

# Iran using pandemic to 'further geopolitical objectives, exert domestic control': Report

Fri, 2022-01-21 21:57

LONDON: Despite being the “epicentre” of COVID-19 infections in the Middle East and North Africa, the Iranian regime “has repeatedly utilised the pandemic to further geopolitical objectives and exert domestic control,” according to a new report by London-based political risk advisory firm Sibylline.

The report said Iranian cases accounts for 40 percent of the region’s 15 million cases, and with an official death toll of 132,000, the country also dominates the region’s 250,000 fatalities.

Despite the toll that the virus has taken on Iran, it lags behind other regional states – such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE – in vaccination rates.

Tehran’s response to the virus has contributed to the sky-high toll it has taken on the Iranian people, the report said.

“Mismanagement and false information have been symbolic of the country’s strategic response to the health crisis, with skewed medical advice and inconsistent figures severely underestimating the true epidemiological landscape of the country,” it added.

“Furthermore, Iran’s hard lined and ultraconservative President Ebrahim Raisi has exploited the health crisis to bolster anti-Western sentiments, spread conspiracy theories and state-sponsored media campaigns.”

Throughout the pandemic, Iran has been rocked by protests in many regions and the capital. In response, Tehran has enhanced domestic repression and cracked down on platforms used to organize protests or spread messages that counter regime narratives.

It “blocked Signal, a messaging app which gained popularity following concerns surrounding the state surveillance of WhatsApp, on 25 January 2021,” said the report.

Rhiannon Phillips, associate analyst for MENA at Sibylline, told Arab News: “Whilst the rest of the Middle Eastern region, and world, are increasingly adopting a strategy which promotes gradually easing measures and ‘learning how to live with COVID-19,’ the Iranian government will almost certainly seek to maintain repressive domestic measures, despite the trajectory of infection rate.”

This trajectory, she added, can be attributed to the country’s “anti-Western ideology.” This is exemplified “by their refusal to import Western vaccines until urged during their fifth wave of the pandemic in late 2021,” she said.

There is little hope that Tehran will change its trajectory to address the crisis, she added. Instead, “the Iranian population will continue to suffer under worsening socio-economic conditions amid US sanctions and the ongoing health crisis.

“Such conditions will inevitably drive an increase in protest activity which are met with heavy state repression.”



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COVID-19 deaths set new daily record as curbs lifted

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[\*\*Britain's Prince William to visit\*\*](#)

# Dubai next month

Fri, 2022-01-21 20:00

LONDON: Britain's Prince William will visit Dubai next month as part of Expo 2020's UK National Day, Kensington Palace has announced.

The Duke of Cambridge will travel to the UAE on Feb. 10 at the request of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.

His trip, which coincides with the UAE marking its 50th year, will be his first to the emirates and his first major overseas visit since a 2019 tour of the Middle East.

"The bond between the UK and the UAE is deep and strong and Prince William's visit will highlight and build upon these links as he has the opportunity to engage with young Emiratis, leaders from government and committed conservationists," the palace statement said.

During the UK National Day at Expo 2020, the Commonwealth Games 2022 baton relay, launched by Queen Elizabeth II from Buckingham Palace last October, will parade through the site while stopping at the national pavilions of Commonwealth nations.



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## [Palestinian foreign minister says US moving too slow on pushing peace](#)

Author:

Fri, 2022-01-21 00:03

NEW YORK: Palestinian Foreign Minister Riad Malki criticized US President Joe Biden on Thursday for moving too slowly to reverse all of former President Donald Trump administration's adverse policies against the Palestinians and not using Washington's special relationship to pressure Israel to abandon "its rejection of a two-state solution and peace negotiations."

Malki told the UN Security Council there were hopes that the end of Donald Trump's administration and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government "would be enough to pave the way for renewed momentum for peace."

But while the Biden administration reversed several "unlawful and ill-advised" Trump policies, he said it has been slow to act, especially on the US commitment to reopen the US consulate in east Jerusalem which would restore Washington's main diplomatic mission for the Palestinians in the contested city.

After Biden took office a year ago, the Palestinians thought the US "could try to move the Israeli position toward us," Malki told reporters later.

"But we have seen that the Israeli position has been able to move the American position a little bit toward them – and this is really what troubles us very much."

The US "has yet to ensure the current Israeli government renounces its colonial policies and abandons its rejection of the two-state solution and peace negotiations," Malki said.

"This is an unacceptable stance that should neither be tolerated nor excused and must be reversed."

Malki said he had "a very open, frank discussion" earlier on Wednesday with US Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield, including on US-Palestinian relations, the peace process, Palestinian expectations from the US and "what they are trying to do in the near future in order to see things moving forward in the

right direction.”

He said the Palestinians are engaging with the US administration about possible ways to eliminate restrictions imposed by Congress on reopening the Palestinian diplomatic mission in Washington.

Tor Wennesland, the UN Mideast envoy, told the council that six Palestinian men were killed by Israeli security forces, another died in unclear circumstances, and 249 Palestinians were injured, including 46 children, in the West Bank in the past month.

He said 15 Israelis were injured in attacks by Palestinians.

Malki called on the Security Council to take urgent action to resolve the decades-old Israeli-Palestinian conflict and save the two-state solution, pointing to Israel’s accelerated settlement construction, demolition of Palestinian homes, confiscation of Palestinian land “and even annexing Palestinian land.”

“Absent this sense of urgency, prepare yourself then to attend the funeral of this solution, with all the consequences of such a death for the lives of millions of people, Palestinians and others,” Malki warned.

“The Palestinian people will survive, but the two-state solution may not,” he said.

