

# Iran denies US claim it's helping Venezuela oil sector

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Fri, 2020-05-01 13:01

TEHRAN: Iran on Friday rejected US claims it is helping Venezuela to rebuild its oil industry, saying the accusations are designed to increase pressure and disrupt the two countries' trade ties.

Elliott Abrams, the envoy leading US efforts to topple Venezuela's leftist leader Nicolas Maduro, has alleged that the cash-strapped country is paying Iran in gold to restore the troubled sector.

US President Donald Trump's administration has imposed unilateral sanctions aimed at ending oil exports from Iran and Venezuela, both major crude producers.

Iran's foreign ministry in a statement called Abrams' claims "baseless," without directly addressing accusations that the Islamic republic is being paid in gold.

It accused Washington of trying to increase "pressure on Venezuela's government and disrupt trade between Iran and Venezuela."

It said US policies against Venezuela including "economic sanctions, military threats and a recent transition council" had failed.

Washington was now "trying to create obstacles in Venezuela's plan to rebuild its refineries and produce oil products such as petrol, which is in short supply due to cruel US sanctions."

Venezuela has the world's largest proven oil reserves but analysts say that the sector operates below capacity.

The country's economy has been collapsing, with millions fleeing as they lack basic goods.

Iran has also taken a hit from US sanctions after Trump pulled out of a nuclear accord and reimposed them in 2018.

Maduro has withstood more than a year of US-led efforts to remove him and retains the support of the military.

Iran has repeatedly expressed support for Maduro against opposition leader Juan Guaido, who is recognized by some 60 nations as interim president due to reports of irregularities in Maduro's 2018 re-election.



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## [Egypt army says 10 soldiers killed or injured in North Sinai blast](#)

Author:

AFP

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Thu, 2020-04-30 22:15

CAIRO: Egypt's army said on Thursday that 10 soldiers were either killed or wounded in a blast targeting an armored vehicle in the restive northern Sinai.

The attack occurred south the city of Bir Al-Abed in the troubled North Sinai

region, the epicenter of a long-running extremist insurgency spearheaded by a local affiliate of the Daesh group.

Army spokesman Tamer Al-Rifai said the 10 casualties included an officer but did not provide details on the number of those killed or wounded.

No group immediately claimed responsibility for the attack, which occurred during the Islamic holy fasting month of Ramadan.

Egypt's President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi extended his condolences to the victims on Twitter.

Security forces have for years been battling to contain the insurgency in the turbulent North Sinai which intensified following the military's 2013 ouster of Islamist President Muhammad Mursi.

Scores of soldiers and police were killed in militant attacks especially in the turbulent region over the years.

In February 2018, Egyptian security forces launched a nationwide, large-scale operation against militants, mainly focused on the North Sinai region.

More than 845 suspected militants have been killed in the region along with more than 60 security personnel, according to army figures.



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Egypt's 'corona coexistence' plan to begin after Eid holidays  
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# Syria says Israeli helicopters strike targets in southern Syria

Author:

Reuters

ID:

1588334498855389700

Fri, 2020-05-01 11:30

AMMAN: Israeli helicopters fired several rockets from the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights on targets inside southern Syria, Syrian state media reported on Friday, in what intelligence sources say is part of an increase in strikes against Iran-backed militias.

Opposition sources in the area said several militia posts near Quneitra were targeted in the attack, which reports said caused only material damage.

There was no immediate comment from the Israeli army.

Bases and convoys run by Lebanon's Iranian-backed Hezbollah militia, which has a strong presence in the Syrian Golan Heights, have been hit by Israel in recent years.

A regional intelligence source said Israel was stepping up raids in Syria at a time when world attention and the region, including Syria, were distracted by the coronavirus pandemic.

Separately, the Syrian army said on Friday a series of blasts at an ammunition depot east of Homs had led to casualties but was not caused by an attack as earlier announced.

However, the UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said the blasts were caused by Israeli strikes targeting a military base on the Homs-Palmyra road run by Hezbollah.

Two weeks ago, an Israeli drone attack targeted a car carrying forces from Hezbollah in southern Syria along the border with Lebanon without causing casualties.

A few days later, Israel struck central Syria near the ancient city of Palmyra, in what regional intelligence sources said were Iranian-backed outposts and a command center.

Israel has acknowledged in recent years it has conducted many raids inside Syria since the start of the civil war in 2011.

After Syria announced last Monday it had intercepted airstrikes by Israel near the capital Damascus, Israeli defense minister Naftali Bennett told Israeli media that Israel would step up its campaign against Iran in Syria. "We have moved from blocking Iran's entrenchment in Syria to forcing it out of there, and we will not stop," Bennett said in a statement.

"We will not allow more strategic threats to grow just across our borders without taking action, We will continue to take the fight to the enemy's territory," Bennett said.

The Syrian army said Monday's strikes had killed three Syrian civilians and injured several others from shrapnel that hit their homes.

