

Vienna talks on Iran nuclear deal resume amid tensions

Author:

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VIENNA: Negotiations between Iran and world powers aimed at salvaging a tattered 2015 nuclear deal resumed in Vienna on Thursday after a few days' pause, with tensions high after Tehran made demands last week that European countries strongly criticized.

EU diplomat Enrique Mora, who chaired Thursday's meeting of all the deal's remaining signatories – Iran, Britain, France, Germany, Russia and China – said afterward that he felt “a renewed sense of purpose on the need to work and to reach an agreement on bringing the (agreement) back to life.”

Mora said: “Whether that will be confirmed and endorsed by negotiations on the details, we will see in the coming days,” adding that the positive impression “has to be tested.” He said that it is becoming “more imperative” with time to reach an agreement quickly.

Mora said participants are approaching the task “with the realism necessary to get an agreement, because it's difficult, because there are different positions, because some points are still extremely open.” He added: “We have to close them, and we don't have all the time of the world.”

The US has participated indirectly in the ongoing talks because it withdrew from the accord in 2018 under then-President Donald Trump. President Joe Biden has signaled that he wants to rejoin the deal.

Washington plans to send a delegation led by Robert Malley, the special US envoy for Iran, to Vienna over the weekend.

Meanwhile, the US will send a senior government delegation to the UAE next week to meet with banks over concerns about Iran sanctions compliance, a State Department spokesperson said on Thursday.

The move suggests Washington is looking to crank up economic pressure on Tehran amid Western doubts about Tehran's determination to salvage the accord.

The US delegation, which will include the head of the US Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control, Andrea Gacki, will warn banks that have business with Iran and are not in compliance with the sanctions.

A State Department spokesperson said the US had evidence of noncompliance, and that the banks could later be sanctioned or penalized over their dealings.

Russia's Ambassador to the UN in Vienna Mikhail Ulyanov told the TASS agency that Thursday's talks had “removed a number of misunderstandings that had created some tension,” but did not elaborate.

The current round of talks is the seventh since they started in April.

Iranian officials have insisted they are “serious about the talks.”

“The fact that the two sides are continuing to talk indicates that they want to narrow the gaps,” said Iran's chief negotiator Ali Bagheri.

The EU's top foreign policy official Josep Borrell asked Iran's Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian to "respond to worries concerning its current nuclear program," which has intensified in recent months.



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US says Iran's escalation of nuclear program will test mutual return to deal
Renewed Iran nuclear talks seen Thursday, but France believes Tehran playing for time

[Israeli foreign minister arrives in Cairo to strengthen relations](#)

Author:
Thu, 2021-12-09 23:39

CAIRO: Israel's foreign minister arrived in Cairo on Thursday on a diplomatic visit aimed at strengthening ties and shoring up a tenuous cease-fire between Israel and Gaza's militant Hamas rulers.

Foreign Minister Yair Lapid met with Egypt's President, Abdel Fattah El-Sisi,

and the country's foreign minister, Sameh Shoukry, for talks that reflected budding ties between Egypt and Israel's new government. Egypt's intelligence chief also participated in the meetings.

Egypt, the first Arab country to reach a peace agreement with Israel, has served as a key mediator between Israel and Hamas.

Israel's Foreign Ministry said Lapid presented a plan to develop Gaza's economy in return for assurances of quiet, and eventually disarmament, by Hamas. It said the plan must address "the issue of captives and missing persons."

Lapid also discussed Israeli efforts to strengthen the rival Palestinian Authority, whose forces were toppled by Hamas in 2007. Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas governs only limited autonomous areas in the Israeli-occupied West Bank.

Lapid raised Israel's concerns about Iran's nuclear program and expressed his country's desire to ramp up cooperation with Israel in the civilian fields of economics, energy, agriculture, and trade, according to the Israeli Foreign Ministry.

"Egypt is an especially important strategic partner for Israel," Lapid said. "My goal is to strengthen our security, diplomatic, and economic relations with Egypt. It's important to continue to work on the peace between our two nations."

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Upon his arrival, Lapid was welcomed by El-Sisi, who stressed his country's commitment to a two-state solution and to achieving a "comprehensive and just" peace in the Middle East, according to a statement released by El-Sisi's office.

During separate talks with his Egyptian counterpart, Lapid handed over 95 stolen Egyptian archaeological items that were seized in Israel.

Israel's Foreign Ministry said a smuggler was caught with some of the items in 2013 at the airport when arriving from a flight from Egypt. More than 90 others were found at a Jerusalem antiques store the same year.

It said the items included hieroglyphic inscriptions on stone, a fragment of a wooden sarcophagus, inscriptions on papyrus, figurines of Egyptian goddesses and other figures placed inside tombs as burial offerings. Israel released a photo of Lapid and Shoukry in front of a table filled with the artifacts.

Egypt and Israel reached a historic peace accord in 1979. Relations have generally been cool between the countries, though behind-the-scenes security cooperation remains strong. There have been growing signs of overall cooperation in recent months.



