

Time shrinking for Iran nuclear deal, US envoy warns

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MANAMA: The US envoy for Iran warned Friday that Tehran was approaching the point of no return for reviving a nuclear deal after it boosted its stocks of enriched uranium before talks resume this month.

Robert Malley said Iran risked making it “impossible” to gain any benefit from resuming the agreement, which has been on hold since then president Donald Trump walked away in 2018.

This week, with Iran set for talks with world powers in Vienna on November 29, the International Atomic Energy Agency said Tehran had again increased its stockpile of highly enriched uranium.

“The time will come if Iran continues at this pace with the advancements they’ve made, (it) will make it impossible even if we were going to go back to the JCPOA to recapture the benefits,” Malley told the Manama Dialogue conference in Bahrain.

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action was the agreement struck in 2015 under which Iran agreed to clear limits on its nuclear activities in return for an easing of sanctions.

“Iran’s advances are spreading alarm across the region... that’s what’s making the clock tick faster and making all of us say that the time is short for a return to the JCPOA,” Malley said.

On Wednesday, the US and its Gulf Arab allies accused Iran of causing a nuclear crisis and destabilising the region with its ballistic missile program and support for armed militias.

Malley said the US shared a “commonality of purpose” with rivals Russia and China “because we want to avoid that crisis, all of us, the crisis that would be sparked if Iran continues on its current path.”

“And I want to be clear, because there’s no ambiguity about what they seem to be doing now, which is to drag their feet on the nuclear talks and accelerate the progress in their nuclear program.”

The US envoy said he was not encouraged by the statements from the new Iranian government of President Ebrahim Raisi, which earlier on Friday accused Washington of conducting a “propaganda campaign” against the country. “If they stick to their public pronouncements, unfortunately we’re not headed in the right direction... but let’s wait to see what happens,” he said, pledging that President Joe Biden would honor a revived deal.

“Our intent, our clear intent in coming back into the deal is to stick with the deal because we don’t want to see a nuclear crisis,” Malley said.

Iran had reacted angrily to a US pledge to take its Gulf Arab allies’ interests into account in any revived nuclear deal with their arch rival.

“The US government, which is responsible for the current situation after withdrawing from the nuclear deal, is once again trying to provoke a crisis,”

foreign ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh charged.



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[Lebanon PM says information minister will resign soon](#)

Author:

Fri, 2021-11-19 22:42

BEIRUT: Lebanese Prime Minister Najib Mikati announced on Friday that he will soon call a cabinet session, saying that the situation in the country is “very difficult and the people should not have to deal with more crises.”

His remarks came after protesters stormed the Ministry of Health building in Beirut on Friday morning in opposition to the lifting of subsidies on medicines, which has caused prices of vital health care treatments to skyrocket.

Arab News learned from a source close to Mikati that Information Minister George Kordahi will submit his resignation from the government during the soon-to-be-held cabinet session. Kordahi's recent statements regarding Saudi Arabia prompted the Kingdom and other Gulf states to cut diplomatic and economic ties with Lebanon.

The Iran-backed Lebanese political group Hezbollah has insisted that Kordahi should not resign to defuse the diplomatic crisis, citing "national sovereignty."

President Michel Aoun recently told a Lebanese military delegation that "Lebanon always seeks better relations with the Arab countries, especially the Gulf."

He added: "We hope that what led to a problem with these countries will be quickly resolved. It is important that the interests of the Lebanese people not be harmed and that they do not pay for what is happening."

In an interview with the Arabic-language daily Al-Akhbar, published on Friday, Aoun said he was not enthusiastic about the information minister being dismissed during the cabinet session, and would prefer that the decision be made personally by Kordahi.

Mikati visited Aoun on Friday morning and informed him of his intention to hold a cabinet session. He then headed to the General Labor Union headquarters, where he announced: "There are over 100 items on the cabinet's agenda, (so we need to hold) a session soon to manage the state's affairs and expedite the public budget and refer it to parliament for approval, in parallel with approving the required reforms (to reach an) agreement with the International Monetary Fund."

Cabinet sessions were suspended less than a month after Mikati formed his government in September, as Hezbollah and the Amal Movement called for the removal of Tarek Bitar, the judge leading the probe into the August 2020 Beirut Port blast, accusing Bitar of "politicizing" the investigation.

