

Gulf to play key role as EU plans to cut Russian gas imports, says envoy

Author:

Fri, 2022-03-11 21:46

RIYADH: Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states will have an important role as the EU plans to cut Russian gas imports by two-thirds before the end of the year, said the EU ambassador to the Kingdom.

Speaking to reporters in Riyadh, Patrick Simonnet said that the EU has proposed a new plan to reduce its dependence on Russian energy amid Moscow's invasion of Ukraine, and Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states would play a key role as energy partners.

The European Commission, the executive arm of the EU, has proposed to reduce its purchases of Russian gas by two-thirds by the end of the year, and cease buying fossil fuels from Russia before 2030.

In a reply to Arab News, the envoy said that this would be achieved by diversifying suppliers, which includes energy partners in the Gulf, and by increasing renewable hydrogen production and improving energy efficiency in households.

The EU seeks to increase imports of green hydrogen from Saudi Arabia, which is one of the largest producers in the world, he said.

Saudi Arabia aims to produce 4 million tons of hydrogen by 2030.

The EU envoy said: "There are discussions and negotiations to import natural gas from the Gulf countries, led by Saudi Arabia, which has entered into the gas production strongly during the recent period and has launched many projects in this sector."

He said there is a new plan to change energy providers in general, especially renewable energy and hydrogen gas.

"We need to discuss with Saudi Arabia and other gulf countries how far we can redirect our gas imports," he said.

"The plan of Europe is also not only to continue importing gas from other sources but to invest in and import renewable energy."

During the press conference at the EU office in Riyadh, the envoy noted that the EU has a very close relationship with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states, stressing the need to further expand relationships in all fields and work to further enhance the partnership.

The envoy said that to enhance cooperation with the Gulf countries, a special cooperation strategy has been developed between the countries of the region that will enter into effective implementation at the beginning of January

2023, based on the recommendations of the meeting of foreign ministers of the Gulf Cooperation Council countries with their counterparts from the EU countries.

“Pillars have been laid in various sectors, most notably commercial investments, tourism and energy, achieving security and stability in the region, as well as offering solutions to climate change problems and supporting the initiatives put forward, foremost of which is the Middle East Green Initiative, which was proposed by Saudi Arabia.”

Simonnet noted that an important basis for further expanding close ties is the Saudi support for humanitarian relief, as the Kingdom represents a living and active example in this, especially in Yemen, Syria, and Afghanistan.

Commenting on the resumption of free trade negotiations between the EU and the Gulf states, he said: “There are great moves towards restarting negotiations in the near future, after studying technical issues that are being worked on, paving the way for the two parties to sit back at the negotiating table, after a ministerial meeting was recently held in Brussels on this issue.”

Without specifying a timeframe for the start of negotiations, the envoy affirmed that the two sides have a strong desire to resume free trade negotiations.

Citing the latest statistics, Simonnet said that the EU is Saudi Arabia’s one of the largest trading partners, with about €40 billion (\$44 billion) trade in 2020, stressing that European companies aspire to increase their investments in all diversified economic and commercial sectors.





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[CPJ urges Iran to free journalist seized at march in Tehran](#)

Author:

Fri, 2022-03-11 20:58

LONDON: The Committee to Protect Journalists has urged the Iranian authorities to free a journalist who was seized at an International Women's Day parade.

Amir-Abbas Azarmvand, a financial reporter for state-run economic newspaper SMT, had been arrested in September 2021 for allegedly "colluding against national security" and "spreading propaganda against the system," according to HRANA (Human Rights Activists News Agency) and CPJ's reporting from the time; he was released on bail on Sept. 23.

He was sentenced to four years and four months behind bars in January this year but was not summoned to jail, CPJ said, until suddenly being detained on Tuesday. He has now been sent to Evin Prison to begin the sentence.

"Iranian authorities must immediately release journalist Amir-Abbas Azarmvand and ensure that he does not face any further charges over his work," Sherif Mansour, Middle East and North Africa program coordinator at the CPJ, said.

"It is bad enough that Iran sentences journalists to years in prison over their reporting – it is even worse when those sentences hang over a journalist's head, to be enforced whenever authorities want to retaliate," Mansour said.

CPJ said: "Iranian authorities must release journalist Amir-Abbas Azarmvand from prison immediately and should cease jailing members of the press for their work."

Tehran has a long history of abusing journalists and other citizens who report on the regime and its activities – even for state media.

On its website, CPJ lists the newspapers shut down and the journalists jailed by the Islamic Republic as it seeks to exert control over the public sphere and discourse within it.



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[Committee to Protect Journalists \(CPJ\)](#)

Record number of journalists jailed in 2021: CPJ Turkish journalist convicted but freed over Erdogan insult

[Libya armed groups step back after Tripoli escalation](#)

Author:

AFP

ID:

1647014421083817500

Fri, 2022-03-11 19:08

TRIPOLI: Libya's parliament-appointed prime minister said Friday that armed groups backing him had withdrawn from positions around Tripoli, after the UN

warned of a new escalation in the divided country.

