

Are Yemen's Iran-backed Houthis firing warning shots across Biden administration's bows?

Wed, 2021-01-27 01:59

LONDON: Was the object sighted high above Riyadh on Tuesday a stray projectile with no evident target or a warning shot across the bows of the Biden administration? That was the question uppermost in the minds of defense experts and political analysts, just three days after a “hostile air target” – assumed to be a ballistic missile – heading towards the Saudi capital was intercepted and destroyed.

Social media was abuzz on Tuesday with footage of smoke hanging over Riyadh, with residents describing how the windows of their homes were rattled by the impact of at least one explosion. By late evening, Yemen's Iran-backed Houthis had not bragged about a direct hit on the city of 7.68 million people. The militia's behavior ran true to form: it had denied involvement in Saturday's failed attack.

But the fact of the matter is, these could be the first significant attacks targeting a major Saudi city since the US State Department designated the Houthis as a “Foreign Terrorist Organization” on Jan. 19 – one of the final acts of the Donald Trump administration in its “maximum pressure” campaign against Iran and its proxies.



A flurry of attacks on US allies could be attempts by Iran to test President Biden's resolve or, with luck, even kickstart dialogue. (AFP)

Without naming the Houthis explicitly, the Biden administration issued a statement after Saturday's incident, condemning the undeniable targeting of civilians. "Such attacks contravene international law and undermine all efforts to promote peace and stability," the State Department said.

To many political observers, the new Houthi approach is a complete no-brainer: Threatened with sanctions and political isolation, and desperate for potential concessions from Washington, the militia is trying to have its cake and eat it too by launching attacks on Riyadh and not claiming responsibility for them.

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"There is no doubt that after evaluating the international response and noticing that a claim of responsibility would be counterproductive – especially after being classified by the State Department as "terrorists" –

the Houthis tried to deny they were behind Saturday's attack," Hamdan Al-Shehri, a political analyst and international relations scholar, told Arab News.

"However, everyone knows that the Houthis, backed by Iran, are the ones who carry out such terrorist acts and use ballistic missiles and drones. They also tried to get on the new US administration's good side by denying what happened in the Kingdom. But everyone knows who is responsible for these actions."



Riyadh, which is roughly 850 km from the Yemeni border, was first attacked by the Houthis on Nov. 4, 2017. (Shutterstock)

According to experts, the Houthis have a strategy of swinging between bragging about targeting civilians and maintaining plausible deniability. In other words, they pick and choose whichever attitude suits their objectives, and those of its Iranian patrons, at any given time.

Put bluntly, the brazen strikes targeting Saudi Arabia's capital may not be routine tactical operations in a low-intensity conflict but rather reflective of a larger strategic decision by Iran to put President Joe Biden's foreign-policy team on notice.

The Trump administration withdrew the US from the Obama-era nuclear accord with Iran in May 2018 and reimposed a slew of economic sanctions on the regime in Tehran. The strategy was matched by a zero-tolerance approach to Iranian influence in Yemen, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Palestine.

