

Iran, unlike West, upbeat about nuclear talks, say experts

Author:

Tue, 2021-12-21 23:27

TEHRAN: Iran believes it has scored points in the Vienna talks meant to revive its tattered 2015 nuclear deal by managing to include sanctions relief in discussion documents for the next round, experts say.

The lifting of the punishing sanctions regime then-US President Donald Trump imposed when he pulled Washington out of the agreement in 2018 has been Tehran's top priority.

European powers have voiced frustration at a lack of progress so far in the Vienna talks, which their diplomats warned Friday are "rapidly reaching the end of the road."

But from Tehran's perspective, there has been progress, say Iranian officials and political analysts from the Islamic republic and abroad.

"The parties have agreed on two new texts, the result of intense discussions in recent days in Vienna," Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh said Monday.

"These are documents in which Iran's position has been taken into account ... and on the basis of which we can continue future discussions."

Bernard Hourcade, a French expert on Iran, said Tehran had "succeeded in this session in convincing their interlocutors that the sanctions must be settled as a priority, because this will pave the way for technical settlement of the nuclear component."

He said Iran regularly stresses that it has "always respected" the original 2015 deal, called the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), and "that it is up to the United States, which has flouted its honor, to repair the damage."

Iran, Hourcade added, "knows the balance of power is to its advantage because it is now at the threshold, that it is able in the short term, like about 30 other countries in the world, to manufacture an atomic bomb if it wishes. It can enrich uranium whenever it wants."

The parties to the 2015 deal with Iran – Britain, China, France, Germany, Russia and the United States – saw it as the best way to stop it developing a nuclear weapons capability, a goal Tehran has always denied pursuing.

Iran pledged to reduce its nuclear activities, which are monitored by the International Atomic Energy Agency, in exchange for relief from sanctions then in force against it.

FASTFACT

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When Trump pulled out of the deal, he imposed an even more painful and sweeping sanctions regime, including a unilateral US ban on Iran's crucial oil sales, leading Iran to step up its nuclear activities again. After US President Joe Biden replaced Trump, talks to revive the accord resumed. They stopped before Iran's June presidential election, then resumed on Nov. 29.

Tehran's new ultraconservative government has said agreement could be reached "quickly" if the West is serious about lifting sanctions and stops making "threats."

Iran refuses to engage directly with the US, so Washington is participating indirectly.

Iran's arch foe Israel is not a party to the talks but has threatened force if diplomacy fails, and the US has also said it is preparing "alternatives."

Biden's national security adviser, Jake Sullivan, has voiced frustration with the talks, saying days ago that "it's not going well in the sense that we do not yet have a pathway back into the JCPOA."

Sullivan was due to arrive in Israel later Tuesday for talks, which White House officials said would focus partly on Iran and the "very serious situation" around the nuclear talks, which they described as "fluid."

In the ongoing talks, say observers, Iran has sought to rely on its allies China and Russia, and also hoped to benefit from the goodwill gesture of recently agreeing to replace IAEA monitoring cameras at one nuclear site.

Iranian political scientist Hossein Kanani-Moghaddam said Tehran saw as an "important step" the fact that there are now two texts – one on lifting sanctions, the other on Iran's nuclear activities.

Tehran's chief negotiator Ali Bagheri presented the two documents as "supplementary points" to what had been negotiated by his reformist predecessors.

Bagheri – an ultraconservative, and a harsh critic of the original deal – has insisted the main priority is "the complete lifting of unjust and inhumane sanctions."

He now sees things going Iran's way, Kanani-Moghaddam believes.

"It appears that the Islamic republic wants to reach a definitive conclusion, whether it be final withdrawal or total membership of the JCPOA," he said.

“In any case, the objective is to get out of this uncertain situation.”



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Iran's Guard fires cruise missiles in military exercise

[Lebanese Constitutional Council fails to accept Aoun's appeal](#)

Tue, 2021-12-21 23:17

BEIRUT: The Lebanese Constitutional Council was unable to take a decision on Tuesday regarding the appeal submitted by President Michel Aoun's team against the amendments introduced by Parliament to the electoral law, because it "failed to secure a majority of seven members," according to spokesman Judge Tannous Meshleb.

The amended electoral law is thus effective, and the parliamentary elections shall be held in accordance with the law after it is published in the Official Gazette.