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Enhanced agreement between US and Egypt to prevent antiquities trafficking
Egypt to supply Lebanon with gas to alleviate power crisis

[Yemen army kills Hezbollah military expert in Marib](#)

Thu, 2021-12-09 23:32

AL-MUKALLA: A Hezbollah military leader fighting for the Iran-backed Houthis has been killed in clashes with government forces in the central province of Marib, Yemen's information minister revealed on Thursday.

In a tweet, Moammar Al-Eryani said that expert adviser Akram Al-Sayed died when Yemeni army troops shelled Houthi positions south of Marib, inflicting a blow to a Houthi militia push to seize control of Marib city.

The Houthis are being supported by thousands of fighters, including many from Iran, Lebanon, and Iraq.

Al-Eryani called on the international community and UN Security Council permanent members, "to condemn this blatant interference, which undermines de-escalation efforts in Yemen, continues bloodshed, and exacerbates humanitarian suffering of Yemenis."

The minister urged an intensification of sanctions against Lebanese Hezbollah and demanded that the government in Lebanon curb the influx of Hezbollah fighters to Yemen.

The Yemeni government has long accused Iran of deploying fighters from its proxy militias in the region to reinforce the Houthis.

In August, the Yemeni government announced the death in a coalition airstrike in Serwah of an Iranian military officer who was providing the Houthis with frontline military advice in Marib.

Last year, Arab coalition warplanes killed two Hezbollah military experts in Yemen during airstrikes on a training camp outside Houthi-held Sanaa.

Meanwhile, sources in Marib reported an increasing number of attacks by the Houthis on government troops over the past two weeks which had been concentrated on a chain of mountains known as Al-Balaq, on the southern edges of Marib. Heavy fighting had left dozens of combatants dead on both sides, they said.

Yemen's Defense Ministry denied Houthi claims that the group had seized control of strategic eastern parts of Al-Balaq saying that army troops and allied tribesmen had repulsed attacks.

Several civilians were wounded on Thursday when two missiles fired by the Houthis ripped through Al-Hamma camp that hosts 264 internally displaced families on the outskirts of Marib, the government's Executive Unit said.

It added that the number of displaced people living in Marib city and its surrounding areas had increased to 2,231,460 after 96,328 people had fled districts south of Marib since early September.



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Yemen calls for punishing Iran for military supplies to Houthis
Yemen army advances in Shabwa as coalition pounds Houthi targets

[Palestinian resistance forces claim Israeli security wall around Gaza will not block them](#)

Author:

Thu, 2021-12-09 23:24

GAZA CITY: Israel has announced the completion of an enhanced security barrier around the Gaza Strip designed to prevent militants from sneaking into the country.

However, Palestinian factions have rejected Israeli claims that the wall would stop them digging tunnels.

The 65-kilometer barrier includes radar systems, maritime sensors, and a network of underground sensors to detect militant tunnels. Existing fencing has been replaced with a 6-meter-high "smart fence" with detection devices and cameras.

Israel recently celebrated completion of the project, which it announced in 2016, to prevent a repetition of the 2014 war experience in which Palestinian factions used tunnels to carry out offensive operations and confront Israeli ground forces.

Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz, said: "The wall, an innovative and technologically advanced project, deprives Hamas of one of the capabilities it tried to develop."

Israel used 1,200 workers, 1.2 million cubic meters of concrete, and 140,000 tons of iron and steel to build the wall, at a cost of 3.5 billion shekels (\$1.13 billion).

The Israeli army said the amount of concrete used was sufficient to "build a road from Israel to Bulgaria, while the amount of iron and steel is equivalent to the length of a steel section from Israel to Australia."

In a report, Israeli newspaper Yedioth Ahronoth, said: "It is expected that the new wall will prevent incursions on the ground, and in fact imprison Palestinians who try to infiltrate into Israel within a 200- to 100-meter strip between the old and new fences until the army forces arrive and neutralize the threat."

It quoted a senior Israeli army official as saying that "the new wall cut the tunnels that were on their way to Israel, even during the years of work."

Israel has waged four wars on the Gaza Strip since Hamas took control of the small coastal enclave in mid-2007 and has made it clear that its goal is to stop the building of all tunnels.

However, Palestinian factions said the wall was doomed to failure similar to other Israeli fortifications in the past.

Abu Musab, a field commander in Al-Qassam Brigades, the military wing of Hamas, said the group was constantly developing its capabilities, and drew inspiration from the experience of previous wars and clashes.

"The factions in Gaza, despite their simple capabilities compared to the Israeli arsenal, are able to surprise the enemy with qualitative operations and from where they are not calculated. This wall will not stand in the way of the resistance to respond to Israel's aggressions and crimes.

"The Iron Dome (mobile all-weather air defense system) did not succeed in preventing the Palestinian rockets that reached the farthest range inside the occupying country. This wall will not prevent Hamas from repelling any aggression and defending its people," he added.

And spokesman for the Popular Resistance Committees, Muhammad Al-Buraim,

said: "Such walls will not affect the capabilities of the factions in Gaza, which are constantly working on developments in their capabilities, and will not fail to achieve their goals.

"This is not the first time that the occupation has tried to isolate Gaza with walls and many restrictions in an attempt to protect its soldiers and settlers, and the resistance each time had new tactics that surprised the occupation and achieved successes," he added.

