

# Algerian president signs new constitution into law

Author:

AFP

ID:

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Fri, 2021-01-01 16:54

ALGIERS: Algeria's president Friday signed the country's new constitution into law, his office said, after the document was approved in a November referendum on record low turnout as its leader received treatment abroad for Covid-19.

President Abdelmadjid Tebboune, who returned to Algeria this week after two months in Germany, had promoted the new constitution as the "cornerstone of the new Algeria", as he sought to turn the page on the long-running Hirak mass protest movement.

But the document received the backing of less than 15 percent of the electorate, in a November vote overshadowed by the novel coronavirus pandemic and following Hirak calls for a boycott.

The Hirak first launched vast street demonstrations in early 2019 to oppose then-president Abdelaziz Bouteflika's bid for a fifth term in office.

Following his resignation that April, the Hirak kept up the pressure to demand a full overhaul of the ruling system in place since the North African country's 1962 independence from France.

The new constitution was pitched as responding to the demands of the Hirak, but keeps in place Algeria's presidential regime and expands the powers of the army, a central pillar of the state.

Tebboune, 75, on Thursday approved Algeria's 2021 budget and is hoping to launch a vaccination campaign against the novel coronavirus, using the Sputnik V jab produced by its Russian ally, as early as this month.



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Algeria president Tebboune returns from COVID-19 treatment in Germany  
Algerians impatient for change with president still out sick

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## [Iran tells IAEA it plans to enrich uranium up to 20% at Fordow site](#)

Fri, 2021-01-01 19:42

VIENNA: Iran has told the United Nations nuclear watchdog it plans to enrich uranium to 20 percent purity, a level it achieved before its 2015 accord, at its Fordow site buried inside a mountain, the agency said on Friday. The move is the latest of several recent announcements by Iran to the International Atomic Energy Agency that it plans to further breach the deal, which it started violating in 2019 in retaliation for Washington's withdrawal from the agreement and the reimposition of US sanctions against Tehran. This step was one of many mentioned in a law passed by Iran's parliament last month in response to the killing of the country's top nuclear scientist, which Tehran has blamed on Israel. Such moves by Iran could complicate efforts by US President-elect Joe Biden to rejoin the deal. "Iran has informed the Agency that in order to comply with a legal act

