

# 2020: Not all doom and gloom despite Middle East's coronavirus woes

Wed, 2020-12-30 21:51

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## JANUARY

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### **Qassem Soleimani killed in US drone strike**

Just days into the new year, the Gulf appeared to be on the brink of all out war. Iran's General Qassem Soleimani – commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)'s extraterritorial Quds Force – was eliminated in a US drone strike near Baghdad airport on Jan. 3. Iran retaliated with a barrage of ballistic missiles targeting US bases in Iraq. In the process, Iran accidentally shot down a Ukrainian commercial jet, killing all 176 passengers and crew on board. The confrontation followed months of tit-for-tat exchanges since the US withdrew from the Iran nuclear deal in May 2018 and reimposed sanctions on Tehran. *(Image credit: AFP)*



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## FEBRUARY

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## Coronavirus pandemic hits the Middle East

The Middle East and North Africa were not spared the ravages of COVID-19, with communities enduring the same medical, economic and mental health challenges felt across the globe. GCC countries quickly suspended international flights, devastating the region's leisure and hospitality sectors. Religious tourism was not exempt, disappointing millions of pilgrims. Face masks, sanitizers and social distancing quickly became the norm, while job losses, school closures and a shift to online shopping and remote work radically changed daily life. Meanwhile, in the region's conflict zones, the pandemic further hampered humanitarian interventions, making life even harder for millions of displaced families. *(Image credit: SPA)*



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## MARCH

### Houthi missiles continue to target KSA

Spring arrived with more violence on the Arabian Peninsula, when Saudi Arabia intercepted three ballistic missiles fired from Yemen by the Iran-backed Houthi militias. Two civilians suffered minor injuries caused by falling debris in Riyadh, while another missile was shot down over the southern city of Jazan. It was the first major assault on Saudi Arabia since the devastating twin strikes on Saudi oil installations in September 2019. John Abizaid, the US ambassador to Saudi Arabia, condemned the targeting of cities, while GCC Secretary-General Dr. Naif bin Falah Al-Hajraf said the "terrorist attack" had not only targeted Saudi Arabia but the collective security and stability of the Gulf. *(Image credit: AFP)*



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## APRIL

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### **Lebanon legalizes cannabis for medicinal use**

Lebanon became the first Arab country to pass a law legalizing cannabis cultivation for medicinal and commercial use. Lebanon had previously outlawed the growth, sale and consumption of cannabis, rejecting attempts to legalize its production. Attitudes began to shift after US consultancy firm McKinsey touted the legalization of cannabis in a study on how the government could revitalize the economy. In 2018, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) ranked Lebanon among the world's top five cannabis producers. In 2019, Raed Khoury, Lebanon's then-minister of economy, said medicinal marijuana exports could generate up to \$1 billion in annual revenues. *(Image credit: AFP)*



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**MAY**

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**Veteran Egyptian actor and comedian Hassan Hosny dies**

Hassan Hosny, actor, comedian and veteran of Egyptian cinema, died on May 30 at the age of 88 following a heart attack. His career in theater, film and comedy spanned over 50 years, earning him the affectionate nickname of the “Joker” of Egyptian cinema. Born in Cairo in 1931, the young actor discovered his love of the stage while at school before becoming a regular performer in the military’s theatrical group in the 1960s. He went on to star in countless films and TV shows, including “Nasser 56” and “El Nazer,” receiving several prestigious awards. He was laid to rest in the Hosny family cemetery outside Cairo. *(Image credit: Social Media/Instagram)*



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## JUNE

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### **Explosions and fires break out in Iran**

Still reeling from the killing of Soleimani in January and wrestling with one of the worst COVID-19 outbreaks in the region, Iran entered the summer of 2020 with a rash of suspicious explosions at its nuclear enrichment facilities, missile sites, petrochemical centers, power plants and medical clinics. A blast at the Parchin military complex east of Tehran was downplayed by state media as a gas storage incident. Later, fires broke out at a power station in Ahvaz and at the Natanz nuclear facility and 19 people died in an explosion at a clinic in northern Tehran. The cause of the blasts remains unclear to date. *(Image credit: Reuters)*