Retired Maj. Gen. Rafiq Abu Hani, a specialist in military affairs, described the Israeli wall as "highly fortified," but expected that Palestinian factions would find ways to overcome it in any future confrontation.

He said: "The apartheid wall in the West Bank did not prevent Palestinian attacks, and the Iron Dome system did not prevent the launching of rockets from Gaza."

He pointed out that the building of the wall showed that Israel recognized its inability to "militarily resolve its conflict with Gaza," adding that it also suggested an Israeli ground invasion of Gaza now looked unlikely.



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Israel closes probe of police who shot Palestinian attacker
Human rights commission calls for end to Israeli occupation of Palestine

Judge Bitar resumes Beirut blast probe; unwilling to budge

Author:

Najia Houssari

ID:

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Thu, 2021-12-09 23:21

BEIRUT: The lawyers of the Beirut port explosion victims and the 17 arrested defendants fear the lawyers of the politicians accused of being involved in the crime would resort to the Court of Cassation after they exhausted their cases before the Court of Appeal.

Tarek Bitar, the judge leading the probe, had resumed his meetings on Wednesday in his office at the Justice Palace after the judiciary defied the pressures to remove him from the case.

Every setback in the investigations delays the indictment and the trials even further.

The horrific blast occurred on Aug. 4, 2020, after 1,750 tons of ammonium nitrate stored at the Beirut port along with seized explosives exploded, killing 220 victims, injuring over 6,500 people, and destroying the Beirut waterfront and its back neighborhoods.

Bitar and his predecessor, Judge Fadi Sawan, accused former PM Hassan Diab and four former ministers, Ali Hassan Khalil, Ghazi Zeaiter, Nohad Machnouk and Youssef Finianos of being involved in the crime and charged them with “a felony of probable intent to murder and a misdemeanor of negligence because they were aware of the presence of the ammonium nitrate, and did not take measures to spare the country such a disaster.”

Director-General of State Security Maj. Gen. Tony Saliba, his counterpart at the General Security Maj. Gen. Abbas Ibrahim and several judges have also been accused of being involved.

Bitar has not yet received the results of the simulation he conducted of the explosion in August. A security source told Arab News that security experts are still reviewing the simulation before drawing up their report and presenting it to the judge.

Bitar is yet to receive the satellite images [from the day of the explosion] that the Russian administration handed over to the Lebanese Foreign Minister Abdallah Bou Habib over a week ago. “The satellite images have been given to experts from the security forces for reviewing,” the source noted.

He downplayed the possibility of these images revealing significant details.

"These satellites are always rotating, so they might not have taken any images right before or during the explosion. If these satellites were above the Beirut port following the blast, then these images are worthless to the investigation because what matters is what led to the explosion."

The security source noted that the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) asked many countries for satellite images when it was investigating the assassination of former PM Rafik Hariri, but none of the satellites had taken images right before or during the crime.

On Thursday, former minister and lawyer Rachid Derbas, representing Diab, submitted formal pleas before Bitar, regarding the jurisdiction of the Judicial Council and the Supreme Council for the Trial of Presidents and Ministers.

A judicial source told Arab News that all the arrests and charges made by Bitar "were based on acts that led to the explosion, and anyone who says otherwise is lying. The investigation does not focus only on the explosion. It is rather manifold; how the ship loaded with ammonium nitrate arrived in Lebanon and all the events that led to the day of the explosion. This investigation is carried out by a single judge, while such crimes usually have an integrated team to expedite things."

He questioned why Hezbollah is suspicious of the investigation's path and is accusing Bitar of politicizing the case.

The judicial source recalled a speech Hezbollah's Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah gave in the wake of the blast, in which he said he will not provide a cover for anyone involved, no matter their sect, especially if they were Shiites, then, later on, started accusing Bitar of politicizing the investigation and targeting specific sects. "Bitar's investigation is still ongoing and he is summoning everyone he believes the facts point to as being involved. He still has a lot of suspects he needs to question."

Whenever Bitar takes a step forward, he stumbles over new obstacles. The source wondered: "How come the STL's verdict did not provoke any offensive stances such as the ones Bitar is facing today?"

The judicial source believed Bitar would not step down, "otherwise, he would be admitting to all the accusations made against him.

"Bitar's conscience is clear and he is simply doing his duty," he said, adding: "The judiciary has to shelter Bitar, just as the military court did and imprisoned the journalist who dared to utter offensive words against the military institution."

The ruling class is trying to evade Bitar by insisting that politicians should be tried before the Supreme Council for the Trial of Presidents and Ministers.

Legal expert and former MP Salah Hanin had previously told Arab News: "The PM and ministers do not have immunity when they commit a criminal offense such as the port explosion crime. It subjects them to ordinary laws and to the

same judiciary that exercises its authority over all citizens.”

Hanin cited Article 70 of the Constitution, which stipulates that the parliament has the right to impeach the PM and ministers for high treason or breach of their duties. “This article does not include criminal offenses; they thus must appear before the judiciary.”



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Lebanon elite united against Beirut port blast probe seen as survival threat
Beirut port blast victim dies after 14 months