

# US grants sanctions relief to Iran as nuclear talks remain in balance

Sat, 2022-02-05 00:34

WASHINGTON D.C.: The Biden administration on Friday restored some sanctions relief to Iran's atomic program as talks aimed at salvaging the languishing 2015 nuclear deal enter a critical phase.

As US negotiators head back to Vienna for what could be a make-or-break session, Secretary of State Antony Blinken signed several sanctions waivers related to Iran's civilian nuclear activities. The move reverses the Trump administration's decision to rescind them.

The waivers are intended to entice Iran to return to compliance with the 2015 deal that it has been violating since former President Donald Trump withdrew from the agreement in 2018 and re-imposed US sanctions.

Iran says it is not respecting the terms of the deal because the US pulled out of it first. Iran has demanded the restoration of all sanctions relief it was promised under the deal to return to compliance.

Friday's move lifts the sanctions threat against foreign countries and companies from Russia, China and Europe that had been cooperating with non-military parts of Iran's nuclear program under the terms of the 2015 deal, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA.

The Trump administration had ended the so-called "civ-nuke" waivers in May 2020 as part of its "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran that began when Trump withdrew the US from the deal in 2018, complaining that it was the worst diplomatic agreement ever negotiated and gave Iran a pathway to developing the bomb.

As a presidential candidate, Joe Biden made a US return to the nuclear deal a priority, and his administration has pursued that goal but there has been little progress toward that end since he took office a year ago. Administration officials said the waivers were being restored to help push the Vienna negotiations forward.

"The waiver with respect to these activities is designed to facilitate discussions that would help to close a deal on a mutual return to full implementation of the JCPOA and lay the groundwork for Iran's return to performance of its JCPOA commitments," the State Department said in a notice to Congress that announced the move.

"It is also designed to serve U.S. nonproliferation and nuclear safety interests and constrain Iran's nuclear activities," the department said. "It is being issued as a matter of policy discretion with these objectives in mind, and not pursuant to a commitment or as part of a quid pro quo. We are focused on working with partners and allies to counter the full range of

threats that Iran poses.”

A copy of the State Department notice and the actual waivers signed by Blinken were obtained by The Associated Press.

The waivers permit foreign countries and companies to work on civilian projects at Iran’s Bushehr nuclear power station, its Arak heavy water plant and the Tehran Research Reactor. Former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo had revoked the waivers in May, 2020, accusing Iran of “nuclear extortion” for continuing and expanding work at the sites.

Critics of the nuclear deal who lobbied Trump to withdraw from it protested, arguing that even if the Biden administration wants to return to the 2015 deal it should at least demand some concessions from Iran before up front granting it sanctions relief.

“From a negotiating perspective, they look desperate: we’ll waive sanctions before we even have a deal, just say yes to anything!” said Rich Goldberg, a vocal deal opponent who is a senior adviser to the hawkish Foundation for Defense of Democracies.

One senior State Department official familiar with the waivers maintained that the move is not a “concession” to Iran and was being taken “in our vital national interest as well as the interest of the region and the world.” The official was not authorized to discuss the matter publicly and spoke on condition of anonymity.



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## [UK accused of neglecting Briton held in Yemen since 2017](#)

Author:

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Fri, 2022-02-04 23:17

LONDON: The family of a British man held since 2017 and allegedly tortured in Yemen on Friday accused the UK government of apathy about his fate.

Luke Symons, 29, was detained by Houthi militia in southwest Yemen along with his Yemeni wife on suspicion of espionage, which his family strongly denies. They say his arm was broken during one interrogation in a bid to force a confession, and that his physical and mental health has degenerated during solitary confinement in the Yemeni capital Sanaa.

His wife was released and has been able to visit him periodically in the prison, and is alarmed at his condition, according to Symons' grandfather Robert Cummings.

"Luke's going through hell. He's getting no medical attention, and we've been going backwards, not forward, with this (UK) government," Cummings told AFP by phone from the family's home in Cardiff.

"The government should ask the question, 'what do the Houthis want to get Luke released?'," he said, accusing the militia of holding his grandson as a "bargaining chip" for unspecified aims.

"But they just won't ask the question," Cummings said, alleging inaction both by the Foreign Office in London and by Saudi-based British diplomats responsible for Yemen.

Amnesty International, which this week launched a fresh appeal for UK intervention, demanded that Foreign Secretary Liz Truss meet the family.

"It's long overdue that the government properly engaged with his family and exerted sustained pressure on the Houthis to get him out of jail and back home to Cardiff," Amnesty's UK chief Sacha Deshmukh said.

