

# EU diplomat says 'difficult' Iran nuclear talks resume with Tehran focused on sanctions relief

Mon, 2021-12-27 21:10

VIENNA: Negotiators trying to save the landmark Iran nuclear deal resumed discussions on Monday with the EU chair warning of "difficult" work ahead. Negotiations to salvage the 2015 agreement restarted in late November, after a five-month hiatus following the election of ultraconservative Iran President Ebrahim Raisi.

The talks seek to bring back the US, after it left the accord in 2018, and curtail Iran's nuclear activities, stepped up in response to the US withdrawal and reimposed sanctions.

EU diplomat Enrique Mora, who is chairing the talks, said all sides were showing "a clear will to work toward the successful end of this negotiation." "If we work hard in the days and weeks ahead we should have a positive result... It's going to be very difficult, it's going to be very hard. Difficult political decisions have to be taken both in Tehran and in Washington," the talks' coordinator, Mora told a news conference.

He was speaking shortly after a meeting of the remaining parties to the deal – Iran, Russia, China, France, Britain, Germany and the European Union – formally kicked off the round on Monday evening.

"There is a sense of urgency in all delegations that this negotiation has to be finished in a relatively reasonable period of time. Again, I wouldn't put limits but we are talking about weeks, not about months," Mora said.

He said the talks will discuss US sanctions-lifting and Iran's atomic commitments in parallel despite comments by Tehran and Beijing suggesting sanctions would be the focus.

"We are working on both tracks in parallel ... We are not working on one side and forgetting or neglecting the other. On the contrary, both tracks are mutually reinforcing," Mora added.

Ahead of the resumption, Iran's Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian said the agenda should be "the issue of guarantees and verification" on the lifting of US sanctions.

"The most important thing for us is to reach a point where we can verify that Iranian oil will be sold easily and without any limits, that the money for this oil will be transferred in foreign currency to Iranian bank accounts, and that we will be able to benefit from all the revenues," he said, quoted by state news agency IRNA.

The talks involve delegations from Iran and the other countries that remain party to the landmark accord – Britain, China, France, Germany and Russia. Washington is participating indirectly, with diplomats shuttling back and forth between the Iranian and the US sides.

Iran has reported progress in the talks, but European diplomats have warned they are "rapidly reaching the end of the road."

US negotiator Rob Malley has said there are only "weeks" left to revive the deal, if Iran continues its current pace of nuclear activities.

The seventh round of talks, the first under Iran's new hard-line President Ebrahim Raisi, ended 10 days ago after adding some new Iranian demands to a working text. Western powers said progress was too slow and negotiators had "weeks not months" left before the 2015 deal becomes meaningless.

The deal offered Iran a lifting of economic sanctions in return for strict curbs on its nuclear program.

The goal was to make it practically impossible for Iran to build an atomic bomb, while allowing it to pursue a civilian nuclear program.

But the deal started to unravel in 2018 when former US president Donald Trump pulled out and began imposing sanctions on the Islamic republic.

US President Joe Biden has said he is willing to return to the deal as long as Iran also resumes the original terms.

Iran, which denies it wants to acquire a nuclear arsenal, has gradually abandoned its commitments to the accord since 2019, including by stepping up its enrichment of uranium.

Iran's arch-rival Israel, which staunchly opposes the nuclear deal, had reportedly warned in November that the Islamic republic had taken the technical steps to prepare to enrich uranium to military-grade levels of around 90 percent.

"Stopping Iran's nuclear program is the primary challenge for Israeli foreign and security policy," Israel's Foreign Minister Yair Lapid said on Monday.

"We prefer to act through international cooperation, but if necessary, we will defend ourselves, by ourselves."

On Saturday, Atomic Energy Organization of Iran director Mohammad Eslami said Tehran has no plans to enrich uranium beyond 60 percent, even if the Vienna talks fail.

Eslami said the enrichment levels were related to the needs of the country, in remarks published by the Russian news agency RIA Novosti.

Mora said he decided to reconvene the talks during many officials' holidays between Christmas and the New Year so as not to lose time, but he added that talks would stop for three days as of Friday "because the facilities will not be available," referring to the luxury hotel hosting most meetings. They are expecting to resume Monday next week.

Moscow's ambassador to the UN in Vienna, Mikhail Ulyanov, said on Twitter that negotiators "held businesslike and result-oriented discussions."

"In particular they agreed to intensify the drafting process in order to achieve an agreement ASAP," he said.

Earlier Monday, he said it was the "presumably final round of negotiations."

