

UN envoy in Sanaa in last-ditch bid to salvage peace plan

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Sun, 2021-05-30 20:13

AL-MUKALLA: The UN special envoy to Yemen, Martin Griffiths, traveled to Houthi-held Sanaa on Sunday in a last-ditch bid to convince the Iran-backed rebels to accept a UN-brokered peace plan and stop their assault on Marib. In his first visit to the city in a year, Griffiths will meet Houthi officials to discuss proposals including a nationwide cease-fire, the lifting of restrictions on Hodeidah ports and the reopening of Sanaa airport. On Friday, the UN envoy called on the Yemeni government and the Houthis to make bold concessions to end months of political deadlock and reach a peace agreement.

In the past, the Houthis snubbed Griffiths and the US special envoy to Yemen, Timothy Lenderking, and rejected international calls to halt their deadly offensive on the central province of Marib, demanding that the Arab coalition end airstrikes on their forces and arrange unregulated and unchecked flights from and to Sanaa airport as part of the peace initiatives.

The Yemeni government rejected the Houthi demands, saying that heavy aerial bombardments by Arab coalition warplanes have largely foiled Houthi assaults on Marib and that ending the airstrikes would enable the Houthis to advance quickly toward the strategic city.

On Sunday, Yemen's Foreign Minister, Ahmed Awad bin Mubarak, said that the internationally recognized government of Yemen welcomes all initiatives to end the conflict.

He added that the Yemeni government seeks a "sustainable and comprehensive" peace that will bring back stability to the country and end the Houthi coup, according to the official SABA news agency.

Meanwhile, on the ground, dozens of combatants were killed on Sunday in heavy fighting between the Houthis and the Yemeni army backed by allied tribesmen in mountainous areas west of Marib city.

Local military officers said that at least 30 Houthis died when Yemeni government forces pushed back their offensive in Marib's Al-Kasara.

Loyalists shared videos showing thick smoke billowing from contested areas in Marib after Arab coalition warplanes targeted Houthi locations and military reinforcements.

Thousands of government troops and Houthi fighters have been killed since February when the rebels renewed an offensive on Marib, the Yemen government's last northern stronghold.

Accusations

The Yemeni government has accused the Houthis of violating the Stockholm Agreement by turning the Red Sea ports under their control into factories for making and launching booby-trapped boats.

Yemen's Information Minister, Moammar Al-Eryani, said that the latest Houthi

attack in the Red Sea foiled by the Arab coalition shows that the rebels are still threatening international maritime traffic and breaching existing agreements.

“Houthis using Hodeidah, Salif and Ras Issa ports as bases for launching terrorist attacks and for booby-trapped boats, confirming their disavowal of Sweden Agreement and exploitation to implement Iranian agenda to spread chaos and terrorism in region and threaten international interests,” the Yemeni minister said in a twitter post.

Under the peace deal between the Yemeni government and the Houthis in late 2018, known as the Stockholm Agreement, the Yemeni government agreed to stop a military offensive on the city of Hodeidah in return for the Houthis handing over ports in Hodeidah to neutral forces and depositing revenues into the central bank in the city.



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Yemeni riyal in free fall again amid political deadlock
Yemen FM says Iran's support for Houthis is prolonging war

Iran's cabinet dismisses central bank chief Hemmati

Sun, 2021-05-30 17:58

TEHRAN: Iran's Cabinet dismissed the governor of the central bank on Sunday after he decided to run for the June 18 presidential election, state TV reported.

The report said the decision was taken after Abdonasser Hemmati decided to run in presidential elections and "it prevents him from having a sufficient presence in the central bank and carrying out the serious duties and responsibilities of the CBI chief in the sensitive areas of money and currency."

The report also said Deputy Governor Akbar Komijani would be taking over all responsibilities from Hemmati, who had held the position since 2018.

Hemmati in an Instagram post thanked Rouhani, and said the president has the power to dismiss him. "I thank the president for his trust, especially in the first year of my service."

On Wednesday, Iran's Guardian Council – clerics and jurists who approve presidential candidates – approved only seven out of some 590 applicants. The Council on Tuesday barred former parliament speaker Ali Larijani, a conservative allied with Rouhani, as well as former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad from running.



