

He said the people had "sensed the danger" posed by an authority that only cared about its interests and "deliberately" led the country to collapse.

Geagea ruled out the possibility of disrupting the elections.

"We will confront any such attempt and the Lebanese army, along with other security forces, is able to guarantee elections are held in the best possible way."

While it remains unclear how to get people to even start thinking about voting in the absence of a social protection network for the poorest and needy families in light of Lebanon's worsening economic collapse, the efforts of security services are focused on prosecuting illegal financial practices that manipulate the exchange rate and prosecuting gangs of robbers.

The Higher Banking Commission announced that it would start issuing warnings prior to writing off the licenses granted by the central bank to 188 money changers for their lack of commitment to registering dollar-buying and selling transactions on the Sayrafa platform.

The Lebanese Army Command announced: "A patrol from the Military Intelligence Directorate, supported by a force from the army, raided the homes of two Lebanese citizens in the Ghobeiry area in the southern suburbs of Beirut and arrested them for forming a gang that carried out armed robberies and sold weapons, in addition to participating in the Tayouneh incidents on Oct. 14, 2021, assaulting peaceful demonstrators, provoking riots and blocking roads."

It said ammunition, military equipment and drugs were seized from the house of one of the arrested individuals.



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More talks on Lebanese cabinet as deadline in doubt

[Lebanese national jailed in Miami for sexual assault](#)

Author:

Sat, 2022-01-08 22:56

CHICAGO: Lebanese national Marwan Habib, 32, has been jailed without bond after he was arrested on Friday for sexually assaulting a woman at a hotel in Miami, Florida.

He appeared in court on Friday before Miami-Dade 11th Circuit Court Judge Marisa Tinkler Mendez after he was taken into custody.

Habib met his victim at a club but later followed her to her hotel and then fraudulently convinced the clerk to give him a key to her room.

Police told reporters that Habib had entered the victim's room at Hotel Victor in South Beach on Friday night and then sexually assaulted her.

He faces the felony charge of "burglary with assault or battery," according to court records. He is also being held for an "immigration review" by the court.

Habib asked the judge if he could "pay a fine and go home," but Mendez responded: "You are not going home today, sir." She denied him bond, which would have allowed him to be free until his next court hearing.

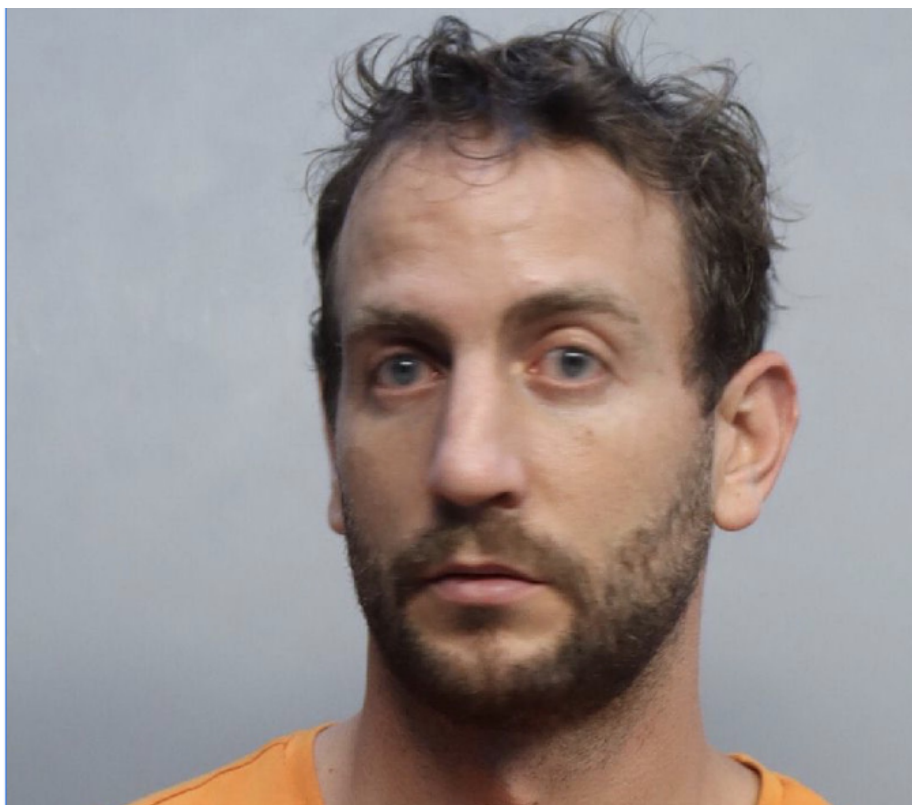
Instead, he was ordered into the custody of the Miami-Dade Turner Guilford Knight Correctional Center, where he is being held pending further court appearances.

Police are investigating whether Habib tracked and sexually assaulted other women, according to Miami media reports.

Police said they are investigating several complaints from women who said they were harassed by the suspect.

Habib has reportedly alluded police in Lebanon, where he is suspected of rape and sexual assault.

According to court records, he could be extradited back to Lebanon, where he could face further charges.



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Philippines seeks to prosecute former US diplomat over sexual abuse of minor

[Lebanon power company says protesters behind national blackout](#)

Author:

AFP

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Sat, 2022-01-08 22:33

BEIRUT: Lebanon's state electricity company said Saturday that its power plants had stopped working after protesters stormed a key substation and tampered with the electrical equipment.

The small Mediterranean country is already grappling with round-the-clock power cuts that last at least 20 hours a day due to a financial crisis that has hampered key imports, including fuel for power stations.

Demonstrators angered by the blackouts stormed an Electricite du Liban substation in the Aramoun region north of Beirut on Saturday, EDL said in a statement.

"Protesters disconnected a 150-220 kilovolt power transformer and opened circuit breakers connecting the Zahrani power plant to the Aramoun station," it said.

"This caused disturbances on the electrical grid... which led to a total blackout across Lebanese territory as of 17:27 (1527 GMT)."

The disruption will pile more pressure on private generators that are already struggling to keep up with the near-total absence of state power.

Private generator owners have hiked prices and rationed supply in recent months, with costs surging after the government gradually lifted fuel subsidies.

The average generator bill for a Lebanese family usually costs more than the monthly minimum wage of 675,000 Lebanese pounds – now worth just \$22 as the local currency hits record lows against the dollar on the black market.

The international community has long demanded a complete overhaul of Lebanon's ruinous electricity sector, which has cost the government more than \$40 billion since the end of the 1975-1990 civil war.

Lebanon has reached an agreement on bringing Jordanian electricity and Egyptian gas into the country via war-torn Syria, while Shiite movement Hezbollah has separately started hydrocarbon deliveries from Iran.



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