*(With AFP and Reuters)*



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[Enrique Mora](#)

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## [Egyptian, Jordanian, Palestinian officials meet](#)

Mon, 2021-12-27 20:37

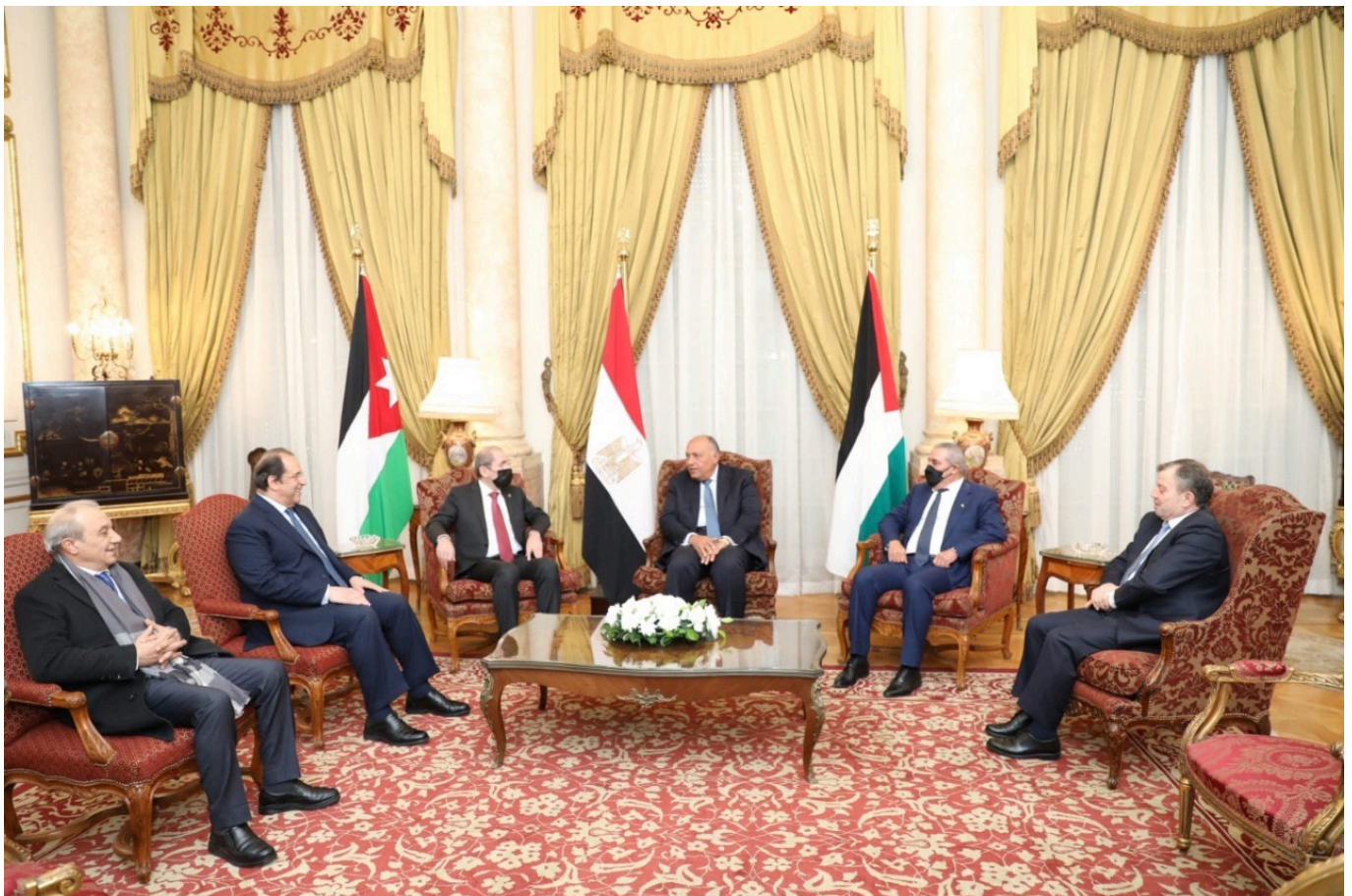
CAIRO: A meeting in Cairo between Egyptian, Jordanian and Palestinian officials on Monday discussed ways to enhance relations, developments related to the peace process, and efforts to strengthen Palestinian unity.

The participants were the country's intelligence chiefs, the foreign ministers of Egypt and Jordan, and Hussein Al-Sheikh, a member of the central committee of the Palestinian faction Fatah.

During the meeting, which comes within the framework of existing tripartite coordination, Al-Sheikh reviewed Israeli escalation and violations against the Palestinian people, and the crimes carried out by settlers under the protection of Israel's military.