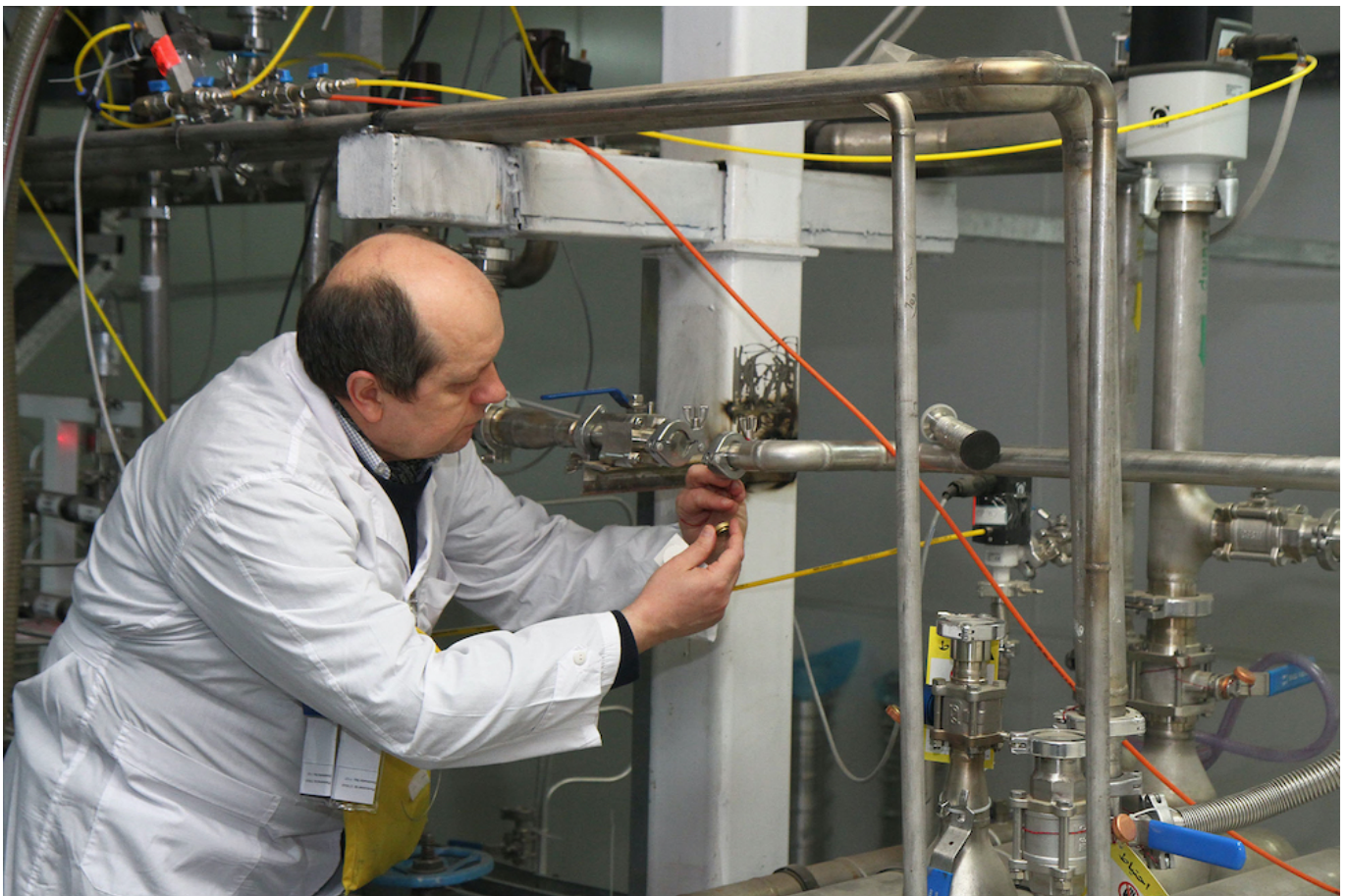
recently passed by the country's parliament, the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran intends to produce low-enriched uranium (LEU) up to 20 percent at the Fordow Fuel Enrichment Plant," the IAEA said in a statement.

An IAEA report to member states earlier on Friday obtained by Reuters used similar wording in describing a letter by Iran to the IAEA dated Dec. 31. "Iran's letter to the Agency ... did not say when this enrichment activity would take place," the IAEA statement said.

Fordow was built inside a mountain, apparently to protect it from aerial bombardment, and the 2015 deal does not allow enrichment there. Iran is already enriching at Fordow with first-generation IR-1 centrifuges. Iran has breached the deal's 3.67 percent limit on the purity to which it can enrich uranium, but it has only gone up to 4.5 percent so far, well short of the 20 percent it achieved before the deal and the 90 percent that is weapons-grade.

The deal's main aim was to extend the time Iran would need to produce enough fissile material for a nuclear bomb, if it chose to, to at least a year from roughly two to three months. It also lifted international sanctions against Tehran.

US intelligence agencies and the IAEA believe Iran had a secret, coordinated nuclear weapons program that it halted in 2003. Iran denies ever having had one.



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Iran staggers into 2021 with its many vulnerabilities exposed New agreement needed to revive Iran nuclear deal under Biden, IAEA chief says

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## [Iran staggers into 2021 with its many vulnerabilities exposed](#)

Thu, 2020-12-31 23:52

MISSOURI, US: Iran's woes during 2020 proved worse than most. The year began with shockwaves from the fuel price hike protests (which broke out in late November 2019) still reverberating all across the country. Then on Jan. 3, the US assassinated Qassem Soleimani, Iran's regional "shadow commander." On edge due to fear of another American or Israeli attack, Iranian air defense forces then mistakenly shot down a Ukraine-bound civilian airliner minutes shortly after it took off in Tehran, killing all 176 people on board.

