

# UN says 'following with concern' Houthi seizure of UAE-flagged ship, urges restraint

Wed, 2022-01-05 20:28

NEW YORK: The UN said on Wednesday that it is "following with concern" reports that a UAE-flagged cargo ship had been seized by the Houthi militia.

"While the circumstances around the incident remain unclear, we are following with concern the reports of the seizure by Houthis of a vessel flying the flag of the UAE in what the Houthis have described as 'Yemeni waters,'" the spokesperson for the UN Secretary-General Stephane Dujarric said.

Dujarric called on all countries in the region to exercise restraint and and "refrain from taking any escalatory action."

He continued: "We reaffirm the need to respect the rights and obligations related to maritime navigation in accordance with international law."

He also urged all Yemeni parties to engage with the UN's Yemen envoy Hans Grundberg in order "to advance the political process to reach a comprehensive and negotiated settlement to end the conflict in the country."

UAE-flagged Rawabi was hijacked off the Yemeni port city of Hodeidah by armed Houthis on Sunday, the Arab coalition said on Monday.

It had been transporting medical equipment from the remote Yemeni island of Socotra in the Arabian Sea to the Saudi port of Jazan, the coalition added.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[UN](#)

[Houthis](#)

[Rawabi](#)

[UAE](#)

[Yemen](#)

Houthis suffer fresh blows in Shabwa as government forces capture military base

---

## [US-led coalition comes under fire in Iraq and Syria](#)

Wed, 2022-01-05 20:22

BAGHDAD: Bases used by the US-led coalition fighting the Daesh group came under fire Wednesday in Iraq and Syria but without causing any casualties, officials said, the latest of several attacks.

Attacks targeting installations hosting coalition forces have come as Tehran and its allies across the Middle East held emotional commemorations marking

the second anniversary on Monday of the assassination of Iranian commander General Qasem Soleimani and his Iraqi lieutenant in a US drone strike at Baghdad airport.

The US said at the time that Soleimani was planning imminent action against US personnel in Iraq, a country long torn between the competing demands of its principal allies Washington and Tehran.

On Wednesday evening, five rockets targeted an air base used by the coalition in western Iraq.

"We observed five rounds... the closest impact was two kilometers (1.2 miles) away," a coalition official said Wednesday. "No damage, no casualties."

The rockets landed near the Ain Al-Asad air base in the desert of Al-Anbar province. The same base was targeted on Tuesday, when US-led coalition forces shot down two armed drones.

On Monday, the coalition also shot down two armed drones targeting a compound attached to a US diplomatic base at the airport in Baghdad, the Iraqi capital.

Photos obtained by AFP showed remains of one of the drones with the message "commanders' revenge operations" written on it.

The January 3, 2020 strike, ordered by then-US president Donald Trump, hit a car in which Soleimani and Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis were traveling on the edge of the airport.

Five days after his killing, Iran fired missiles at an air base in Iraq housing US troops and another near Irbil in the country's north.

Since then dozens of rockets and roadside bombs have targeted US security, military and diplomatic sites across Iraq.

Western officials have blamed hard-line pro-Iran factions for the attacks, which have never been claimed.

The Hashed Al-Shaabi – a coalition of former paramilitary groups now integrated into the Iraqi state security apparatus – has repeatedly called for the withdrawal of US troops deployed in Iraq as part of the coalition. Muhandis was deputy leader of the Hashed at the time of his killing.

Coalition troops switched to a training and advisory role with the end of their combat mission in Iraq early last month.

Also on Wednesday, the coalition said one of its bases in northeast Syria came under fire from Iran-backed groups.

"Coalition forces were targeted this morning by eight rounds of indirect fire at Green Village" base, a statement said.

"The attack did not cause any casualties, but several rounds impacted inside the coalition base and caused minor damage."

The day before, the forces said they had foiled a rocket attack on the same base, located in a part of war-ravaged Syria under the control of Kurdish forces.

Earlier Wednesday, the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said pro-Iran militia fighters fired shells toward a US base in eastern Syria's Al-Omar oil field, causing damage but no casualties.

However, the coalition said it hadn't received reports of new attacks.

