

Parkour brings youngsters a taste of freedom in Gaza

Thu, 2021-01-28 01:44

GAZA: Using crutches, Palestinian Mohamed Aliwa leaps from one concrete slab to another, determined that his missing leg won't stop him doing parkour, a sport that brings respite from grim reality in Gaza.

The Palestinian teen's right leg was amputated near the knee in 2018 after he was hit by Israeli army fire during protests along the fortified border separating the Gaza Strip from Israel.

Along with his lower leg, he lost his dream of being a professional parkour athlete, he said.

But watching his friends jumping from obstacle to obstacle, the 18-year-old, who now sometimes makes use of a prosthetic limb, decided that his disability shouldn't bring his moves to an end.

"I asked my friends to help me walk, and little by little I came to move and jump almost like them," he said, talking in a rehabilitation center which he visits at least once a week.

Parkour, an extreme sport also known as free-running, originated in France in the 1990s.

It involves navigating urban obstacles using a fast-paced mix of jumping, vaulting, running and rolling.

"Sometimes I feel frustrated," says Aliwa. "But I told myself that if I could do that (again), then everything else in my life would be easy."

He says the sport gives him "incredible energy."

In Gaza, young people have been practicing parkour for years, bounding from ruin to ruin in an enclave pockmarked by three wars between Israel and Hamas, which has ruled Gaza since 2007.

But even the easiest jump carries risks, and that is why Jihad Abu Sultan, 32, opened what he says is the "first parkour academy in the Palestinian territories," with the support of French sporting goods giant Decathlon.

"I started doing parkour in 2005," he said at his club in Al-Shati refugee camp, near Gaza City.

"At the time, we didn't have a dedicated space, we trained in cemeteries and on the ruins of buildings destroyed by Israel."

Abu Sultan says that the sport was practiced by individuals on an ad hoc basis until two months ago, when he came together with fellow enthusiasts to

establish the club, which they call "Wallrunners." It teaches the sport "in a safe way, far from the dangers of the street," he said.

It has a modest budget but already has some 70 members, including seven girls, who can jump from one wooden block to another, perform somersaults and swing on parallel bars.

On the ground are rubber mats, to soften falls. The Gaza Strip has been under Israeli blockade for more than a decade and unemployment is about 50 percent, rising to 65 percent among young people, according to the World Bank.

For some, Parkour shines a ray of light into what is a dreary existence.

"For a generation of young Palestinians who have grown up in a flood of under-employment, it has become a method of self-expression, an escape, and a way of life," says the Wallrunners website in English.



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Gazans run free with parkour More than 20 injured by blast in Gaza home

Vaccines vs. variants: Israel's exit from pandemic hangs in balance

Author:

Thu, 2021-01-28 01:17

JERUSALEM: Israel's plan to parlay its COVID-19 vaccination drive into an exit from the pandemic next month hangs in the balance as new variants of the virus have spurred an increase in infections, a senior official said on Wednesday.

Highly infectious foreign variants are currently flooding Israeli hospitals with serious cases and the newly developed vaccines have yet to be proven fully effective against them, Deputy Health Minister Yoav Kisch said.

Israel currently leads the world on per capita vaccinations, having inoculated about 30 percent of its population of 9 million with at least one dose.

"We are in a war with very low intelligence (about the enemy)," Kisch, a former fighter pilot, said. "That means that things are changing as we go. The enemy is using different tactics and different methods that we are not fully aware of."

Israel began vaccinating high-risk groups on Dec. 19 in what Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu predicted would provide them with full protection by the end of this month and enable the economy to begin reopening in February.

But despite expanded eligibility criteria for the Pfizer Inc. vaccines and the imposition of a third national lockdown, infections and deaths are surging.

"We're in an arms race – except it's not an arms race, it's a race between vaccination and mutation," Netanyahu said on Wednesday at a virtual meeting of the World Economic Forum.

Governments worldwide "should probably expect the companies that are producing the vaccines at this point to modify their vaccines to accommodate the mutations that they don't cover now," said Netanyahu, who is up for reelection on March 23.

