

Iran staggers into 2021 with its many vulnerabilities exposed

Thu, 2020-12-31 23:52

MISSOURI, US: Iran's woes during 2020 proved worse than most. The year began with shockwaves from the fuel price hike protests (which broke out in late November 2019) still reverberating all across the country. Then on Jan. 3, the US assassinated Qassem Soleimani, Iran's regional "shadow commander." On edge due to fear of another American or Israeli attack, Iranian air defense forces then mistakenly shot down a Ukraine-bound civilian airliner minutes shortly after it took off in Tehran, killing all 176 people on board.

Almost one year later, authorities in Tehran have still not managed to rectify the problems or vulnerabilities that emerged so starkly in January 2020. Key Iranian figures still look like easy targets for American or Israeli covert operations, as evidenced by the November 27 assassination of top nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh. Fakhrizadeh was in Tehran when an AI-controlled machine gun from another vehicle targeted his car.

Three months earlier the Israelis also killed a top Al-Qaeda commander, Abu Muhammad al-Masri, who had found refuge in Iran. Like Fakhrizadeh, Al-Masri was gunned down in broad daylight in the streets of Tehran. In this case, the assassins escaped on motorcycle. Most observers believe the Israelis conducted the assassination at America's behest.



Top nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh was assassinated in November. (AFP)

Al-Masri masterminded the 1998 attacks on US embassies in Africa, and his killing occurred on Aug. 7, which was the anniversary of the embassy attacks. As the Iranian economy remains belly-up from American-led sanctions, the same popular discontents that caused the late 2019 protests continue to simmer.

Iranian authorities' rush to intimidate and silence protestors led them in September to hang popular Iranian wrestler Navid Afkari. Afkari was only one of many executed by the regime in 2020 for what most viewed as political crimes.

Worldwide condemnations of Iran increased accordingly. At the UN, Canada brought forward a successful resolution in November condemning the human-rights record of the regime. Referring back to the protests at the end of 2019, Amnesty International completed research concluding that the Iranian state killed 304 people, including children, during the protests and arrested thousands more.



Iran either lacks the ability or fears the consequences of direct attacks on its more serious enemies. (AFP)

Iran responded to the UN resolution and other criticisms by claiming they have “no legal validity” and otherwise ignoring them. In response to the assassination of some of the regime’s most key figures, Tehran vowed serious retaliation – but shows little capacity for following through on such threats against America or Israel.

Iranian cat-and-mouse games with the US fleet in the Gulf in 2020 did nothing but raise tensions a bit, at the same time that the Americans seized a number of Iranian vessels transporting fuel to Venezuela in August. Last week, as Israel sent one of its submarines through the Suez Canal towards the Gulf, Iran again replied with only threats.

Tough line on Iran favored by vulnerable countries

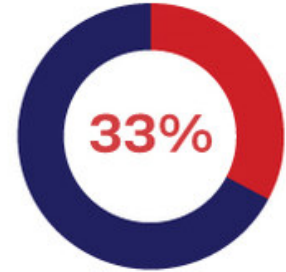
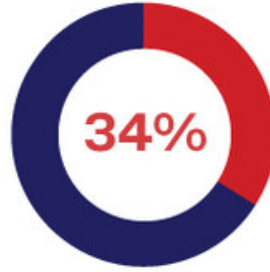
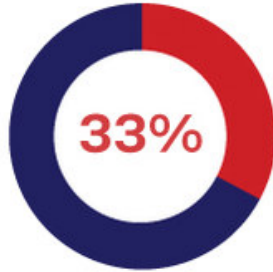
What should the next US president do about US relations with Iran?

Continue sanctions,
lead war posture

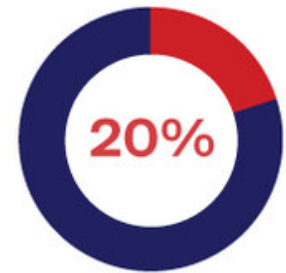
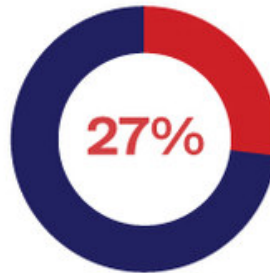
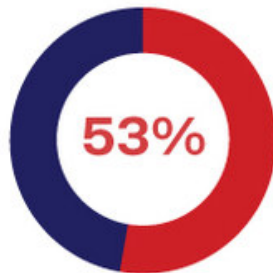
Revive nuclear
agreement