Daesh, which established a so-called caliphate across swathes of Syria and Iraq from 2014, was defeated in Iraq in 2017 by national forces and the coalition that has included more than 80 countries.

However, Daesh remnants still carry out attacks against security forces and civilians.





Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Middle East](#)

[Iraq](#)

[Syria](#)

[Daesh](#)

Two drones shot down targeting Iraq base: anti-Daesh coalition  
Iran-backed armed factions rally in Iraq for anniversary of warlord's death

---

## [Tunisian political crisis deepens](#)

Author:

Tue, 2022-01-04 23:36

TUNIS: Detained Tunisian ex-justice minister Nouredine Bhiri of the Islamist-inspired Ennahda party, who is refusing food or medication after his transfer to hospital, is suspected of "terrorism," the interior minister said Monday.

Bhiri, deputy president of Ennahda – viewed by President Kais Saied as an enemy – was arrested by plainclothes officers on Friday and his whereabouts were initially unknown.

Ennahda had played a central role in Tunisian politics until a power grab by President Kais Saied last year. Tunisia was the only democracy to emerge from the Arab Spring revolts of a decade ago, but civil society groups and Saied's opponents have expressed fear of a slide back to authoritarianism a decade after the revolution that toppled longtime dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali.

"There were fears of acts of terrorism targeting the country's security and we had to act," Interior Minister Taoufik Charfeddine said late Monday of the arrest.

A member of a delegation that visited Bhiri in hospital said on Monday that he was refusing food or medication.

On Sunday activists and a former Ennahda legislator said Bhiri was in a critical condition and facing death.

But the source told AFP that Bhiri, 63, is "not in critical condition for the time being."

The source, asking not to be named, said that a joint team from Tunisia's independent anti-torture group INPT and the United Nations rights commission visited Bhiri at hospital in the northern town of Bizerte on Sunday. He is "lively and lucid," and being kept under close observation in a private room of the hospital's cardiology ward.

Since Friday, however, Bhiri has "refused to take any food or medication, prompting his transfer to hospital" two days later, the source said.

Samir Dilou, a lawyer and ex-Ennahda MP, condemned Bhiri's arrest as "political" and an abuse of the justice system. He told a Tunis news conference that he is lodging a "kidnapping" charge against Saied and Interior Minister Charfeddine.

The interior minister said late Monday that evidence had been sent to the Justice Ministry regarding Bhiri's activities, but that the prosecution "delayed" action on the matter.

This, Charfeddine said, prompted him to "quickly apply ... judicial control" over Bhiri, in a context where he was suspected of "falsifying" identity papers, including for a Syrian woman.

The minister said he had "personally verified" that the detainee was being "treated well."

Bhiri's wife, Saida Akremi, also a lawyer, told reporters he had suffered "a heart attack," and that she was being denied access to him because she refused to sign documents as demanded by security services.

Mondher Ounissi, a doctor and member of Ennahdha's executive bureau, said on Sunday that Bhiri suffers from several chronic illnesses, including diabetes and hypertension.

He has been "deprived of his medication" and "his life is threatened,"

Ounissi said, adding that Bhiri usually takes 16 pills a day.

The Interior Ministry on Friday said that two individuals had been ordered under house arrest, without identifying them.

It said the move was a “preventive measure dictated by the need to preserve national security.”

The anti-torture group INPT has identified the second person detained as Fathi Baldi, a former interior ministry official.

The president “bears full responsibility for the life of Mr. Bhiri,” the anti-Saied group “Citizens against the coup” said Sunday on Twitter.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Tunisia](#)

[political crisis](#)

[Nouredine Bhiri](#)

Tunisia launches national consultation on reforms  
Senior Ennahdha party official held in Tunisia: lawyer

---



# Israel to start reopening to foreigners even as omicron surges

Author:

Tue, 2022-01-04 22:56

JERUSALEM: Israel said it will admit foreigners with presumed COVID-19 immunity from countries deemed medium-risk next week, partially reversing a ban imposed in late November in response to the fast-spreading omicron variant.

