

Ending Houthi sanctions raises Iran terror threat, critics warn

Author:

Tue, 2021-01-26 23:19

CHICAGO: The decision by US President Joe Biden to suspend some sanctions against the Houthi militia in Yemen has raised concerns about a possible escalation in Iran-backed terror attacks.

The US Treasury on Monday said that the sanctions – announced by former US secretary of state Mike Pompeo as one of the outgoing Trump administration's last acts – will be suspended for a month, pending a review by newly appointed Secretary of State Anthony Blinken.

The review is also expected to consider reversing the Houthi militia's designation as a terrorist organization.

However, Blinken did not issue a statement on the decision, which was leaked to some news media wire services, while all of Pompeo's public releases were removed from the State Department website and archived, removing them from public view.

According to some observers, Biden may be using the decision to encourage negotiations with Iran as his administration moves to restore the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) agreement that Trump terminated.

However, Jason Greenblatt, former Trump administration envoy to the Middle East, told Arab News that the suspension of Pompeo's sanctions will result in increased attacks against Gulf nations.

"These Iranian-funded terrorist murderers attack our friends and allies such as Saudi Arabia and cause tremendous suffering in Yemen," Greenblatt said, defending Pompeo's sanctions as "correct."

"This is similar to the situation in Gaza with Iran-funded Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad attacking Israel and also being the cause of tremendous suffering to Palestinians. It is a mistake for the Biden administration to not call the Houthis what they are – terrorists, pure and simple."

The call to suspend the sanctions was made by NGOs and aid agencies working in the war-torn country, which feared they would be targeted for providing assistance.

Designating the Houthis as a "foreign terrorist organization" hampers humanitarian work, they argued.

However, supporters of the designation argue that lifting sanctions will allow Iran to expand its base in the Gulf, resulting in more terrorist attacks similar to the repeated Houthi missile and drone strikes directed at

Riyadh last week.

The announcement riled many Iranian dissidents who have been victimized by Iran's ruling mullahs. Dissident leaders said they were shocked by the suspension and urged Biden to maintain the terrorist designation.

"The undisputed fact is that the Houthis are a creation of the Islamic Republic. The mullahs have been offering ideological, military and terrorist training to them since the early 1990s," one leader, who asked not to be identified, said.

"Iran provides the Houthis with huge caches of weaponry, missiles, drones and other lethal arms that have prolonged that deadly and tragic conflict. As such, lending legitimacy to the Houthis will only undermine the stability of the Middle East region and embolden the Houthis to engage in further aggression, the primary victims of which are the people of Yemen."

Biden campaigned on the promise to rejoin the JCPOA and restore relations with Iran in exchange for Tehran's promise to eliminate its stockpile of medium-enriched uranium and cut its stockpile of low-enriched uranium, but Trump and others accused Iran of secretly building its nuclear arsenal.

Greenblatt described the situation as a "battle of good versus evil," adding: "We don't help matters when we hide from the truth. We must stand with our friends and allies such as Saudi Arabia."



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[US return to Iran nuclear deal would be 'wrong,' says Israeli military leader](#)

Tue, 2021-01-26 22:52

LONDON: Lt. Gen. Aviv Kochavi, the Chief of Staff of the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) said on Tuesday that it would be a mistake for the US to return to the Iran nuclear deal.

He added that military action "must be on the table" as he explained his position on the issue, which contrasts with that of new US President Joe Biden.

The agreement with Tehran, more formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), was signed in 2015 by the five permanent members of the UN Security Council – China, France, Russia, the UK and the US – plus Germany and the EU. President Donald Trump withdrew the US from the deal in 2018 and reimposed sanctions on Tehran, but Biden has pledged to return to the deal.

"If the 2015 nuclear deal had materialized, Iran would have gotten itself a bomb," Kochavi said, adding that a US return to the agreement would be "a wrong thing" to do.

Speaking at the annual conference of Tel Aviv University's Institute for National Security Studies – a leading Israeli think tank – Kochavi said the agreement would allow the Iranian regime to enrich uranium to levels sufficient for the development of a nuclear bomb.

"Strategically, it would presumably lead to the regional nuclearization of the Middle East," he said. "For that reason, anything resembling the current agreement is bad and must not be permitted. The Iran of today is not the Iran of 2015. Today, Iran is under enormous pressure, economic pressures ... that must be maintained in every way, whatever happens."

