

Antony Blinken: US must act urgently to stop Iran nuclear weapon

Tue, 2021-01-19 22:50

LONDON: A new nuclear deal could address Iran's aggressive policies in the Middle East, America's next top diplomat Antony Blinken said on Tuesday. The secretary of state-designate told his confirmation hearing before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that the administration of President-elect Joe Biden would seek a "longer and stronger deal."

But he warned that the time needed for Iran to make enough fissile material for a single nuclear weapon had fallen to three or four months from more than a year since Donald Trump took office.

Trump withdrew the US from the 2015 nuclear deal with world powers, which Biden had helped negotiate under President Barack Obama.

The deal, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), stemmed Iranian nuclear activity in return for an easing of international sanctions. But it was criticized by Gulf countries and in the US for allowing Tehran to pursue aggressive policies in the region and ballistic missile development. Blinken said the new administration had "an urgent responsibility" to do what it could to stop Iran acquiring a nuclear weapon.

"The breakout time – the time it would take Iran to produce enough fissile material for one weapon – has gone from beyond a year, as it was under the JCPOA, to about three or four months, based at least on public reporting," Blinken said.

President Biden, he added, would rejoin the deal if Iran returned to complying with its terms.

"But we would use that as a platform with our allies and partners, who would once again be on the same side with us, to seek a longer and stronger agreement," he said.

A new agreement could address Iran's "destabilizing activities" in the region as well as its missiles, Blinken added.

On Israel and Palestine, Blinken said he backed a two-state solution but said he was doubtful that such a deal was possible soon.

"The only way to ensure Israel's future as a Jewish, democratic state and to give the Palestinians a state to which they are entitled is through the so-called two-state solution," Blinken said. "I think realistically it's hard to see near-term prospects for moving forward on that."

"What would be important is to make sure that neither party takes steps that make the already difficult process even more challenging," he said.

In his farewell speech, President Donald Trump will highlight the Abraham Accords deals, which normalized ties between Israel and several Arab states.

*With AFP and Reuters



The Kingdom vs. COVID-19

How Saudi Arabia acted swiftly and coordinated a global response to fight the coronavirus, preventing a far worse crisis at home and around the world

Enter



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Iran nuclear deal](#)

[JCPOA](#)

[Joe Biden](#)

[Antony Blinken](#)

American Chamber of Commerce: Why Biden will be business as usual for US-KSA economic ties
How the Biden presidency might impact Turkey's Kurdish problem

[Egypt flies aid to Jordan as talks focus on peace, trade](#)

Author:

Tue, 2021-01-19 22:06

CAIRO: Egypt sent a military aircraft loaded with medical aid to Jordan ahead of President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi's official visit to Amman.

The medicines and medical supplies will help the country in its fight against the coronavirus pandemic.

The military flight landed in Jordan before El-Sisi's arrival on Monday to meet Jordan's King Abdullah for talks on a range of regional issues.

Senior ministers and officials from both sides were joined by Jordanian Crown Prince Hussein bin Abdullah for discussions on ways to strengthen bilateral relations and "the latest developments in the regional and Arab arena, foremost of which is the Palestinian issue," the state-run news agency Petra reported.

King Abdullah affirmed Jordan's "clear and firm stance" on Palestine and called for a just and comprehensive peace based on a two-state solution guaranteeing the establishment of an independent, sovereign and viable Palestinian state, with East Jerusalem as its capital.

Both leaders discussed enhancing bilateral relations in trade, development, investment, security cooperation and exchange of information.

Talks also focused on eliminating the threat of terrorism and extremism in order to ensure stability, maintain territorial integrity and encourage prosperity.

During their meeting, the two leaders also "discussed mechanisms to expand tripartite Jordanian-Egyptian-Iraqi cooperation, and their aspiration to continue building on what has been accomplished in the previous three summits."

Regarding the latest efforts to revive the Palestinian peace process, El-Sisi said that Egypt will continue its support for the Palestinian cause "since it is one of the fundamentals of Egyptian policy."

King Abdullah said that he appreciated Egypt's "relentless efforts in supporting the Palestinian cause, which is an extension of its historical role."

He added that these are in line with Egypt's efforts to promote stability, and improve living conditions and economic security in the Gaza Strip.