The change suggests Prime Minister Naftali Bennett's government sees waning value in sweeping travel curbs – which wrecked winter tourism – as domestic coronavirus cases surge.

The Health Ministry said that, as of Jan. 9, foreign travelers from 199 “orange” countries will be admitted if they can prove they are vaccinated or have recovered from COVID-19.

Orange-listed countries include Australia, Italy and Ireland. The ministry recommended that South Africa, Nigeria, Spain, Portugal, France and Canada, among 16 countries listed as “red” or high COVID-19 risk, be changed to “orange.”

The announcement came even as Bennett predicted that new cases could increase tenfold within days. The rapid pace of infection has led to many Israelis waiting hours in lines for COVID-19 tests, although omicron has not brought corresponding rises in mortality.

Health Minister Nitzan Horowitz said Israel would adjust its criteria for compulsory testing and focus primarily on people at high risk. Subsequently, more Israelis “will be required to exercise personal responsibility and perform tests at home,” he said in televised remarks.

The government's strategy is focused on vaccinations, with a fourth dose – or second booster – offered to vulnerable cohorts. Within a day of making it available, 100,000 people received or made an appointment to get the second booster.

“I closed the skies five weeks ago when everything was good,” Bennett said in a televised address on Sunday, referring to Israel's Nov. 25 ban on most travel to and from red-listed countries after omicron was first detected abroad.

“And, over the coming week, it would be reasonable for us to reopen anew.”

The US, Britain, the UAE, Ethiopia, Tanzania, Mexico, Switzerland and Turkey remain on Israel's red list, the Health Ministry said. Visitors from those countries require advance special permission from an Israeli committee to enter.

Israel has also scaled down precautionary self-isolation periods for people who have been exposed to COVID-19 carriers, concerned that mass quarantining could paralyze the economy.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Israel](#)

[omicron](#)

Israel begins fourth COVID-19 jab for over 60s, health workersIsrael to admit some foreigners with presumed COVID-19 immunity as of Jan. 9

---

## [US hopes to build on Iran nuclear talk progress this week](#)

Tue, 2022-01-04 23:25

WASHINGTON: Nuclear deal talks with Iran in Vienna have shown modest progress and the United States hopes to build on that this week, State Department spokesman Ned Price said on Tuesday amid efforts to revive a 2015 agreement. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) lifted sanctions against Tehran in exchange for restrictions on its atomic activities but Donald Trump pulled Washington out of the deal in 2018, a year after he took office. Iran later breached many of the deal's nuclear restrictions and kept pushing



well beyond them. Tehran says it has never pursued the development of nuclear weapons.

In the latest round of indirect talks between Iran and the United States in Vienna, Tehran is focused on getting US sanctions lifted again.

"There was some modest progress in the talks last week. We hope to build on that this week," Price told reporters.

"Sanctions relief and the steps that the United States would take... when it comes to sanctions together with the nuclear steps that Iran would need to take if we were to achieve a mutual return to compliance with the JCPOA – that's really at the heart of the negotiations that are ongoing in Vienna right now."

Meanwhile, Iran said it has detected a new "realism" on the part of Western countries, as further meetings in Vienna aimed at rescuing the accord got underway.

The talks resumed in late November and the latest round was set to formally get underway on Monday after a three-day break for the end of year holidays.

Tehran's chief negotiator Ali Bagheri met with EU coordinator Enrique Mora, Iran's state news agency IRNA reported.

Bagheri held a separate meeting with top negotiators from the European parties to the deal, the agency added.

Monday's meetings were "informal," Russia's envoy in Vienna, Mikhail Ulyanov, said on Twitter.

The meetings came hours after Tehran detected what it called a sense of "realism" from Western parties.

"We sense a retreat, or rather realism from the Western parties in the Vienna negotiations, that there can be no demands beyond the nuclear accord," Foreign Ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh told reporters.

However, "it is too early to judge if the United States and the three European countries have drawn up a real agenda to commit to lifting sanctions," he said.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Iran](#)

[Iran nuclear talks](#)

[nuclear program](#)

Two killed in flash flooding in Iran's southern province of FarsIran nuclear talks 'now urgent': European and US negotiators