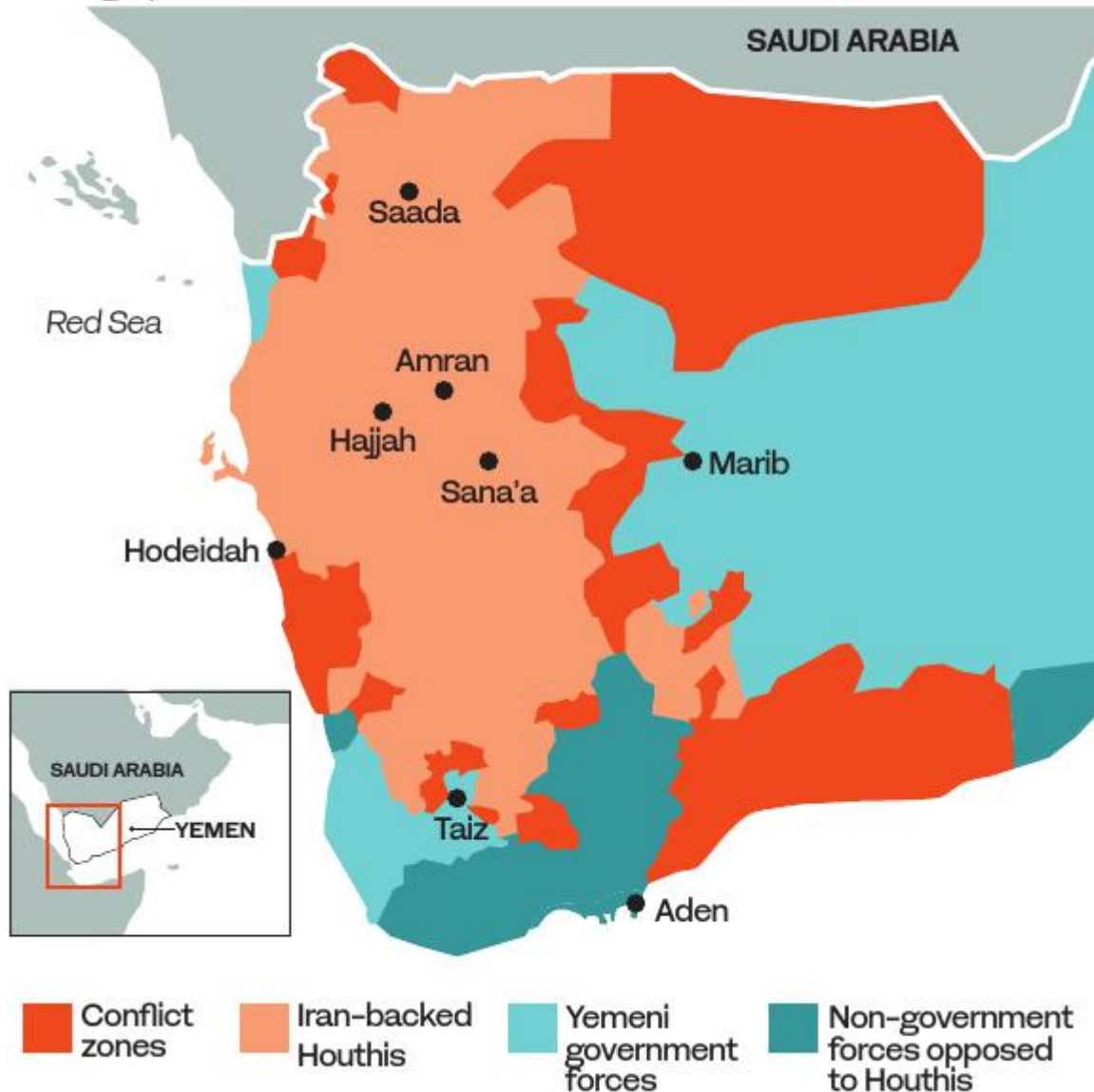
Against this backdrop, a flurry of attacks on Washington's regional allies and partners could very well be attempts by Tehran to test President Biden's resolve or, with luck, even kickstart dialogue.

"There is no doubt that Iran wants to test the new administration to know how serious it is regarding the Yemeni issue and the Iranian nuclear issue, and

it wants to negotiate with more than one card,” Al-Shehri told Arab News.