Negotiate toughened
nuclear agreement

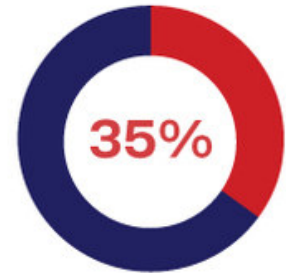
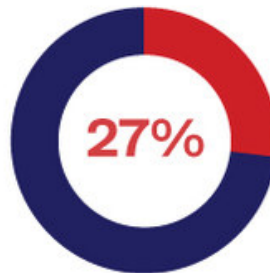
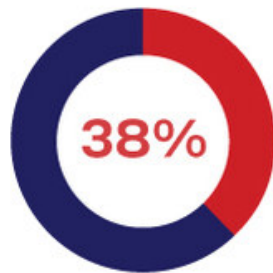
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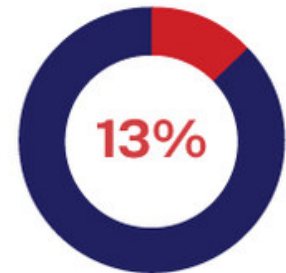
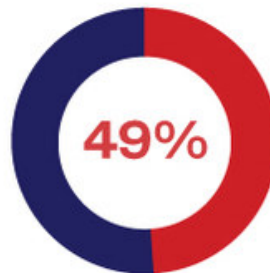
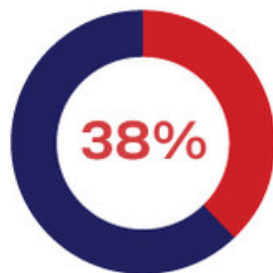
Iraq



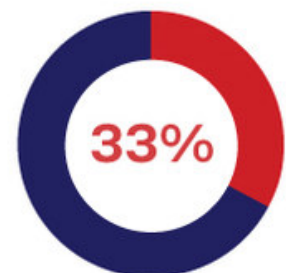
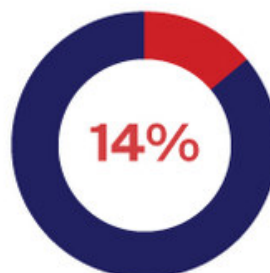
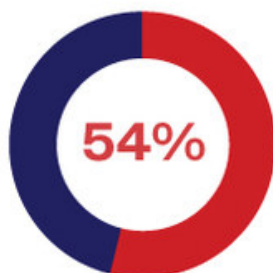
Lebanon



Syria



Yemen



Source: Arab News/YouGov Pan-Arab Survey, 2020

Throughout 2020 Israel continued to hit Iranian personnel in Syria with air strikes and missiles. All the while, Tehran seemed impotent to stop them. Under such circumstances Iran's 2020 launch of its first military satellite, the unveiling of new missiles, and holding annual war games only looked like so much bravado.

The September-November Nagorno-Karabakh war between Armenia and Azerbaijan added to Tehran's headaches during this period. Iran used to play an important role in the Caucasus region and even mediated past disputes between Armenia and Azerbaijan. They have since been eclipsed by Turkey and Russia, with no say in the latest war or its resolution.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan even visited his victorious allies in Baku in December and read a nationalist Azeri poem there which seemingly makes claims upon the Azeri region of northwest Iran. The reaction from Tehran was loud but otherwise toothless.



Since then COVID-19 has killed over 50,000 Iranians and infected some 1.1 million. (AFP)

On top of the economic and political problems, COVID-19 appears to have hit Iran harder than most. In Feb. 2020 – before anywhere else in the Middle East – Iran experienced its first wave of the virus. Since then COVID-19 has killed over 50,000 Iranians and infected some 1.1 million.

The virus led to economic shutdowns and closures that competed with US-led sanctions to see which could damage the country more. With a vaccine now coming out, Iranian authorities are accusing the US of blocking their access to vaccinations as well as to international loans to help combat it.

All these difficulties highlight a central, inescapable reality for 2020: The Iranian state saw itself significantly weakened and incapable of protecting, much less securing, its principal interests.