Almost one year later, authorities in Tehran have still not managed to rectify the problems or vulnerabilities that emerged so starkly in January 2020. Key Iranian figures still look like easy targets for American or Israeli covert operations, as evidenced by the November 27 assassination of top nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh. Fakhrizadeh was in Tehran when an AI-controlled machine gun from another vehicle targeted his car.

Three months earlier the Israelis also killed a top Al-Qaeda commander, Abu Muhammad al-Masri, who had found refuge in Iran. Like Fakhrizadeh, Al-Masri was gunned down in broad daylight in the streets of Tehran. In this case, the assassins escaped on motorcycle. Most observers believe the Israelis conducted the assassination at America's behest.



Top nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh was assassinated in November. (AFP)

Al-Masri masterminded the 1998 attacks on US embassies in Africa, and his killing occurred on Aug. 7, which was the anniversary of the embassy attacks. As the Iranian economy remains belly-up from American-led sanctions, the same popular discontents that caused the late 2019 protests continue to simmer.

Iranian authorities' rush to intimidate and silence protestors led them in September to hang popular Iranian wrestler Navid Afkari. Afkari was only one of many executed by the regime in 2020 for what most viewed as political crimes.

Worldwide condemnations of Iran increased accordingly. At the UN, Canada brought forward a successful resolution in November condemning the human-rights record of the regime. Referring back to the protests at the end of 2019, Amnesty International completed research concluding that the Iranian state killed 304 people, including children, during the protests and arrested thousands more.



Iran either lacks the ability or fears the consequences of direct attacks on its more serious enemies. (AFP)

Iran responded to the UN resolution and other criticisms by claiming they have “no legal validity” and otherwise ignoring them. In response to the assassination of some of the regime’s most key figures, Tehran vowed serious retaliation – but shows little capacity for following through on such threats against America or Israel.

Iranian cat-and-mouse games with the US fleet in the Gulf in 2020 did nothing but raise tensions a bit, at the same time that the Americans seized a number of Iranian vessels transporting fuel to Venezuela in August. Last week, as Israel sent one of its submarines through the Suez Canal towards the Gulf, Iran again replied with only threats.

# Tough line on Iran favored by vulnerable countries

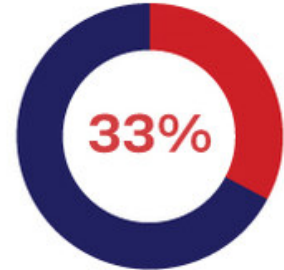
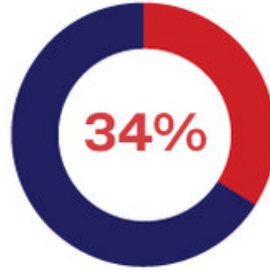
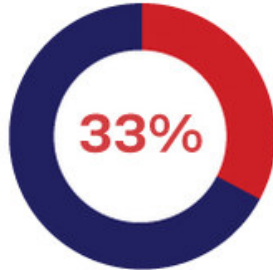
What should the next US president do about US relations with Iran?

Continue sanctions,  
lead war posture

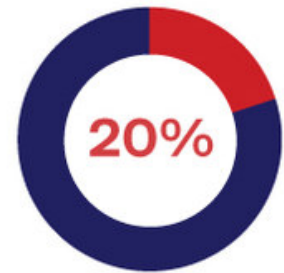
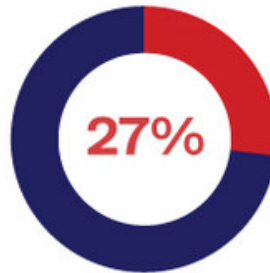
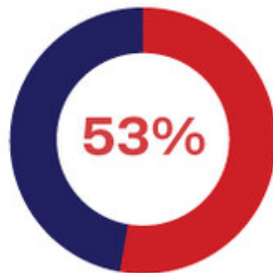
Revive nuclear  
agreement