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[Yemeni riyal in free fall again amid political deadlock](#)

Sat, 2021-05-29 21:33

AL-MUKALLA: Yemen's riyal hit a new record low on the weekend amid deadlocked diplomatic efforts to end the war and rising tensions between the Yemeni government and southern separatists in Aden.

The riyal traded at 930 to the dollar on Saturday in the government-controlled areas, plunging from 900 riyals a couple of weeks ago.

The riyal was 215 to the dollar when the Houthis placed the Yemeni President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi under house arrest in early 2019, sparking the current conflict.

When the new unity government, formed under the Riyadh Agreement in December, returned to Aden as troops withdrew from Abyan, the Yemeni riyal surged to 720 against the US dollar, recovering almost 20 percent of its value.

Experts link the current fall of the riyal to the outcome of UN-brokered peace efforts, renewed hostilities between the Yemeni government and the separatist Southern Transitional Council (STC), and the government's failure to resume oil exports and collecting revenues from state bodies.

"The fall of the riyal is due to the economic and political instability in Yemen," Mustafa Nasr, director of the Economic Media Center, told Arab News on Saturday.

Politically, the UN Yemen envoy Martin Griffiths' latest diplomatic shuttle between Riyadh and Muscat yielded no fruit as warring factions rejected his peace initiative, known as the Joint Declaration, that proposes putting into place a nationwide truce.

The Houthis are still pressing ahead with their deadly offensive on the central city of Marib despite international condemnations and appeals.

In Aden, the interim capital of Yemen, the internationally recognized government has not returned to the city for more than two months amid reports about renewed tension with the STC.

The STC on Saturday appointed Gen. Shalal Ali-Shayae as the commander of counterterrorism forces in Aden, fueling tension with the government whose supporters accused the separatists of violating the Riyadh Agreement.

Shayae, former security chief of Aden and a senior separatist figure, was appointed in December as a military attache at the Yemen Embassy in the UAE.

“The implantation of the Riyadh Agreement (in December) sent positive signals about new economic policies and support to the economy,” Nasr said, adding that the Yemeni riyal plunged again after the government did not remain in Aden or apply reforms to boost revenues and exports.

“Many negative things have happened recently. The crisis in Aden returned. The government neither improved revenues that generate hard currencies nor created a mechanism for covering exports of goods and fuel. To pay public servants, the government printed millions of riyals without coverage,” he said.

During previous rounds of devaluation of the national currency, the Yemeni government replaced the central bank governors, shut down exchange firms to put an end to currency speculation, and provided local fuel and goods traders with the dollar.

The government also floated the riyal to bridge the gap between the official rate and that of the black market and relocated the central bank office from Sanaa to Aden.

The Yemeni government blamed the Houthis for banning the use of new banknotes printed by the Yemeni government in Aden and refusing to deposit revenues from Hodeidah seaports and tax into the central bank in Aden.

Economists argue that the Yemeni riyal would keep falling against the dollar as long as the Yemeni government remains outside the country.

The depreciation of the riyal has led to an expected surge in the price of foods and fuel and sparked protests in several Yemeni cities.

Hundreds of people took to the streets of Aden and Taiz to voice rage over the collapse of the Yemeni currency and the subsequent increase in the price of food and goods.

“My salary has lost more than 20 percent of its value due to the devaluation of the riyal. My relatives in Saudi Arabia donate to me to keep me afloat since my salary can’t cover my expenses,” Abu Abdullah, a government employee, told Arab News.



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Yemeni riyal on rebound as people voice optimism over new government
Yemeni riyal surges amid govt. troop withdrawal

[Egypt's foreign minister to meet Israeli counterpart on Sunday](#)

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Sat, 2021-05-29 16:37

CAIRO: Egypt's foreign minister Sameh Shoukry is due to meet his Israeli counterpart Gabi Ashkenazi on Sunday for talks, Egypt's foreign ministry said on Saturday.