Israel's projections of a vaccine-fueled turnaround last week proved false, Kisch said. Now it is hoping to see in the coming two weeks a reduction in morbidity as well as solid research data showing that the vaccines defeat the variants.

"We are optimistic because, as of now, the knowledge regarding this vaccine is (that it is) effective against them," said Kisch, a lawmaker in Netanyahu's Likud party.

If that is correct, that means a delay of only two to four weeks in Israel's

planned exit from the pandemic, he said. If not, Israel could be facing a further delay of six to eight months.

“We’ll have to wait for a new development of a vaccine that will give the answer against this mutation,” Kisch said.

Israel’s Interior Ministry announced on Wednesday that the country’s land crossings with Jordan and Egypt would be closed to travelers, in a bid to curb the spread of coronavirus.

The decision follows the shutdown of the country’s international airport, which took effect on Tuesday.

“To complete the joint efforts to prevent the increase in morbidity, Interior Minister Arye Deri announced that the land crossings will be closed to Israelis and foreigners,” the ministry said in a statement.



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Gunman fires at Israeli officers in Jerusalem’s Old City, is shot dead
Israel to ban incoming passenger flights to contain COVID-19 spread

Top US diplomat Blinken sees long road to Iran deal

Author:

AFP

ID:

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Wed, 2021-01-27 21:30

WASHINGTON: The United States will only return to the Iran nuclear deal once Tehran meets its commitments, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said Wednesday, warning of a long road until verification.

On his first full day as the top US diplomat, Blinken confirmed President Joe Biden's willingness to return to the deal trashed by his predecessor but rejected Iranian pressure for the United States to act first.

"Iran is out of compliance on a number of fronts. And it would take some time, should it make the decision to do so, for it to come back into compliance and time for us then to assess whether it was meeting its obligations," Blinken told a news conference.

"We're not there yet, to say the least."

Former president Donald Trump bolted from a 2015 nuclear deal negotiated under former president Barack Obama and instead slapped punishing sanctions. Iran responded by reducing its compliance with the deal, formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), under which it was promised economic relief for major curbs in its contested nuclear program.

"President Biden has been very clear in saying that if Iran comes back into full compliance with its obligations under the JCPOA, the United States would do the same thing," Blinken said.

But Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif has demanded that the United States first come into compliance by ending the Trump sanctions, which include a sweeping effort to end Tehran's key export of oil.

Iranian officials fear that the United States – where Trump's Republican Party, narrowly in the minority in Congress, remains adamantly opposed to the nuclear deal – will not fulfill sanctions relief even if Tehran goes ahead.



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Antony Blinken: US must act urgently to stop Iran nuclear weapon
US Secretary of State Blinken discusses Iran's destabilising behavior with UK

[Are Yemen's Iran-backed Houthis firing warning shots across Biden administration's bows?](#)

Wed, 2021-01-27 01:59

LONDON: Was the object sighted high above Riyadh on Tuesday a stray projectile with no evident target or a warning shot across the bows of the Biden administration? That was the question uppermost in the minds of defense experts and political analysts, just three days after a "hostile air target"

– assumed to be a ballistic missile – heading towards the Saudi capital was intercepted and destroyed.

Social media was abuzz on Tuesday with footage of smoke hanging over Riyadh, with residents describing how the windows of their homes were rattled by the impact of at least one explosion. By late evening, Yemen's Iran-backed Houthis had not bragged about a direct hit on the city of 7.68 million people. The militia's behavior ran true to form: it had denied involvement in Saturday's failed attack.

But the fact of the matter is, these could be the first significant attacks targeting a major Saudi city since the US State Department designated the Houthis as a "Foreign Terrorist Organization" on Jan. 19 – one of the final acts of the Donald Trump administration in its "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran and its proxies.



A flurry of attacks on US allies could be attempts by Iran to test President Biden's resolve or, with luck, even kickstart dialogue. (AFP)

Without naming the Houthis explicitly, the Biden administration issued a statement after Saturday's incident, condemning the undeniable targeting of civilians. "Such attacks contravene international law and undermine all efforts to promote peace and stability," the State Department said.