Symons was arrested in April 2017, when Prime Minister Boris Johnson was foreign secretary, and has never been charged.

The detainee's MP in the Welsh capital, Kevin Brennan of the opposition Labour party, pressed his case to Johnson in parliament a month ago.

The prime minister replied that the case was “a very sad one.”

“I know that our staff in the (Foreign Office) work very, very hard to try to release people from the positions they find themselves in,” Johnson said.

“Luke Symons is no exception to that,” he said, promising Brennan a meeting with a Foreign Office minister.

But there has still been no meeting, according to the family and Amnesty. Britain says it has been regularly raising Symons’ plight with the Houthi leadership, and insists it has kept his family informed.

“We know this is a difficult time for Luke Symons and his family. Our staff have been working intensively to secure Luke’s release,” a Foreign Office spokesperson said after the latest appeals.



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# Arab League, OIC welcome Amnesty's report on Israel's 'apartheid' against Palestinians

Author:

Fri, 2022-02-04 02:02

LONDON: The Arab League on Thursday welcomed a report by human rights organization Amnesty International, which called for Israeli authorities to be "held accountable for committing the crime of apartheid against Palestinians."

Dr. Saeed Abu Ali, the Arab League's assistant secretary-general for Palestine and the Occupied Arab Territories, praised the report, and said it represents an important international legal document.

He added that it comes at an urgent and critical time, "in light of the war crimes and crimes against humanity that Palestine is being subjected to, the frequency of which has escalated dangerously during the past year compared to the previous year."

He was speaking during a press briefing in Cairo to shed light on the most prominent violations committed by Israeli authorities against the Palestinian people in the last year.

The Amnesty report, entitled "Israel's apartheid against Palestinians: a cruel system of domination and a crime against humanity," details how Israel enforces a system of oppression and domination against the Palestinian people wherever it has control over their rights, Amnesty said. The 278-page report was compiled over a period of four years.

Abu Ali called on the international community to follow up on the report's important findings, focus on accountability, and identify those responsible for violations and crimes committed daily against the Palestinian people. The Organization of Islamic Cooperation also issued a similar statement, welcoming the report and calling on the international community "to take the necessary measures to ensure accountability of Israel for its violations, crimes and racist policies against the Palestinian people."



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## [Palestine Liberation Organization to choose top negotiator after death of Erekat](#)

Fri, 2022-02-04 00:25

RAMALLAH, West Bank: The Palestine Liberation Organization meets on Sunday to elect key leadership figures tasked with keeping up the struggle for

statehood, at a gathering which may hint at a potential successor for President Mahmoud Abbas.

The most important post up for grabs is that of the late chief negotiator Saeb Erekat, who was PLO secretary-general and had been deeply involved for decades in the now moribund peace talks with Israel. He died in 2020 from coronavirus complications.

Once the undisputed champion of the Palestinian cause, the PLO has lost much of its relevance since the 1994 establishment of the Palestinian Authority.

PLO Chairman Abbas, who is also the PA president, is 86 years old and has seen support dive to historic lows in opinion polls, accused of autocracy in rare West Bank street protests last year.

Palestinians have not been to the ballot box for 16 years, and their aspirations for a two-state solution are strongly rejected by Israel's right-wing nationalist Prime Minister Naftali Bennett.

Violence flares almost daily in the occupied West Bank, and the coastal enclave of Gaza is still recovering from another devastating war with Israel last year.

Against this backdrop, the PLO meeting in Ramallah will seek to fill key posts in the movement that was founded in 1964 and bills itself as the sole representative of all Palestinians.

Also open is the position of high-profile official Hanan Ashrawi, who resigned more than a year ago from the 18-member executive committee, the PLO's top decision-making body.

Abbas confidante Hussein Al-Sheikh, the PA's civil affairs minister, is widely tipped to take over Erekat's seat and chief negotiator role.

He is also among those seen as Abbas's possible successors.

Other contenders are Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh and Marwan Barghouti, who is currently in an Israeli prison over his role in planning attacks and whom supporters describe as the Palestinian Nelson Mandela.

"Sheikh is a person that Israelis seem to hold in high regard. Certainly the Americans do," said Khaled Elgindy, a senior fellow at the Middle East Institute.

"Others feel that he's the kind of guy that they can work with. So in the near term, it seems like it makes a lot of sense."

A veteran of Abbas's Fatah movement, Sheikh has cultivated ties with foreign diplomats and with Israel, and met with Foreign Minister Yair Lapid last month.

