

IAEA confirms Iran has started enriching uranium to 60% purity

Sat, 2021-04-17 21:47

VIENNA: Iran has started the process of enriching uranium to 60% fissile purity at an above-ground nuclear plant at Natanz, the U.N. nuclear watchdog said on Saturday, confirming earlier statements by Iranian officials.

The move has complicated talks aimed at reviving Iran's nuclear deal with major powers as it is a big step towards producing weapons-grade uranium.

Iran had previously only reached 20% purity, and that was already a breach of the deal, which says Iran can only enrich to 3.67%.

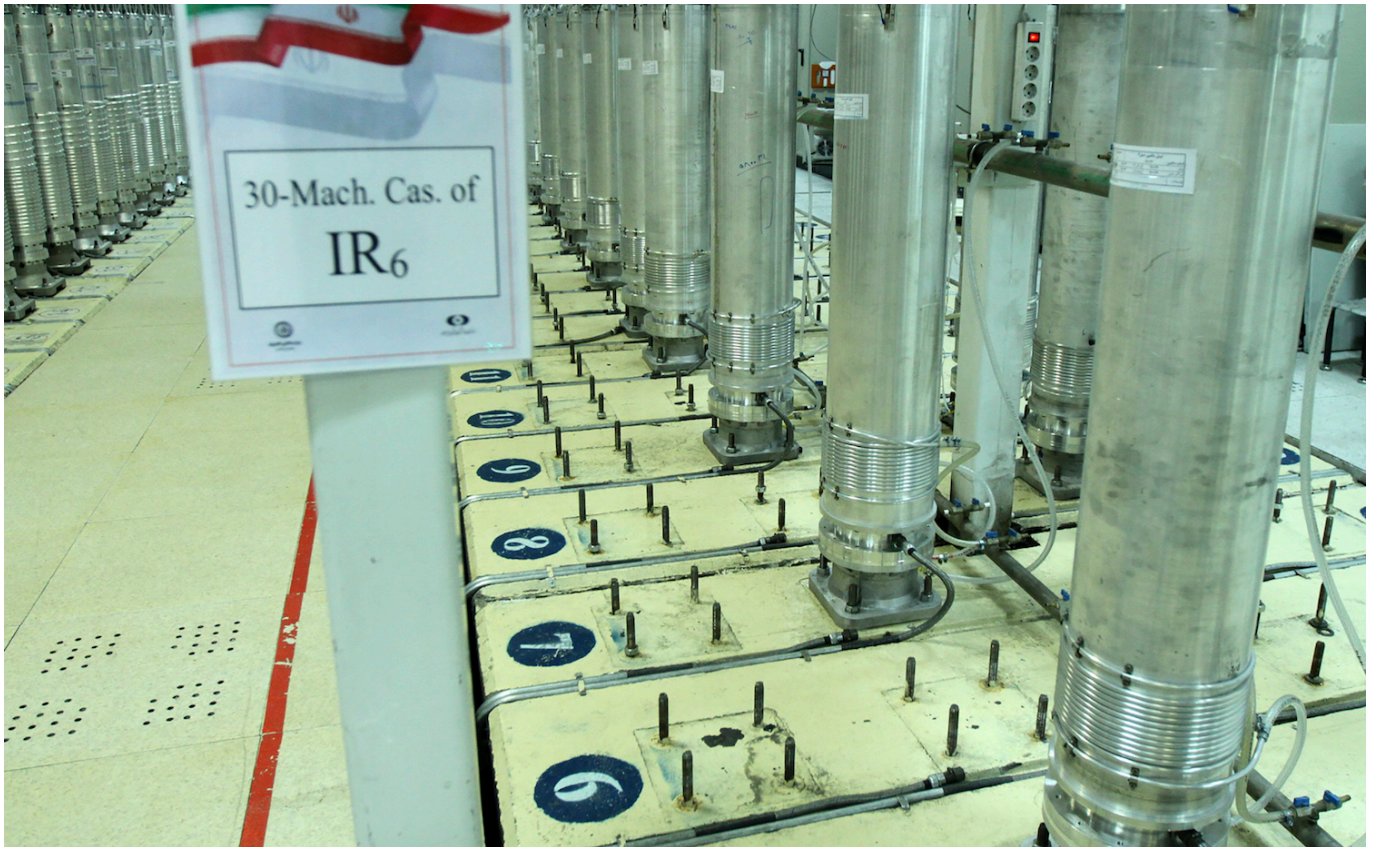
Iran made the step up to 60% in response to an explosion that damaged equipment at the larger, underground Fuel Enrichment Plant at Natanz. Tehran has blamed Israel and named a man wanted in connection with the blast.