To many political observers, the new Houthi approach is a complete no-brainer: Threatened with sanctions and political isolation, and desperate for potential concessions from Washington, the militia is trying to have its cake and eat it too by launching attacks on Riyadh and not claiming responsibility

for them.

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“There is no doubt that after evaluating the international response and noticing that a claim of responsibility would be counterproductive – especially after being classified by the State Department as “terrorists” – the Houthis tried to deny they were behind Saturday’s attack,” Hamdan Al-Shehri, a political analyst and international relations scholar, told Arab News.

“However, everyone knows that the Houthis, backed by Iran, are the ones who carry out such terrorist acts and use ballistic missiles and drones. They also tried to get on the new US administration’s good side by denying what happened in the Kingdom. But everyone knows who is responsible for these actions.”



Riyadh, which is roughly 850 km from the Yemeni border, was first attacked by the Houthis on Nov. 4, 2017. (Shutterstock)

According to experts, the Houthis have a strategy of swinging between bragging about targeting civilians and maintaining plausible deniability. In other words, they pick and choose whichever attitude suits their objectives, and those of its Iranian patrons, at any given time.

Put bluntly, the brazen strikes targeting Saudi Arabia's capital may not be routine tactical operations in a low-intensity conflict but rather reflective of a larger strategic decision by Iran to put President Joe Biden's foreign-policy team on notice.

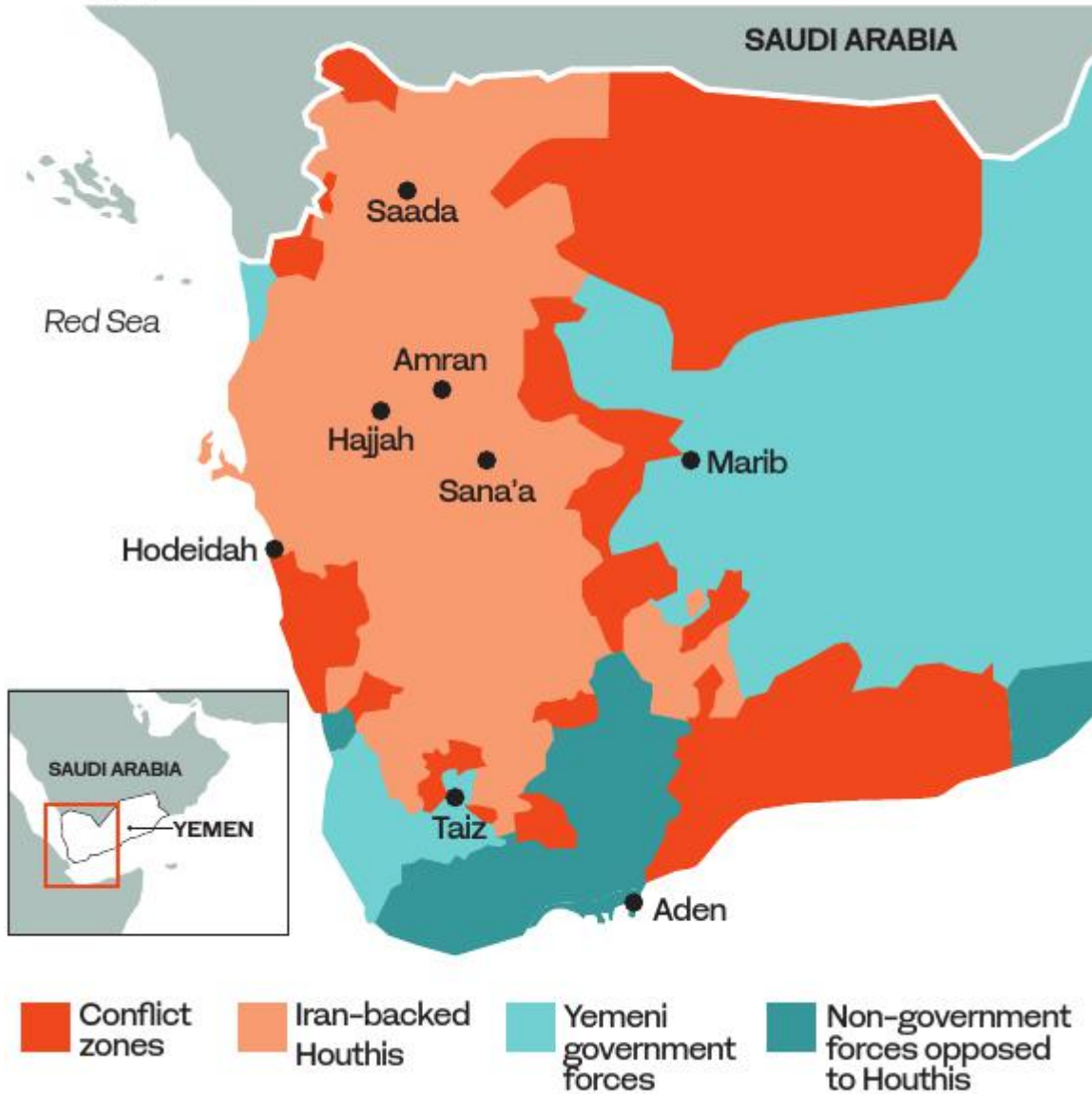
The Trump administration withdrew the US from the Obama-era nuclear accord with Iran in May 2018 and reimposed a slew of economic sanctions on the regime in Tehran. The strategy was matched by a zero-tolerance approach to Iranian influence in Yemen, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Palestine.