Israel says Iran's military presence in Syria, where its militias are



fighting alongside Syrian President Bashar al Assad's forces, is a strategic threat and claims Tehran seeks a permanent presence along its northern borders.

The threat of direct confrontation between arch-enemies Israel and Iran has long simmered in Syria.

Assad has said Iranian forces are welcome to stay in Syria after years of military victories in which Iran and Russia have played a key role in bringing back most of the country under his control.



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Israeli strikes near Syria capital kill 3 civilians  
Syrian government ends school early for over 4 million students

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## [US Congress members urge restoration of aid to Palestinians](#)

Thu, 2020-04-30 19:44

CHICAGO: Fifty-nine Democratic members of Congress have written to Kelly Craft, US ambassador to the UN, urging the Trump administration to restore

humanitarian assistance to Palestinians amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

The funds would support 3,300 health-care workers staffing 144 UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) clinics described as being on “the frontlines in combating” coronavirus.

“As you know, the pandemic has now reached the Gaza Strip, with cases beginning to inexorably rise in a place with few resources to combat the outbreak,” read the letter.

“Coupled with the growing number of COVID-19 cases in the West Bank, Lebanon, Syria and Jordan, the pandemic now poses an unprecedented global health emergency,” it added.

“It is important that we empower these public health officials, who are deliberately putting themselves in harm’s way for the common good, by providing them the resources they need to address the COVID-19 pandemic.”

The letter called for funding to “support the six facilities comprising the East Jerusalem Hospital Network, as well as US NGOs engaged in health work.”

Starting in 2018, President Donald Trump began suspending all US funding to the Palestinians and agencies that support Palestinian refugees, including UNRWA and the US Agency for International Development (USAID), in an effort to pressure Palestinian leaders to embrace his efforts to impose a peace deal favorable to Israel.

US cuts have included \$300 million from UNRWA, pushing it into financial crisis, and \$200 million through USAID that primarily supports health-care services.

UNRWA is working closely with host authorities and the World Health Organization with triage care and protocols in place to identify patients with respiratory symptoms among the Palestinians.

The Trump cuts impacting USAID have undermined health services, including for hospitals and programs to identify breast cancer among Palestinian women.





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UNRWA seeking more funds from Gulf, Europe after US cuts Gaza resumes coronavirus testing amid shortages

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## [Will coronavirus shock make Arab region ready for universal basic income?](#)

Thu, 2020-04-30 18:45

DUBAI: Denmark's government has guaranteed workers affected by the country's lockdown a minimum of 75 percent of their salaries.

In Italy, populist politician Beppe Grillo is calling for regular payments to "Italians [who] won't have a secure income in the next few months."



In the US, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi is willing to look into instituting a universal basic income (UBI) for Americans, which was at the heart of former Democratic hopeful Andrew Yang's presidential campaign.



As people across the world are being ordered to shelter in place to contain the spread of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19), how they will make basic ends meet has become one of the biggest questions facing policymakers.

Liberal activists are hoping that governments adopting cash transfers as a temporary emergency measure will be compelled to retain it once citizens have seen its benefits.

As in the rest of the world, however, the idea of guaranteeing everyone an income both tantalizes and terrifies the Arab region.

"No country in this world is ready for UBI, an unconditional payment to all residents without any conditions," said Dr. Osman Gulseven, associate professor at Skyline University College in Sharjah.



A young boy drives a small vehicle loaded with recyclable items gathered at a landfill, to be sold for extra income, in the Iraqi holy city of Najaf on June 9, 2019. (AFP/File Photo)

"This is not only economically infeasible but also financially impossible for most Arab countries. Those payments will come from taxes, which will again be collected from society – specifically the working middle class.



"It is quite illogical to transfer money from the working people to everyone else."

Although some countries have initiated UBI-like schemes to shore up their COVID-19-battered economies, he does not view it as a potential long-term solution.

"This is an unprecedented crisis period," Gulseven told Arab News.

"Typically, any money paid by the government has to be financed from somewhere. Printing money will cause inflation, which has devastating effects on the economy."

Taxing more from sales and income will further crimp economic activity, in his view.

## Opinion

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

"It is also impossible to pay back everything without financial resources," Gulseven said. "Arab countries do not have the financial means for UBI. Only a few Gulf countries with substantial currency reserves can afford UBI, that too only for their citizens."

Gulseven's view is seconded by George Politis, visiting lecturer at the Costas Grammenos Centre for Shipping, Trade and Finance, who says UBI will not work in periods of financial distress.

"We need normality, functioning economies, growth and prosperity," he said. "Once normality is achieved, the key indicators to study will be GDP per capita, public spending-to-GDP ratio, and poverty levels in order to calculate how much is needed for a given population and whether the state can afford the cost."



Palestinians sit by a fire at the Khan Yunis refugee camp in the southern Gaza Strip on January 28, 2020. (AFP/File Photo)

Politis said UBI in emerging markets could only work through an international or regional body since states cannot self-finance such a policy.

