

US imposes new sanctions on Iran over weapons programs

Fri, 2019-03-22 16:46

WASHINGTON: The United States said on Friday it was imposing sanctions on 14 people and 17 entities connected to Iran's Organization of Defensive Innovation and Research (SPND), a body it said had played a central role in Iran's past nuclear weapons effort.

Among those designated for sanctions was the Shahid Karimi group, which works on missile and explosive-related projects for the SPND, and four associated individuals, the US Treasury Department said in a Statement.

"The US government is taking decisive action against actors at all levels in connection with Iran's Organization of Defensive Innovation and Research (SPND) who have supported the Iranian regime's defense sector," Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin said.

"The United States will continue applying maximum pressure to the Iranian regime, using all economic tools to prevent Iran from developing weapons of mass destruction. Anyone considering dealing with the Iranian defense industry in general, and SPND in particular, risks professional, personal, and financial isolation."

It said the steps targeted current SPND subordinate groups, supporters, front companies, and associated officials. The move freezes any US assets of those targeted and bans US dealings with them.

"Today's action serves as a warning to individuals and entities considering dealing with the Iranian regime's defense sector in general, and SPND in particular: by engaging in sanctionable activity with designated Iranian persons, you risk professional, personal, and financial isolation," the Treasury statement said.

Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said on Thursday that Tehran was determined to boost its defense capabilities despite mounting pressure from the United States and its allies to curb its ballistic missile program.



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France urges Iran to free human rights lawyer Nasrin Sotoudeh
Iran lays false trail to dodge US sanctions

[France urges Iran to free human rights lawyer Nasrin Sotoudeh](#)

Author:

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Thu, 2019-03-21 19:56

PARIS: France on Thursday called for Iranian human rights lawyer Nasrin Sotoudeh to be released and warned Tehran that its adherence to a nuclear accord does not give it a blank cheque on human rights.

"We will do all we can to secure the release of Mrs. Sotoudeh," French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian told the upper chamber Senate.

"She was condemned under astonishing conditions," for "defending the rights of women, in particular those who contest the obligation to wear the Islamic veil," he added.

Sotoudeh's husband Reza Khandan told AFP on Sunday that his wife had been sentenced to a total of 33 years in prison over a case with seven charges, but she is to only serve the longest sentence, 12 years imposed on Sunday for "encouraging corruption and debauchery."

She has also been convicted of espionage.

Sotoudeh has also been sentenced to a total of 148 lashes for appearing in court without the hijab head covering and for another offense.

According to Khandan, Sotoudeh has refrained from choosing a lawyer as attorneys on her previous cases have faced prosecution for representing her.

"We have been making considerable efforts in recent months to preserve the (Iranian) nuclear accord, despite America's withdrawal," said Le Drian.

"We are doing so because we respect our signature, but Iran must also respect its obligations in particular those international agreements relating to civil and political rights," he added.

Last month the UN atomic watchdog said that Iran has been adhering to its deal with world powers on limiting its nuclear program, as diplomatic wrangling continues over the future of the accord.

The latest report from the International Atomic Energy Agency confirmed that Iran was still complying with the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with global powers under which Tehran drastically scaled back its nuclear program in return for sanctions relief.

Last week, European nations rejected a call from US Vice President Mike Pence to follow the US lead in withdrawing from the Iranian nuclear deal.

Le Drian said Thursday: "Our wish to preserve the Vienna accord does not grant carte-blanche to Iran and certainly not in the matter of human rights."

Before her arrest, Sotoudeh, 55, had taken on the cases of several women arrested for appearing in public without headscarves in protest at the mandatory dress code in force in Iran.

Sotoudeh won the European Parliament's prestigious Sakharov Prize in 2012 for her work on high-profile cases, including those of convicts on death row for offenses committed as minors.

She spent three years in prison after representing dissidents arrested during mass protests in 2009 against the disputed re-election of ultra-conservative president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.



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Iran rights lawyer Sotoudeh to face additional 10 years in jail
Iran rights lawyer Nasrin Sotoudeh sentenced to 7 years in jail

[Post-Daesh, north Iraq's minority mosaic blown apart by trauma](#)

Author:

Thu, 2019-03-21 22:36

SINJAR: For decades, his land was his life. Now, like other Sunni Arab farmers in Iraq's diverse north, Mahdi Abu Enad is cut off from his fields, fearing reprisal attacks.