Against this backdrop, a flurry of attacks on Washington's regional allies and partners could very well be attempts by Tehran to test President Biden's resolve or, with luck, even kickstart dialogue.

"There is no doubt that Iran wants to test the new administration to know how serious it is regarding the Yemeni issue and the Iranian nuclear issue, and it wants to negotiate with more than one card," Al-Shehri told Arab News.

THE HOUTHIS' TERROR HEARTLAND

Control over large swathes of Yemen gives the militia a strategic vantage point



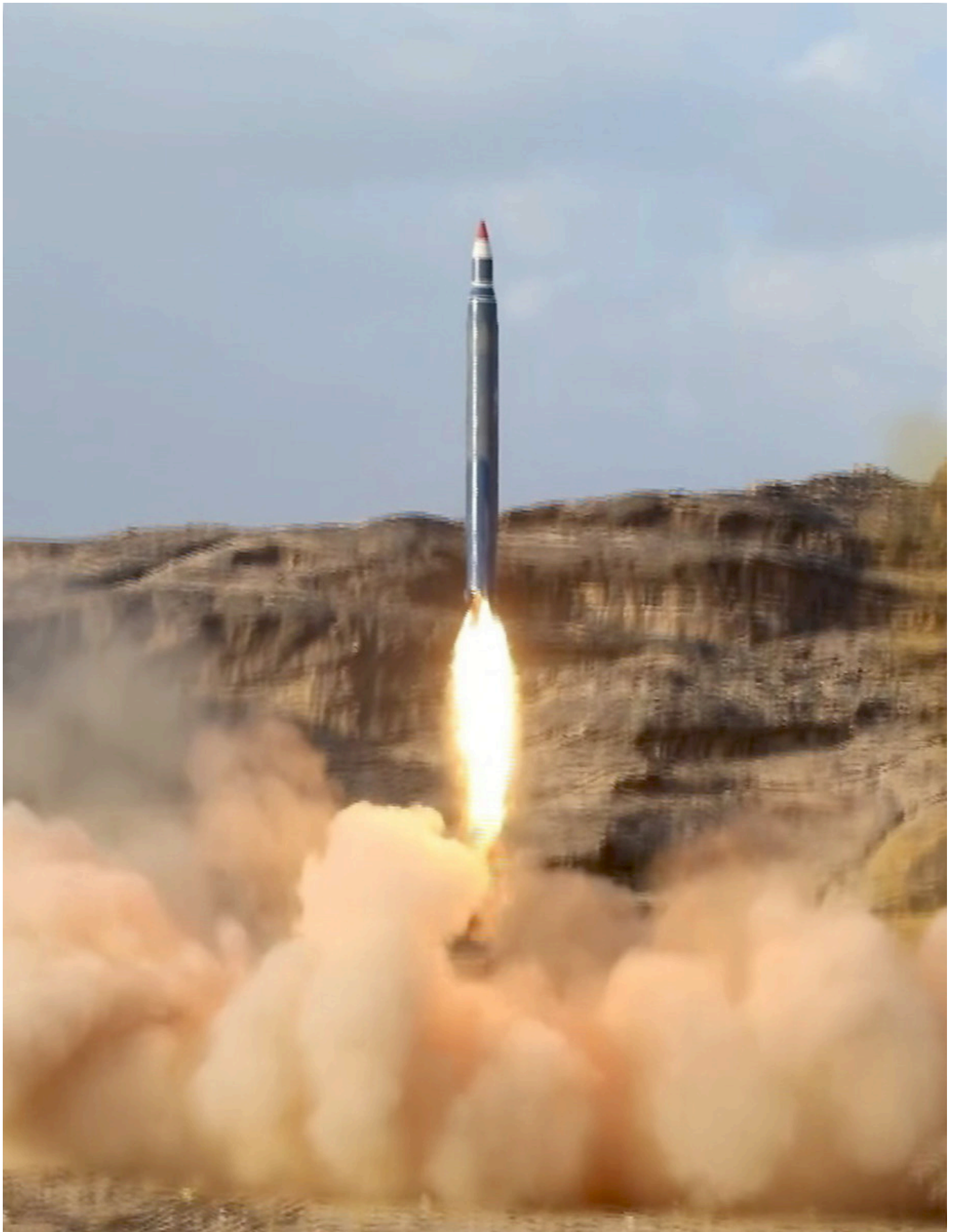
SOURCE: SANA'A CENTRE FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES, BBC