“The lesson from the EU is that there is little appetite among larger and smaller economies for mutual financial collaboration towards surviving the current crisis,” he said.

The International Labor Organization (ILO) estimated in 2018 that UBI’s impact on poverty and inequality depends on such factors as the level of benefits, their capacity to meet people’s needs, and sources of funding.

#### **FASTFACT**

**17.9%**

GDP cost of UBI if adopted in MENA. (Source: ILO)

The study found that the cost would range from 17.9 percent of GDP in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region to about 25 percent of GDP in Asia, Europe and Latin America.

“Some UBI proposals have the potential to advance equity and social justice,



and others do not,” the ILO report said.

“Governments that consider implementing a UBI should carefully examine all options, including the progressive or regressive aspects of the proposed measures, the winners and losers, and the potential risks and trade-offs.”



An Iraqi street vendor sells worry beads after measures of social distancing were eased by the authorities, ahead of the fasting month of Ramadan, in central Baghdad on April 22, 2020. (AFP/File Photo)

According to Dr. Albadr Al-Shateri, former politics professor at the National Defense College in Abu Dhabi, UBI would be an excellent idea for the Arab world, but the groundwork has yet to be laid.

“The development of citizenship in the Western context passed through three phases: first civil liberties, then political participation and finally economic rights,” he told Arab News.

“The Arab world, or any other region for that matter, cannot skip stages.”

He said most Arab countries will be hard-pressed to implement UBI as such a scheme requires sustainable economic structures, something most of them lack.

“Many Arab countries rely on one or two products to maintain their income, which are subject to the vagaries of the international market,” Al-Shateri said.





A vendor, wearing a mask for protection against the coronavirus, stands next to ladies handbags displayed for sale at a shop in the Mall of Dubai on April 28, 2020, after the shopping centre was reopened. (AFP)

"Even if states in the Levant can maintain a sustainable economy, UBI would be hard to sustain. And if a good segment of the population expects regular income from the government, failure to meet that expectation would have dire political consequences."

Al-Shateri says the dual shock of wars and the COVID-19 pandemic does not bode well for the future of the MENA region.

"Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries are not in position to extend a helping hand because of the fall of oil prices, the economic slowdown and the war in Yemen," he said.

Even before the COVID-19 storm hit, economic conditions in many Arab countries were precarious at best.



Emirati men, wearing protective masks to combat the spread coronavirus, walk in the Mall of Dubai on April 28, 2020, after the mall was reopened. (AFP)

Lebanon was already on the verge of collapse, and Syria was reeling from the aftermath of the civil war, which had also damaged the Jordanian economy.

The Palestinian economy remains heavily dependent on the generosity of foreign donors.

“The Levant region might experience more political conflict as a result of the economic woes,” Al-Shateri said.

Cyril Widdershoven, director at Verocy, a Dutch consultancy advising on investments, energy and infrastructure risks and opportunities in the Arab region, concurs with Al-Shateri’s gloomy prognosis.

“Jordan is struggling owing to a lack of reserves, desert agriculture and high unemployment,” he told Arab News.

If the GCC countries are hit by an economic crisis, foreign workers from Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon would face unemployment, which in turn would affect the budgets of their home countries because of the dependence on Gulf remittances, Widdershoven explained.

“Priority should be given in the post-coronavirus era to diversification of economy, population control and sustainable GDP growth. Demand for migration will increase as fewer opportunities at home will force young people to look

towards the US, EU and Australia.”

The potential and most obvious solution for many is International Monetary Fund (IMF) assistance, although it already has applications for support from more than 90 countries, says Politis, who is also a part of the Faculty of Finance at Cass Business School at the University of London.

“The terms for funding will probably be more relaxed than before. After all, this is a global humanitarian problem,” he told Arab News.

“Additionally, a number of local foundations and ultra-wealthy individuals could support people in need, such as refugees and immigrants.”

Some experts expect Levant countries to seek IMF support and use Arab Monetary Fund help for the financing of essential activities.

“There is a very sharp decline from remittances to Levant countries. I expect a devaluation in the Jordanian dinar as there are just not enough reserves to keep the exchange rate pegged to the US dollar,” Gulseven said.

“Poverty and income inequality have always been a significant problem in the region. While I think poverty will increase, I do not see any mass hunger situation.

“The Levantine area has fertile soil suitable for many kinds of agricultural activities and the region is a major exporter of grain, fruit and vegetable.”

Gulseven says the crisis is likely to give a boost to agricultural activities in the Arab region, adding that it is essential that enough of this food supply stays within the region.

“As long as we stay in peace together, we can withstand these difficult times,” he told Arab News. “However, standing together means a fair sharing of income and reduced inequality.

“People in the Levant are already questioning the role of the government in society, and the hungry and desperate will start taking action because they will think they have nothing to lose.

“Now is not the right time for any kind of internal or regional conflicts, so decision-makers should treat the ensuring of food and social safety for all as a matter of utmost importance.”













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as economy shuts down due to coronavirus