Egypt is working with the United States and other regional partners towards

reinforcing a ceasefire it brokered between Israel and Palestinian militants, facilitated in part due to its longstanding relations with both sides. The ministry's statement had no further details. Separately, Israeli news website Walla reported that the head of the Egyptian general intelligence Abbas Kamel was due to travel to Israel and the Palestinian territories on Sunday to meet Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and Hamas officials. Neither Israeli nor Palestinian officials immediately responded to requests for comment.



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change

Sat, 2021-05-29 18:56

LONDON: More than three decades ago, Ebrahim Raisi made a name for himself overseeing the summary execution of thousands of Iranian political prisoners – an act considered one of Tehran's first crimes against humanity.

Now, the religious hard-liner turned prosecutor is running for president of the Islamic Republic, and experts have warned that a flurry of disqualifications have effectively left the infamous jurist out in front in a one-horse race.

In what is set to be one of the country's most restricted elections ever, June 18 will see Iranians go to the polls to vote for Hassan Rouhani's replacement.

Last week the Guardian Council (GC), a body beholden to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, announced the list of state-sanctioned presidential candidates.

IRAN'S PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

The Guardian Council has approved just 7 candidates to run in the June 18 contest

Authorized candidates



Ebrahim Raisi
Ultraconservative
Head of Judicial
Authority



Saeed Jalili
Ultraconservative
Former nuclear
negotiator



Mohsen Mehralizadeh
Reformist
Former
vice president



Mohsen Rezaei
Ultraconservative
Secretary of the
Expediency Council



Alireza Zakani
Ultraconservative
Lawmaker



Abdolnasser Hemmati
Reformist
Central bank
governor



Amir Hossein Ghazizadeh Hashemi
Ultraconservative
Deputy parliamentary speaker

*Candidates approved by the Guardian Council, non-elected body which oversees elections

Main candidates rejected



Mahmoud Ahmadinejad
Populist
Former president



Eshaq Jahanguiri
Reformist
Vice-president



Ali Larjani
Moderate conservative
Former parliamentary speaker

Source: Iran Ministry of Interior

ARAB NEWS

Of the nearly 600 candidates that applied to run in the election, a huge proportion of them – some 585 people – were disallowed by the GC, including such well-known political figures as former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Ali Larjani, a former parliamentary speaker and Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) commander.

Only seven candidates now remain: Secretary of the Expediency Council Mohsen Rezaei; former nuclear negotiator Saeed Jalili; deputy parliamentary speaker Amir Hossein Ghazizadeh Hashemi; former vice president Mohsen Mehralizadeh; central bank governor Abdolnasser Hemmati; lawmaker Alireza Zakani; and

Raisi, the Islamic Republic's chief justice.

Mirko Giordani, founder of strategic advisory group Prelia, says the unexpected disqualification of Ali Larijani – previously seen as the only viable alternative to Raisi – has reduced the presidential election to a “one-horse race” in Raisi's favor.

“Larijani was in the conservative camp, but he's turned more moderate in recent times. He was poised to be the only possible contestant to Raisi – and, even then, the latter was supposed to win,” Giordani told Arab News.

The lineup is now so uncompetitive that incumbent Rouhani and even Raisi himself have both appealed for a wider variety of candidates.



Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei on May 27, 2021 addressing parliament members via video connection during an online meeting in the Iranian capital Tehran, who urged Iranians to ignore calls to boycott next month's presidential election, after several hopefuls were barred from running against ultraconservative candidates. (AFP)

“Usually, Iranian elections are characterized by their strong turnout – around 70 percent – but current numbers are expected to be around 50 percent. That's going to be a huge blow in terms of legitimacy,” Giordani said. “Even if Raisi does clinch the election, there's going to be a lot of questions asked.”

During his time as an Islamic Republic insider, presidential favorite Raisi has overseen a catalogue of human rights abuses that have shocked Iranians, rights groups and the international community.

Among those he has condemned to death is champion wrestler Navid Afkari for his alleged role in anti-government protests. His killing in late 2020 sparked global outrage and protests from world sporting bodies – including the Olympics.

Perhaps his most heinous crime was his direct involvement in the “death commission” that ordered the execution of thousands of political prisoners in 1988. Dubbed a crime against humanity by Amnesty International, Raisi, then a deputy prosecutor for Tehran, oversaw the sham trials that condemned thousands to death.