ARAB NEWS

“It is as though to say: ‘If you are willing to reduce the pressure on the nuclear issue, we will reduce the pressure on targeting Riyadh.’ This is nothing but cheap and shameless political blackmail, and the world knows it.”

“Cheap and shameless” is also one way to describe the Houthis’ penchant for targeting civilian population centers, often hundreds of miles inside Saudi territory.

March 26, 2018, saw one of the biggest Houthi barrages, with Iranian-supplied ballistic missiles raining down on civilian areas in four Saudi cities. Three of them targeted Riyadh, while two were aimed at Jazan and the others at Khamis Mushayt and Najran.



Civilians have been in the Houthis' crosshairs since the very beginning of their takeover of Sana'a. (AFP/File)

Although Saudi air defenses intercepted all seven missiles, an Egyptian civilian was killed by falling debris and two others were injured. All of the attacks appear to have deliberately targeted populated areas.

“Launching indiscriminate attacks is prohibited by international humanitarian law,” Amnesty International’s Samah Hadid said at the time.

“A high death toll may have been averted, possibly due to the missiles being intercepted, but that doesn’t let the Houthi armed group off the hook for this reckless and unlawful act. These missiles cannot be precisely targeted at such distances, so their use in this manner unlawfully endangers civilians.”

Riyadh, which is roughly 850 km from the Yemeni border, was first attacked by the Houthis on Nov. 4, 2017, when an unguided ballistic missile targeted King Khalid International Airport – about 35 km northeast of the capital.

Although the missile was intercepted in flight, fragments fell inside the airport area. No one was hurt, but the result could have been catastrophic.

Opinion

This section contains relevant reference points, placed in (Opinion field)

“An attack with an unguided ballistic missile such as the Burkan H2 from this range is indiscriminate since these weapons are not capable of the necessary accuracy to target military objectives,” Human Rights Watch said at the time.

“When deliberately or indiscriminately directed toward populated areas or civilian objects, such attacks violate the laws of war, and may amount to war crimes.”

A year earlier, in Oct. 2016, a missile, thought to have been a Burkan 1, was intercepted by Saudi air defenses just 65 km south of Makkah. The Houthis claimed at the time their intended target was Jeddah’s King Abdulaziz International Airport.