"The Agency today verified that Iran had begun the production of UF₆ enriched up to 60%... at the (above-ground) Natanz Pilot Fuel Enrichment Plant," the International Atomic Energy Agency said in a statement.

UF₆ is uranium hexafluoride, the form in which uranium is fed into centrifuges for enrichment.

A confidential IAEA report to member states seen by Reuters provided more details.

"According to Iran's declaration to the Agency, the enrichment level of the UF₆ produced at PFEP was 55.3% U-235. The Agency took a sample of the produced UF₆ for destructive analysis to independently verify the enrichment level declared by Iran. The results of this analysis will be reported by the Agency in due course," the report said.



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Iran names suspect in Natanz nuclear site attack, says he fled country
US President Biden says Iranian enrichment to 60% unhelpful, but glad about nuclear talks

[Defiant Lebanese judge stages second raid on money exchange](#)

Sat, 2021-04-17 20:56

BEIRUT: Controversial Lebanese judge and Mount Lebanon state prosecutor Ghada Aoun carried out a second raid on a money exchange in northern Lebanon on Saturday in defiance of a senior judiciary decision dismissing her from an investigation into possible currency export breaches.

Aoun was accompanied by several activists from the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) during the raid on the money exchange in the Awkar district in northern Lebanon.

Less than 24 hours earlier she raided the office with members of the security services.

Aoun remained in the money exchange for several hours on Friday in protest at her dismissal by the the discriminatory Public Prosecutor, Judge Ghassan Oweidat, a decision that caused widespread anger among the Lebanese public.

Caretaker Justice Minister Marie-Claude Najm held an emergency meeting on Saturday with Oweidat as well as Supreme Judicial Council head Judge Suhail Abboud and Judicial Inspection Authority head Judge Borkan Saad.

After the meeting Najm voiced her anger at the situation regarding the judiciary, saying that she refuses to be “a false witness to the decay of the judiciary and the fall of the fig leaf in this state.”

Najm said the events involving Aoun are an indication of “the failure of state institutions.”

Lebanon is facing a political and economic crisis amid disputes between state officials, a deadlock that has led to the collapse of the national currency.

However, critics accuse Aoun of a lack of respect for due process.

HIGHLIGHT

Caretaker Justice Minister Marie-Claude Najm held an emergency meeting on Saturday with Oweidat as well as Supreme Judicial Council head Judge Suhail Abboud and Judicial Inspection Authority head Judge Borkan Saad.

There are six criminal cases and 28 complaints against her before the Judicial Inspection Authority – the largest number of cases filed against any judge in the history of the Lebanese judiciary.

Aoun was investigating the Mecattaf money exchange company and Societe Generale Bank for allegedly withdrawing dollars from the market and shipping the funds abroad.

The Supreme Judicial Council dismissed Aoun along with two other judges who had previously been suspended by the Disciplinary Council for Judges.

Judge Oweidat on Friday asked the Director-General of State Security, Maj. Gen. Antoine Saliba, to suspend the officers who accompanied Aoun on the exchange office raid.

People in Lebanon on Friday watched on TV as Aoun requested that the money exchange office be sealed because the owner, Michel Mecattaf, refused to provide her with details of currency transfers on behalf of banks.

Earlier, Mecattaf’s agents informed Aoun that she had been dismissed from the case.

Aoun remained alone for hours inside the office after state security personnel left. A medical team checked on her after her blood pressure rose, and she left the premises soon after. Later she stepped on to the balcony of her home to wave to FPM supporters, who gathered outside to offer support.

After Aoun's second raid on Saturday, the head of the Mecattaf financial company accused her supporters of "breaking into private property by force."

Mecattaf described the case as "eminently political," saying that he is "a witness and not a convict."

Najm described the events as "unacceptable."

"I am not in a position to please this political party or that team. We want an effective and independent judiciary. The problem is not the laws – oversight and accountability have been absent for years," she said.

Najm also said that "the judiciary is incapable of fighting corruption," and called on judges to "rise up against this reality."