He said these practices show Israel's deliberate disregard for the decisions of the international community.

The meeting's final statement stressed the need to consolidate calm and reconstruction in the Gaza Strip, and to find a political horizon to achieve a just and comprehensive peace on the basis of the two-state solution between Israel and Palestine.





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## Abu Dhabi announces new COVID-19 restrictions at social events

Mon, 2021-12-27 00:44

RIYADH: Abu Dhabi announced it was updating its COVID-19 guidelines for holding indoor and outdoor social events from Monday, in an effort to reduce the number of daily infections, the emirate's media office said on Sunday. The Abu Dhabi Emergency, Crisis and Disasters Committee said "updates include reducing operating capacity of social events such as weddings, funerals and family gatherings, to a maximum of 60 percent" capacity. Up to 50 people are permitted at indoor events, and attendees at outdoor events and open-air activities should not exceed 150, while social events at home should not host more than 30 people.

Abu Dhabi Emergency, Crisis and Disasters Committee has updated measures to host indoor and outdoor social events and family celebrations, effective 27 December 2021, enhancing precautionary measures to protect public health. [pic.twitter.com/v0tsflyd6S](https://pic.twitter.com/v0tsflyd6S)

– مكتب أبوظبي الإعلامي (@admediaoffice) [December 26, 2021](#)

"Entry to social events requires adherence to existing precautionary measures, including showing green pass on Alhosn app, presenting a negative PCR test result received within 48 hours, and wearing masks while observing physical distancing protocol," the new guidelines say. The committee said it will increase inspection and monitoring tours to ensure all preventive and precautionary measures are being implemented and urged those eligible to receive a booster dose of the COVID-19 vaccine, and maintain green status on Alhosn app through regular PCR testing.



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## [French arrest man over chemical weapons parts in Syria](#)

Author:

AFP

ID:

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Sun, 2021-12-26 00:07

PARIS: A French-Syrian man has been detained by French police on suspicion of

supplying components for the manufacture of chemical weapons in Syria through his shipping company, sources briefed on the case told AFP Sunday.

The man, who was born in 1962 and lives abroad, was arrested Saturday in the south of France according to one of the sources.

He has been held on suspicion of “conspiracy to commit crimes against humanity, accessory to crimes against humanity and accessory to war crimes,” a judicial source told AFP.

The war in Syria has killed close to half a million people and spurred the largest conflict-induced displacement since World War II.

Syria denies the use of chemical weapons. It insists it handed over its weapons stockpiles under a 2013 agreement with the US and Russia, prompted by a suspected sarin gas attack that killed 1,400 in the Damascus suburb of Ghouta.

But Syria was stripped of its Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) voting rights in April after a probe blamed it for further poison gas attacks.

It will remain suspended until it has fully declared its chemical weapons and weapons-making facilities.



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# First omicron coronavirus case detected in Gaza Strip

Author:

Sun, 2021-12-26 23:43

GAZA: The Palestinian Health Ministry said on Sunday it had identified the first case of the omicron coronavirus variant in the Gaza Strip.

The carrier is a Gaza resident who was infected within the coastal territory, ministry official Majdi Dhair told a news conference.

Dhair said this meant the variant, first identified in southern Africa and Hong Kong last month, existed in Gaza and was now spreading among the population.

The discovery poses a new challenge to the enclave's under-developed health system.

"We are ahead of difficult days. It is expected that the omicron variant will spread fast," he told reporters.

Gaza, with a population of 2.2 million people, has registered 189,837 COVID-19 infections and 1,691 deaths.

Dhair urged Gazans to get vaccinated, putting the percentage of those who had already received shots at around 40 percent.

In the Israeli-occupied West Bank, three cases of omicron variant had been detected among Palestinians on Dec. 16 and the number had since risen to 23 among the 3.1 million population, Palestinian health authorities said.

In a separate development, Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett went into isolation at home after his 14-year-old daughter tested positive for the coronavirus, his office said.

Bennett awaits the results of a COVID-19 PCR test.

Bennett left the weekly meeting of his Cabinet and headed home after learning of his daughter's positive test, which came amid fast-spreading infections in Israel caused by the omicron variant.

The premier's daughter had been vaccinated against COVID-19, his office said. It did not disclose whether she had been infected by omicron or the delta variant also prevalent in Israel.

Before the Cabinet session began, Bennett, who had a vaccine booster shot on Aug. 20, and other members of his government took rapid antigen tests and received negative results.

Bennett drew public criticism after his wife and children went on holiday abroad early this month, despite his calls for Israelis to help stem Omicron's spread by cancelling plans to fly overseas.



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