

Damascus and Tehran pledge to confront US sanctions

Mon, 2021-08-30 01:42

DAMASCUS: Iran and Syria have vowed to take “mighty steps” to confront US sanctions imposed on the two regional allies, saying their relations will strengthen under Iran’s new leadership.

The announcement was made by Iran’s new Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian.

He was received at the airport in Damascus by Faisal Miqdad, foreign minister in the Syrian regime.

Iran has been one of Syrian President Bashar Assad’s strongest backers, sending thousands of fighters from around the region to help his troops in Syria’s 10-year conflict that has killed half a million and displaced half the country’s pre-war population of 23 million.

With the help of Russia and Iran, Syrian regime forces now control much of Syria.

But the country has been suffering for years under American and EU sanctions.

US Treasury sanctions have targeted a network that spans Syria, Iran and Russia, and which is responsible for shipping oil to the Syrian regime.

American sanctions were imposed on Tehran after former President Donald Trump pulled America out of a nuclear deal between Iran and world powers in 2018.

The sanctions have caused severe fuel shortages in Syria, which has been relying mostly on Iranian oil shipments that have been subjected to mysterious attacks over the past two years.

FASTFACT

US Treasury sanctions have targeted a network that spans Syria, Iran and Russia, and which is responsible for shipping oil to Bashar Assad’s regime.

The regime has blamed Israel for the attacks.

“The leadership of the two countries will together take mighty steps to confront economic terrorism and reduce pressure on our people,” Amir-Abdollahian said at the airport.

He did not say how the two countries will fight the sanctions.

Amir-Abdollahian’s visit to Syria comes a day after he represented Iran in a conference attended by officials from around the Middle East aimed at easing regional tensions.

Amir-Abdollahian described Syria as the “land of resistance,” adding that Damascus and Tehran had worked together “on the ground and achieved joint victories.”



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Iran appoints ex-roads minister as head of nuclear agency
Iran's Khamenei says Biden has same demands as Trump on nuclear issue

[UN envoy calls on Libya's parliament to finalize election law](#)

Mon, 2021-08-30 20:09

ALGIERS: The UN envoy to Libya Jan Kubis said on Monday that time was pressing for Libyans to finalize a legal framework for elections to be held on time in December.

"The (Libyan) government has taken the necessary dispositions to hold elections but we need a legal framework," Kubis said at the opening of a meeting in Algeria of Libya's neighbors.

"The members of parliament are now trying to finalize the electoral law and time is running out," Kubis said in statements carried in French by the official Algerian news agency APS.

Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry affirmed his country's firm position toward strengthening the structure of Libya's security and stability, adding that Egypt prioritizes political solutions to preserve the country's unity and its national institutions to achieve a comprehensive settlement. Foreign ministry spokesman Ahmed Hafez, said Shoukry stressed during the meeting the important role of neighboring countries to ensure that security and political conditions in Libya are restored, and achieve the legitimate aspirations of the Libyan people.



Egypt's Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry attends a meeting by Libya's neighbors as part of international efforts to reach a political settlement to the country's conflict, in the Algerian capital Algiers, on Aug. 30, 2021. (AFP)

Shoukry praised the achievements of the 5+5 Joint Military Commission, the latest of which was the opening of the coastal road between the east and west. He said that is why it needs to be provided with full support to complete its various tasks, including ensuring the exit of all foreign forces, as well as foreign fighters and mercenaries.

Shoukry called for the need to expedite all necessary measures to ensure that the elections are held on time.

The two-day ministerial meeting is aimed at helping Libyans achieve national reconciliation and draw a roadmap for organizing the polls.

But recent talks in Geneva have exposed deep divisions over when to hold elections, what elections to hold, and on what constitutional grounds, threatening to plunge Libya back into crisis.

The North African country was gripped by violence and political turmoil in the aftermath of the 2011 NATO-backed uprising that ousted dictator Muammar Qaddafi and in which he was killed.

In recent years, the oil-rich country split between two rival administrations backed by foreign powers and myriad militias.

After eastern strongman Khalifa Haftar's forces were routed from the country's west last year, the two camps signed a cease-fire in Geneva in October.

An interim administration was established in March this year to prepare for presidential and parliamentary polls on Dec. 24.

Kubis on Monday said that Libya's unity government backed by the UN has "allocated the necessary budget for the elections.