Although the regime in Tehran remains quite capable of kidnapping or killing Iranian dissidents abroad (such as a Paris-based dissident leader recently kidnapped from Iraq and a Balochi activist murdered in Canada last week), the same does not hold true for American and Israeli targets. Iran either lacks the ability or fears the consequences of direct attacks on its more serious enemies.

Even indirect responses have serious limitations. Iran's foes assassinated Soleimani after his supposed role in spurring on Iraqi Shiite militias to launch rockets on American bases in that country. Any dramatic Iranian move to avenge attacks on its people – even if carried out by an Iranian proxy rather than Tehran itself – thus appears too risky for a regime so outclassed by the Americans and the Israelis.



Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. (AFP)

Less dramatic Iranian stratagems, such as pressuring the Shiite-led government in Baghdad to evict American forces from Iraq, likewise seem limited in terms of what they can accomplish. Iraqis, including Shiite ones, have their own interests and problems, leading to them to continue working with Americans in Iraq.

If the incoming Biden administration in the US proves savvier than Obama and his advisers were regarding Iran, they will take this Iranian weakness into account. Although President-elect Biden has clearly expressed his desire to return to the nuclear accord's framework agreement with Iran, he may do so more carefully than his predecessors.

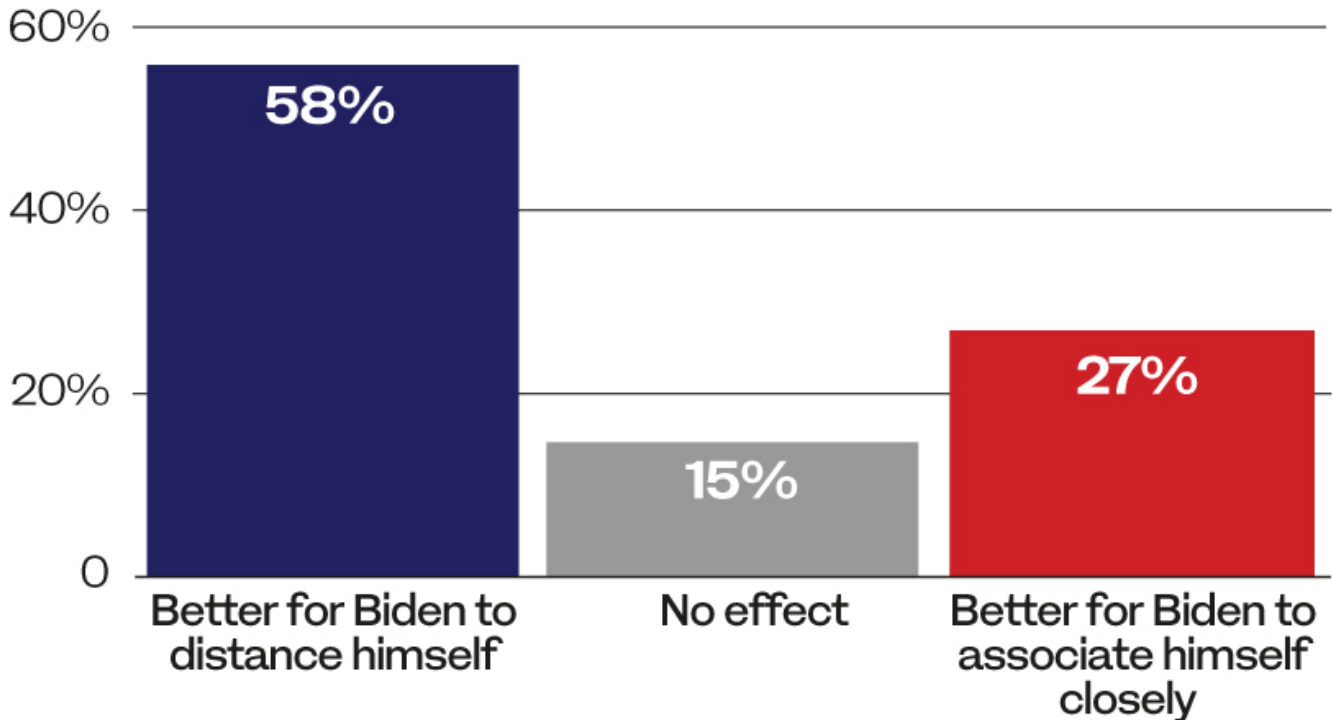
The Obama administration's mistake with Iran involved treating the regime there as if it were a deer that might get "spooked" away from negotiations. As a result, the Obama administration halted all kinds of US anti-Iran efforts unrelated to the negotiations. This included, for example, shutting down a major multi-year Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) investigation into

Lebanese Hezbollah's international money laundering.