The monarch praised efforts aimed at advancing the reconciliation process and encouraging political consensus between all Palestinian factions.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Egypt](#)

[Jordan](#)

[Abdel Fattah El-Sisi](#)

[King Abdullah](#)

Jordan's King Abdullah, Egypt's El-Sisi meet in bid to reignite Mid-East peace talks
Egyptian leader in Jordan for post-Trump strategy talks

Egyptian city hosts Libyan constitutional talks

Tue, 2021-01-19 21:46

CAIRO: The southern Egyptian city of Hurgada is set to host three days of meetings to discuss Libya's constitutional path with the Libyan House of Representatives and the State Council, sponsored by the country's UN Support Mission.

The meetings will discuss ways to reach an agreement between the two chambers on a project to create a constitutional and legal base, according to which the December elections will be held.

A committee of 30 members split equally between the House of Representatives and the State Council will submit periodic reports to the Presidency of the Council, provided that it submits a final report within 40 days or less.

They will discuss constitutional regulation mechanisms for this year's elections.

The meetings follow the legal committee of the Libyan Forum for Political Dialogue presenting their recommendations regarding the constitutional basis for the elections. The virtual meeting was conducted under the auspices of the UN.

The UN Support Mission in Libya said that over recent months, several meetings were held to discuss the roadmap that ultimately achieves a comprehensive settlement of the Libyan crisis.

The mission stated that the roadmap, drawn up in Tunisia last November, was the first critical step to renew the political legitimacy of Libyan institutions and restore the country's sovereignty through holding national elections on Dec. 24.

It added that the participants in the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum also agreed on clear steps leading to the elections.

The elections will be held on an agreed constitutional base, and the forum will set a reasonable timeframe for politicians and the relevant institutions to prepare for the event, with sufficient planning for possible failures.

Forum participants, during their recent sessions in Geneva, agreed on the need to restructure the executive authority that governs Libya in the pre-election period, provided that the role of the new unified government is to provide the necessary conditions for holding elections, launching national reconciliation, fighting corruption and restoring public services.

Cairo hosted a meeting between Oct. 11 and 13 between the delegations of parliament and the State Council during which constitutional issues were discussed.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Libya](#)

[Egypt](#)

[Khalifa Haftar](#)

UN chief hails progress in Libya talks
Security Council members approve choice of new UN envoy to Libya

[Crypto-miners take down Iran electric grids, prompting crackdown](#)

Author:

Tue, 2021-01-19 00:13

LONDON: Iran has ordered a crackdown on cryptocurrency miners after blackouts in major cities were attributed to the excess toll the activity takes on the energy grid.

Parts of Tehran, as well as Mashhad and Tabriz, have experienced repeated blackouts in recent weeks, temporarily halting production lines and plunging the cities into darkness.

State electricity company Tavanir said it had temporarily halted all known crypto-mining operations, including a Chinese-Iranian mine in Rafsanjan that is reported to have been consuming 175 megawatt hours – enough electricity to power an average Western home for 17 years.

Cryptocurrency mining is a process in which specialized computers complete progressively more difficult calculations to verify transactions and thereby produce cryptocurrencies, the most popular of which is Bitcoin.

The process is extremely energy intensive, meaning that cryptocurrency mining is most profitable in locations with cheap energy.

Because of significant state subsidies and excess fuel reserves held by Iran due to sanctions, oil-fueled electricity is very cheap in the country – less than 1 cent per kilowatt hour.

This has massively fueled production of cryptocurrencies in Iran, to the extent that in 2020, the country was responsible for 8 percent of all the world's Bitcoin production.

The effect of the crypto-mining on Iran's grids has become such a problem that the government is now offering a \$4,750 reward for tips on illegal crypto-mining locations.

At \$35,000 each, the price of Bitcoin has reached record levels in recent weeks, making mining of the currency particularly attractive in a place with few economic opportunities such as Iran.

The appeal of Bitcoin and other cryptocurrencies is also relevant for states and groups that operate on the fringes of the global economy, such as Iran, Venezuela and North Korea, as well as terrorist groups.

Bitcoins can be traded outside the traditional banking system, allowing Iran to circumvent economic sanctions on its financial sectors, and terrorist groups such as Hezbollah and Daesh to trade on the black market anonymously.

In 2019, Iran's President Hassan Rouhani announced that his country would launch its own cryptocurrency to circumvent US sanctions, but little else is known about the project.

Despite the difficulty in tracing cryptocurrency transactions, in 2018 the US sanctioned two Iranians who had been converting cryptocurrency into Iranian rials on behalf of hackers who had targeted American corporations, hospitals, universities and government agencies.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Middle East](#)

[bitcoin](#)

[cryptocurrencies](#)

[Iran](#)

Boom or bust? Say hello to cryptocurrency lending
Call for cryptocurrency
curbs to protect consumers

[Intensifying clashes in Hodeidah kill dozens of fighters, civilians](#)

Author:

Tue, 2021-01-19 00:02

AL-MUKALLA: Flaring battles in Yemen's western province of Hodeidah have left dozens of fighters and civilians dead over the past five days, local officials, media reports and residents have said.