Negotiate toughened  
nuclear agreement

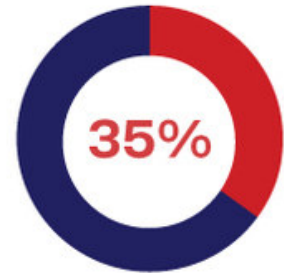
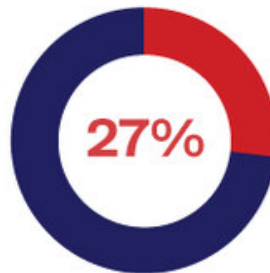
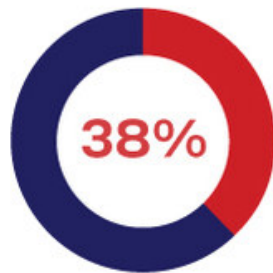
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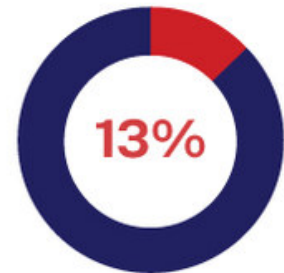
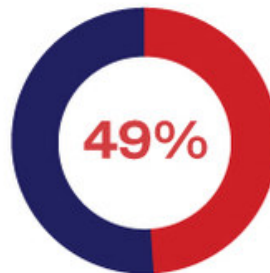
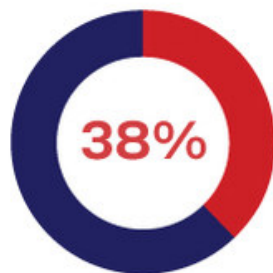
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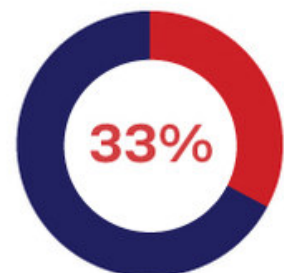
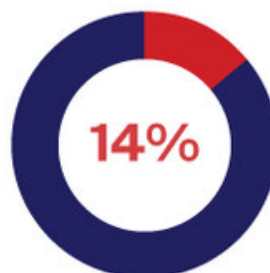
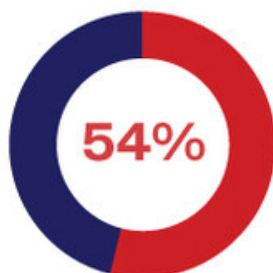
Lebanon



Syria



Yemen



Source: Arab News/YouGov Pan-Arab Survey, 2020

Throughout 2020 Israel continued to hit Iranian personnel in Syria with air strikes and missiles. All the while, Tehran seemed impotent to stop them. Under such circumstances Iran's 2020 launch of its first military satellite, the unveiling of new missiles, and holding annual war games only looked like so much bravado.

The September-November Nagorno-Karabakh war between Armenia and Azerbaijan added to Tehran's headaches during this period. Iran used to play an important role in the Caucasus region and even mediated past disputes between Armenia and Azerbaijan. They have since been eclipsed by Turkey and Russia, with no say in the latest war or its resolution.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan even visited his victorious allies in Baku in December and read a nationalist Azeri poem there which seemingly makes claims upon the Azeri region of northwest Iran. The reaction from Tehran was loud but otherwise toothless.



Since then COVID-19 has killed over 50,000 Iranians and infected some 1.1 million. (AFP)

On top of the economic and political problems, COVID-19 appears to have hit Iran harder than most. In Feb. 2020 – before anywhere else in the Middle East – Iran experienced its first wave of the virus. Since then COVID-19 has killed over 50,000 Iranians and infected some 1.1 million.

The virus led to economic shutdowns and closures that competed with US-led sanctions to see which could damage the country more. With a vaccine now coming out, Iranian authorities are accusing the US of blocking their access to vaccinations as well as to international loans to help combat it.

All these difficulties highlight a central, inescapable reality for 2020: The Iranian state saw itself significantly weakened and incapable of protecting, much less securing, its principal interests.