Following the deadly clashes between supporters of Hezbollah and the Amal Movement protesting Bitar's handling of the investigation on one side and the Lebanese Armed Forces and unidentified gunmen on the other in Tayouneh on October 14 this year, Hezbollah and the Amal Movement refused to attend cabinet sessions, with Hezbollah claiming the LAF was responsible for the clashes and calling for the arrest of LAF affiliates involved in the incident.

The successive crises have worsened Lebanon's already disastrous economic collapse. The Lebanese pound has continued to lose value; it is currently being traded at 23,000 Lebanese pounds to the dollar.

“Lebanon has no choice but to resort to the IMF, and negotiations may last until 2022,” Mikati said. “But through the IMF, our country is giving a certain signal to the world that Lebanon can recover and must be supported.

“The world does not want Lebanon to fall and is ready to help us,” he continued. “And when I say the world, I also mean the Arab countries. But we need to do the required work first. We have hit an unprecedented inflation rate due to the years and years of subsidies, which we can no longer provide since the public treasury is unable to bear it.”

He announced that steps would be taken “at the beginning of December to secure aid for 250,000 families from the World Bank, amounting to \$245 million.” Mikati said the payment process would begin at the end of 2021 or the beginning of 2022.

“There is assistance intended for 40,000 families residing in villages 700 meters above sea level, worth \$165 per family,” he added. “We will also cooperate with the UN Food Program, which will allocate \$600 million to the Lebanese, starting at the beginning of next year.”

Mikati also referenced the smuggling and illegal storage of subsidized medicines for chronic and cancerous diseases and noted that an investigation into the lack of subsidized baby formula in the market showed that it was “used for nutritional purposes in dairy factories.”

Mikati stressed that the government had no intention of selling any of the state’s assets at the moment. “It’s not the right time,” he said. “Our current priority is to reform all sectors and improve the electricity supply.”

Ali Darwish, an MP in Mikati’s parliamentary bloc, said Mikati had “intensified his political consultations in search of a way out of the political crisis.”

Darwish told Arab News: “Everyone was convinced of the need to hold cabinet sessions. Everyone agreed on the need to defuse crises, and that judicial issues should only be resolved within the judiciary itself. When paralysis affects the public sector and the health sector, no party, including Hezbollah, has any interest in obstructing solutions, because everyone will be affected.”



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Thu, 2021-11-18 19:15

NAJAF, IRAQ: Influential Shiite cleric Moqtada Sadr, the big winner in initial results from Iraq's election last month, on Thursday called on the "losers" not to disturb the war-scarred country's democratic process. His appeal came after weeks of tensions that peaked in early November when an explosives-laden drone hit the residence of Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhemi, in what his office called an assassination attempt. Final results of the October 10 legislative ballot have still not been

announced. But the Conquest (Fatah) Alliance, the political arm of the pro-Iran Hashed Al-Shaabi, suffered a decline in seats from 48 to around 15, leading it to denounce the outcome as "fraud."

The Hashed is a paramilitary network now integrated into the regular forces. Sadr, who campaigned as a nationalist and critic of Iran, was the big winner with more than 70 of the 329 seats, according to the initial count.

At a press conference, he addressed "political forces who consider themselves the losers of these elections" and said their defeat "should not open a path to the ruin of Iraq's democratic process."

What they are doing, he added, "will only accentuate the people's rejection of you."

No group claimed responsibility for the drone attack in which Kadhemi was unhurt.

It occurred two days after security forces clashed with supporters of Iran-backed parties near the high-security Green Zone, where Kadhemi lives.

Despite their electoral losses, the Hashed will remain a political force as the country's myriad of factions engage in marathon negotiations to form alliances and name a new prime minister.

Sadr, however, reiterated the necessity of forming a majority government, saying: "Our options, as an individual or entity, are either as a majority government or opposition."

Since the election Sadr, who once led a militia against American and Iraqi government forces, has repeatedly said that the future prime minister should be from his party.

Experts say he could try to build a parliamentary majority by allying with groups outside of the Shiite community.

The new government, elected in a ballot with record-low turnout, will take power in a country mired in corruption and economic crisis.



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[UN security council calls on Houthis to end US embassy raid, release hostages](#)

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Fri, 2021-11-19 01:34

NEW YORK: The UN Security Council condemned “in the strongest terms” the Houthis’ ongoing breach of the former US embassy compound in Sanaa, calling

on the Iran-backed militia to immediately withdraw their militants from the premises and release the detainees.