Heavy fighting broke out between government forces and Iran-backed Houthis in Hodeidah and in flashpoints in two districts in the province.

The Joint Forces, an umbrella term for three major military units located on the country's western coast, said in a statement that at least 95 Houthis, including field leaders, were killed or wounded in the fighting as the Yemeni government warned against the collapse of the Stockholm Agreement due to Houthi military escalations in the province.

Two field Houthi commanders identified as Abu Taha Al-Murtadha and Abdul Wahan Mohammed Ali, together with dozens of rebels, were killed in the fighting. Their bodies are still scattered on the battlefields in Durihimi and Hays districts, the Joint Forces said. At least 12 government troops were also killed in the fighting.

Under heavy artillery, tank and mortar fire, Houthis last week marched toward government-controlled areas in Hays and Durihimi, triggering fierce clashes that ended when loyalists pushed them back to their previous territory.

On Saturday and Sunday, the rebels staged heavy attacks on government forces, using explosive-laden drones and heavy weapons, before retreating after suffering heavy fatalities, local army commanders said. An old woman was killed and several others were wounded in the fighting and shelling, official media and an aid organization said.

The eruption of fighting in Hodeidah has prompted international medical charity Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF) into putting its local health facilities on alert to handle a predicted surge in patients.

FASTFACT

The Yemen's Abductees' Mothers Association, an all-female rights organization, has accused the Houthis of abducting 95 civilians, including 13 children, during their latest military assault on Haima, northeast of Taiz.

"Intense fighting has escalated along southern Hodeidah frontlines in Yemen. The MSF team in Mocha Trauma Hospital is engaging mass its casualty plan to respond to influxes of wounded. We are intensely worried for civilians living near the frontline areas," the group said in a statement, repeating appeals to warring factions to avoid harming civilians.

"In Late 2020, MSF treated a high number of civilians from this front-line area. Civilians must not be targeted or harmed in the conflict." The MSF surgical hospital in the Red Sea Mocha received 17 wounded civilians in the previous 72 hours, the organization said on Monday.

Yemen's internationally recognized government has warned that a truce in the province of Hodeidah under the Stockholm Agreement could crumble if Houthi military operations do not stop.

Yemeni Foreign Minister Ahmed Awadh bin Mubarak told Arab News on Monday that a Houthi military escalation would have "negative effects" on the Stockholm Agreement, adding that the Houthis have "proved that they are not serious about peace" and are "stooges for Iran."

He said: "These are certainly negative messages adding to the crime of bombing the airport. This confirms what we have repeatedly said, that this group has no interest in peace and its decision is not in its hands, but rather in the hands of Tehran."

Awadh added that Houthis killed a government officer, attacked government

forces, obstructed the distribution of humanitarian assistance and launched bomb boat attacks in the Red Sea under the nose of the UN monitoring mission in Hodeidah.

Under the Stockholm Agreement, the Yemeni government stalled a military offensive in Hodeidah city in exchange for a Houthi withdrawal from the city's seaports and a commitment to end the depositing of revenues into the central bank in Hodeidah.

Both sides agreed to enter a truce under the supervision of UN monitors. But local rights groups have said that more than 500 civilians have been killed in Hodeidah by Houthi shelling and land mines since late 2018. Last week, Yemen's Prime Minister Maen Abdul Malik Saeed appeared in an interview with foreign journalists, saying he "regretted" ending the military offensive in Hodeidah that was about to bring the city under government's control "within five days."

The Yemen's Abductees' Mothers Association, an all-female rights organization, has accused the Houthis of abducting 95 civilians, including 13 children, during their latest military assault on Haima, northeast of Taiz. The organization Sunday arranged a small sit-in in the southern city of Taiz to protest against "systematic" raids by Houthis in Haima and the abduction of dozens of civilians.

"We hold the Houthi group responsible for the lives and safety of abducted people and children," read one poster seen by Arab News.

Col. Abdul Basit Al-Baher, a Yemeni army spokesperson in the city of Taiz, recently told Arab News that Houthis killed 12 civilians, wounded 30 more and raided 63 houses during a recent offensive intended to suppress a rebellion by locals.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Yemen](#)

[Houthis](#)

Yemen's government vows to mitigate effects of Houthi terrorism designation
Saudi Arabia's KSrelief distributes more than 35 tons of food baskets in
Yemen's Marib