"But it is important that as soon as possible we have a legal framework" for the polls, he said.

Kubis said he told MPs to "assume their responsibilities and not waste time." He also called on Libya's neighbors to appoint observers to monitor the polls.

(With AFP)





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Libyan interim PM pushes back against parliament in speech
UN hails joint Libya force to protect water network

[Palestinian president, Israeli defense minister hold rare talks](#)

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Mon, 2021-08-30 09:47

RAMALLAH, Palestinian Territories: Israel's defense minister has met Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas for a rare high-level meeting, but a source close to Prime Minister Naftali Bennett insisted Monday his government had no plans to reboot peace talks.

Defense Minister Benny Gantz met Abbas in Ramallah for what were reportedly the first direct talks between an Israeli cabinet member and the 86-year-old Palestinian leader in several years.

The meeting, which Gantz's office said focused on "security policy, civilian and economic issues," came just hours after Bennett returned from Washington where he met US President Joe Biden.

Biden said he would urge Bennett to find ways "to advance peace and security and prosperity for Israelis and Palestinians."

According to a defense ministry statement, Gantz told Abbas that Israel "seeks to take measures that will strengthen the PA's economy."

"They also discussed shaping the security and economic situations in the West Bank and in Gaza," and agreed to "continue communicating further," it added.

A source close to Bennett said the meeting that he had approved focused on "issues between the defense establishment and the Palestinian Authority."

"There is no peace process with the Palestinians nor will there be," under Bennett's leadership, said the source who requested anonymity.

The Gantz-Abbas meeting included the head of the Israeli military branch responsible for civil affairs in the Palestinian territories, Ghasan Alyan, senior PA official Hussein Al Sheikh and Palestinian intelligence chief Majid Faraj.

Gantz's office said he and Abbas had held "a one-on-one meeting" after the broader talks.

Al Sheikh confirmed the meeting on Twitter but the PA was not immediately available to comment on its substance.

Bennett, 49, took office in June as head of an eclectic coalition in which his hawkish party holds only a handful of seats.

He is a long-standing opponent of Palestinian statehood and the former head of a council that lobbies for Jewish settlers in the West Bank, a territory occupied by Israel since 1967.

Jewish settlements in the West Bank are considered illegal under international law.

But despite Bennett's personal views, his government has sought to warm ties with the PA, which had effectively collapsed under former prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu, in power from 2009 until June this year.

Netanyahu, also a pro-settlement right-winger long reviled by Palestinians, further alienated Abbas through his tight embrace of former US president Donald Trump, accused of extreme pro-Israel bias.

Bennett's government has indicated a desire to boost the PA amid concern over a fresh conflict with Hamas Islamists who control Israeli-blockaded Gaza and are rivals of Abbas's Fatah secular Fatah movement.

An 11-day conflict in May between Israel and Palestinian militants in Gaza marked the worst hostilities in the area since 2014 and unrest has persisted despite an Egypt-brokered cease-fire.

Hamas condemned the Abbas-Gantz meeting, charging that it "deepens Palestinian political division."

Abbas has tightened his hold over the PA since his election in 2006.

He canceled elections set for May and July that would have been the first

Palestinian polls in 15 years.

The veteran leader cited Israel's refusal to allow voting in annexed east Jerusalem, which Palestinians see as their future capital.

But some Palestinian experts said Abbas balked when it seemed clear Hamas was poised to rout Fatah at the polls.

Abbas's PA has also come under mounting global criticism over an alleged crackdown on internal opposition following the death in Palestinian custody of a prominent activist.

The United Nations and European Union last week expressed alarm over a spate of arrests targeting leading critics of Abbas and the PA.



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Rocket fired from Gaza toward Israel after 4 Palestinians killed in West Bank clashes

Oil spill from power station spreads along Syria's coast

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Wed, 2021-08-25 12:07

DAMASCUS: A massive oil spill caused by leakage from a power plant inside one of Syria's oil refineries is spreading along the coast of the Mediterranean country, Syria's state news agency said and satellite photos showed Wednesday.

SANA said the spill reached the coastal town of Jableh, about 20 kilometers north of the refinery in the town of Baniyas, adding that Syria's environment department and the municipality of the coastal province of Latakia have placed all concerned departments on alert. It said work is underway to clean the coast in the rocky areas.

