

Pentagon downplays Iran military satellite as 'tumbling webcam'

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Mon, 2020-04-27 13:30

Washington: The head of the US Space Command said the Pentagon believes that Iran's first successful launch of a military satellite into space does not pose any intelligence threat.

The Nour satellite placed into orbit on April 22 is classified by the US military as a small 3U Cubesat, three adjoined units each no more than a liter in volume and less than 1.3 kilograms (one pound) each, said General Jay Raymond in a tweet late Sunday.

[@US_SpaceCom](#) continues to track 2 objects [@PeteAFB's @18SPCS](#) associated w/[#space](#) launch from Iran, characterizing NOUR 01([#SATCAT](#) 45529) as 3U Cubesat. Iran states it has imaging capabilities—actually, it's a tumbling webcam in space; unlikely providing intel. [#spaceishard](#)

– Gen. Jay Raymond (@SpaceForceCS0) [April 25, 2020](#)

"Iran states it has imaging capabilities – actually, it's a tumbling webcam in space; unlikely providing intel," he wrote.

"[#spaceishard](#)," Raymond added to the tweet.

While Raymond downplayed any threat from the satellite, the United States has warned that Tehran's ability to place it into space represents a significant advance in its long-range missile capability, posing a greater threat to US forces and allies in the Middle East.

Last week US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo accused Iran of violating a 2015 UN Security Council resolution against Tehran advancing any nuclear-capable ballistic missile activities.

On Saturday, Pompeo called for the United Nations to extend its conventional arms embargo on Iran beyond its scheduled end in October.

"All peace-loving nations must reject Iran's development of ballistic-missile-capable technologies and join together to constrain Iran's dangerous missile programs," he said.



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Iranian IRGC navy 'harassed' US military ships in the GulfRouhani urges Iran military to remain vigilant against 'provocations'

[Gaza restaurants to reopen as lockdown eases](#)

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Mon, 2020-04-27 12:38

Gaza City: Restaurants in Gaza were to be allowed to reopen from Monday, the economy ministry in the Hamas-run enclave announced, following pleas from restaurant owners to ease economic suffering.

“It was decided to allow restaurants and cafes in the (Gaza) Strip to reopen their doors to customers starting from today, the ministry said in a statement.

Under the decision based on health ministry recommendations, restaurants must continue to observe social distancing rules, it said.

Since the middle of March, the Hamas government has imposed strict measures to avoid a widespread outbreak of COVID-19.

Schools, universities, mosques and restaurants have been closed.

So far Gaza has recorded only 17 confirmed cases of the novel coronavirus, all Palestinians returning from outside the Gaza Strip.

Those who contracted the virus have been placed in isolation immediately upon their return.

There are no confirmed cases among Palestinians who stayed inside Gaza, according to Hamas, the Islamist movement that has controlled the coastal enclave since 2007.

Gaza’s population is overwhelmingly Muslim and most people are observing the holy month of Ramadan, including fasting from sunrise to sunset before eating large meals with their families.

Salah Abu Haseera, head of the Committee for Restaurants, Hotels and Touristic Services in Gaza, told AFP the ministry’s decision “came after an appeal to open restaurants to avoid further losses and a serious recession.” Restaurants reopening could allow some 2,500 people to return to work, he said.

Gaza, blockaded by Israel for 13 years, suffers from poverty rates close to 50 percent.

Israel says the measures are necessary to isolate Hamas, with which it has fought three wars since 2008.

In the West Bank, the largest part of the Palestinian territories but controlled by a rival government, restaurants remain closed.



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Besieged Gazans anxious over new Israeli government's moves

[Lebanon protests hinder virus testing by health teams](#)

Author:

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Mon, 2020-04-27 12:42

BEIRUT: Scattered anti-government protests broke out in several parts of Lebanon on Monday amid a crash in the local currency and a surge in food prices, leading to road closures that prevented medical teams from setting out from Beirut to conduct coronavirus tests across the country. The Health Ministry said its teams would try again on Tuesday, urging

protesters to let the paramedics work to evaluate the spread of the virus in the tiny country of 5 million people.