She added: "There is a lack of confidence in the judiciary, and this is a major insult."

Retired General Prosecutor Hatem Madi told Arab News: "Judge Oweidat's decision shows that some judges are working independently, but things must be put to rights. Regardless of whether Oweidat's decision was right or wrong, the public prosecution offices in Lebanon must be an integrated unit."

The decision to dismiss Aoun revived a political dispute between the FPM and the Future Movement, the two parties in conflict over the formation of the government.

The FPM, headed by MP Gebran Bassil, said that it will "continue to expose every file related to the fight against corruption," saluting "every judge who rightfully performs their duties despite the injustice to which they are sometimes exposed."

The Future Movement said that "mourning for judges after encouraging them to violate laws and asking them to open discretionary files for opponents is a matter that no longer fools any of the Lebanese people."



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Lebanon schools to reopen in cooperation with the Red Cross
With food and fuel, Hezbollah braces for the worst in Lebanon collapse

[Qatar's controversial cleric Qaradawi contracts coronavirus](#)

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Sat, 2021-04-17 20:50

LONDON: Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, an Egyptian cleric based in Qatar and infamous for his [controversial religious edicts](#), has contracted COVID-19.

"Sheikh Al-Qaradawi has been infected with the coronavirus and he is in good condition, praise be to God. He is receiving health care, reassures his followers, and asks you to pray for his recovery and good health," his official Twitter account stated.

تبين إصابة سماحة الشيخ القرضاوي بفيروس (كورونا)، وهو بحالة جيدة
والحمد لله، ويتلقى الرعاية الصحية، وهو يطمئن محبيه، ويسألكم
الدعاء له بالشفاء والعافية.

– يوسف القرضاوي (@alqaradawy) [April 17, 2021](#)

The news was also reported by Turkish state-run news agency Anadolu. His son Abdul-Rahman Yusuf Al-Qaradawi confirmed that the cleric had coronavirus on Twitter and said his father had been vaccinated against the virus previously. He also requested prayers for his father. Al-Qaradawi is 94 years old and is the spiritual leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, head of the European council for Fatwa and Research and co-founder of IslamOnline.net.



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Google bans app that features introduction from Muslim Brotherhood's Al-Qaradawi
Tech giants must probe Qatar hate preacher, analysts say

[Russia calls for deeper military ties with Libya](#)

Author:

Sat, 2021-04-17 01:01

MOSCOW: Russia has welcomed the prospect of renewed military cooperation with war-shattered Libya as Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu hosted Prime Minister Abdul Hamid Dbeibah.

Libya has been gripped by chaos for almost a decade, since its leader Muammar Qaddafi was brought down and killed in a 2011 uprising.

In February, Libya embarked on a new phase of its post-Qaddafi transition after interim leaders were selected to lead the country until December elections.

"I consider your Moscow visit to be the first step towards resuming full-scale cooperation between the defense ministries of the two countries,"

Shoigu told the Libyan prime minister in remarks released by his ministry. Shoigu said he hoped that “the Russia-friendly Libyan people would overcome the years-long crisis which has broken out as a result of crude outside interference.”

Dbeibah and Mohammed Younes Menfi, chairman of Libya’s Presidential Council, face the task of trying to reunify the institutions of a state undermined by divisions between the UN-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli and a rival administration backed by military leader Khalifa Haftar in the east.

Moscow has backed Haftar against the GNA in the conflict and has been accused of sending mercenaries of the Wagner Group private military company to join the fight.

Russia said in February it is prepared for “constructive” work with Libya’s interim leaders.

Dbeibah for his part said Libya needed Moscow’s support and expressed gratitude for President Vladimir Putin’s backing.

FASTFACT

Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said he hoped that ‘the Russia-friendly Libyan people would overcome the years-long crisis which has broken out as a result of crude outside interference.’

“We would like to give new momentum to our cooperation and build new bridges between our countries,” he said in remarks translated into Russian.

Dbeibah said authorities hoped that Libya would see a “new economic climate,” with Russia playing a key role and providing “economic support,” the Russian Defense Ministry said.

On Thursday, Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin hosted Dbeibah for talks on cooperation in energy and other spheres.

The talks took place as diplomats said the UN Security Council unanimously adopted a resolution endorsing the progress that Libya’s warring sides have made towards peace since signing a ceasefire in October.

