

IAEA found uranium traces at two sites Iran barred it from: Sources

Author:

Reuters

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VIENNA/PARIS: The UN nuclear watchdog found uranium particles at two Iranian sites it inspected after months of stonewalling, diplomats say, and it is preparing to rebuke Tehran for failing to explain, possibly complicating US efforts to revive nuclear diplomacy.

The find and Iran's response risk hurting efforts by the new US administration to restore Iran's 2015 nuclear deal, which President Joe Biden's predecessor Donald Trump abandoned.

Although the sites where the material was found are believed to have been inactive for nearly two decades, opponents of the nuclear deal, such as Israel, say evidence of undeclared nuclear activities shows that Iran has not been acting in good faith.

Iran's ambassador to the International Atomic Energy Agency, Kazem Gharibabadi, declined to comment, as did the IAEA itself.

A senior Iranian official said: "We have nothing to hide. That is why we allowed the inspectors to visit those sites."

Iran has set a deadline of next week for Biden to lift sanctions reimposed by Trump, or it will halt snap IAEA inspections under the deal, which lifted sanctions in return for curbs on Iran's nuclear program. Next week is also when the IAEA is expected to issue a quarterly report on Iran's nuclear activities.

Seven diplomats told Reuters the agency will use that opportunity to rebuke Iran for failing to explain to its satisfaction how the uranium particles wound up at two undeclared sites. The rebuke could come either in the quarterly report or in an additional report released the same day.

US intelligence agencies and the IAEA believe Iran had a secret, coordinated nuclear weapons program that it halted in 2003, which Iran denies. The 2015 nuclear deal effectively drew a line under that past, but Iran is still required to explain evidence of undeclared past activities or material to the IAEA.

The material was found during snap IAEA inspections that were carried out at the two sites in August and September of last year, after Iran barred access for seven months.

The Wall Street Journal reported earlier this month that radioactive material was found in the samples taken by inspectors at the two sites, although the newspaper did not specify what the material was.

Four diplomats who follow the agency's work closely told Reuters the material found in those samples was uranium.

Identifying the material as uranium creates a burden on Iran to explain it, as enriched uranium can be used in the core of a nuclear weapon. Iran is obliged to account for all uranium so the IAEA can verify it is not diverting

any to a weapons program.

Two of the sources said the uranium found last year was not enriched. But nevertheless, its presence suggests undisclosed nuclear material or activities at the sites, which Iran would have had to declare.

The IAEA's full findings are a closely guarded secret within the agency and only a small number of countries have been informed of the specifics.

Five diplomats said that after the IAEA confronted Iran with the findings it gave unsatisfactory answers. Two of them said Iran told the agency the traces were the result of contamination by radioactive equipment moved there from another site, but the IAEA checked and the particles at the sites did not match.

One diplomat briefed on the exchanges but not the detailed findings said Iran had given "implausible answers," describing Iran's response as "typical delaying tactics."

The agency has said it suspects one of the sites hosted uranium conversion work, a step in processing the material before enrichment, and the other was used for explosive testing.

The seven diplomats said they expect the agency to call Iran out for having failed to explain the traces found at the two sites, as well as over its continued failure to explain material found previously at another site in Tehran, Turqzabad.

Diplomats said it remained unclear whether the IAEA's 35-nation Board of Governors, which meets the week after the quarterly report, would take action condemning Iran. Several said the focus was on efforts to salvage the 2015 deal by bringing Washington back into it.

"Everyone is waiting on the Americans," one diplomat said.



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Biden: US must address Iran's 'destabilizing activities' EU aims for meeting on Iran nuclear deal with US, official says

[Biden: US must address Iran's 'destabilizing activities'](#)

Fri, 2021-02-19 19:47

JEDDAH: President Joe Biden said on Friday it is imperative that the US works with other global powers to curb Iran's "destabilizing activities."

Addressing the Munich Security Conference, he also said his administration is "prepared to re-engage in negotiations" with the UN Security Council on Tehran's nuclear program.

"We must address Iran's destabilizing activities across the Middle East," Biden said. "We will work with our European, and other, partners as we proceed."

Earlier, his administration said it was ready to engage in talks with Iran and world powers to discuss a return to the 2015 nuclear deal, more formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. Former President Donald Trump withdrew the US from the deal in 2018.

Hamdan Al-Shehri, a Saudi political analyst and international relations scholar, told Arab News that it appears there is a tacit agreement between the US and Iran about the nuclear issue.