The protests came as the government began easing a weeks-long lockdown to limit the spread of the new coronavirus in Lebanon, which has reported 710 cases and 24 deaths so far. The number of registered cases has dropped over the past two weeks, leading to the shortening of the nighttime curfew by one hour and allowing some businesses to resume work on Monday.

The Lebanese national currency hit a new record low over the weekend, with 4,000 pounds to the dollar on the black market while the official price remained at 1,507 pounds. Coronavirus and the lockdown has worsened the most serious economic and financial crisis to hit Lebanon since the end of the 1975-90 civil war.

Around noon Monday, Lebanese troops forcefully removed dozens of protesters from a major highway in Zouk Mosbeh, north of Beirut, and traffic resumed. Shortly afterward, it was blocked again with burning tires.

The Lebanese army said it respects the people's right to protest as long as the protesters don't close roads or attack public and private property.

"Our demands are simple and we are not asking for the impossible," said protester George Ghanem in Zouk Mosbeh, citing early parliamentary elections and an independent judiciary. "We want to live in dignity ... we will continue and no one will remove us from the street."

A woman carried a placard reading: "My salary buys me two cartons of milk."

On Sunday night, the Central Bank of Lebanon issued a circular instructing currency exchange shops not to sell the dollar for more than 3,200 pounds. On Monday, most exchange shops were not selling dollars, saying clients who have dollars are refusing to exchange their hard currency at such a low price.

Earlier over the weekend, several banks in northern and southern Lebanon were attacked, some with firebombs, reflecting rising public anger against banks that have imposed capital controls on people's accounts.

In a sign of the deepening crisis, Lebanon's Prime Minister Hassan Diab on Friday accused the longtime Central Bank governor, Riad Salameh, of orchestrating the local currency's crash, and criticised what he called the governor's "opaque" policies that the premier said covered up major banking sector losses and capital flight.

Lebanon is one of the world's most indebted countries and has been grappling with a liquidity crunch, an economic recession and rising unemployment.



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Lebanon reels from double blow of virus pandemic and currency crash
Lebanon's top Christian cleric backs central bank governor as currency tumbles

[Lebanon has hands on masks and hearts for fear of new pound collapse](#)

Sun, 2020-04-26 21:49

BEIRUT: As if the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak was not enough for Lebanon, the possible rise in the US dollar's exchange rate against the Lebanese pound is adding to problems for those already facing severe economic hardship.

The sliding pound will have a huge impact on the earnings of average Lebanese people. The exchange rate of the dollar on the black market on Sunday was 4,200 Lebanese pounds.

The Lebanese Health Ministry has recorded three new COVID-19 cases, raising the total number of confirmed cases from Feb. 21 until Sunday to 707. No new deaths have been recorded, leaving the toll at 24.

The Ministry of Interior is set to relax COVID-19 restrictions on Monday, but with certain precautions like wearing face masks now mandatory.

The new procedures will allow factories, storage facilities for medical drugs and foodstuffs, supermarkets, minimarkets, sweet shops, patisseries, bakeries, restaurants, takeaway shops, hotels, serviced apartments, insurance offices, and libraries to work longer hours.

People in vocational trades will be allowed to work, including carpenters, blacksmiths, plumbers, seamstresses and tailors, electricians, mechanics, upholsterers, goldsmiths and florists.

Public transport and cargo vehicles will resume work from 5 a.m. to 9 p.m.

Health Minister Hamad Hassan wrote on Twitter: "We are moving very carefully and cautiously on the right and disciplined path. We all abide by the general mobilization controls as the safe return journey takes effect."

Licensed moneychangers will resume work on Monday, having not done so since Thursday in protest of the "unjustified deterioration of the exchange rate." This return coincides with the growing political tension toward the monetary policy of the governor of the Banque du Liban.