The net effect of Obama and Secretary of State John Kerry's efforts to "encourage negotiations" was to empower Iran and give it carte blanche to do whatever it liked. A more sophisticated Biden administration policy would be to consider negotiating to resume the nuclear deal with Iran while truly keeping other unrelated matters separate.

Why Biden should shed the Obama-era baggage

Should he associate closely or distance himself from the Obama administration?



Source: Arab News/YouGov Pan-Arab Survey, 2020

This would mean maintaining a good deal of US pressure as well as non-nuclear related sanctions on Iran. In effect, the Iranians would receive at the most a partial lifting of sanctions for abiding by the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (a.k.a. the "nuclear deal"). If the Iranians wanted relief from other sanctions, such as the ones applied for supporting terrorism, they would have to adjust their behavior accordingly.

In the final analysis, if the incoming Biden administration proves sufficiently savvy to take advantage of Iran's annus horribilis, they could thus conceivably contain both Iran's nuclear weapon ambitions and its more destabilizing policies in the region. Such a more nuanced approach would in turn reassure other Middle Eastern allies that Iran is not simply getting its Obama-issued carte blanche back.

• *David Romano is Thomas G. Strong Professor of Middle East Politics at Missouri State University*



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Iranian experts plotted attack on Aden airport: Yemeni PM UN denounces Iran's execution of child offender

[Many Lebanese, their hopes in tatters, say they fear what 2021 will bring](#)

Author:

Thu, 2020-12-31 23:34

BEIRUT: After a year of financial, political and social turmoil, few in Lebanon believe the crisis-racked country's situation will improve in the coming 12 months, while growing numbers fear their plight will worsen dramatically.

"Our country is broken," said Rima Al-Khatib, who works in the banking sector, describing a year in which her father died and the family was unable to pray for him in the mosque because of a nationwide lockdown at the time.

Al-Khatib told Arab News that she "is in a state of denial about everything that happened this year."

"I don't want to reflect on it because it is too painful," she said.

With university and health studies in recent weeks showing alarming levels of depression and anxiety in young and old alike, it is clear few people have any expectations, let alone dreams, for the new year.

One mental health survey concluded that up to 16 percent of people aged 18-24 suffer from severe depression, while 41 percent of women still suffer from post-traumatic stress in the wake of the Beirut port blast.

Meanwhile, lockdowns imposed to halt the spread of the coronavirus affected the mental health of 41 percent of the participants in another study, with a further survey claiming 9.5 percent of the population risk becoming depressed because of the country's dire economic situation.

Al-Khatib said that she will never forget the day of the port explosion.

"I was in my car on the road and a balcony fell from a building in front of me," she recalled. "I could not understand what happened. My friend narrowly escaped death and the explosion killed two of my work colleagues, leaving two children orphans."

Al-Khatib said that many Lebanese believe the country "has been taken hostage by a terrorist organization."

"Our salaries have lost their value. I no longer listen to the news and I do not want to after the government messed up everything by not paying the eurobonds. Now foodstuffs are priced according to the banks' dollar exchange rate. If the central bank runs out of dollars, what will our life be like?" she said.

"Lebanon has lost its place in the region and I don't know if it can regain it."

Majed Baitmouni, a market trader, said that the past year "pulled me back 40 years, financially and morally."

He said: "The government has brought us only calamities, and the coronavirus made things worse. I had to close my bag shop in Beirut because vendors want me to pay my rent in dollars, so I returned their goods and received the final blow. I have barely any money left and cannot do anything except sell vegetables and fruit in my local area. My wife and children helped me, but instead of making a profit, my debts increased."

Baitmouni said he no longer trusts the politicians. "They are threatening our livelihoods. They have destroyed us."

Abdullah Sultan, who owns an iron factory, said he believes the situation will worsen in the new year.

"My priority is for my children to leave this country. My grandmother used to tell us that things would get better soon. I do not want to say the same thing. The problem lies in the foundations of the country and the people – these cannot be changed," he said.

Assima Ramadan, an office worker, said that 2020 had left her isolated, and she feared the new year would be worse.