"In fact, what we see today is that the US administration is lenient and is giving no weight to its allies in the region," he said.

Al-Shehri added that the current US administration is repeating the same mistakes made by the Obama administration, and warned that this would create a trust deficit between the US and its regional allies.

"It will also lead to a nuclear arms race in the region, as no country would accept seeing Iran having a nuclear weapon while that country does not," he said. "Saudi Arabia, for instance, has made it clear that if Iran developed a nuclear bomb, it would follow suit the next day."

Al-Shehri also criticized the decision to lift a ban on many Iranian

diplomats entering the US, which was imposed by the Trump administration, and the removal of the Houthi militias from Washington's list of terrorist organizations.

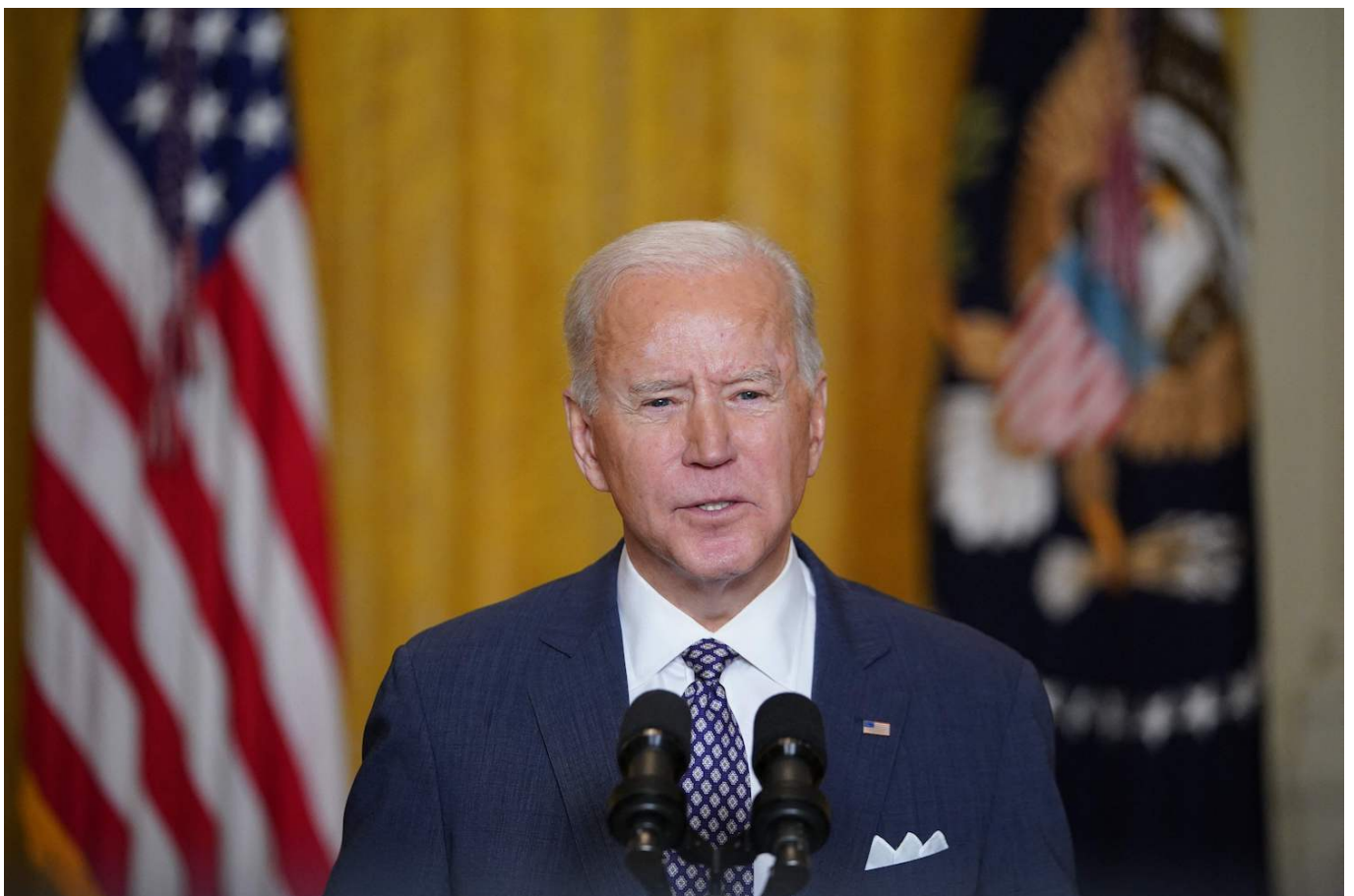
Meanwhile, inspectors from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the UN's nuclear watchdog, found uranium particles at two sites in Iran that they were able to inspect after months of stonewalling, diplomats said.