Opinion

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

Kochavi said that Iran's advanced centrifuge activity and recent advances in uranium enrichment could mean that the regime is "only weeks" away from the production of a nuclear bomb. The the most stringent action possible must be taken to prevent Tehran from developing nuclear weapons, he added.

"In light of this fundamental analysis, I have instructed the IDF to draw up a number of operational plans, in addition to the existing plans, and we are working on them diligently and will develop them over the coming year," Kochavi said.

He added that any decision to act on the IDF's plans would be made by Israel's political leadership and that "these plans must be on the table."

New US Secretary of State Antony Blinken – whose appointment to the post was confirmed by the Senate on Tuesday – said last week it is "vitaly important" that Washington consults with Israel and Gulf states about a potential return to the JCPOA.

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He told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that "whatever its limitations," the 2015 nuclear deal has been relatively successful in preventing Iran from producing the necessary materials to create nuclear weapons.

"Kochavi's timeline on which Iran can build nuclear weapons is, to put it mildly, doubtful," Kyle Orton, an independent geopolitical analyst, told Arab News.

"His statement on the sanctions needing to be maintained because Iran is right on the cusp of serious concessions is simply untrue – the Iranian theocracy has retained all important functions under these sanctions.

"Despite all the Israeli strikes, Iran is entrenched in a way that cannot now be removed and Israel is reduced to striking at targets it has hit three and four and five times before."

However, Orton said the IDF chief's "messaging might well work politically in the US to hem in Biden when it comes to the JCPOA."

He added: "If the US restarts negotiations with Tehran, they will probably only begin after the June (presidential) 'election' in Iran."



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[Lebanese protesters break lockdown: 'Death by COVID-19 is better than starvation'](#)

Tue, 2021-01-26 21:01

BEIRUT: The closure and curfew period in Lebanon has been extended for two more weeks to contain the spread of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19), prompting people in Tripoli, Beirut, and Sidon to take to the streets.

The protests were spontaneous, considering that the neighborhoods from which they started are poor, where the residents work for daily wages.

The Minister of Social Affairs and Tourism in the caretaker government Ramzi Musharrafieh said on Tuesday that "230,000 families in Lebanon benefit from aid and have been receiving 400,000 Lebanese pounds (\$263) per month since the beginning of the crisis." He added that "25 percent of the Lebanese people do not need aid."

Hundreds of people took to the streets in Tripoli, Sidon, and Beirut to denounce the suspension of the economy and the failure to provide people with alternatives.

One of the protesters said: "Contracting COVID-19 and dying of it is easier than having my family and myself starve to death."

Protesters in Tripoli took to Al-Nour Square on Monday after days of expressing their impatience and protesting outside the houses of the city's officials.

One of the protesters said: "COVID-19 does not scare us. We cannot tolerate this life of humiliation anymore. The officials in power have starved and robbed us."

The protesters clashed with the security forces – the army and the Internal Security Forces – hurling stones and water bottles at them.

Their chants demanded financial compensation for the poorest families, who have not been able to work for two weeks and must wait a further two weeks before they can return to their jobs, resulting in a whole month without any financial income.

The protests spiralled out of control and turned into riots that ended with dozens of arrests. Several army personnel were deployed to control the situation in Al-Nour Square and its vicinity. Riot police used tear gas to disperse the protesters.

The Lebanese Red Cross said it brought in six ambulances as 41 people were injured during the protests. The organization transferred 12 people to hospitals, while 29 were treated at the scene.

In support of the Tripoli protests, dozens gathered at the Ring Bridge in central Beirut.

Activists gathered in Sidon's Elia Square for a vigil, amid security measures. The protesters chanted slogans denouncing the political authority's arbitrary decisions, which they argue worsened the economic collapse.

Some protesters said that 60 percent of the poor people in Lebanon are suffering because of these decisions, which were not accompanied with support for people who were laid off due to lockdown measures.

The protests extended to Taalbaya in the Bekaa and the coastal town of Jiyeh. The protesters moved from the poor neighborhoods of Beirut to Corniche el Mazraa and blocked the road, but the riot police reopened it.

Bechara Al-Asmar, head of the General Labor Union, told Arab News: "Things are heading toward chaos, and the authorities' decisions are ill-considered. When forcing people to stop working, it is important to give them incentives and compensation. There are 120,000 daily workers impacted by the closure, which has come amid a severe economic crisis."

He added: "They must exempt the factories that suspended production so that they can survive and not lay off their workers if the closure results in stopping operation.