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## JULY

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### **UAE successfully launches Mars mission**

Midsummer heralded a remarkable achievement: the first unmanned Arab space mission to Mars. At 21:58 UTC on July 19, the Emirates Mars Mission launched its probe "Hope" from the Tanegashima Space Centre in Japan. It is scheduled to arrive in orbit around the Red Planet in February 2021 to coincide with the UAE's 50th anniversary, where it will study Martian weather cycles and atmospheric events. A team of experts at the Mohammed bin Rashid Space Center in Dubai is supervising the probe's seven-month voyage. *(Image credit: AFP)*



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## AUGUST

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### **Port blast compounds Lebanon's misery**

Tragedy struck Lebanon's capital Beirut on Aug. 4 when a massive explosion ripped through its port area. The blast, caused when tons of improperly stored ammonium nitrate caught fire, sent a gigantic shockwave tearing through the city. The explosion was so massive it was reportedly heard as far away as in Cyprus. More than 200 people were killed and over 6,000 injured, while thousands more lost their homes and businesses. The country was already embroiled in a banking crisis, social unrest, sectarian rivalries and the coronavirus outbreak. *(Image credit: AFP)*



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## SEPTEMBER

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### **UAE-Israel agreement sets in motion peace deals**

With the onset of autumn came the news that Israel and the UAE had normalized relations in a watershed deal brokered by the US known as the Abraham Accords. Similar deals quickly followed with Bahrain and Sudan. The first ever commercial flights between Tel Aviv and Abu Dhabi were established and an Israeli delegation landed in Abu Dhabi to finalize the pact. The Accords were hailed by the US administration as a historic breakthrough. The Palestinian leadership meanwhile branded the normalization a “betrayal” of its cause to establish an independent state based on the 1967 borders with its capital in Jerusalem. *(Image credit: AFP)*





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## OCTOBER

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### **Sudan eyes end to war with rebel groups**

The government of Sudan signed a peace agreement with 10 of the country's rebel opposition groups, potentially ending 17 years of ethnic strife and civil war. Representatives signed the agreement following year-long talks at a ceremony in the South Sudanese capital Juba. The deal covered issues from land ownership, reparations and compensation, to wealth, power sharing and the return of refugees. Following the deal, Sudan's Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok welcomed rebel leaders to the capital Khartoum, where crowds celebrated the end of hostilities. *(Image credit: AFP)*