Although the sites where the particles were found are believed to have been inactive for nearly two decades, opponents of the nuclear deal, including Israel, say it is evidence of undeclared nuclear activity and shows that Iran has not been acting in good faith.

Next week, the IAEA is expected to issue a quarterly report on Iran's nuclear activities. Seven diplomats told Reuters the agency will use that opportunity to rebuke Iran for failing to explain to its satisfaction how the uranium particles came to be at the two undeclared sites. The rebuke, which could come either in the quarterly report or a separate document issued the same day, might complicate US efforts to revive its nuclear diplomacy with Tehran.

UK authorities said that Iran must return to full compliance with the 2015 nuclear deal and that the West must not give the impression that it is prepared to ignore Tehran's breaches of the accord.

"I don't think that we should be sending a signal that we are going to overlook this noncompliance or just brush it under the carpet," James Cleverly, Britain's junior foreign minister with responsibility for the Middle East and North Africa, told the BBC.



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EU aims for meeting on Iran nuclear deal with US, official says
Watchdog slams Iran's suppression of journalists

[Jordan says troops kill 2 drug smugglers near Syria border](#)

Author:

Associated Press

ID:

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Fri, 2021-02-19 15:10

AMMAN: Jordanian troops clashed with drug smugglers on the border with Syria on Friday, killing two people and seizing a shipment of hashish and amphetamines, the military said.

The military said it thwarted two attempts to "infiltrate a group of people and smuggle quantities of drugs" into Jordan. The statement said "rules of engagement were applied, which resulted in the killing of two people and the arrest of a third." It said the others fled back into Syria following the incident.

The amphetamines were labeled captagon, the street name for a drug whose chemical base is fenethylamine.

Jordan is a close Western ally and has long been seen as an island of stability in a turbulent region. The kingdom hosts more than 650,000 Syrian refugees.



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Tears, relief, and gratitude as Jordan vaccinates Syrian refugees
Jordan reports high adherence to COVID-19 protocols in schools as students return

[Israel returns 2 shepherds to Syria amid reports of swap](#)