Meshleb denied "any political deal being proposed to the Constitutional

Council in return for accepting the appeal.” Following the council meeting, he stressed: “The discussion was legal, and after seven sessions, we were unable to reach a unanimous decision. There was no sectarian division, but members had different opinions regarding expatriate voting. I regret not being able to reach a decision, but there wasn’t much else we could do. This is a failure on the Constitutional Council’s part. I don’t know if any of my colleagues interfered, but I don’t doubt anyone.”

Aoun and the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) had objected to the amendments made to the electoral law in terms of changing the expatriate voting formula by canceling the six allocated seats and allowing expatriates to vote for the electoral lists, as well as canceling mega voting centers.

Baabda Palace sources described what happened in the Constitutional Council as a “fail,” accusing “certain forces of disrupting the judiciary, the Constitutional Council, the procedural authority and the criminal auditing.”

On Monday, the Lebanese heard rumors about a barter deal between Hezbollah, the FPM and Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri; the Constitutional Council would approve Aoun’s appeal in exchange for stopping Tarek Bitar, the judge leading the probe into the Beirut port explosion, from questioning the politicians he accused of being involved in the crime. The deal also includes making new judicial appointments and appointing a new Central Bank governor.

FASTFACT

Aoun and the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) had objected to the amendments made to the electoral law in terms of changing the expatriate voting formula by canceling the six allocated seats and allowing expatriates to vote for the electoral lists, as well as canceling mega voting centers.

The FPM hoped the Constitutional Council would accept the appeal so expatriates would not be able to vote in all electoral districts. This is because about 225,000 expatriates will have a very big influence in districts considered essential to the FPM, especially since a good majority of expatriates who registered to vote from abroad in the upcoming parliamentary elections are Christians.

The rumored barter was then negotiated in the open and the political dispute over it happened before the eyes of UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres during his official visit to Lebanon.

After meeting with Guterres on Monday afternoon, Prime Minister Najib Mikati met with Berri and left the meeting angry. “I have nothing to do with any of this,” Mikati commented, prompting many to assume he would soon resign, but his media office later ruled out such intentions.

A source close to Mikati noted that he does not accept interference in judicial or banking affairs and that his government refuses to be part of such a sin.

After meeting with Mikati on Tuesday, MP Mohammed Al-Hajjar, from the Future Bloc, told Arab News: “Mikati insists that institutions assume their role. He refuses to allow any institution to step on another’s toes. The issue of interfering with the judiciary is out of the question, and any type of deal is unacceptable.”

Al-Hajjar added: “The Future Movement stood with Mikati, despite our comments on Bitar’s performance. We did not demand that he be removed, but we said that the judiciary must stop violating the Constitution. If he had taken our suggestion to lift immunity for everyone, we would not have reached this point.”

Meanwhile, Guterres visited the UNIFIL headquarters in Naqoura on the southern Lebanese border where he toured the Blue Line with Maj. Gen. Stefano Del Col and discussed UNIFIL’s role there with senior international officers.

Guterres also held a closed meeting in Tyre with civil society representatives, amid tight security measures by the Lebanese army.



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Lebanon needs \$12-15 bn to kickstart recovery: central bank chief
Request to silence Lebanese alternative media fails

GCC-UK FMs: Strategic partnership essential to promoting Middle East security and stability

Mon, 2021-12-20 23:43

LONDON: Foreign Ministers from the Gulf Cooperation Council and the UK said that the strategic UK-GCC relationship is essential in promoting peace, security, stability, and economic growth in the Middle East region and beyond.

Britain's Foreign Secretary Liz Truss met foreign ministers of the GCC and its Secretary General at Chevening, England on Monday.

During the meeting, the foreign ministers agreed the UK-GCC relationship will be strengthened across all fields and that they were committed to developing the partnership in emerging areas such as clean technology, digital infrastructure, and cyber.

The UK and the GCC already cooperate closely in a wide range of areas including political dialogue, security, foreign policy, trade and investment, and development.

The reenergised UK-GCC partnership will help keep UK and GCC citizens safe, and generate business opportunities and jobs, the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office said.

The UK and GCC member states emphasised the importance of enhancing people-to-people links, which are an essential element in promoting understanding between their peoples, and a key driver of innovation, business opportunities, and cultural and educational exchange.

The UK and GCC member states underlined their commitment to work together to identify bilateral opportunities for joint investment in infrastructure and clean technology in the developing world.