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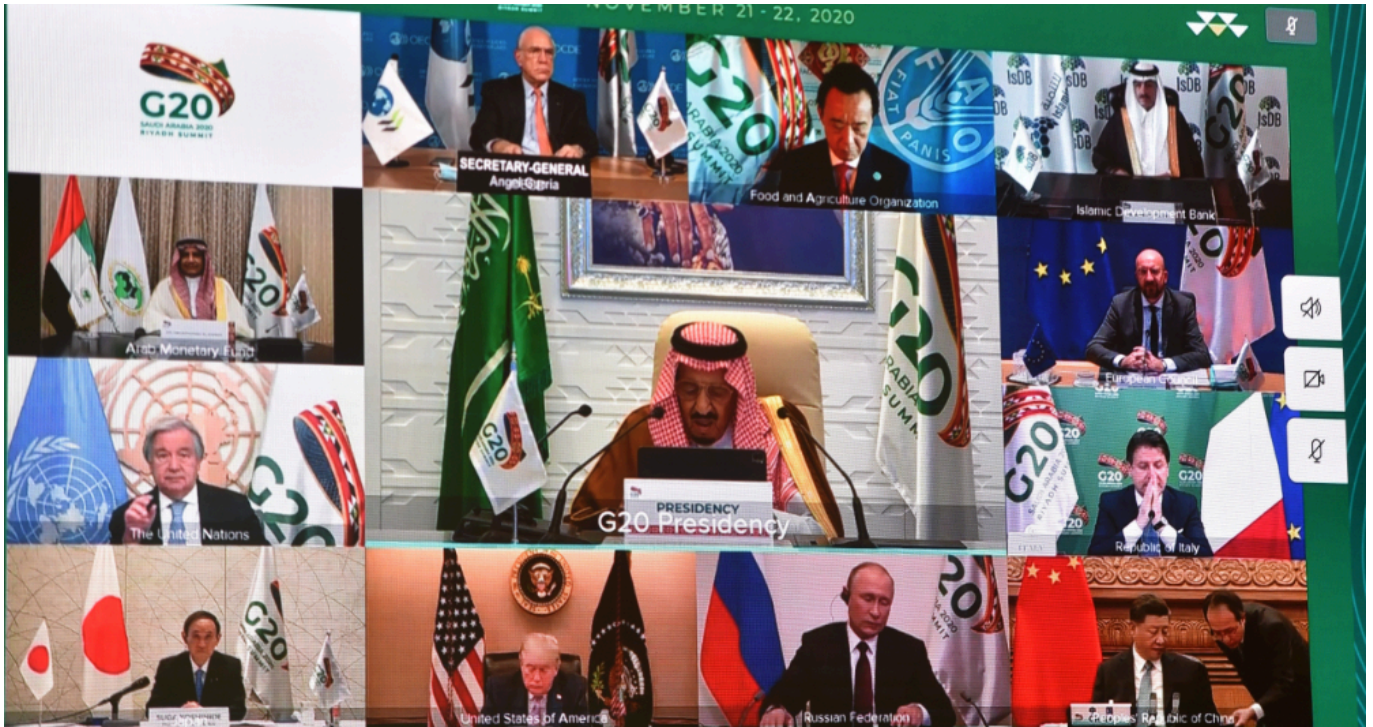
## NOVEMBER

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### **Riyadh hosts virtual G20 Summit of leaders**

Owing to COVID-19 travel restrictions, this year's G20 Summit took place virtually for the first time in its history. Under Saudi Arabia's presidency, the two-day summit hosted by Riyadh laid the foundations for a more inclusive, resilient, and sustainable recovery from the coronavirus pandemic. The conference also explored collective responses to environmental protection, urban planning, women's empowerment and technological change. The theme of this year's presidency was "Realizing Opportunities of the 21st Century for All." In his closing remarks to summit delegates, Saudi Arabia's King Salman said: "Due to its unique stature regionally and internationally ... the Kingdom will continue to play a key role within the G20 to achieve global cooperation and find solutions to the world's most pressing challenges."

*(Image credit: AFP)*



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## DECEMBER

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### **Iran executes journalist as it struggles under sanctions**

The year concluded on a dark note with the execution of activist-journalist Ruhollah Zam by the Iranian state a little more than a year after authorities tricked him into traveling to Iraq where he was abducted. Zam's work helped inspire nationwide protests against economic injustice in 2017 as Tehran struggled under the weight of US sanctions. The 47-year-old, who had lived in Paris, is among several opposition figures seized by Iranian operatives in recent months while based overseas. His execution comes as Iran seeks to pressure France and other European powers into salvaging the nuclear deal in the waning days of the Trump administration. *(Image credit: AFP)*



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No overlooking Syria's suffering amid global coronavirus concerns  
How the coronavirus crisis has shifted priorities for Arab cities

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## Iran allocates \$150,000 for families of victims of Ukraine plane crash

Author:

Reuters

ID:

1609352465632110900

Wed, 2020-12-30 16:48

LONDON: Iran's Cabinet on Wednesday allocated \$150,000 for the families of each of the 176 victims of a Ukrainian plane shot down in Iranian airspace in January, the official IRNA news agency reported.

Describing Iran's handling of the situation as "unacceptable," Ukraine said the amount of compensation should be negotiated and called for those responsible to be brought to justice.

An Iranian government statement said: "The cabinet approved the provision of \$150,000 or the equivalent in euros as soon as possible to the families and survivors of each of the victims of the Ukrainian plane crash," IRNA reported. Iran's Revolutionary Guards have said they accidentally shot down the Ukraine International Airlines plane shortly after takeoff, mistaking it for a missile when tensions with the United States were high.