Civilians have been in the Houthis’ crosshairs since the very beginning of their takeover of Sana’a. In May 2015 there were repeated indiscriminate attacks with short-range rockets from northern Yemen into populated areas of southern Saudi Arabia, which left several civilians dead.



The Houthis are trying to have their cake and eat it too by launching attacks on Riyadh and not claiming responsibility for them. (Reuters/File)

Fighting in Yemen escalated in 2015 when the Houthis overthrew the UN-recognized government of President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi. An Arab coalition, backed by the US, Britain and France, launched a military campaign to restore the legitimate government to power.

Since then, repeated attempts to reach a peace settlement have foundered, with the militia's representatives failing to attend UN-brokered talks in Geneva in Sept. 2018 and its combatants willfully ignoring the terms of the Stockholm and Riyadh agreements.

An April 2020 ceasefire announced by the coalition at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic quickly fell apart when the Houthis resumed cross-border drone and missile strikes targeting Saudi Arabia.

The conflict, now in its sixth year, has left 112,000 dead and 24 million in dire need of humanitarian assistance.

Twitter: [@RobertPEdwards](https://twitter.com/RobertPEdwards)

Twitter: [@Tarek_AliAhmad](https://twitter.com/Tarek_AliAhmad)



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Yemen steps up diplomatic drive for Houthi terrorist designation
Ending Houthi sanctions raises Iran terror threat, critics warn

[Yemen steps up diplomatic drive for Houthi terrorist designation](#)

Author:

Wed, 2021-01-27 00:43

AL-MUKALLA: The Yemeni government and its envoys abroad have cranked up a diplomatic campaign to convince the world to designate the Houthi militia movement a terrorist organization, stressing that doing so would put an end to Houthi attacks inside and outside Yemen, and smooth the way for peace.

The official news agency SABA reported on Monday that Prime Minister Maen Abdulmalik Saeed said during a video conference with the EU ambassadors to Yemen that the EU should follow the example of the US by designating the Houthis terrorists, since it would end the Houthis' objections to peace plans, and hinder Iran. He repeated his government's pledges to work on

mitigating the effects of the designation on humanitarian activities in Houthi-controlled areas.

Similarly, the country's Foreign Minister Ahmed Awad bin Mubarak urged Mauritania and other countries to label the Houthis a terrorist organization, noting that the US designation came in the context of increasing pressure by the international community on the rebels to accept peace initiatives, and to stop fueling violence in Yemen and the region, abandoning Iran's "destructive" projects.

During a phone call with the Mauritanian foreign minister and the former UN Yemen envoy, Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed, Bin Mubarak called upon Mauritania and other "brotherly" countries to place sanctions on the Houthis to curb their abuses against Yemen.

Yemen's Shoura Council urged the international community to follow the US move, saying that the designation would restrain the Houthis and lead to peace and stability in the country.

The Shoura Council Presidency stressed "the importance, fairness and accuracy of the US administration's decision to classify the Houthi militia as a terrorist group."

Yemen's ambassadors have also sought to convince their host countries to declare the Houthis a terrorist organization.

On social media, dozens of Yemeni activists, politicians and military figures, journalists and former prisoners have moved ahead with a campaign of highlighting Houthi crimes. "(The) Houthis and Daesh are two sides of the same coin," said Samera Al-Houri, a victim of abduction by the Houthis, sharing images of the captors who tortured her.

Yemen's government forces on Monday took charge of a strategic location in the port city of Aden, the country's interim capital, from the pro-independence Southern Transitional Council (STC), local media reports said.

For the first time in two years, Presidential Protection Forces (PPF) took control of a military location close to the historic Sira Fortress after the separatists' withdrawal, under the terms of the Riyadh Agreement.

During the handover ceremony that was attended by local military commanders and Saudi military officers in Aden, Brig. Fadhel Al-Darae, chief of staff of 1st Presidential Protection Brigade, urged Yemenis to unify military efforts towards defeating the Iran-backed Houthis. "We are all brothers and colleagues. Our guns must be pointed at one target and one enemy, which is the Houthis," Al-Darae said.



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Yemeni government and Houthis hold prisoner swap meeting