As a first step, they committed to develop mechanisms for strong partnerships on these issues and work together to develop a pipeline of potential joint investment projects.

The foreign ministers welcomed the ambitious five-year strategy and enlarged remit of British Investment International (BII), the UK's development finance institution.

BII will play a central role in the UK government's offer to help developing and emerging countries meet their significant financing needs for infrastructure and enterprise.

The foreign ministers also discussed the resumption of Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action talks in Vienna, and underlined that this is the last

opportunity to restore the JCPOA as Iran's continued nuclear escalation is permanently eroding the benefits of the deal and undermining regional and international security.

They urged Iran to seize the current diplomatic opportunity to restore the JCPOA now to avoid bringing the region and international community to a crisis point.

Foreign Ministers also noted that a restored JCPOA is the best avenue towards inclusive, and more lasting diplomatic efforts to ensure regional security in a Gulf region permanently free of nuclear weapons.



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UAE's trade surplus with GCC rises more than three-fold on higher exports
Saudi, UK foreign ministers discuss security ties and regional issues

International community needs to strengthen Lebanon support, says UN chief

Author:

Mon, 2021-12-20 23:25

BEIRUT: The international community needs to strengthen its support to Lebanon to overcome the country's current "very difficult circumstances," UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said in Beirut on Monday.

Guterres also said Lebanon needed proper accountability for last year's port explosion and that elections due to be held next year could usher in political stability in the country.

His comments followed a meeting with Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri and a visit to the port, where he laid a wreath at a memorial for the hundreds who died when chemicals stored at the facility for nearly seven years exploded.

Guterres was keen to record his observations on the second day of his official visit to Lebanon.

He said that only the Lebanese could solve Lebanese problems, and he renewed his call for political leaders "to come together" to overcome divisions.

He inspected the blast site for the first time, reviewing the damage to the port and its surroundings, despite the stormy and rainy weather.

A minute's silence was observed in front of a plaque honoring victims of the explosion.

In notes distributed by his media office, the secretary-general said he visited the port to pay tribute to the victims who had lost their lives and to express his solidarity to the wounded and their families.

"I know the suffering and I know the will of the people to know the truth. The will of the people is to have proper accountability and I want to express my very deep solidarity to all the victims of that tragedy."

His day included an extensive meeting with representatives of international bodies and organizations, chaired by Guterres and Lebanese Prime Minister Najib Mikati.

Arab News learned that the importance of the meeting stemmed from its conclusion that the efforts of UN agencies "must coordinate with each other on the ground in order to produce more effective work."

Guterres said that Mikati confirmed "the government's commitment to conduct

negotiations with the IMF and its commitment to carry out a number of necessary administrative and financial reforms” to promote economic recovery.

FASTFACT

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterre says Lebanon needs proper accountability for last year’s port explosion and that elections due to be held next year could usher in political stability in the country.

Mikati stressed Lebanon’s “adherence to the role of the UN Interim Force in Lebanon in the south, respecting international resolutions.”

He highlighted Lebanon’s “commitment to the policy of disassociation from any dispute between Arab countries, as was its decision in 2011” and that Lebanon would not “in any case, be anything but a unifying factor among the Arab brothers, and is keen on the best relations with all its friends.”

He said Lebanon needed urgent aid in many areas, with a focus on delivering aid to the poorest and middle-class groups, in addition to marginalized segments.

He stressed the need to give special importance to expanding the social protection network, and said the government was “determined” to hold parliamentary elections on time without delay. “We look forward to the unwavering support of the UN,” he added.

The UN chief took part in an important meeting with religious authorities and listened to the positions of Lebanese sects on the developments in Lebanon.

Their speeches reflected the political divergence in Lebanon.

They affirmed their “commitment to the values of openness, tolerance and coexistence, as they are the essence of Lebanon’s identity and stability” in a joint statement, and encouraged “the adoption of dialogue as a means of resolving differences in the spirit of consensus and teamwork.”

The UN chief also visited the northern city of Tripoli, where he inspected centers and schools that provide services to residents and refugees. He met women leaders and activists.

His talks with Berri focused on the presence of UNIFIL forces in southern Lebanon and “the need to end all violations of the ceasefire.”

Guterres said the speaker had drawn his attention to the “violations of the airspace of Lebanon, and also the need for total implementation of the resolutions of the UN Security Council.”