Ukraine's foreign ministry said the compensation amount should be determined through negotiations, taking into account international practice, and that establishing the causes of the tragedy and bringing those responsible to justice was a prerequisite.

"The Ukrainian side expects from Iran a draft technical report on the circumstances of the aircraft shooting down," ministry spokesman Oleh Nikolenko said, adding that Iran had yet to implement earlier agreements, without giving details.

"This situation is especially unacceptable, since we are talking about the fate of innocent people," Nikolenko said.

Iran's Roads and Urban Development Minister Mohammad Eslami told state television on Wednesday that the final report on the crash had been sent to the countries participating in the investigation.

Under United Nations rules, Iran retains overall control of the investigation while the United States and Ukraine are accredited as the countries where the jet was respectively built and operated. Canada has also played a role as the home of many of the victims on the downed plane.

International rules on air crash investigations known as Annex 13 include a recommendation that a final report appears within 12 months, which in this case runs until early January, though many high-profile probes take longer. A spokeswoman for the Transportation Safety Board (TSB) of Canada said by email the agency was informed that a "draft investigation report was going to be distributed" this week, although the TSB will not have access to it. The TSB will only receive a copy of the final report when published.

Habib Haghjoo, an Iranian-born Canadian who lost his daughter and granddaughter in the crash, said he did not trust the news from Tehran and

stressed that his priority is the report.  
“They want to wrap it up,” he said of Iran. “We want the truth.”



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Iran retrieves cockpit conversation from Ukraine plane shot down with missileIran will not hand over 'damaged' black box of Ukraine plane

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## [Algeria's Tebboune returns after COVID-19 treatment, state media says](#)

Tue, 2020-12-29 22:12

ALGIERS: Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune has returned after weeks away being treated for COVID-19 in Germany, state television reported on Tuesday.

Tebboune's absence since the end of October has fuelled speculation over his ability to finish his first term.

"It is hard to be far from one's country," Tebboune said, according to footage broadcast after he arrived from Berlin at around 6 p.m. local time.

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Algeria's Abdelmadjid Tebboune says needs up to 3 weeks to recover from COVID-19  
Algeria says President Tebboune's COVID-19 treatment nearing completion

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## [How the coronavirus crisis has shifted priorities for Arab cities](#)

Tue, 2020-12-29 22:01

WASHINGTON, DC: If you are looking for something new in human history, look no further than mass urbanization. Large, bustling, urban metropolises with millions of residents have become such a common feature of our world today that it's easy to forget how new they are.

To wit: in the year 1800, roughly 3 percent of the world lived in cities and,



by 1900, that number had risen to only 15 percent.

Today, some 55 percent of humans on our planet live in cities, and we are headed for two out of three people on earth as urban dwellers within a generation.

Cities are vital to our well-being. They are centers of innovation and job-creation, and generate some 80 percent of global GDP. It is no exaggeration to say that our global economy is a collection of city economies.



Arab region's cities have fared poorly compared with their counterparts in East Asia, but have kept pace with other cities in the developing world. (AFP)

According to some estimates, over the past three decades, some 2 billion people have moved from countryside to city.

If one were to paint an iconic image of our times, it should involve a newly arrived migrant to a city, preferably an Asian city with a dramatic skyline, airplanes in the sky, high-speed trains in the distance, the drumbeat of globalization in the background.

Most of the world's rapid urbanization over this time has taken place in Africa and Asia, including, of course the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). In the MENA region in the 1960s, roughly 35 percent of the population lived in cities.

Today, almost two out of three people from the region live in cities – higher

than the global average. If we can point to one defining long-term trend over the past four decades in the MENA region, it should be rapid urbanization.

Now, the city itself, of course, is not new. In fact, the first agglomeration of peoples that came together in what we might call cities grew in the fertile crescent region of Iraq some 7,000 years ago.

Middle Eastern cities take their place among the ancient and medieval worlds as great civilizational centers: Cairo, Baghdad, Damascus, Aleppo, Istanbul, Isfahan.

