

Iraqi PM to make first Iran visit on Saturday

Wed, 2019-04-03 22:19

BAGHDAD: Iraqi Premier Adel Abdel Mahdi will travel to Iran on Saturday, a member of his office said, in his first official visit to the country rivaling Washington for influence over Baghdad.

The US reimposed tough sanctions on Tehran's energy and finance sectors last year but has granted Baghdad several exemptions to keep temporarily importing Iranian gas and electricity, crucial to Iraq's faltering power sector.

Abdel Mahdi, 77, has repeatedly said Iraq wants good ties with both the US and Iran.

The prime minister would spend two days in the Islamic republic, a member of his office said on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak to the press.

He was expected to discuss "the issue of trade outside the framework of sanctions" in addition to "the rapprochement and the convergence of views between Iran and Arab countries," the official said.

Iran is the second-largest supplier of imported goods to Iraq and also enjoys vast political influence in the country, particularly among Iraq's Shiite parties.

Those factions credit Iran for helping Iraqi armed forces defeat the Daesh group in a fierce three-year battle that ravaged much of the country. Since declaring victory over Daesh in 2017, Iraq has strived to make a diplomatic comeback as a mediator among regional rivals.

A string of top officials have visited the Iraqi capital in recent months, including Iranian President Hassan Rouhani in March, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in January, and a host of Arab leaders.

During his weekly press conference on Tuesday, Abdel Mahdi said he was planning trips to Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the US, without specifying dates.

The premier has rarely traveled since coming to power in October, making his first trip abroad in late March to Egypt.

There, he met Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi and King Abdullah of Jordan.

Last month, Iraq's Speaker of Parliament Mohammed Al-Halbusi traveled to the US, where he said his country would need to rely on Iranian gas and electricity for another three years.



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Security tops agenda as Iraqi PM visits Egypt in first foreign trip
Iraqi, Jordanian leaders join Egypt at Cairo summit

[Four suicide bombers hit Syria's Raqqa – SDF](#)

Author:

Reuters

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Wed, 2019-04-03 14:11

BEIRUT: Four suicide bombers struck in Syria's Raqqa on Wednesday, a spokesman for the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) which controls the city said in a message to journalists.

A string of bombings have in recent months targeted the northeastern corner

of Syria held by the SDF, even after its capture of the last Daesh enclave in the area.

Daesh has claimed responsibility for several of those attacks, underscoring its continued threat after its territorial defeat last month at Baghouz on the Euphrates at the Iraqi border.

In January, the group targeted a restaurant in Manbij, a flashpoint city held by a militia allied to the SDF near areas controlled by the Syrian government and Turkey-backed rebels, killing four Americans.

“Four suicide bombers blew themselves up,” said Mustafa Bali, head of the SDF’s media office, in an online chat when asked about blasts in Raqqa.

The SDF drove Daesh from Raqqa in 2017 but the fierce military campaign there, including intensive air strikes from a US-led coalition, left much of the city in ruins.

Daesh fighters are still holding out in a remote area of the Syrian desert and security officials say others have gone under ground in Iraqi cities.

Spearheaded by the Kurdish YPG militia, the SDF’s hold over northeastern Syria, including much of the border with Turkey, alarms Ankara which regards it as a terrorist group.



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[Algeria council accepts Bouteflika resignation](#)

Author:

AFP

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Wed, 2019-04-03 13:40

ALGIERS: Algeria's Constitutional Council officially accepted the resignation of president Abdelaziz Bouteflika, state TV reported Wednesday, a day after the 82-year-old announced he was quitting following weeks of massive demonstrations.

The council informed parliament "of the declaration of the definitive vacancy of the Presidency of the Republic," the television station announced in a news ticker.

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[Palestinians pray for fish as Israel opens deeper waters](#)

Author:

Tue, 2019-04-02 22:18

GAZA: As their rickety motorboats pattered out into deep Mediterranean waters for the first time in almost two decades, the Palestinian fishermen prayed for deepwater mackerel and tuna to supplement Gaza's usual shallows fare of sardines, shrimp and crab.

This week, as part of Egyptian-mediated efforts to ease the plight of 2 million residents of the blockaded Gaza Strip, Israel has extended the area where it permits Palestinians to fish.