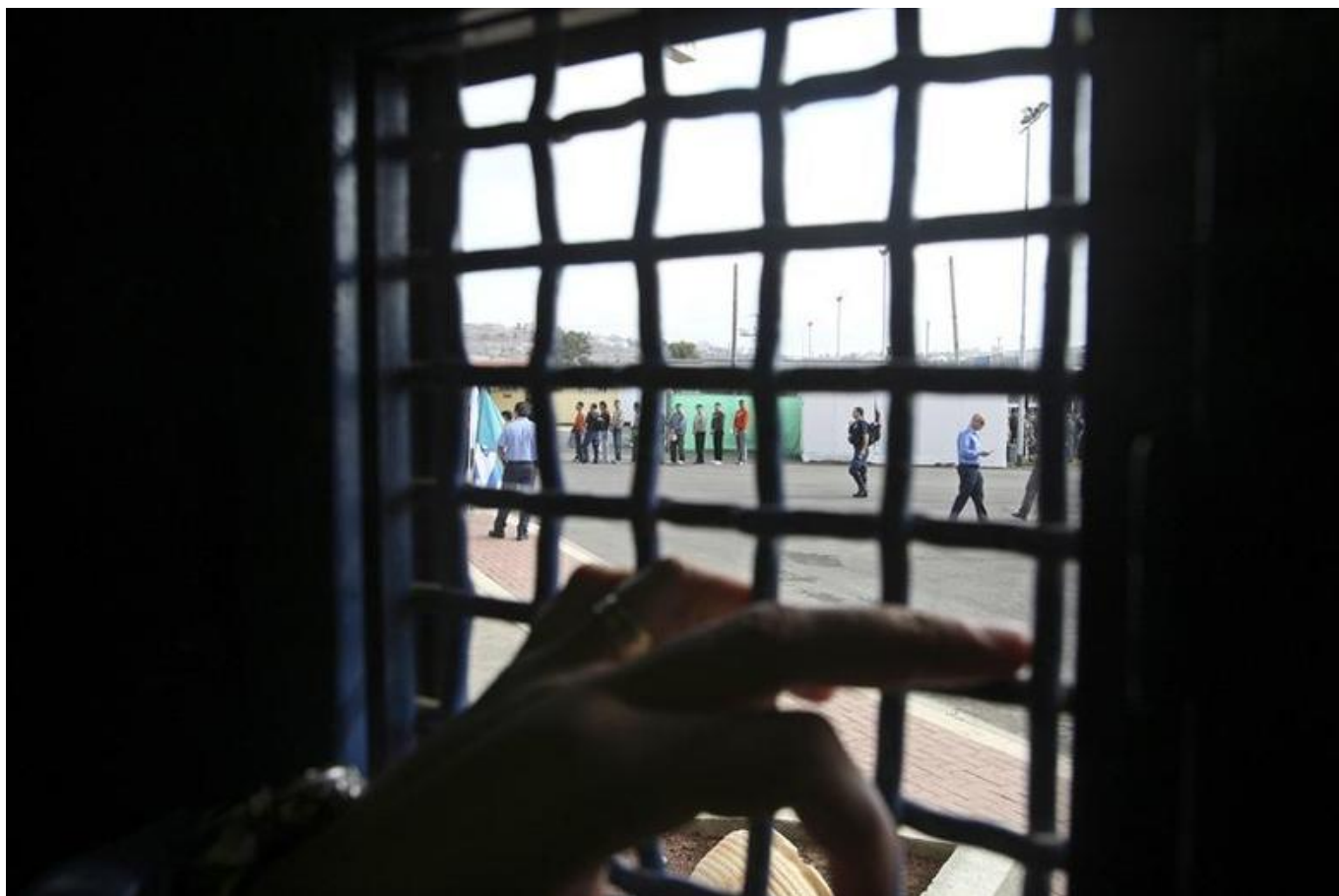
Author:

Thu, 2021-02-18 23:22

JERUSALEM: The Israeli army on Thursday said it has returned two shepherds who crossed into Israeli territory back to Syria, a development that an Israeli official said was part of a prisoner swap that Syria had reported the previous day.

Syria's official news agency SANA said Wednesday that with the help of Russian mediation, Syria has negotiated the release of two Syrians held by Israel in exchange for an Israeli woman who had entered Syria by mistake. It made no mention of the two shepherds in that report.

Israeli media reported that a business jet took off from Tel Aviv for Moscow on Thursday night amid expectations that an Israeli woman held by the Syrian regime would soon be transferred to Israel, by way of Russia. The reports said an Israeli government coordinator was on the plane and would bring the young woman back with him as part of the swap. She has not been identified by name, and Israeli media only reported that she is a 25-year-old originally from the ultra-Orthodox settlement of Modiin Ilit. The two Syrians were identified as Nihal Al-Makt, who had been under house arrest in her village in the Israeli-annexed Golan Heights, and Ziyab Qahmouz, detained in 2016 and serving 14 years in Israeli jails. Al-Makt, SANA said, was serving a three-year suspended sentence in addition to reporting daily for a year to Israeli authorities. She said those restrictions were lifted on Wednesday and speaking to Syrian Al-Ikhbariya TV through Skype, she said she was now free. Qahmouz reportedly refused to leave Israeli custody as he wanted to go back to his village in the Golan and not be deported to Syria. According to the Israeli side, Al-Makt also refused to be deported to Syria. The report did not say what charges the two Syrians had faced. Israel captured the Golan in the 1967 Mideast war and annexed the territory in 1981, a move that is not widely recognized internationally. The Israeli army said the two shepherds, whom it did not identify, had been apprehended in the Golan Heights in recent weeks after crossing in from Syria and that their release was ordered by the government. An Israeli official, speaking on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to discuss the matter with the media, said the release of the shepherds was part of the deal with Syria. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's office declined comment. Syria's SANA later said that two more Syrians – likely the two shepherds – returned home to their villages in Quneitra province in Syria on Thursday, in continuation of the mediated swap that began a day earlier. They were identified as Mohamad Hussein and Tareq Al-Obeidan.



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[Algeria dissolves lower house of parliament, calls early legislative elections](#)

Author:

Thu, 2021-02-18 22:18

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