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Control over large swathes of Yemen gives the militia a strategic vantage point



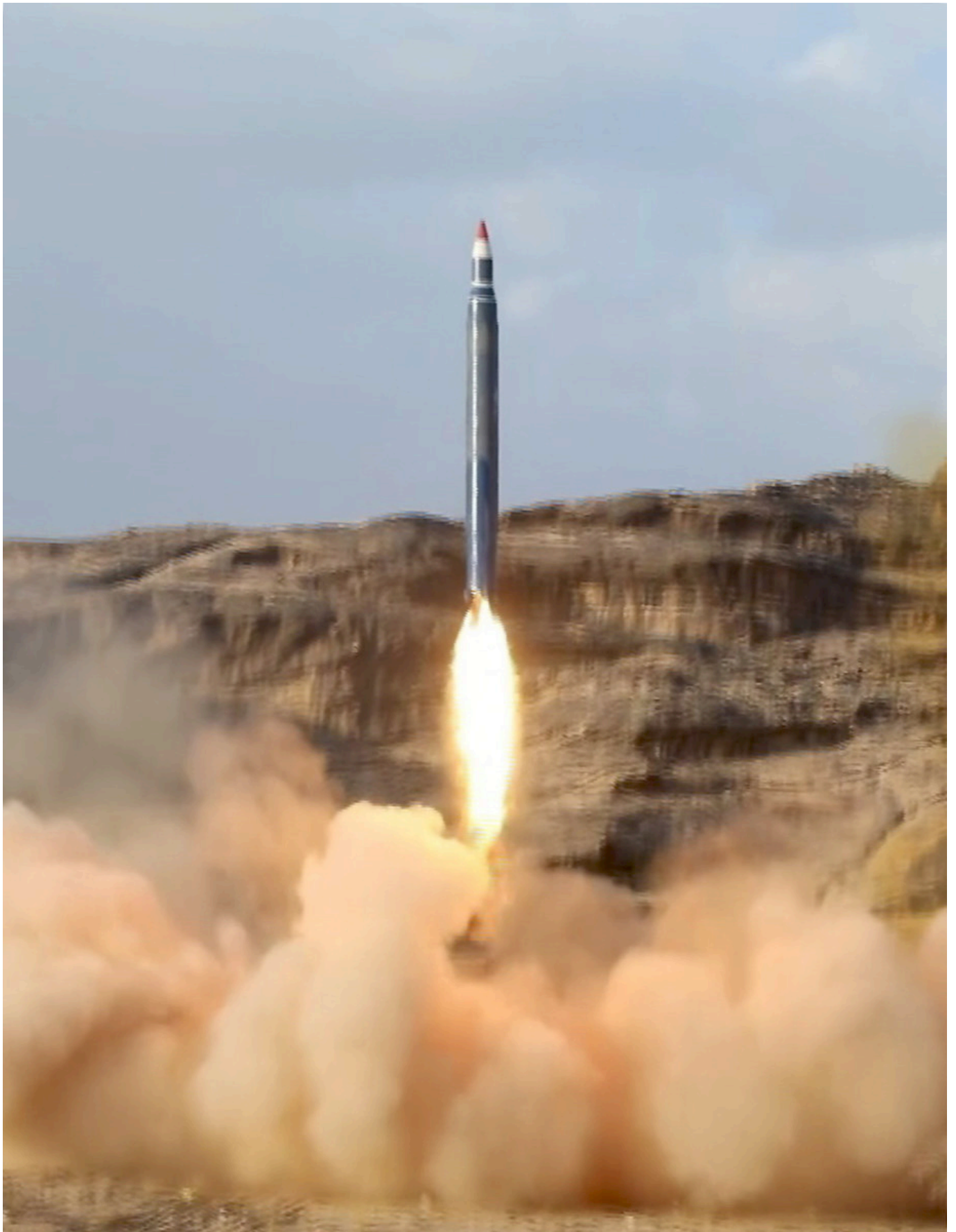
SOURCE: SANA'A CENTRE FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES, BBC

ARAB NEWS

“It is as though to say: ‘If you are willing to reduce the pressure on the nuclear issue, we will reduce the pressure on targeting Riyadh.’ This is nothing but cheap and shameless political blackmail, and the world knows it.”

“Cheap and shameless” is also one way to describe the Houthis’ penchant for targeting civilian population centers, often hundreds of miles inside Saudi territory.