“We discussed the importance of the cooperation between UNIFIL and the Lebanese Armed Forces that the international community needs also to support much more strongly. In the scope of our activities, we will also be doing

everything we can in order to facilitate the negotiations that hopefully will lead to a rapid solution for the delimitation of the maritime border.”

During a joint press conference, Berri said: “If there is a disturbance in a place, the responsibility lies with Israel, which occupies our land, and not with us. Every day, there is an Israeli violation of the Lebanese airspace, and they even use our airspace to strike Syria.”

His words came against the backdrop of a UN demand for Lebanon to facilitate the mission of UNIFIL forces during their work on the ground.

Hezbollah often obstructs the work of these patrols on the pretext that they are entering private property.



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UN secretary-general in Beirut to ‘stand by and support Lebanon’ Lebanon may reach initial pact with IMF between Jan-Feb – deputy PM

EU diplomat visits threatened Sheikh Jarrah home

Mon, 2021-12-20 22:53

AMMAN: The head of the EU Mission to the West Bank and Gaza Strip, Sven Kuhn von Burgsorff, visited the home of the Salem family, that is currently facing eviction, on Dec. 28.

The EU official made a strong public appeal, calling on Israel to call off the eviction, asking: "How on Earth is it possible that a family is evicted on Christmas in the middle of the winter?"

The EU delegation ran a photo on Twitter, adding: "Members of Nassar family continue gathering on their land in the neighborhood of #SheikhJarrah in the occupied #Jerusalem after Israeli settlers placed barbed wires around the land in an attempt to seize it. #SaveSheikhJarrah."

Israel has been waging a concerted campaign to take over as many homes as possible in the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood of occupied East Jerusalem to turn it into a Jewish area.

Fatmeh Salem, 69, who was born in the family home and has lived there all her life, said she had paid rent to the Jordanian government for the house since the 1950s.

The Israeli-controlled administration of absentee properties is a major enabler of Jewish settler groups, while Palestinians who lost homes in West Jerusalem and live now in East Jerusalem are not even allowed to have their homes back.

FASTFACT

The last evictions in Sheikh Jarrah took place in 2017.

On Dec. 19, the opposition Israeli website Plus972 gave details of what occurred while their reporter visited the Salem family in Sheikh Jarrah early this month.

"Fatmeh was home when she heard banging on her front door last week," it reported. "She opened it and saw Jerusalem Deputy Mayor Aryeh King, holding a telephone and filming her.

"Next to him stood Yosef – from the municipality and King's No. 2 official – claiming he had purchased the rights to the land from a Jewish family that lived in the home before 1948.

"'This is my home,' the official said and handed her an eviction notice.

“‘Seriously?’ she asked.

“‘Yes, this is our house and we will get it back,’ Yosef replied.”

Plus972’s reporter continued: “Our conversation is cut off by noise coming from outside. Young, English-speaking Jews have arrived with metal fence posts. Fatma (Fatmeh) storms out to confront them: ‘What are you doing?’ she asks, as they begin to fence in a plot of the land adjacent to Fatma’s home, which is currently used as a parking space for two residents of the neighborhood, as well as a settler who moved to Sheikh Jarrah two years ago.

“Palestinians arrived, and a verbal altercation broke out. ‘How can I get into my home? Why are you doing this?’ Fatma yelled at them.

“The man who took charge of the fencing was Haim Silberstein, one of Aryeh King’s associates, who was wearing a suit and demanded we not film him.

“The police arrived ... and upon seeing legal papers showing the settlers had no right to build the fence, ordered the construction be stopped.”

Fatmeh then told the Plus972 reporter: “This is the beginning of our expulsion.”

An hour later, the reporter continued, King himself arrived at the home.

“He stood before the family and said: ‘Soon there will be a neighborhood for Jews here, thank God,’ before reciting the names of the various Palestinian neighborhoods in Jerusalem that he has already helped Judaize,” the reporter added.

The last expulsion in Sheikh Jarrah took place in 2017 against members of the Shamaneh family.

Back then, Aryeh King was reportedly directly involved through his organization, the Israel Land Fund, which assisted in taking over the Shamaneh’s home.



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UN urges Israel to stop demolitions and evacuations in Sheikh Jarrah in West Bank
Illinois congresswoman slams Iron Dome funding and 'theft' of Sheikh Jarrah homes