Recent archaeological evidence also shows that several Arabian Peninsula coastal cities from Aden to Dubai played a vital role in Silk Road trade routes, and advanced civilizational networks.

But what of the Arab world city today? How has the region fared in this historic trend of mass urbanization, and how have the region's cities handled the COVID-19 pandemic?

Broadly speaking, with a few exceptions in the GCC states, the Arab region's cities have fared poorly compared with their counterparts in East Asia, but have kept pace with other cities in the developing world.

Let's take a look at the biggest city first: Cairo. With a metro area population of more than 20 million, Cairo is the Arab world's only megacity, defined as an urban agglomeration of 10 million or more people.

There are some 33 million megacities in the world today, mostly in East and South Asia.

Megacities are centers of growth and innovation, prosperity and knowledge, but they also present myriad challenges from pollution and congestion to income inequality and massive infrastructure needs.



Cairo “has continuously failed to capitalize on the agglomeration benefits afforded by its population size.” – Karim Elgendy and Natasha Abaza. (AFP)

Cairo’s population is roughly the same size as Beijing, but its GDP is roughly a quarter of the Chinese capital, according to a McKinsey study.

Cities with large populations might benefit from a demographic gift or be weighed down by a demographic burden.

In Cairo’s case, according to a study of regional cities by Karim Elgendy and Natasha Abaza, the city “has continuously failed to capitalize on the agglomeration benefits afforded by its population size.”

Egypt’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic has been poor. In a dispatch from Cairo by Declan Walsh of the New York Times, he writes that as patients came streaming through hospitals, “resources were alarmingly scarce. Doctors lacked protective equipment, often making do with a single mask for a 24-hour shift. Testing kits were in short supply.”

National testing has been extremely low in Egypt, far behind Iraq, Jordan or even war-torn Libya. Still, anyone who has visited Cairo will understand one basic fact: its people have often been ingenious, inventive, and remarkably entrepreneurial in difficult conditions.

Rather than giving the “Person of the Year” honor to a predictable choice like President-elect Joe Biden, Time magazine should have honored the frontline medical worker in developing countries from Cairo to Karachi who have battled this deadly disease with little national government support.



The recent Kearney Global Cities Report and Index – a comprehensive study that ranks cities across 29 metrics of global connectivity – ranks Dubai 27th globally, the only regional city to make the top 30. (AFP)

What of other MENA cities? How have they fared in the pandemic and, more broadly how have they fared in our contemporary world.

It has become axiomatic to point to Dubai and Abu Dhabi as leaders. The recent Kearney Global Cities Report and Index – a comprehensive study that ranks cities across 29 metrics of global connectivity – ranks Dubai 27th globally, the only regional city to make the top 30.

Of particular note this year has been the meteoric rise of Abu Dhabi. The UAE capital ranked seventh this year in Kearney's Global City Outlook Index, ahead of major cities like Amsterdam, San Francisco, Berlin and New York.

The Outlook report focuses on "cities on the rise" and Abu Dhabi's leap from number 20 to 7 within a year has been "driven by long-term investments in economic performance and diversification."

The UAE has been a leader worldwide in handling the coronavirus pandemic through its comprehensive national testing programs, contact tracing, and healthcare infrastructure response. The Australia-based Global Response to Infectious Disease Index ranked the UAE among the top 10 countries worldwide in its response to COVID-19, on par with the likes of New Zealand, Singapore, Norway, Japan and Taiwan.

A key lesson to Dubai and Abu Dhabi's success has been the relentless building of infrastructure. According to AT Kearney, the two UAE cities

topped the world in the infrastructure metric. Riyadh also deserves mention here. The Saudi capital has been rapidly growing its infrastructure.

Riyadh's first metro lines are on course to open in 2021, and major infrastructure projects to decongest roads and grow the airport suggest a transport-oriented urban policy that will serve the capital well over the long term.