Supporters of Iran's former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad gather outside the Interior Ministry headquarters in the capital Tehran on May 12, 2021. In what is set to be one of the country's most restricted elections ever, June 18 will see Iranians go to the polls to vote for Hassan Rouhani's replacement.
(AFP/File Photo)

“Groups of prisoners were rounded up, blindfolded and brought before committees involving judicial, prosecution, intelligence and prison officials,” Amnesty International reported. “These ‘death commissions’ bore no resemblance to a court and their proceedings were summary and arbitrary in the extreme.

“Prisoners were asked questions such as whether they were prepared to repent for their political opinions, publicly denounce their political groups and declare loyalty to the Islamic Republic. Some were asked cruel questions such as whether they were willing to walk through an active minefield to assist the army or participate in firing squads.

“They were never told that their answers could condemn them to death.”

The exact number of people Raisi put to death is unknown, but estimates range from 1 to 3,000 in the summer of 1988 alone. Other perceived dissidents faced torture and harassment.

“Many of those allegedly involved in the 1988 killings still hold positions of power,” Amnesty said, with Raisi arguably being the most prominent. Now, with the assistance of the Supreme Leader and the Guardian Council, he is on the path to the presidency.

“The regime is basically picking who is going to be the next president by disqualifying so many of the candidates who stood for election,” Meir Javedanfar, Iran lecturer at IDC Herzliya and a former BBC Persian reporter, told Arab News. “The chances of an upset, or anyone else winning, are low.”



Head of Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps Hossein Salami leaves after delivering a speech during a march to condemn the ongoing Israeli air strikes on the Gaza Strip, in the capital Tehran's Palestine square, on May 19, 2021. (AFP)

For Javedanfar, Raisi is the regime's continuity candidate.

“A Raisi presidency will mean continuation of Ayatollah Khamenei's foreign policy, which means acrimonious relations with America; continued support for Iranian presence in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and Yemen; continuing the resistance economy.

“I also think that we're going to see a crackdown on existing liberties, for example on social media. I'm even worried that a Raisi government could

implement a national intranet.”

An intranet would allow Tehran to tightly control the flow of online information in and out of Iran by effectively cordoning off the Iranian cybersphere.

“The Islamic Republic is concerned about the dissemination of Western ideas among Iranians, especially feminism. Raisi would be the person to do this,” Javedanfer said.

Giordani says a Raisi presidency is likely to focus heavily on rooting out corruption, a trait that he says was a hallmark of the conservative’s tenure in the country’s controversial judiciary.



People, mask-clad due to the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic, walk beneath a billboard depicting the Islamic Republic founder Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (R) and Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei (L) at Enghelab Square in the centre of Iran’s capital Tehran on May 16, 2021. (AFP)

Ali Alfoneh, a senior fellow at the Washington-based Arab Gulf States Institute, believes the focus on corruption has always been highly selective – and political.

“Raisi dedicated his tenure as chief justice of Iran to engaging in a selective fight against corruption,” Alfoneh told Arab News. “Selective because Raisi, for the most part, targeted his political opponents and their close relatives.”

Alfoneh also believes, despite the media attention that the conservative-

leaning list of presidential candidates has invited, the “hard-line” and “reformist” distinction is a misnomer that does not accurately depict Iran’s murky politics.

“The hard-line-softline dichotomy in Iranian politics is totally false,” said Alfoneh. “Due to the lack of formal political parties with written party programs, the ruling elites of the Islamic Republic organize in fluid networks around leader figures to secure personal gains.”



This handout picture provided by the office of Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei on May 27, 2021 shows members of Iran’s parliament saluting him via video connection during an online meeting in the Iranian capital Tehran. (AFP)

Therefore, “personal gains, rather than ideology” are “the organizing principle of Iranian politics.”

Alfoneh shares Giordani’s view about the June 18 election’s distinct lack of legitimacy in the eyes of the Iranian public.

“The ruling elites of the Islamic Republic are subjected to a permanent purge, and over the years, the regime has become less representative of Iran’s population,” he said.

“This has already caused problems for a regime, which, for all its authoritarianism, is sensitive to public opinion.”

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Close ally of supreme leader is favorite to win Iran election