Libya has had rival administrations since the eastern-based assembly swore in a prime minister earlier this month in a challenge to interim premier Abdulhamid Dbeibah.

Dbeibah has refused to hand over power to Fathi Bashagha, arguing that his own administration, installed last year under a United Nations-led peace process, has a mandate to rule until elections.

Pro-Bashagha forces had deployed on the eastern edges of Tripoli on Thursday, prompting the UN mission in Libya (UNSMIL) to warn against any escalation. But Bashagha's office said in a statement in the early hours of Friday that the groups had "opted not to use arms, and to return to their bases."

The groups had mobilized "to provide security, not to wage war," it said. Libya has been riven by conflict since the 2011 revolt that toppled dictator Muammar Qaddafi, and has had two rival governments before: from 2014 until Dbeibah was sworn in last year.

Washington's ambassador to Libya, Richard Norland, had also warned Thursday against spiralling tensions.

Late Thursday evening he said he had spoken to both Dbeibah and Bashagha, praising what he said were moves to resolve the standoff peacefully.

He commended Dbeibah's "commitment to protect lives" and Bashagha's "willingness to de-escalate tensions."

"Libya's stability and unity can only be sustained through dialogue and respect for the right of freedom of movement throughout the country," he tweeted.

In a recording published on Friday, Bashagha said he was "ready for any dialogue" and repeated that he was "a supporter of peace, not war."

"We reassure our compatriots in Tripoli that there will not be a war," he said.



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[Fathi Bashagha](#)

[Abdulhamid Dbeibah](#)

Rival Libyan premier says he plans to be in Tripoli in days
Armed groups deploy in Tripoli amid Libyan election postponement decision

[Iran nuclear talks paused after Russian demands](#)

Author:

AFP

ID:

1647000106472172800

Fri, 2022-03-11 11:56

VIENNA: The EU said Friday that the talks it is chairing on the revival of the 2015 Iran nuclear accord must be paused, days after fresh demands from Russia complicated negotiations.

The EU's foreign policy chief Josep Borrell tweeted that the pause was "due

to external factors,” despite the fact that “a final text is essentially ready and on the table.”

The current round of negotiations started in late November between Britain, China, France, Germany, Iran and Russia, with the US taking part indirectly. They had reached most of the way toward their aim – the revival of the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which began unraveling when former US President Donald Trump withdrew from the deal in 2018.

However, last week Russia said it was demanding guarantees that the Western sanctions imposed on its economy following its invasion of Ukraine would not affect its trade with Iran.

As with the original JCPOA in 2015, Moscow had been expected to play a role in the implementation of any fresh deal, for example by receiving shipments of enriched uranium from Iran.

After he withdrew from the JCPOA, Trump went on to reimpose swingeing sanctions on the Iranian economy, including on its vital oil sector.

That prompted Iran to start disregarding the curbs laid down in the deal on its nuclear activity, including its stockpile of enriched uranium – now at more than 15 times its limit in the deal.

The JCPOA’s aim was to ensure Iran would not be able to develop a nuclear weapon, which it has always denied wanting to do.

“Russia’s gambit may be to delay the revival of the deal in order to avoid a flood of Iranian oil on the market” and the concomitant fall in prices, French academic and Iran specialist Clement Therme said.

“In keeping prices high, the Kremlin can use energy as a weapon against the West,” he added.

As for Iran itself, “the Islamic Republic isn’t in a position to counter the Russian strategy,” he explained.

“Moscow is making use of Iran’s weakness.”

Iranian foreign ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh said the pause in talks “could be a momentum for resolving any remaining issue.”

“No external factor will affect our joint will to go forward for a collective agreement,” he said in a tweet.

Russia’s ambassador to the UN in Vienna, Mikhail Ulyanov, told reporters outside the hotel where the talks have been taking place that he rejected “attempts to put all the blame on the Russian Federation.”

“The conclusion of the deal does not depend on Russia only,” he said, saying that other parties to the talks “need additional time.”

He added that Russia was in favor of the “earliest conclusion” of the talks.

Borrell said on Friday that he would “continue to be in touch with all #JCPOA participants and the US to overcome the current situation and to close the agreement.”

He gave no further details on when the talks might resume.



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EU foreign policy chief says 'pause' needed in Iran talks
White House: Iran nuclear deal "close," end of negotiations challenging

[Lebanese prosecutor bans five bank board chiefs from travel](#)

Author:

Reuters

ID:

1646935882295370600

Thu, 2022-03-10 21:15

BEIRUT: A Lebanese prosecutor on Thursday issued travel bans against the heads of the boards of five Lebanese banks as a precautionary measure as she investigates transactions by their banks, the prosecutor told Reuters. Judge Ghada Aoun issued the bans against Salim Sfeir of Bank of Beirut, Samir Hanna of Bank Audi, Antoun Sehnaoui of SGBL, Saad Azhari of Blom Bank, and Raya Hassan of Bankmed.

She has not charged any of them with a crime.

When contacted, Hassan told Reuters she was “speechless” and noted she had joined the bank after the transactions took place.

Azhari did not immediately respond to a request for comment, neither did officials from Bank Audi, SGBL and Bank of Beirut.



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