"What can the factories that have agreements with clients abroad do to deliver their products? This is the only sector that is bringing Lebanon fresh money and giving people jobs."

Al-Asmar said that aid provided by the government "covers 47,000 families, and a further 8,000 taxi drivers have been added to them. This is a small percentage compared to the need among the general population."

He continued: "Employees are now receiving half a salary or a very meager salary if they don't lose their jobs as employers prefer shutting down their businesses to continuous losses."

Bechara added: "We are facing a major social crisis. The daily workers are complaining of their inability to put bread on the table, while the state is unable to hold coordination meetings, so how can it provide compensation for those affected?"



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Jordan demands Israel end Al-Aqsa 'provocations'

Author:

Tue, 2021-01-26 00:54

AMMAN: Jordan urged Israel on Monday to stop blocking restoration work at Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa mosque compound, Islam's third holiest site. Jordanian foreign ministry spokesman Daifallah Alfayez said he had sent a "protest note" demanding Israel "refrain from such violations and provocations, and respect the mandate of Jordan in administering Muslim holy sites."

There was no immediate response from Israel.

Under a 1994 peace deal, the Jewish state recognizes Jordan's oversight of Muslim holy sites in east Jerusalem, the Palestinian sector of the city occupied and annexed by Israel since 1967.

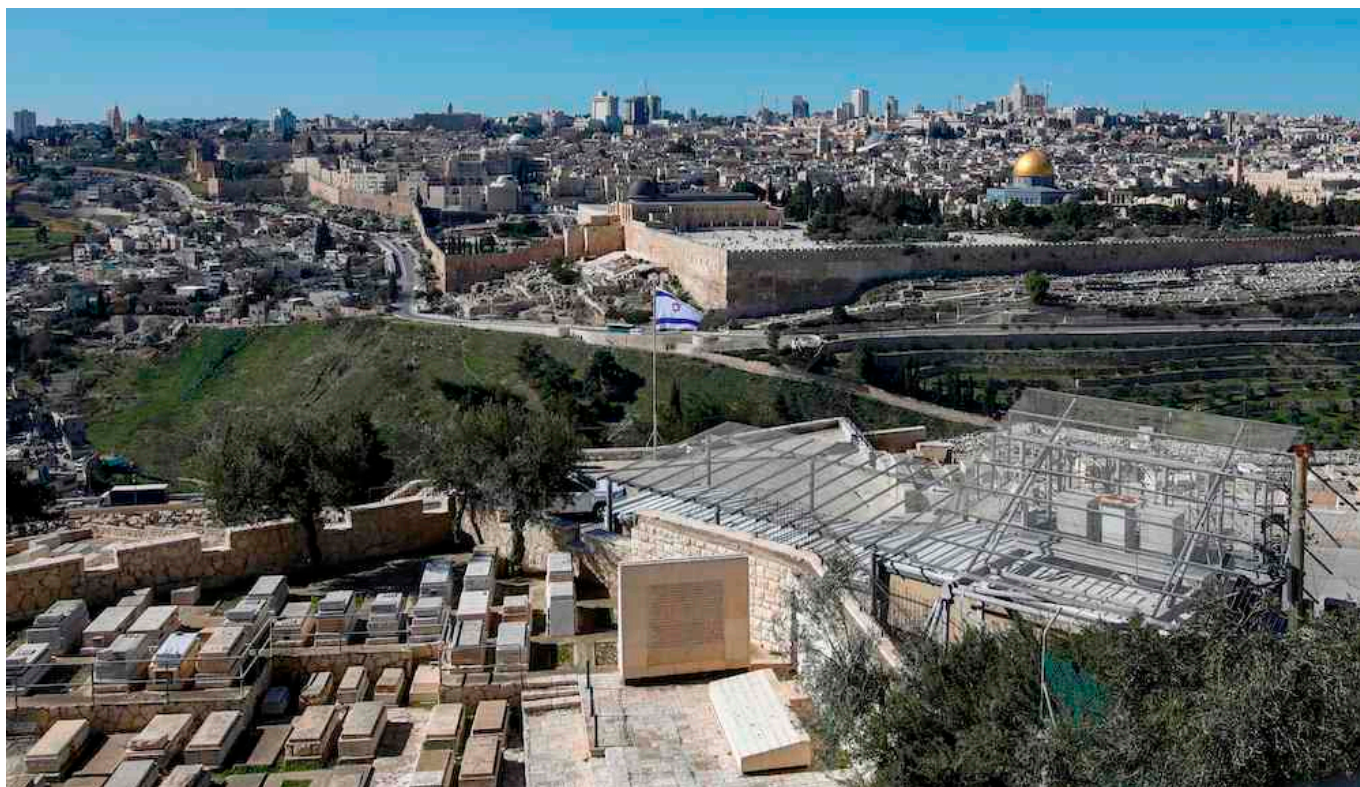
Known by Muslims as the Haram Al-Sharif, or Holy Sanctuary, and as the Temple Mount by Jews, the compound houses the golden Dome of the Rock shrine and Al-Aqsa mosque.