“What happens then? Will you convert to advocates of the one-state solution of freedom and equal rights for all between the river and the sea? These would be the only options available then.”

Malki urged support for an international peace conference and echoed Russia’s call for a ministerial meeting of the Quartet of Mideast mediators – the US, UN, EU and Russia – “as soon as possible to mobilize efforts to get out from the current impasse.”

He said the UN, EU and Russia have agreed to a ministerial meeting but “we’re still waiting for the approval of the American side.”

He said the three other Quartet members should convince the US about the importance of a ministerial meeting to move the Middle East peace process forward.

Thomas-Greenfield, the US ambassador, made no mention of the meeting with Malki or the Quartet in her briefing to the council, but she reaffirmed the Biden administration’s “strong support for a two-state solution” and said “this year offers an opportunity to recommit to reaching a political solution to the conflict.”

The US envoy, who visited Israel and the West Bank in November, reiterated that Israel and the Palestinians “are locked in a spiral of distrust.”

“Israelis don’t believe they have a partner for peace, while Palestinians are trapped in despair born of the complete absence of a political horizon,” she



said.

To make progress, Thomas-Greenfield said both sides must refrain from unilateral steps that increase tensions and undercut efforts toward a two-state solution.

That means Israel should refrain from annexing territory, settlement activity, demolitions and evictions “like what we saw in Sheikh Jarrah,” the Jerusalem neighborhood where Israel on Wednesday evicted Palestinian residents from a disputed property and demolished it, and Palestinians should stop inciting violence and compensating individuals imprisoned “for acts of terrorism,” Thomas-Greenfield said.



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Human rights commission calls for end to Israeli occupation of Palestine

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## [Israel releases Palestinians held after eviction](#)

Author:

Thu, 2022-01-20 23:54

JERUSALEM: Five members of a Palestinian family arrested after Israeli police demolished their house in East Jerusalem have been released, their lawyer said on Thursday.

The arrest of several members of the Salhiya family came as they were evicted from their house in the sensitive neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah by Israeli authorities before dawn on Wednesday. Walid Abu Tayeh, the family's lawyer, confirmed "the release of the five people detained since Wednesday, including Mahmoud Salhiya and his sons."

Police had accused several Salhiya family members of "violating a court order" and public disturbance.

Abu Tayeh said the release of the five on Thursday was conditional on payment of a 1,000 Israeli shekel (\$320) fine, and that the group was forbidden from entering Sheikh Jarrah for one month.

The looming eviction of other Palestinian families from Sheikh Jarrah in May last year partly fueled an 11-day war between Israel and armed Palestinian factions in Gaza.

In those cases, Palestinians risked having to surrender plots of land to Jewish settlers who had mounted legal claims to the land.

But Jerusalem authorities have stressed the Salhiya family eviction is a different case and that the city intends to build a special needs school on the land, benefitting Arab residents of east Jerusalem.

The city has said it purchased the land from previous Arab owners and that the Salhiya's had lived there illegally for years, but failed to agree to a compromise on an eviction order first issued in 2017. The foreign ministries of France, Germany, Italy and Spain urged Israeli authorities to stop the construction of new housing units in East Jerusalem.

In a statement, the European countries said that the hundreds of new buildings would "constitute an additional obstacle to the two-state solution," referring to international peace efforts to create a state for Palestinians.

Israeli authorities recently approved plans for the construction of around 3,500 homes in occupied East Jerusalem, nearly half of which are to be built in the controversial areas of Givat Hamatos and Har Homa.

The foreign ministries said that building in this area would further disconnect the West Bank from East Jerusalem and that these settlements are a violation of international law.

The four countries also expressed concern about the evictions and demolitions in the East Jerusalem neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah.

The Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Israel captured East Jerusalem including the Old City in a 1967 war and later annexed it, a move not recognized internationally.

Palestinians want East Jerusalem for the capital of a state they seek in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, which abuts the city, and the Gaza Strip. Israel views the entire city as its indivisible capital.

Most world powers deem the Israeli settlements illegal for taking in territory where Palestinians seek statehood.



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## [Tunisia says 50,000 joined consultation ahead of new constitution](#)

Author:

Thu, 2022-01-20 23:53

TUNIS: More than 50,000 people have participated in Tunisia's national



consultation that will feed into the drafting of a new constitution, authorities said.

President Kais Saied had announced the consultation in December when he extended a suspension of parliament, a move which fueled concerns for the only democracy to have emerged from the Arab Spring uprisings a decade ago.

The consultation will last until March 20. Topics include political, economic, financial, social, health, educational and cultural affairs.

“We are at the fifth day and the number of participants has reached 52,000 – that’s good,” Technology Minister Nizar Ben Neji said. “We will intensify our awareness campaign.”

The electronic platform for the consultations was fully launched on Saturday after it partially opened on Jan. 1.

Tunisians abroad are also able to participate, using their identify card to access the platform and register their remarks.

Authorities say more than three quarters of Tunisia’s 12 million population has internet access, while those without will be able to use computers in youth centers across the country.

A constitutional referendum is planned for July 25, 2022 – exactly a year after Saied sacked the government, suspended parliament and said he would assume executive powers.

The president later took steps to rule by decree, and in early December vowed to press on with reforms to the political system.

His intervention was initially supported by many Tunisians frustrated over repeated deadlocks within the fractious legislature.

On Dec. 13, Saied laid out a roadmap for drafting a new constitution, which is set to grant more powers to the executive branch at the expense of the legislature in the North African nation, before elections at the end of this year. Saied won elections in 2019 with a landslide 73 percent of votes.



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