The opposing sides in Libya had asked for a UN resolution documenting their progress on political and security issues once they came to the ceasefire agreement last fall.

Libya has been ravaged by bloodshed since the fall and killing of Qaddafi. An array of armed groups arose to fill the vacuum, and many coalesced around the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord or around strongman Khalifa Haftar, who backed an eastern administration.

The two camps fought for more than a year before Haftar was forced to retreat.

In October they signed a truce, setting in motion a UN-led process that saw a new transitional government installed in February.

The resolution that was passed in New York Friday calls for the creation of a ceasefire surveillance unit of up to 60 members within the UN mission in Libya, called UNSMIL.

This is separate from a ceasefire monitoring mechanism that the warring parties themselves are working to create.

The UN unit will help the local one oversee the ceasefire. But the resolution says nothing about who will oversee the departure of the 20,000 foreign fighters and mercenaries who have joined the fray in Libya. A recently released report by UN experts accused some foreign governments of turning the country into a stage to play out rivalries and ignoring UN sanctions and a decade-long UN arms embargo, which it said has remained “totally ineffective.” The resolution “strongly urges all member states to respect and support the full implementation of the ceasefire agreement, including through the withdrawal of all foreign forces and mercenaries from Libya without delay.” It would also demand full compliance with an arms embargo on Libya.



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US imposes sanctions on Moscow, expels 10 Russian diplomatsEgypt continues to push for political solution in Libya

[Sudan denies that delegation will visit Israel](#)

Author:

Sat, 2021-04-17 00:55

KHARTOUM: Sudan has denied reports that it would send its a first delegation to Israel months after a deal for ties between the two countries, and two Sudanese sources said Khartoum had scrapped a planned visit. Sources had previously told Reuters that a Sudanese delegation comprising security and intelligence officials would travel to Israel next week. Sudan agreed to take steps toward normal ties with Israel last year in a deal brokered by then US President Donald Trump's administration. This month, Sudan's Cabinet voted to repeal a 1958 law to boycott Israel. The issue is divisive in Sudan, which is going through a delicate political transition following the overthrow of former leader Omar Bashir in 2019. Two official Sudanese sources told Reuters that an invitation to visit Israel had been accepted, but that plans had later changed. They gave no explanation for the change. Sudan's general intelligence service said "news circulating on some media and social media about the visit of a security delegation to Sudan was not true," state news agency SUNA reported. Sudan's security and defense council also denied the news. The deal for Sudan to normalize ties with Israel was struck alongside normalization deals with the UAE, Bahrain and Morocco, and came as the US agreed to remove Sudan from its list of state sponsors of terrorism. Sudan's military is seen to have led the move, but civilian groups with which it is sharing power are more reluctant and say the deal must be approved by a yet-to-be formed transitional parliament. Cyprus, meanwhile, hosted a meeting of top diplomats from Israel and the UAE, as well as Greece, for talks they said reflected the "changing face" of the Middle East. "This new strategic membership stretches from the shores of the Arabian Gulf" to the Mediterranean and Europe, Israeli Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi told a news conference in the coastal resort city of Paphos. Standing alongside Anwar Gargash, adviser to UAE President Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed, he said their encounter was a sign of "the changing face of the Middle East." He called for a "strategic partnership in energy between the Eastern Med and the Gulf." Gargash said ties with the Jewish state amounted to an "alternative strategic view" aimed at bolstering regional security, adding that the Paphos talks covered economic and political cooperation, as well as "using technology to fight COVID-19." The Cypriot and Greek foreign ministers, unmasked before a backdrop of the Mediterranean, both stressed the new regional grouping was open to all parties. "The path is open for all countries of the region to join us," said host Nikos Christodoulides, without a direct mention of Turkey, whose troops occupy the northern third of Cyprus and which is in dispute with Nicosia and Athens over gas deposits in the eastern Mediterranean. Greek Foreign Minister Nikos Dendias, who has visited both Turkey and Libya over the past week, stressed calls for "the withdrawal of all foreign forces" from the North African country, where Turkish troops are posted. On Iran and its controversial nuclear program, Ashkenazi reiterated that Israel would "do whatever it takes to prevent this radical and anti-Semitic regime from acquiring nuclear weapons."



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River, road and rail: Egypt, Sudan move forward with joint projects