March 26, 2018, saw one of the biggest Houthi barrages, with Iranian-supplied ballistic missiles raining down on civilian areas in four Saudi cities. Three of them targeted Riyadh, while two were aimed at Jazan and the others at Khamis Mushayt and Najran.



Civilians have been in the Houthis' crosshairs since the very beginning of their takeover of Sana'a. (AFP/File)

Although Saudi air defenses intercepted all seven missiles, an Egyptian civilian was killed by falling debris and two others were injured. All of the attacks appear to have deliberately targeted populated areas.

“Launching indiscriminate attacks is prohibited by international humanitarian law,” Amnesty International’s Samah Hadid said at the time.

“A high death toll may have been averted, possibly due to the missiles being intercepted, but that doesn’t let the Houthi armed group off the hook for this reckless and unlawful act. These missiles cannot be precisely targeted at such distances, so their use in this manner unlawfully endangers civilians.”

Riyadh, which is roughly 850 km from the Yemeni border, was first attacked by the Houthis on Nov. 4, 2017, when an unguided ballistic missile targeted King Khalid International Airport – about 35 km northeast of the capital.

Although the missile was intercepted in flight, fragments fell inside the airport area. No one was hurt, but the result could have been catastrophic.

Opinion

This section contains relevant reference points, placed in (Opinion field)

“An attack with an unguided ballistic missile such as the Burkan H2 from this range is indiscriminate since these weapons are not capable of the necessary accuracy to target military objectives,” Human Rights Watch said at the time.

“When deliberately or indiscriminately directed toward populated areas or civilian objects, such attacks violate the laws of war, and may amount to war crimes.”

A year earlier, in Oct. 2016, a missile, thought to have been a Burkan 1, was intercepted by Saudi air defenses just 65 km south of Makkah. The Houthis claimed at the time their intended target was Jeddah’s King Abdulaziz International Airport.

Civilians have been in the Houthis’ crosshairs since the very beginning of their takeover of Sana’a. In May 2015 there were repeated indiscriminate attacks with short-range rockets from northern Yemen into populated areas of southern Saudi Arabia, which left several civilians dead.



The Houthis are trying to have their cake and eat it too by launching attacks on Riyadh and not claiming responsibility for them. (Reuters/File)

Fighting in Yemen escalated in 2015 when the Houthis overthrew the UN-recognized government of President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi. An Arab coalition, backed by the US, Britain and France, launched a military campaign to restore the legitimate government to power.

Since then, repeated attempts to reach a peace settlement have foundered, with the militia's representatives failing to attend UN-brokered talks in Geneva in Sept. 2018 and its combatants willfully ignoring the terms of the Stockholm and Riyadh agreements.

An April 2020 ceasefire announced by the coalition at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic quickly fell apart when the Houthis resumed cross-border drone and missile strikes targeting Saudi Arabia.

The conflict, now in its sixth year, has left 112,000 dead and 24 million in dire need of humanitarian assistance.

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Yemen steps up diplomatic drive for Houthi terrorist designation
Ending Houthi sanctions raises Iran terror threat, critics warn

[Yemen steps up diplomatic drive for Houthi terrorist designation](#)

Author:

Wed, 2021-01-27 00:43

AL-MUKALLA: The Yemeni government and its envoys abroad have cranked up a diplomatic campaign to convince the world to designate the Houthi militia movement a terrorist organization, stressing that doing so would put an end to Houthi attacks inside and outside Yemen, and smooth the way for peace.

The official news agency SABA reported on Monday that Prime Minister Maen Abdulmalik Saeed said during a video conference with the EU ambassadors to Yemen that the EU should follow the example of the US by designating the Houthis terrorists, since it would end the Houthis' objections to peace plans, and hinder Iran. He repeated his government's pledges to work on

mitigating the effects of the designation on humanitarian activities in Houthi-controlled areas.

Similarly, the country's Foreign Minister Ahmed Awad bin Mubarak urged Mauritania and other countries to label the Houthis a terrorist organization, noting that the US designation came in the context of increasing pressure by the international community on the rebels to accept peace initiatives, and to stop fueling violence in Yemen and the region, abandoning Iran's "destructive" projects.