Bennett's coalition government has ruled out formal peace talks with the Palestinians but has said it wants to deepen economic cooperation with the PA

to improve livelihoods in the West Bank.

“It does look like Abu Mazen (Abbas) is sort of preparing the ground for a future succession process,” said Elgindy.

“I’m just not sure that the actual succession process is going to unfold according to his wishes.”



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## [Calls to break silence on Lokman Slim assassination anniversary](#)

Fri, 2022-02-04 00:12

BEIRUT: Friday marks the first anniversary of the assassination of Lebanese researcher and publisher Lokman Slim, but his family is yet to receive any new information regarding the course of the judicial investigation to uncover



the circumstances of the crime.

Slim, 58, was shot dead on Feb. 3, 2021.

His body was found in his car in the village of Aaddousiyyeh in southern Lebanon, the day after his family reported that they had lost contact with him while he was returning from visiting a friend in the area where Hezbollah has great influence.

Slim, who was known for his outspoken opposition to Hezbollah, had been threatened before his death.

Slogans accusing Slim of treason had been written on the walls of his home in the southern suburb of Beirut, with taglines glorifying "gun silencers" and expressions such as "Hezbollah is the honor of the nation."

The Lokman Slim Foundation launched a campaign coinciding with the anniversary of his assassination calling for "breaking the silence surrounding political assassinations and opposing the culture of murder and impunity."

The primary task of the foundation set up in Slim's name is to document "political assassinations in the Middle East and North Africa."

Activists and analysts say Lebanon's modern history is replete with assassinations and assassination attempts against politicians, journalists, academics, clerics and activists, whose perpetrators remain unknown.

The latest of these crimes is the Beirut port explosion on Aug. 4, 2020, which killed 220 people, injured 6,500 others and destroyed part of the capital.

The Beirut port probe is still suspended by a political decision and obstructed especially by Hezbollah.

As no suspect has been arrested for Slim's assassination, Human Rights Watch in a statement on Thursday criticized "the flawed investigations into politically sensitive murders."

It called on donors to review the aid provided to the Internal Security Forces and the judiciary in Lebanon.

Aya Majzoub, Lebanon researcher at HRW, said: "The unsolved murders and shoddy homicide investigations are a reminder of the dangerous weakness of Lebanon's rule of law in the face of unaccountable elites and armed groups.

"The security forces and judiciary, often generously funded and trained by donor countries, have the technical capacities to investigate murders, but have failed to identify any suspects in these sensitive cases or to follow obvious avenues of investigation."

The cases HRW examined are: Slim, a longtime Hezbollah critic; Joe Bejjani, a telecommunications worker and amateur military photographer shot on Dec. 21,

2020; Col. Mounir bou Rjeily, a retired customs officer found dead in his home on Dec. 2, 2020 from being struck with a sharp object on his head; and Antoine Dagher, the head of Byblos Bank's ethics and anti-fraud department and former head of its compliance unit, who was stabbed to death on June 4, 2020.

On the first anniversary of Slim's assassination, many officials denounced his killing and the failure to hold the killers accountable.

"We will never forget," former Prime Minister Saad Hariri wrote on Twitter, captioning a picture of Slim.

Former Justice Minister Ashraf Rifi tweeted: "Investigating the crime is forbidden and the killers are not held accountable.

"In the tutelage state, Lebanon's best are treacherously killed, at the hands of Iran's tools, but Lebanon remains stronger than them, and justice will prevail sooner or later."

The lawyers of the National Council to End the Iranian Occupation of Lebanon called on the security and judicial authorities to "publish the findings of the investigations to uncover the killer, who we believe is Hezbollah."

They added: "The martyr, comrade Slim, was assassinated in Hezbollah's area of influence. Either Hezbollah is the killer or it must come forward with information to expose the killers. The question remains: Does the state fear the truth, or does it fear Hezbollah?"

In this context, the Lebanon Debate news website published an article about what it considered the "fake achievement" of the ISF's Information Branch by recently busting 17 Israeli spy rings in Lebanon.

"After Hezbollah arrested an agent who was recruiting people in Lebanon by tempting them to work for an association and get paid in US dollars, and following in-depth investigations, the party believed the case was too complex and thus referred it to an officer with whom it was previously cooperating," the article read.

"This Information Branch officer then looked further into the case and discovered new leads, which allowed the arrest of the members of these spy rings.

"The fact that the Information Branch kept its investigations secret and did not leak any information about it, prompted the party that leaked the information to leak the investigations to the media," Lebanon Debate pointed out.



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