Riyadh ranks as one of the top five largest cities in the region, while Jeddah metropolitan area makes the top 10. (AFP)

With a metro area population of roughly 7.2 million, Riyadh ranks as one of the top five largest cities in the region, while Jeddah metropolitan area makes the top 10. Both cities would benefit from a simultaneous drive of decongestion (of roads) and expansion (of global trade networks).

A recent report by Euromonitor International points out that the next regional megacity could be Baghdad. Unfortunately, Baghdad, like other historically rich and cosmopolitan cities like Beirut or pre-war Damascus, has largely lagged in its provision of services and infrastructure for its people.

Like Egypt, however, these countries are rich in human resources that can – if allowed to grow – can unleash tremendous innovation.

Following infrastructure, this leads us to the second “I” word – innovation. Any city of the future must be relentlessly innovative.

The global geostrategist Parag Khanna told me: “Even at the height of the pandemic, it’s become clear that several cities – notably those in the Gulf – have the resources and strategic willpower to invest in their future infrastructure and areas of innovation. There are very few such places in the world today.



Some 55 percent of humans on our planet live in cities, and we are headed for two out of three people on earth as urban dwellers within a generation. (AFP)

Cities of the future must embrace the three “I”s – investment, infrastructure and innovation. Cities need to invest in education, healthcare, human resources, capacity, technology and a whole host of other sectors to build resiliency.

Perhaps most importantly, cities must invest and target infrastructure and innovation. Large-scale infrastructure projects are costly, but when planned well, they reap benefits for generations.

As for innovation, regional cities should create the right mix of regulatory policies that would allow the region’s natural entrepreneurs to flourish.

In fact, author and geo-economic strategist Michael O’Sullivan told me that the MENA region should ride the wave of the growing e-commerce economy fueled by the pandemic by investing more in fintech and medtech, and other e-commerce industries.

This is sound advice, one rooted in history. After all, the great cities of the region have historically been on the cutting edge of trade and innovation networks.

There is really no “secret sauce” to building more vibrant, prosperous, resilient cities.

The difference today will be between those who can execute their plans, and those who, for reasons of inertia or mismanagement or corruption, fail to deliver for their people.

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No overlooking Syria's suffering amid global coronavirus concerns  
How Dubai defied the odds to bounce back from the coronavirus crisis

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## [US will not be held hostage to 'nuclear blackmail': Pompeo](#)

Author:

Tue, 2020-12-29 21:34

LONDON: US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said Washington would not be held

hostage to “nuclear blackmail” by the Iranian regime in a tweet on Tuesday.

Pompeo tweeted a video titled “US Policy on Iran Sanctions, Explained” with which he also said Iran had “sown instability and terror” since coming to power in 1979 and continued to threaten the US and its allies.

The Iranian regime has sown instability and terror, threatening the U.S. and our allies. The [@realDonaldTrump](#) Administration didn't accept the status quo and re-imposed sanctions, initiating a campaign of maximum pressure. America will not be held hostage to nuclear blackmail. [pic.twitter.com/z4JQTN0Und](https://pic.twitter.com/z4JQTN0Und)

– Secretary Pompeo (@SecPompeo) [December 29, 2020](#)

“The Trump administration didn't accept the status quo and reimposed sanctions, initiating a campaign of maximum pressure. America will not be held hostage to nuclear blackmail,” he added.

In the video, State Department spokeswoman Geraldine Gassam Griffith said Tehran had, for decades, been the world's largest state sponsor of terrorism and continued to funnel money and weapons to proxies around the Middle East, such as Hamas and Hezbollah.

Griffith also said that Iran had carried out assassinations on five continents and attacks on vital installations such as Saudi oil facilities and Iraqi bases.

Referencing the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) nuclear deal, which President Trump pulled the US out of in 2018, Griffith also said the deal had given Iran access to \$150 billion to fund its proxies.

With Tehran continuing its malign behavior, the spokeswoman said Washington



had no choice but to restore strict sanctions and maximum pressure on the Iranian regime.



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New film 'Nasrin' tells story of hero who stood up to the Iranian regime  
US imposes sanctions on companies over support for sale of Iranian petrochemicals