“My husband and I lost our life savings in the banks when their value collapsed. We hoped to live with dignity when we grow old, but now we will have to fear illness and the future. Because of the pandemic I have become afraid to walk outside. It is a feeling of helplessness and frustration, and I do not know how to get rid of it.”

University professor Aref Al-Abd said the past year had dealt Lebanon “a fatal blow,” adding: “What can I do to have a dignified life with my family?”

Economic and political deterioration will lead to a deterioration in security, he said.

“What is left of Lebanon? They hit banks, hospitals, universities, and there is fear they will strike coexistence. What happened in the port of Beirut is frightening.”

Sarah Fakhry, a young lawyer specializing in corporate law, said that she had supported protests against the “corrupt ruling authority” in the country.

“But things became even worse. The explosion at the Beirut port added to my fears. The state did not take responsibility for the victims.”

Now the companies that hire Fakhry, including large corporations, are facing closure.

“People are filing lawsuits against the banks, but they do not trust the judiciary,” she said. “I am one of those who has prepared their immigration papers again. I used to live in France and returned to Lebanon five years ago because life abroad is difficult. Now I will not look back.

“The future in Lebanon is dark, and I do not want to be part of it.”



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Lebanon set for muted NYE celebrations amid economic, health crises
Lebanon lockdown possible if COVID-19 cases increase

[UN denounces Iran's execution of child offender](#)

Author:

Thu, 2020-12-31 19:34

LONDON: The United Nations Human Rights office has condemned Iran's execution of a child offender as "appalling," while questioning his access to fair judicial process throughout his trial.

Mohammad Hassan Rezaiee was executed early Thursday morning in Iran for an offence he allegedly committed when he was 16 years old.

Rezaiee, who spent 12 years behind bars before his execution was eventually carried out, is the fourth person Tehran has executed this year for crimes committed as a minor. The UN said 80 more child offenders remain on death row.

UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet "strongly condemns the killing of Mohammad Hassan Rezaiee," a statement from her office said.

"The UN has repeatedly urged Iran to cease the appalling practice of executing child offenders," it added.

Iran has long faced accusations from the UN and rights groups that detainees in Iran face torture, chronically unfair trials, and are regularly barred access to legal counsel and due process prior to sentencing, and Rezaiee's experience of the Iranian judicial system was said to be no different.

"There are deeply troubling allegations that forced confessions extracted through torture were used in the conviction of Mr. Rezaiee, and there are numerous other serious concerns about violations of his fair trial rights," the statement said.

Diana Eltahawy, Amnesty International's deputy director for the Middle East and North Africa, previously explained that Rezaiee was arrested in 2007 in connection with the fatal stabbing of a man in a fist fight, but that his trial was "grossly unfair."

She said: "Authorities held him in prolonged solitary confinement, without access to his family and lawyer. They repeatedly tortured him to 'confess,' including by beating him with sticks, kicking and punching him, and whipping him with pipe hoses."

The young man's execution, the UN said, "takes place in the context of a series of recent executions in Iran. Between 19 and 26 December, at least eight individuals were executed in different prisons across the country. Unconfirmed reports suggest that at least eight other individuals are at risk of imminent execution.

"The High Commissioner urges Iranian authorities to halt all executions of child offenders."



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Iranian experts plotted attack on Aden airport: Yemeni PM UN rights chief says 'appalled' by Iran execution of two minors

[Security firms say suspicious object on oil tanker off Iraq](#)

Author:

Thu, 2020-12-31 19:33

DUBAI: Sailors involved in transferring fuel oil from an Iraqi tanker in the Gulf to another vessel owned by a shipping company traded in the US discovered a "suspicious object" they fear could be a mine, authorities said Thursday.

The discovery comes amid heightened tensions between Iran and the US in the waning days of President Donald Trump's administration.

Already, America has conducted B-52 bomber flyovers and sent a nuclear submarine into the Arabian Gulf over what Trump officials describe as the

possibility of an Iranian attack on the one-year anniversary of the US drones strike in Baghdad that killed a top Iranian general.

Two private security firms said sailors feared they found a limpet mine on the MT Pola, a Liberian-flagged tanker that was receiving assistance Thursday in the Gulf off Basra. A limpet mine is a type of naval mine that attaches to the side of a ship, usually by a diver-member of special forces. It later explodes, and can significantly damage a vessel.