During a phone call with the Mauritanian foreign minister and the former UN Yemen envoy, Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed, Bin Mubarak called upon Mauritania and other "brotherly" countries to place sanctions on the Houthis to curb their abuses against Yemen.

Yemen's Shoura Council urged the international community to follow the US move, saying that the designation would restrain the Houthis and lead to peace and stability in the country.

The Shoura Council Presidency stressed "the importance, fairness and accuracy of the US administration's decision to classify the Houthi militia as a terrorist group."

Yemen's ambassadors have also sought to convince their host countries to declare the Houthis a terrorist organization.

On social media, dozens of Yemeni activists, politicians and military figures, journalists and former prisoners have moved ahead with a campaign of highlighting Houthi crimes. "(The) Houthis and Daesh are two sides of the same coin," said Samera Al-Houri, a victim of abduction by the Houthis, sharing images of the captors who tortured her.

Yemen's government forces on Monday took charge of a strategic location in the port city of Aden, the country's interim capital, from the pro-independence Southern Transitional Council (STC), local media reports said.

For the first time in two years, Presidential Protection Forces (PPF) took control of a military location close to the historic Sira Fortress after the separatists' withdrawal, under the terms of the Riyadh Agreement.

During the handover ceremony that was attended by local military commanders and Saudi military officers in Aden, Brig. Fadhel Al-Darae, chief of staff of 1st Presidential Protection Brigade, urged Yemenis to unify military efforts towards defeating the Iran-backed Houthis. "We are all brothers and colleagues. Our guns must be pointed at one target and one enemy, which is the Houthis," Al-Darae said.



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Yemeni government and Houthis hold prisoner swap meeting

[Ending Houthi sanctions raises Iran terror threat, critics warn](#)

Author:

Tue, 2021-01-26 23:19

CHICAGO: The decision by US President Joe Biden to suspend some sanctions against the Houthi militia in Yemen has raised concerns about a possible escalation in Iran-backed terror attacks.

The US Treasury on Monday said that the sanctions – announced by former US secretary of state Mike Pompeo as one of the outgoing Trump administration's last acts – will be suspended for a month, pending a review by newly appointed Secretary of State Anthony Blinken.

The review is also expected to consider reversing the Houthi militia's designation as a terrorist organization.

However, Blinken did not issue a statement on the decision, which was leaked to some news media wire services, while all of Pompeo's public releases were removed from the State Department website and archived, removing them from public view.

According to some observers, Biden may be using the decision to encourage negotiations with Iran as his administration moves to restore the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) agreement that Trump terminated.

However, Jason Greenblatt, former Trump administration envoy to the Middle East, told Arab News that the suspension of Pompeo's sanctions will result in increased attacks against Gulf nations.

"These Iranian-funded terrorist murderers attack our friends and allies such as Saudi Arabia and cause tremendous suffering in Yemen," Greenblatt said, defending Pompeo's sanctions as "correct."

"This is similar to the situation in Gaza with Iran-funded Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad attacking Israel and also being the cause of tremendous suffering to Palestinians. It is a mistake for the Biden administration to not call the Houthis what they are – terrorists, pure and simple."

The call to suspend the sanctions was made by NGOs and aid agencies working in the war-torn country, which feared they would be targeted for providing assistance.

Designating the Houthis as a "foreign terrorist organization" hampers humanitarian work, they argued.

However, supporters of the designation argue that lifting sanctions will allow Iran to expand its base in the Gulf, resulting in more terrorist attacks similar to the repeated Houthi missile and drone strikes directed at Riyadh last week.

The announcement riled many Iranian dissidents who have been victimized by Iran's ruling mullahs. Dissident leaders said they were shocked by the suspension and urged Biden to maintain the terrorist designation.