He hails from the mountainous region of Sinjar, which borders Syria and is home to an array of communities – Shiite and Sunni Arabs, Kurds, and Yazidis.

That patchwork was ripped apart when Daesh rampaged across the area in 2014, and has not reconciled even long after Iraqi forces ousted IS in 2017.

Yazidis, whose men Daesh killed en masse and whose women and girls were enslaved by the group, say they have suffered the most.

They accuse their Sunni Arab neighbors of granting the extremists of Daesh a foothold in Sinjar.

Displaced Sunni Arabs, on the other hand, slam the sweeping accusation as unfair and say looting and the threat of retaliatory violence have kept them from coming home.

“We stand accused of belonging to IS (Daesh) because they settled in Sunni areas, but IS doesn’t represent Sunnis,” said Abu Enad, displaced from his hometown to Al-Baaj since 2014.

“We all lost our livelihoods. It’s been four years since we cultivated our land because we fear for our lives,” he said.

In 2017, Human Rights Watch said Yazidi armed groups reportedly abducted and executed 52 Sunni Arab civilians in retaliation for Daesh abuses.

Fearing similar abuses, Abu Enad still lives about 10 km from his farm, and was only able to tend to it during planting season with a paramilitary escort.

“We had to leave at 4:00 p.m. every day because the situation was not safe enough. So how could you come back with your family to resume farming and living here?” he said.

Across Iraq, around a third of the population relies on farming to survive, and the ratio was even higher in Sinjar.

For centuries, the region’s diverse farmers jointly sold their fig and wheat harvests in the provincial capital of Mosul, 120 km to the east.

But in the wake of Daesh, farming equipment was stolen, orchards burned, and rubble stuffed into irrigation wells.

Now, the area’s once-lush farming hamlets have been reduced to ruined ghost towns, with most Arab villages including Abu Enad’s left flattened.

A few kilometers to the north, the main town of Sinjar is also still rubble, with little power, water, or health services available.

A few thousand Yazidi families have come back, but tens of thousands more are still stuck in displacement camps elsewhere in Iraq and Syria, while others fled to Europe.

And more than 3,000 Yazidis remain missing, many of them believed to be women and girls taken as sex slaves.

That has made it difficult for the community to forgive or forget the mass crimes against them.

"The Arabs of Sinjar were involved in the abduction of our women," said Yazidi cleric Sheikh Fakher Khalaf.

"They betrayed the co-existence we had, so they can no longer live among us," said Khalaf, who returned home to Sinjar after three years of displacement.

"Those who have done nothing, we respect them. But those who have blood on their hands, they must face justice. Sinjar is not a place for them."

Several local initiatives have made minimal progress on reconciliation, but efforts have not gone far enough, said the Norwegian Refugee Council.

"We are seeing plans to rebuild and rehabilitate some parts, but we're not seeing any concrete process toward reconciliations," said spokesman Tom Peyre-Costa.

He called for more dialogue between communities, transparent and fair trials, and accountability for all perpetrators of crimes.

Iraqi courts have tried hundreds for belonging to Daesh, handing down at least 300 death sentences.

"People who used to be able to live together are not able to do so anymore because of the tension between communities, so this is why reconciliation must be prioritized," he said.

While the communal fissures in Sinjar are particularly deep, the challenge of rebuilding trust after Daesh is one faced across Iraqi society.

Displaced Sunnis with perceived ties to Daesh undergo tough screening processes to return to their hometowns, where they sometimes face harassment.

Abu Enad, the displaced farmer, still hopes that Sinjar can return to its harmonious past.

"We Sunnis have been hurt by Daesh like Yazidis were hurt," he said.

"We want to come back to our land so we can farm and live off the fruits of our labor alongside them."



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Iraq begins exhuming mass Yazidi grave left by Daesh
Iraqi Yazidis celebrate restoration of temple destroyed by Daesh

[Egypt races to reduce impact of \\$5 billion Ethiopian dam](#)

Author:

Thu, 2019-03-21 20:50

CAIRO: An international research group has warned of “dire humanitarian consequences” if a controversial Ethiopian project to dam the Nile leads to conflict with Egypt and neighboring Sudan.

The \$5 billion dam is a source of friction between the three countries that could spill over into open hostility, the Brussels-based International Crisis Group said in a report.

Egypt and Sudan fear the dam, now being built near the Sudanese border, could reduce available water to both countries.