Although the regime in Tehran remains quite capable of kidnapping or killing Iranian dissidents abroad (such as a Paris-based dissident leader recently kidnapped from Iraq and a Balochi activist murdered in Canada last week), the same does not hold true for American and Israeli targets. Iran either lacks the ability or fears the consequences of direct attacks on its more serious enemies.

Even indirect responses have serious limitations. Iran's foes assassinated Soleimani after his supposed role in spurring on Iraqi Shiite militias to launch rockets on American bases in that country. Any dramatic Iranian move to avenge attacks on its people – even if carried out by an Iranian proxy rather than Tehran itself – thus appears too risky for a regime so outclassed by the Americans and the Israelis.



Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. (AFP)

Less dramatic Iranian stratagems, such as pressuring the Shiite-led government in Baghdad to evict American forces from Iraq, likewise seem limited in terms of what they can accomplish. Iraqis, including Shiite ones, have their own interests and problems, leading to them to continue working with Americans in Iraq.

If the incoming Biden administration in the US proves savvier than Obama and his advisers were regarding Iran, they will take this Iranian weakness into account. Although President-elect Biden has clearly expressed his desire to return to the nuclear accord's framework agreement with Iran, he may do so more carefully than his predecessors.

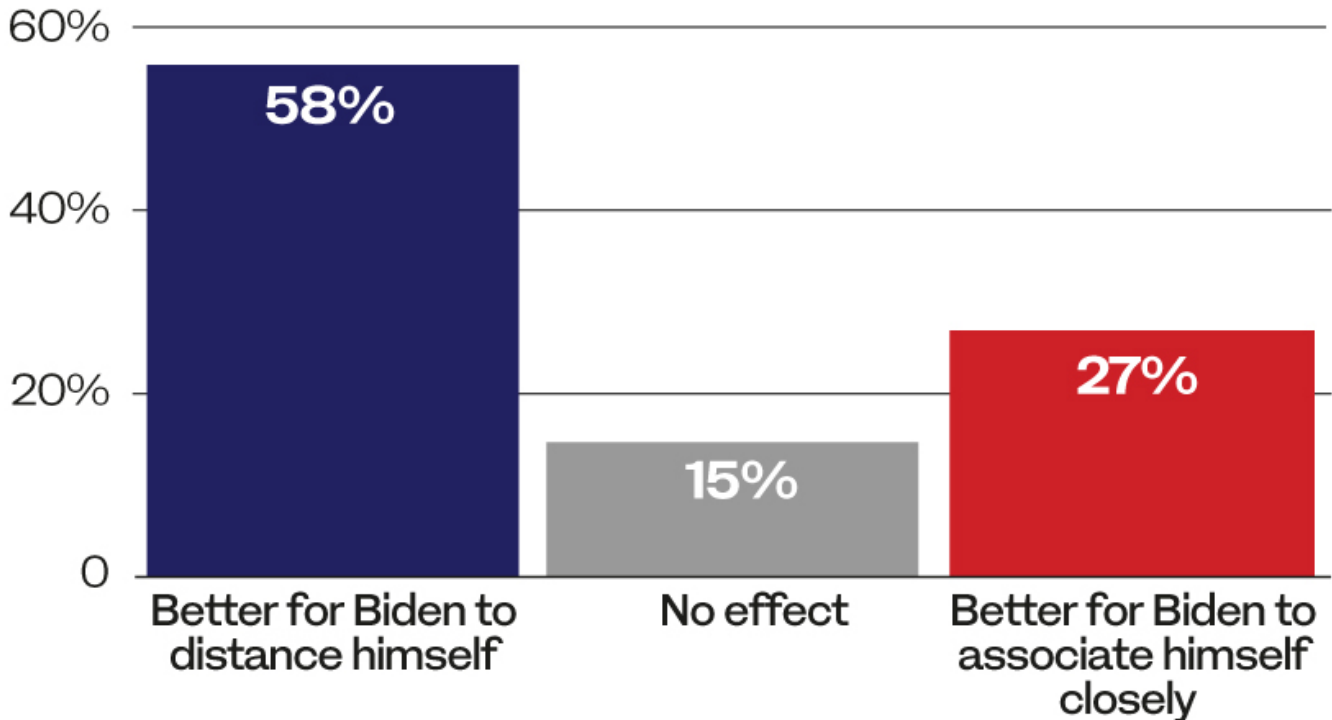
The Obama administration's mistake with Iran involved treating the regime there as if it were a deer that might get "spooked" away from negotiations. As a result, the Obama administration halted all kinds of US anti-Iran efforts unrelated to the negotiations. This included, for example, shutting down a major multi-year Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) investigation into