"The undisputed fact is that the Houthis are a creation of the Islamic Republic. The mullahs have been offering ideological, military and terrorist training to them since the early 1990s," one leader, who asked not to be identified, said.

"Iran provides the Houthis with huge caches of weaponry, missiles, drones and other lethal arms that have prolonged that deadly and tragic conflict. As such, lending legitimacy to the Houthis will only undermine the stability of the Middle East region and embolden the Houthis to engage in further aggression, the primary victims of which are the people of Yemen."

Biden campaigned on the promise to rejoin the JCPOA and restore relations with Iran in exchange for Tehran's promise to eliminate its stockpile of medium-enriched uranium and cut its stockpile of low-enriched uranium, but

Trump and others accused Iran of secretly building its nuclear arsenal.

Greenblatt described the situation as a “battle of good versus evil,” adding: “We don’t help matters when we hide from the truth. We must stand with our friends and allies such as Saudi Arabia.”



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Houthi, Iranian influence will ‘reshape’ Yemeni society, warns UK ambassador
Yemeni government and Houthis hold prisoner swap meeting

[US return to Iran nuclear deal would be ‘wrong,’ says Israeli military leader](#)

Tue, 2021-01-26 22:52

LONDON: Lt. Gen. Aviv Kochavi, the Chief of Staff of the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) said on Tuesday that it would be a mistake for the US to return to the Iran nuclear deal.

He added that military action “must be on the table” as he explained his

position on the issue, which contrasts with that of new US President Joe Biden.

The agreement with Tehran, more formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), was signed in 2015 by the five permanent members of the UN Security Council – China, France, Russia, the UK and the US – plus Germany and the EU. President Donald Trump withdrew the US from the deal in 2018 and reimposed sanctions on Tehran, but Biden has pledged to return to the deal.

“If the 2015 nuclear deal had materialized, Iran would have gotten itself a bomb,” Kochavi said, adding that a US return to the agreement would be “a wrong thing” to do.

Speaking at the annual conference of Tel Aviv University’s Institute for National Security Studies – a leading Israeli think tank – Kochavi said the agreement would allow the Iranian regime to enrich uranium to levels sufficient for the development of a nuclear bomb.

“Strategically, it would presumably lead to the regional nuclearization of the Middle East,” he said. “For that reason, anything resembling the current agreement is bad and must not be permitted. The Iran of today is not the Iran of 2015. Today, Iran is under enormous pressure, economic pressures ... that must be maintained in every way, whatever happens.”

Opinion

This section contains relevant reference points, placed in (Opinion field)

Kochavi said that Iran’s advanced centrifuge activity and recent advances in uranium enrichment could mean that the regime is “only weeks” away from the production of a nuclear bomb. The the most stringent action possible must be taken to prevent Tehran from developing nuclear weapons, he added.

“In light of this fundamental analysis, I have instructed the IDF to draw up a number of operational plans, in addition to the existing plans, and we are working on them diligently and will develop them over the coming year,” Kochavi said.

He added that any decision to act on the IDF’s plans would be made by Israel’s political leadership and that “these plans must be on the table.”

New US Secretary of State Antony Blinken – whose appointment to the post was confirmed by the Senate on Tuesday – said last week it is “vitally important” that Washington consults with Israel and Gulf states about a potential return to the JCPOA.

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He told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that “whatever its limitations,” the 2015 nuclear deal has been relatively successful in preventing Iran from producing the necessary materials to create nuclear weapons.

“Kochavi’s timeline on which Iran can build nuclear weapons is, to put it mildly, doubtful,” Kyle Orton, an independent geopolitical analyst, told Arab News.

“His statement on the sanctions needing to be maintained because Iran is right on the cusp of serious concessions is simply untrue – the Iranian theocracy has retained all important functions under these sanctions.

“Despite all the Israeli strikes, Iran is entrenched in a way that cannot now be removed and Israel is reduced to striking at targets it has hit three and four and five times before.”

However, Orton said the IDF chief’s “messaging might well work politically in the US to hem in Biden when it comes to the JCPOA.”