The US had issued similar calls to the Houthis last week after the rebels stormed the compound that formerly hosted the US embassy in the Yemen capital and took hostage an unspecified number of Yemenis working at the premises.

The embassy raid came on the heels of a visit by a mission representing the five permanent members of the UN Security Council (the US, the UK, France, Russia, and China). During the visit, they voiced support to the Yemeni government and criticized the Houthis, condemning their attacks on Saudi Arabia and the ongoing Marib offensive.

The US State Department has vowed to intensify its “diplomatic efforts to secure the release of our staff and the vacating of our compound, including through our international partners.”

The US transferred its embassy to Riyadh in 2015 at the onset of the civil war in Yemen.

Security council members specifically called for the protection of a diplomatic mission that has been temporarily recalled, “together with its property and archives.”

In a statement, the council “recalled the fundamental principles enshrined in the 1961 Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations and the 1963 Vienna Convention on Consular Relations notably the prohibition against the intrusion into the diplomatic property as well as the inviolability of the premises of the mission and their immunity from search, requisition, attachment or execution.”



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US calls on Houthis to 'immediately release' Sanaa embassy staff

[Libya's powerful ex-minister announces bid for president](#)

Author:

Fri, 2021-11-19 01:12

TRIPOLI: Libya's former interior minister announced on Thursday his bid to run for president in the much-anticipated elections next month, the latest candidate to join the race for the highest office in the devastated by years of civil war.

Fathi Bashagha submitted his candidacy papers in Tripoli, and declared that his political platform envisages "a new Libya" based on justice, respect for human rights and a market-led economy.

The 59-year-old is the fourth candidate to join the race, which has so far seen three controversial figures announce their bids, including a son of the country's late dictator Muammar Qaddafi and a powerful military commander.

The vote faces growing uncertainty. Libya has been wracked by chaos since an uprising toppled Qaddafi in 2011. The country had for years been split between a government in the east and a UN-supported administration in Tripoli, aided by western-based militias.

"Libya will not go back to pre-2011. We will build a new Libya," Bashagha told reporters in announcing his bid.

"We will bring an end to suffering, tears and blood."

"Libya will turn from a rentier state into a free-market economy," he added.

"We will be embracing reform, reconciliation and the reconstruction."

A former air force pilot and businessman, Bashagha served as interior minister from 2018 until earlier this year in the UN-supported regime headed by Fayez Sarraj, establishing himself as a powerful figure in western Libya.

He cultivated ties with Turkey, France and the US, but also with Egypt and Russia which backed his nominal rivals in the intra-Libyan conflict.

Sarraj's regime stepped down after a new transitional government was elected by Libyan delegates in Geneva in February under UN-mediated talks.

Bashagha was a contender for the post of prime minister but in the end, Abdul Hamid Mohammed Dbeibah was chosen to lead the transitional Cabinet.

The interim government's task is to steer Libya toward national reconciliation and lead the nation through general elections set for Dec. 24.

Bashagha survived an attack on his motorcade on a Tripoli highway in February, when gunmen opened fire on his motorcade.

He was unhurt but at least one of his guards was wounded.

The race kicked off on Sunday, when Saif Al-Islam Qaddafi, the son and one-time heir apparent of the late dictator, filed his official candidacy papers in the southern town of Sabha. Saif Al-Islam, who is wanted by the International Criminal Court on charges of crimes against humanity, spent recent years in hiding after he was released from a militia-run prison in the town of Zintan in June 2017.

On Tuesday, the commander of a self-styled army that answered to Libya's east-based administration, Khalifa Haftar, announced his bid.

Haftar's forces had previously besieged Tripoli in a year-long campaign to try to capture the Libyan capital.

He is also a defendant in at least three separate federal lawsuits filed in a US court where plaintiffs allege their loved ones were killed or tortured by his forces.

Libya's influential Parliament Speaker Aguila Saleh joined the race late on Wednesday.

The 77-year-old has led the country's House of Representatives that came to power in the 2014 elections, which ended up being contested.

In the aftermath, Libya split further into rival administrations in the east and west, and the lawmaking body fled from Tripoli to the eastern city of Tobruk after a court ruled it was no longer legitimate.

The December elections also face other obstacles, including occasional infighting among armed groups, the deep rift that remains between Libya's east and west, and the presence of thousands of foreign fighters and troops.



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