Lebanese Hezbollah's international money laundering.

The net effect of Obama and Secretary of State John Kerry's efforts to "encourage negotiations" was to empower Iran and give it carte blanche to do whatever it liked. A more sophisticated Biden administration policy would be to consider negotiating to resume the nuclear deal with Iran while truly keeping other unrelated matters separate.

## Why Biden should shed the Obama-era baggage

Should he associate closely or distance himself from the Obama administration?



Source: Arab News/YouGov Pan-Arab Survey, 2020

This would mean maintaining a good deal of US pressure as well as non-nuclear related sanctions on Iran. In effect, the Iranians would receive at the most a partial lifting of sanctions for abiding by the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (a.k.a. the "nuclear deal"). If the Iranians wanted relief from other sanctions, such as the ones applied for supporting terrorism, they would have to adjust their behavior accordingly.

In the final analysis, if the incoming Biden administration proves sufficiently savvy to take advantage of Iran's annus horribilis, they could thus conceivably contain both Iran's nuclear weapon ambitions and its more destabilizing policies in the region. Such a more nuanced approach would in turn reassure other Middle Eastern allies that Iran is not simply getting its Obama-issued carte blanche back.

• *David Romano is Thomas G. Strong Professor of Middle East Politics at Missouri State University*



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Iranian experts plotted attack on Aden airport: Yemeni PM UN denounces Iran's execution of child offender

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## [Many Lebanese, their hopes in tatters, say they fear what 2021 will bring](#)

Author:

Thu, 2020-12-31 23:34

BEIRUT: After a year of financial, political and social turmoil, few in Lebanon believe the crisis-racked country's situation will improve in the coming 12 months, while growing numbers fear their plight will worsen dramatically.

"Our country is broken," said Rima Al-Khatib, who works in the banking sector, describing a year in which her father died and the family was unable to pray for him in the mosque because of a nationwide lockdown at the time.

Al-Khatib told Arab News that she "is in a state of denial about everything that happened this year."

"I don't want to reflect on it because it is too painful," she said.

With university and health studies in recent weeks showing alarming levels of depression and anxiety in young and old alike, it is clear few people have any expectations, let alone dreams, for the new year.

One mental health survey concluded that up to 16 percent of people aged 18-24 suffer from severe depression, while 41 percent of women still suffer from post-traumatic stress in the wake of the Beirut port blast.

Meanwhile, lockdowns imposed to halt the spread of the coronavirus affected the mental health of 41 percent of the participants in another study, with a further survey claiming 9.5 percent of the population risk becoming depressed because of the country's dire economic situation.

Al-Khatib said that she will never forget the day of the port explosion.

"I was in my car on the road and a balcony fell from a building in front of me," she recalled. "I could not understand what happened. My friend narrowly escaped death and the explosion killed two of my work colleagues, leaving two children orphans."

Al-Khatib said that many Lebanese believe the country "has been taken hostage by a terrorist organization."

"Our salaries have lost their value. I no longer listen to the news and I do not want to after the government messed up everything by not paying the eurobonds. Now foodstuffs are priced according to the banks' dollar exchange rate. If the central bank runs out of dollars, what will our life be like?" she said.

"Lebanon has lost its place in the region and I don't know if it can regain it."

Majed Baitmouni, a market trader, said that the past year "pulled me back 40 years, financially and morally."

