

US sanctions Iran's space program

Tue, 2019-09-03 21:06

WASHINGTON: The Trump administration imposed sanctions Tuesday on Iran's space agency for the first time, accusing it of developing ballistic missiles under the cover of a civilian program to launch satellites into orbit. The sanctions announced by the State and Treasury departments targeting the agency and two of its affiliates follow the explosion Thursday of a rocket at Iran's Imam Khomeini Space Center in what an Iranian official said was a technical malfunction during a test. Following the explosion, President Donald Trump tweeted a surveillance image depicting the apparent aftermath of the incident and declared that the US had nothing to do with what transpired at the launch site.

With the latest sanctions, the Trump administration can subject foreign companies and governments, including international space cooperation organizations, to penalties if they have any involvement with the Iranian space agency. They would also freeze any of the agency's assets in US jurisdictions, though there aren't likely to be any given the state of relations between the two nations.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said the "urgency of the threat" was underscored by Iran's recent attempt to launch a space vehicle. "The United States will not allow Iran to use its space launch program as cover to advance its ballistic missile programs," he said in a statement announcing the sanctions.

Officials said the move was not directly related to last week's explosion but that the surveillance image provided evidence of the U.S. assertion that the Iranian space program is used to develop missiles, including ones capable of carrying nuclear warheads or other weapons of mass destruction over long distances.

The sanctions are part of the Trump administration's escalating campaign of economic and diplomatic measures against Iran since unilaterally withdrawing last year from an international accord that was intended to curb the Iranian nuclear program.

Iran insists it is developing rockets to launch satellites into space, which it has done twice since 2013. The explosion marked the third failure involving a rocket at the Iranian center, which has raised suspicions of sabotage in Iran's space program.

Iran government spokesman Ali Rabiei said Monday the explosion was "a technical matter and a technical error."

Commercially available satellite images by Planet Labs Inc. and Maxar Technologies showed a black plume of smoke rising above a launch pad Thursday, with what appeared to be the charred remains of a rocket and its launch stand. In previous days, satellite images had shown officials there had repainted the launch pad blue.

The blast followed failed launches of the Payam and Doosti satellites in January and February. A separate fire at the Imam Khomeini Space Center in February also killed three researchers, authorities said at the time. Iran is preparing to launch the Nahid-1, a communication satellite, into space.

The U.S. alleges such satellite launches defy a UN Security Council resolution calling on Iran to undertake no activity related to ballistic missiles capable of delivering nuclear weapons.



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France condemns failed Iran satellite launch, urges halt to missile tests
Satellite photos shows burning rocket at Iranian space center

[Israel says Hezbollah plans advanced missile plant in Lebanon's Bekaa](#)

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Tue, 2019-09-03 16:01

JERUSALEM: Israel accused Hezbollah on Tuesday of setting up a factory for precision-guided missiles in Lebanon's Bekaa valley, in a veiled warning of further possible Israeli counter-strikes after a drone attack near Beirut set off brief cross-border fighting.

Sunday's shelling exchange was the fiercest between Israel and Hezbollah since the 2006 Lebanon war. While neither is keen to escalate, Israel has said it could act against any upgrades of Hezbollah's missile arsenal, while Hezbollah has said it would retaliate for attacks on Lebanese soil.

In a statement to media accompanied by satellite images, the Israeli military said that Hezbollah, with Iranian assistance, had been bringing specialized equipment to a weapons factory near the Bekaa village of Al-Nabi Sheet with a view to setting up a production line for precision-guidance missiles.

Hezbollah recently moved some of the equipment to "civilian locations" in Beirut as a precaution against strikes, the Israeli military statement said, alluding to tensions that surged after the Aug. 25 drone incident in Beirut's suburbs.

There was no immediate comment from Hezbollah, which has denied having precision-guided missile production sites in Lebanon. But it says it possess such weapons, which could be used to home in on and knock out key Israeli infrastructure.

In an Aug 31 speech, Hezbollah leader Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah accused Israel of using the movement's capability with precision-guided missiles as a pretext for attacks.

Israel has not formally claimed responsibility for the Beirut drone strike, which a regional security source said hit a component of the precision-guided missile project.

Hoping to move Beirut to rein in Hezbollah, Israel has signalled that in any further flare-up it could carry out widespread attacks on Lebanon.