He added: “If the US restarts negotiations with Tehran, they will probably only begin after the June (presidential) ‘election’ in Iran.”



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Moscow, Tehran call for 'rescue' of Iran nuclear deal
Antony Blinken: US must act urgently to stop Iran nuclear weapon

[Lebanese protesters break lockdown: 'Death by COVID-19 is better than starvation'](#)

Tue, 2021-01-26 21:01

BEIRUT: The closure and curfew period in Lebanon has been extended for two more weeks to contain the spread of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19), prompting people in Tripoli, Beirut, and Sidon to take to the streets.

The protests were spontaneous, considering that the neighborhoods from which they started are poor, where the residents work for daily wages.

The Minister of Social Affairs and Tourism in the caretaker government Ramzi Musharrafieh said on Tuesday that "230,000 families in Lebanon benefit from aid and have been receiving 400,000 Lebanese pounds (\$263) per month since the beginning of the crisis." He added that "25 percent of the Lebanese people do not need aid."

Hundreds of people took to the streets in Tripoli, Sidon, and Beirut to denounce the suspension of the economy and the failure to provide people with alternatives.

One of the protesters said: "Contracting COVID-19 and dying of it is easier than having my family and myself starve to death."

Protesters in Tripoli took to Al-Nour Square on Monday after days of expressing their impatience and protesting outside the houses of the city's officials.

One of the protesters said: "COVID-19 does not scare us. We cannot tolerate this life of humiliation anymore. The officials in power have starved and robbed us."

The protesters clashed with the security forces – the army and the Internal Security Forces – hurling stones and water bottles at them.

Their chants demanded financial compensation for the poorest families, who have not been able to work for two weeks and must wait a further two weeks before they can return to their jobs, resulting in a whole month without any financial income.

The protests spiralled out of control and turned into riots that ended with dozens of arrests. Several army personnel were deployed to control the situation in Al-Nour Square and its vicinity. Riot police used tear gas to disperse the protesters.

The Lebanese Red Cross said it brought in six ambulances as 41 people were injured during the protests. The organization transferred 12 people to hospitals, while 29 were treated at the scene.

In support of the Tripoli protests, dozens gathered at the Ring Bridge in central Beirut.

Activists gathered in Sidon's Elia Square for a vigil, amid security measures. The protesters chanted slogans denouncing the political authority's arbitrary decisions, which they argue worsened the economic collapse.

Some protesters said that 60 percent of the poor people in Lebanon are suffering because of these decisions, which were not accompanied with support for people who were laid off due to lockdown measures.

The protests extended to Taalbaya in the Bekaa and the coastal town of Jiyeh. The protesters moved from the poor neighborhoods of Beirut to Corniche el Mazraa and blocked the road, but the riot police reopened it.

Bechara Al-Asmar, head of the General Labor Union, told Arab News: "Things are heading toward chaos, and the authorities' decisions are ill-considered. When forcing people to stop working, it is important to give them incentives and compensation. There are 120,000 daily workers impacted by the closure, which has come amid a severe economic crisis."

He added: "They must exempt the factories that suspended production so that they can survive and not lay off their workers if the closure results in stopping operation.

"What can the factories that have agreements with clients abroad do to deliver their products? This is the only sector that is bringing Lebanon fresh money and giving people jobs."

Al-Asmar said that aid provided by the government "covers 47,000 families, and a further 8,000 taxi drivers have been added to them. This is a small percentage compared to the need among the general population."

He continued: "Employees are now receiving half a salary or a very meager salary if they don't lose their jobs as employers prefer shutting down their businesses to continuous losses."

Bechara added: "We are facing a major social crisis. The daily workers are complaining of their inability to put bread on the table, while the state is unable to hold coordination meetings, so how can it provide compensation for those affected?"



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Lebanon extends lockdown into February as virus numbers riseMonths-old baby tests positive for COVID-19 in Lebanon