He said: "The government has brought us only calamities, and the coronavirus made things worse. I had to close my bag shop in Beirut because vendors want me to pay my rent in dollars, so I returned their goods and received the final blow. I have barely any money left and cannot do anything except sell vegetables and fruit in my local area. My wife and children helped me, but instead of making a profit, my debts increased."

Baitmouni said he no longer trusts the politicians. "They are threatening our livelihoods. They have destroyed us."

Abdullah Sultan, who owns an iron factory, said he believes the situation will worsen in the new year.

"My priority is for my children to leave this country. My grandmother used to tell us that things would get better soon. I do not want to say the same thing. The problem lies in the foundations of the country and the people – these cannot be changed," he said.

Assima Ramadan, an office worker, said that 2020 had left her isolated, and she feared the new year would be worse.

“My husband and I lost our life savings in the banks when their value collapsed. We hoped to live with dignity when we grow old, but now we will have to fear illness and the future. Because of the pandemic I have become afraid to walk outside. It is a feeling of helplessness and frustration, and I do not know how to get rid of it.”

University professor Aref Al-Abd said the past year had dealt Lebanon “a fatal blow,” adding: “What can I do to have a dignified life with my family?”

Economic and political deterioration will lead to a deterioration in security, he said.

“What is left of Lebanon? They hit banks, hospitals, universities, and there is fear they will strike coexistence. What happened in the port of Beirut is frightening.”

Sarah Fakhry, a young lawyer specializing in corporate law, said that she had supported protests against the “corrupt ruling authority” in the country.

“But things became even worse. The explosion at the Beirut port added to my fears. The state did not take responsibility for the victims.”

Now the companies that hire Fakhry, including large corporations, are facing closure.

“People are filing lawsuits against the banks, but they do not trust the judiciary,” she said. “I am one of those who has prepared their immigration papers again. I used to live in France and returned to Lebanon five years ago because life abroad is difficult. Now I will not look back.

“The future in Lebanon is dark, and I do not want to be part of it.”



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Lebanon set for muted NYE celebrations amid economic, health crises  
Lebanon lockdown possible if COVID-19 cases increase

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## [UN denounces Iran's execution of child offender](#)

Author:

Thu, 2020-12-31 19:34

LONDON: The United Nations Human Rights office has condemned Iran's execution of a child offender as "appalling," while questioning his access to fair judicial process throughout his trial.

Mohammad Hassan Rezaiee was executed early Thursday morning in Iran for an offence he allegedly committed when he was 16 years old.

Rezaiee, who spent 12 years behind bars before his execution was eventually carried out, is the fourth person Tehran has executed this year for crimes committed as a minor. The UN said 80 more child offenders remain on death row.

UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet "strongly condemns the killing of Mohammad Hassan Rezaiee," a statement from her office said.

"The UN has repeatedly urged Iran to cease the appalling practice of executing child offenders," it added.

Iran has long faced accusations from the UN and rights groups that detainees in Iran face torture, chronically unfair trials, and are regularly barred access to legal counsel and due process prior to sentencing, and Rezaiee's experience of the Iranian judicial system was said to be no different.

"There are deeply troubling allegations that forced confessions extracted through torture were used in the conviction of Mr. Rezaiee, and there are numerous other serious concerns about violations of his fair trial rights," the statement said.

Diana Eltahawy, Amnesty International's deputy director for the Middle East and North Africa, previously explained that Rezaiee was arrested in 2007 in connection with the fatal stabbing of a man in a fist fight, but that his trial was "grossly unfair."

She said: "Authorities held him in prolonged solitary confinement, without access to his family and lawyer. They repeatedly tortured him to 'confess,' including by beating him with sticks, kicking and punching him, and whipping him with pipe hoses."

The young man's execution, the UN said, "takes place in the context of a series of recent executions in Iran. Between 19 and 26 December, at least eight individuals were executed in different prisons across the country. Unconfirmed reports suggest that at least eight other individuals are at risk of imminent execution.

"The High Commissioner urges Iranian authorities to halt all executions of child offenders."



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