Jordan, which said Israel's police had interrupted restoration work on the Dome of the Rock," stressed that the Waqf, the Islamic endowments authority, was "the sole authority responsible for the supervision and maintenance of Al-Aqsa."

On Sunday, the Waqf accused Israeli police of blocking "all reconstruction projects in the compound," including stopping building supplies and "the entry of basic materials necessary for maintenance."

The Waqf said maintenance teams were "unable to maintain or repair the most basic facilities of the mosque and its employees are exposed to prosecution, threats of arrest and expulsion."

On Saturday, the Waqf said police stopped work by "photocopying the identity cards of workers and technicians, preventing them from working and threatening them with arrest if work continues."



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[Iraq hangs three convicted of 'terrorism': security source](#)

Author:

Tue, 2021-01-26 00:36

NASIRIYAH: Three Iraqis convicted of "terrorism" were hanged on Monday, a security source said, days after a deadly double suicide attack in a crowded Baghdad marketplace killed over 30 people. The reported hangings came after rights groups warned Iraq may authorize a spree of such executions in a show of strength following the bombings on

Thursday, which were claimed by the Daesh group.

"Three people convicted under Article 4 of the anti-terror law were executed on Monday at the Nasiriyah central prison," the security source told AFP, on condition of anonymity.

On Sunday, an official from Iraq's presidency told AFP more than 340 execution orders "for terrorism or criminal acts" were ready to be carried out.

"We are continuing to sign off on more," that official said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

Another official from Iraq's presidency said Monday that all the orders were signed after 2014, most of them under ex-president Fuad Massum and at a time when IS occupied a third of the country.

Thursday's attack, which killed at least 32 people, was a jolting reminder of the persistent threat posed by IS, despite the government declaring victory over the jihadists in late 2017.

A 2005 law carries the death penalty for anyone convicted of "terrorism," which can include membership of an extremist group even if they are not convicted of any specific acts.

Rights groups have warned that executions were being used for political reasons.

"Leaders resort to announcements of mass executions simply to signal to the public that they're taking... (these issues) seriously," said Belkis Wille, senior crisis and conflict researcher at Human Rights Watch.

"The death penalty is used as a political tool more than anything else," she told AFP on Sunday.

Since Baghdad officially declared victory over IS, Iraqi courts have sentenced hundreds to death for crimes perpetrated during the jihadists' 2014 seizure of swathes of the country and their brutal three-year hold over cities including Mosul.

Only a small proportion of the sentences have been carried out, as they must be approved by the president.

Barham Saleh, who has held the post since 2018, is known to be personally against capital punishment, and has resisted signing execution orders in the past.

Some Iraqis took to social media to demand tougher action from Saleh after Thursday's attack, accusing him of "not carrying out the sentences" and risking a prison break.

A protest is planned to take place on Tuesday in Nasiriyah, demanding that jihadists be executed in revenge for last week's double suicide attack in the capital.

Despite Saleh's moderating influence, Iraq in 2019 carried out the fourth highest number of executions among nations worldwide, after China, Iran and Saudi Arabia, according to Amnesty International.

Judicial sources told AFP at least 30 executions took place in 2020.

They include 21 men convicted of "terrorism" and executed at Nasiriyah prison in November.

The move sparked condemnations from the United Nations, which described the news as "deeply troubling" and called on Iraq to halt any further planned executions.

Rights groups accuse Iraq's justice system of corruption, carrying out rushed trials on circumstantial evidence and failing to allow the accused a proper

defense.

UN Human Rights Commissioner Michelle Bachelet said late last year that given such gaps in Iraq's legal system, implementing capital punishment "may amount to an arbitrary deprivation of life by the State."



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Fears of Iraq execution spree after Daesh attack