The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, or Al-Nahda dam, has been under construction since 2011 and is due to be completed in 2022. When finished it will be the largest dam in Africa, generating about 6,000 megawatts of electricity for domestic use and export.

Dr. Abbas Al-Sharaki, a water resources expert at the Institute of African Studies at Cairo University, told Arab News that Egypt is likely to face a water crisis in the future because of the dam.

Planned negotiations on the dam between the leaders of Egypt and Ethiopia are unlikely to succeed, he said.

Ethiopia plans to store 74 billion cubic meters of Nile water behind the dam, which would affect the 55.5 billion cubic meters of water that Egypt currently gets from the Nile. Ethiopia's leaders insist the dam will also benefit all three countries.

Dr. Mahmoud Abu Zeid, the former Egyptian minister of irrigation, said that the impact of the Ethiopian dam on the Egyptian water quota is inevitable, but Egypt is looking to reduce its effects and delay it as long as possible until other resources are raised.

Dr. Hisham Bakhit, professor of water resources at Cairo University, said that Egypt is conducting large-scale research to reduce the impact of the dam.

Egypt has many sustainable solutions to manage the Nile's water, he said.

The country gets 90 percent of its irrigation and drinking water from the Nile, and has "historical rights" over the river guaranteed under treaties in 1929 and 1959, Bakhit said.

MP Mustafa Al-Jundi said that Egypt has the right to appeal to the African Union, the African Parliament, the UN and international courts in the case of Ethiopia's intransigence.

Mohamed Abdel-Ati, Egypt's minister of irrigation and water resources, said this week that Cairo does not oppose the development ambitions of any country "as long as they don't harm any shares in water or threaten national security."

The ministry is working to tap all sources of water and implement modern methods in irrigation. Desalination and wastewater treatment plants, and experimental studies into salt water farming are among Egypt's plans to ensure reliable future supplies, he said.

The Al-Nahda dam was 60 percent complete before work stopped in August as a result of a funding crisis. In January, a Chinese company, Voith Hydro Shanghai, signed a deal to build the turbine generators at the dam.



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Nile crisis must be resolved to avoid conflict: Think tankEgypt, Sudan vow to cooperate as Ethiopia builds Nile dam

[Pompeo calls Hezbollah risk to Middle East stability](#)

Author:

Thu, 2019-03-21 20:21

JERUSALEM: US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo described Hezbollah on Wednesday as a risk to Middle East stability and conferred with Israel about the heavily armed, Iranian-backed Lebanese group ahead of a trip to Beirut.

Pompeo, who has been on a regional tour to promote the Trump administration's hard tack against Iran, received a warning from Israel which worries it may

again be in the sights of Hezbollah forces winding down their intervention in Syria's war.

Meeting Israeli President Reuven Rivlin in Jerusalem, Pompeo listed Hezbollah, Palestinian Hamas and Yemen's Houthis – all recipients of Iranian support – as “entities that present risks to Middle East stability and to Israel.”

“They are determined to wipe this country off the face of the planet and we have a moral obligation and a political one to prevent that from happening. You should know that the United States is prepared to do that,” Pompeo said in public remarks at the meeting.

For its part, Israel has carried out repeated airstrikes on Hezbollah in Syria, where the Shiite militia – along with Russian air power – helped President Bashar Assad turn the tables against rebels and militants.

In a speech broadcast on the Persian new year on Thursday, Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said the Islamic Republic had successfully resisted “unprecedented, strong” US sanctions.

Iran has faced economic hardship since US President Donald Trump withdrew last year from the 2015 nuclear deal between Tehran and world powers and reimposed sanctions.

Pompeo's visit to Jerusalem was widely seen in Israel as a boost for Netanyahu, who enjoys a close relationship with Trump, just three weeks before closely contested Israeli election.

In a further signal of solidarity with Israel, Pompeo was later scheduled, accompanied by Netanyahu, to visit Judaism's Western Wall in Jerusalem's Old City.

In May 2017, Trump became the first sitting U.S. president to visit the wall, but did not ask Netanyahu to join him.

Seven months later, Trump broke with decades of U.S. policy and recognised Jerusalem as Israel's capital, incensing Palestinians who claim the city's eastern sector as the capital of a future state they seek.

Last May, Washington moved its embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. Pompeo also visited the embassy on Thursday.



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Netanyahu and Pompeo vow to counter Iranian aggression
Pompeo thanks Saudi crown prince for supporting UN Yemen envoy Griffiths during Middle East tour