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Damascus hails Hezbollah attack on Israel across the Lebanese border
Israel lifts Gaza fuel restriction after calm returns

[Lebanon summons Turkish ambassador after president raised Ottoman era atrocities](#)

Author:

Tue, 2019-09-03 17:24

BEIRUT: Lebanon summoned the Turkish ambassador on Tuesday over a war of words relating to atrocities carried out during the Ottoman empire.

Beirut has been angered by a statement from the Turkish foreign ministry issued in response to a speech by President Michel Aoun, which referred to violence and killing during the Ottoman occupation of what became the state of Lebanon.

Hakan Cakil was ordered to attend the foreign ministry and asked for "clarifications about the statement and for clear correction of the mistake made by the Turkish side, to avoid misunderstanding and in preservation of the special bilateral ties."

Speaking on Saturday to mark the centennial of the formation of Greater Lebanon, Aoun referred to the "state terror practiced by the Ottomans against the Lebanese, especially during World War I."

He said there had been "hundreds of thousands of victims between famine, conscription and forced labor, without omitting the gallows through which they wanted to annihilate the spirit of emancipation and rebellion."

On Sunday, the Turkish foreign ministry issued an angry response, accusing Aoun's speech of being "baseless and biased." It also said "terror" had not taken place under Ottoman rule.

The row comes shortly after a visit to Lebanon by the Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu.



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Ousted mayors in Turkey denounce 'political' sackings Turkey receives another S-400 missile system delivery from Russia

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Paedophiles would face mandatory jail sentences and the most serious offenders could be jailed for life under sweeping changes to Federal sentencing laws to be introduced to Parliament next week.

Lebanese officials declare state of economic emergency

Author:

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Mon, 2019-09-02 18:58

BEIRUT: Lebanon's political leaders declared what they called an economic state of emergency Monday following a meeting aimed at finding a solution to the country's economic crisis, raising concerns that more taxes will be imposed.

Lebanon has one of the world's highest public debts in the world, standing at 150 percent of gross domestic product. Growth has plummeted and budget deficit reached 11 percent of GDP as economic activities slowed and remittances from Lebanese living abroad shrank.

The government hopes to bring down the budget deficit to 7.6 percent of the GDP this year and to 6.5 percent in 2020.

The meeting at the presidential palace discussed measures to be taken in the near future and as part of the 2020 draft budget.

Prime Minister Saad Hariri told reporters after the meeting that the leaders have agreed on "declaring an economic state of emergency" and the formation of a committee that will follow on the situation.

Hariri added that employment in the public sector will be frozen and work will begin for a new retirement system. He said officials will work on reducing the percentage of the debt through partnership between the public and private sectors.

President Michel Aoun said in a speech at the opening of the one-day session that everyone should make "sacrifices" in order to get one of the world's most indebted countries out of its problems.

"We have to unite our efforts to come out with solutions to the economic crisis that is strangling the dreams and hopes of our people," Aoun said. No official details about the expected measures have been made public but economists who took part in preparatory talks for Monday's meeting said they included raising tax on gasoline, boosting the value added tax from 11 percent to 15 percent on luxury items, as well as fighting tax evasion.

The meeting came 10 days after international ratings agency Fitch downgraded Lebanon's ratings and as tensions on the border with Israel increased in recent days. Hezbollah on Sunday fired a barrage of anti-tank missiles in retaliation for an airstrike that targeted the group in Syria and an alleged Israeli drone attack south of Beirut late last month.

The recent developments have led for the first time in years for the US dollar to reach 1,560 Lebanese pounds on the black market, compared with the 1,500 that has been fixed since 1997.

Hariri vowed that the peg of the Lebanese pound to the American currency will remain in place.

Corruption-plagued Lebanon suffers from one of the world's highest debt ratios, high unemployment and little growth.

In July, Lebanon's parliament ratified a controversial austerity budget that aims to save the indebted economy.

Last month, Standard & Poor's Global Ratings maintained its long- and short-term foreign and local currency sovereign credit ratings, saying the country's outlook remains negative. The agency is scheduled to issue new ratings within six months.

Hariri said Lebanon has a period of six months to act and it is better "that we not become like states that collapsed."

In January, Moody's downgraded Lebanon's issuer ratings to Caa1 from B3 while changing the outlook to stable from negative.



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