The head of the Syndicate of Money Changers, Mahmoud Murad, told Arab News: "We are literally holding our breath on Monday because things are rapidly developing and heading in a very dangerous direction."

He added: "Things have got out of control. What is happening is not convincing at all. Some people are messing with the exchange market, and we know nothing about them except that they are controlling the exchange rate even from their houses."

Murad said: "We are waiting for the platform that the Banque du Liban promised us to know how to price the dollar, but we have not been informed of anything until now. There is an app on social media known as Lebanese Lira. We do not know its source, but it has been controlling the market for more than 3 months. This app has been shared by people since the dollar's exchange rate was 1,600 liras. People have only been selling their dollars according to this app's price. Someone is buying all the dollars on the market in an abnormal way."

Murad pointed out that he "filed a complaint in the court against this app, but no one has acted yet." He explained that there were people working from their houses and delivering exchanged money after buying dollars. "This practice dissolves the capital of legitimate money changers," he said.

He added that dismissing the governor of the Banque du Liban, Riad Salamé, in light of the current political crisis was not the cure. He said the central bank must intervene strongly in the market by injecting \$50 million to \$100

million for the market price to stabilize. He said: "It is not enough to intervene using \$5-\$7 million a day, which happened last week for one day."

On Saturday night, a bomb was thrown at a Fransabank branch in Sidon, resulting in material damage. The bank's security camera captured images of two suspects, according to preliminary investigations by the security services.

The phrase "You are in danger" was sprayed outside several other banks in Sidon, prompting the security services to take measures to protect banks and the central bank's branch there.

The leader of the Free Patriotic Movement, Gebran Bassil, defended in a press conference on Sunday the government's request to audit the central bank's accounts. He held "thieving, corrupt, and greedy beneficiaries as well as bank owners, shareholders, and the central bank" responsible for the state's financial losses. He defended himself by refuting charges of having "any property or money at home or abroad."

Attacks on Salamé were met with violent reactions from the opposition of Hassan Diab's government.

Maronite Patriarch Bechara Boutros Al-Rahi also rejected accusations leveled against the governor, blaming him for the slide in the value of the pound, and called for Salamé to be given the right to defend himself.

Al-Rahi said: "It is totally unacceptable to target the dignity of the man and the institution that has not known such a thing since its establishment in the days of President Fuad Chehab."

Al-Rahi asked: "Who benefits from destabilizing the governorship of the Banque du Liban? It is part of a plan to change the face of Lebanon."



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Lebanon's top Christian cleric backs central bank governor as currency tumbles
Lebanon has avoided coronavirus worst case scenario, health minister says

[Syrian govt ends school early for over 4 mln students](#)

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Sun, 2020-04-26 16:42

DAMASCUS: More than four million students in Syria confined at home due to the coronavirus will not resume classes this year but will advance to the

next grade, the government said Sunday.

The decision was taken weeks after schools were closed in mid-March to combat the spread of the virus, leaving many students and teachers to adapt to distance learning.

“All primary and secondary school students will move on to the next class,” the government announcement said, according to state news agency SANA.

Brevet and baccalaureate examinations – usually taken at the end of secondary school and high school respectively – will still be sat by 557,000 students, according to the education ministry.

The government will increase the number of exam centers to ensure “distance” between students, SANA reported.

After schools were shuttered, some institutions moved to online teaching, while a specialized education ministry TV channel broadcast Arabic, English, mathematics and science courses.

But daily power cuts that can last for hours and capped, costly household Internet have posed challenges to distance learning efforts in the country wracked by war since 2011.

Universities will remain closed at least through the end of the holy month of Ramadan in late May, according to SANA.

Damascus has officially reported 42 cases of COVID-19 and three deaths from the disease in government-controlled territory.

Authorities have adopted a series of measures to stem the spread of the virus, closing shops and restaurants as well as imposing a strict curfew and movement restrictions.



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Syrian dancer takes a spookily empty Paris as her canvas