A day earlier, Syria's government said that maintenance teams at Baniyas Thermal Station had brought a fuel leakage from one of the tanks under control.

Satellite images from Planet Labs Inc. on Wednesday showed what appeared to be a massive oil spill stretching out over 25.5 square kilometers. An image from Monday showed no sign of the slick, suggesting whatever happened to cause the spill happened later.

The head of the Electricity Workers Syndicate at Tartous Workers Union, Dawoud Darwish, blamed cracks in one of the fuel tanks at the thermal station. He pointed out that the tank was filled with 15,000 tons of fuel. Syria's oil resources are mostly outside of government controlled areas but its two refineries are under government control and operating. This makes Damascus reliant on Iran for fuel, but US Treasury sanctions have hindered the supply network, which spans Syria, Iran and Russia.

There has been a series of mysterious attacks on vessels in Mideast waters, including off Syria's coast, for over a year. They have come amid rising tensions in the region between Iran, Israel and the United States.

In May, Syria's foreign minister blamed Israel for mysterious attacks targeting oil tankers heading to Syria, saying they violate international law and will not go unpunished.



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Iran fuel tanker attacked off Syria: Monitor

[Iran Parliament approves most of president Ibrahim Raisi's new ministers](#)

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Wed, 2021-08-25 19:05

TEHRAN: Iran's hard-liner dominated Parliament on Wednesday voted to approve most of the ministers proposed by newly elected President Ibrahim Raisi,

state TV reported.

Lawmakers voted in favor of 18 of 19 ministers proposed by Raisi after five days of hearings and discussions.

They did not approve Hossein Baghgoi, nominated for education minister, whose experience was disputed during hearings. He received 76 votes out of 286 present lawmakers. The chamber has 290 seats.

Raisi had appealed to lawmakers to vote quickly to approve his nominees so the government can get to work dealing with the pandemic and economic situation in the country suffering from years of sanctions by the US. Raisi has said his foreign policy will focus on engagement with all nations and the removal of sanctions. New Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian, who received 270 votes from lawmakers, said his ministry "would not run away from the negotiating table" and will do its best to remove all sanctions against the country.

Amirabdollahian, 56, has served in a range of administrations over the decades. He was deputy foreign minister for Arab and African Affairs under former populist hard-line President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, known in the West for his Holocaust denial and disputed re-election in 2009.

When relative moderate President Hassan Rouhani entered office in 2013, Amirabdollahian kept his job before leaving to become an international affairs adviser to the former Parliament speaker. Rouhani struck the nuclear deal with world powers that granted Iran sanctions relief in exchange for curbs on its nuclear program.

In a hearing in Parliament on Sunday, Amirabdollahian said negotiations must guarantee the rights of the Iranian people. The diplomat also welcomed friendship with neighboring countries, especially with Iran's regional rival Saudi Arabia "for the benefit of the whole region."

Former foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif congratulated Amirabdollahian on his confirmation. "Wishing him, the ministry and its officials, and the new administration, all success in international relations," Zarif said in a tweet.

Javad Owji, 54, a career technocrat and long-time official in the country's vital oil and gas sector, received 198 votes to work as oil minister.

Exporting crude is a major foreign source of revenue for the nation.

During the Parliament hearing, Owji promised to apply an "active attitude for bypassing sanctions" and use of the private sector in "exporting crude."

The Cabinet list included no women, few surprises and several officials from Iran's paramilitary Revolutionary Guard. The supreme leader also typically weighs in on picking officials for the most sensitive positions, such as foreign minister.

The parties to the nuclear accord have met in Vienna for months to try to revive the deal. The last round of talks ended in June with no date set for their resumption. Raisi has promised his administration will focus on lifting sanctions that have clobbered Iran's already ailing economy.

Meanwhile, Gen. Ahmad Vahidi was confirmed Wednesday as the interior minister with 266 votes.

Vahidi is a former defense minister blacklisted by the US in 2010 and wanted by Interpol over his alleged role in the 1994 bombing of a Jewish cultural center in Buenos Aires. The attack killed 85 people and wounded hundreds. Vahidi also served as commander of Iran's expeditionary Quds Force in the late 1980s, responsible for Tehran's proxies across the Middle East.

Later in the day, Raisi expressed gratitude to parliamentarians for their votes.



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Iran's new president Raisi names anti-Western hardliner as foreign minister