The two firms, Ambrey Intelligence and Dryad Global, say investigations are ongoing.

The United Kingdom Marine Trade Operations, an organization under Britain's royal navy, said on its website that an "unknown object" had been attached to a ship's hull in the vicinity of Iraq's Khor Al-Zubair Port, without providing further information.

The US Navy's 5th Fleet, which patrols the Mideast, was monitoring the incident, said spokeswoman Cmdr. Rebecca Rebarich. Iraqi officials did not immediately comment on the incident.

The Pola, along with another tanker, serves as floating fuel oil storage of Iraq's State Organization of Marketing of Oil, said Sudharsan Sarathy, a senior oil analyst at the data-analysis firm Refinitiv. Smaller vessels carry the fuel oil to the ship, which then conducts ship-to-ship transfers in the Arabian Gulf to clients.

Sarathy said the Pola was conducting a ship-to-ship transfer with the MT Nordic Freedom, a Bermuda-flagged tanker. Dryad Global posted a satellite photo that it said showed the Pola and the Nordic Freedom.

The owners of the Nordic Freedom, the company Nordic American Tankers, could not be immediately reached. Stock in the firm traded slightly down early Thursday on the New York Stock Exchange at just under \$3 a share.

In 2019, the US blamed Iran for a series of limpet mine attacks on oil tankers near the Strait of Hormuz, the narrow mouth of the Arabian Gulf through which 20% of all the world's oil passes. Iran denies being involved. The location of the tankers involved in Thursday's incident sits just offshore from the border of Iraq and Iran near the mouth of the Euphrates and Tigris rivers in the Shatt Al-Arab. Iran has been closely allied to Iraq since the 2003 US-led invasion that toppled dictator Saddam Hussein, while also arming and aiding militia groups in the country.

Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif on Twitter earlier Thursday criticized Trump for wasting "billions to fly B52s & send armadas to OUR region."

"Intelligence from Iraq indicate plot to FABRICATE pretext for war," Zarif wrote, without elaborating. "Iran doesn't seek war but will OPENLY & DIRECTLY defend its people, security & vital interests."

Separately in Iraq, an improvised explosive device detonated near a convoy belonging to an Iraqi company providing logistical support to US coalition forces Thursday, police officials said.

The attack in the Yusifiyah district south of the capital, Baghdad, caused minor damage and briefly halted the convoy before it continued on its way, the two officials said. The officials spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak to journalists.

The attack was the latest in a series of recent attacks targeting trucks transporting logistical support to coalition bases in Iraq. No casualties have been reported in the attacks.



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Iraqi PM says country is at a crossroadsIran to resume gas flows to Iraq after agreement on unpaid bills: Iraq ministry

[Egypt summons Ethiopian diplomat over dam comments](#)

Thu, 2020-12-31 17:56

CAIRO: Egypt's foreign ministry said it has summoned Ethiopia's top diplomat in Cairo over comments by an Addis Ababa official regarding a controversial dam on the Nile.

The Egyptian ministry "summoned the Ethiopian Charge d'Affaires in Cairo to explain comments by the spokesperson for the Ethiopian Ministry for Foreign Affairs regarding domestic Egyptian affairs," it said late Wednesday.

The statement did not cite specific comments but followed a statement by the

Ethiopian official on the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), Africa's biggest hydroelectric project, which has raised fears for vital water supplies downstream in Egypt and Sudan.

"They know the GERD won't harm them, it's a diversion from internal problems," Dina Mufti, the Ethiopian ministry's spokesman and a former ambassador to Egypt, said Tuesday.

Mufti contended that without this "distraction", Egypt and Sudan would "have to deal with many local issues waiting to explode, especially up there (in Egypt)."

The three countries have been in talks since 2011 but have failed to reach a deal on filling the dam. The negotiations have been stalled since August.

The Nile, the world's longest river at 6,000 kilometres (3,700 miles), is a lifeline supplying both water and electricity to 10 countries.

Ethiopia views the dam as essential for its growing power needs, and insists that the flow of water downstream will not be affected.

But Egypt, a country of more than 100 million people who depend on the Nile for 97 percent of their water needs, opposes unilateral moves by Ethiopia. Along with Sudan, it has called for a legally binding political solution to the dispute.



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Egypt's cabinet allows GASC to co-found shareholding shipping company
Top Egypt officials visit Libya capital for first time in years