"Such a distance has been off-limits. And hopefully there are lots of fish to bring back," said 69-year-old fisherman Ahmed Al-Amoudi.

Israel keeps a naval cordon on Gaza, part of a blockade it and neighboring Egypt say is necessary to prevent arms smuggling by the Hamas extremists that rule the coastal territory.

Since 2000, Israel has limited Palestinian fishing waters to just 6-9 miles from the Gaza coast. But on Monday it broadened the limit to 12-15 miles (19-24 km) out.

"This step is part of the civilian policy aimed at preventing a humanitarian deterioration in the Gaza Strip and reflects the policy of distinguishing between terror and the uninvolved populace," an Israeli official said.

Palestinians saw the move as an Israeli concession to a year of protests at the border, combined with several surges of cross-border fighting which have prompted foreign mediation on ways to help Gaza's economy.

"Thanks to God and then to the 'March of Return', which opened up the sea for us," Al-Amoudi said, referring to the weekly demonstrations at the frontier, which demand a lifting of the blockade and the right for Palestinians to return to homes their families fled or were forced from when Israel was founded.

April to June are peak Gaza fishing season. The sector accounts for less than 5 percent of the enclave's GDP and supports some 50,000 people, a fraction of

the 2 million population.

But the fishing has value beyond the numbers, as one of the few viable industries in Gaza, where more than half the population is unemployed and nearly 80 percent receive some form of aid, according to the World Bank.

With Gaza's land borders tightly controlled by neighboring Israel and Egypt, the sea's horizon provides many Palestinians with a glimpse of hoped-for freedoms of movement in the future.

The fishermen still have it hard, with fuel and spare parts for their boats scarce. They say that Israel has also barred the importation to Gaza of wire cables that would allow them to line nets for plumbing the depths.

But fisherman Wael Abu Mohammed was still cautiously upbeat.

"With 15 miles now we will be comfortable, if there are no problems with the Israelis," the father of 10 said. "We hope for the best."

The past year has been the deadliest in Gaza since the last war between Hamas and Israel five years ago, with nearly 200 Palestinians killed by Israeli forces at the border demonstrations. One Israeli soldier was killed.

United Nations investigators say Israel has used excessive force. Israel says it has no choice but to use deadly force to protect the border from militants and infiltrators.

The Israeli navy has in the past fired on Palestinian boats that strayed from the fishing zones, sometimes impounding the vessels and detaining their occupants. In addition to smuggling, Israel worries about seaborne attacks. In the 2014 Gaza war, Hamas frogmen swam from Gaza to storm an Israeli coastal base.

The Israeli official said that maintaining the expanded zone for Gaza fisherman "depends on (them) honoring the agreements" and that any attempt to venture beyond it "will be handled accordingly by the (Israeli) security services."



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Gaza fisherman battles poverty with plastic-bottle boat
Gaza fisherman killed at sea by Egyptian fire: union

[Twitter says action taken against Netanyahu bot network](#)

Author:

Tue, 2019-04-02 21:54

JERUSALEM: Twitter said on Tuesday it has “taken action” after an Israeli watchdog exposed an alleged bot network spreading propaganda in support of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and smearing his opponents.

Noam Rotem, one of the researchers behind the report, said Tuesday he has seen Twitter shut down 258 of the over 400 automated and fake accounts his team identified.

Twitter did not comment on the number of accounts removed, but said that the platform prohibits fabricated accounts and “has taken action where violations are identified” to ensure healthy dialogue online during election cycles.

With just a week until the national vote, the pro-Netanyahu bot network discovery jolted Israel’s already turbulent campaign season.

Netanyahu lambasted the report as “libel,” and his challenger Benny Gantz accused him of “trying to steal the election.”

Netanyahu’s Likud party had denied using fake accounts.

In a video clip dismissing the report’s findings, Likud said 985,408 Israelis had voted for Netanyahu in the previous election in 2015.

Separately, the premier’s office said that Netanyahu will meet Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow on Thursday, just five days ahead of an April 9 Israeli election.

Netanyahu has held a series of meetings with foreign leaders in the runup to the vote, helping him further his argument that he is Israel’s irreplaceable statesman. His office did not provide further details in its brief statement on the meeting.

Israel and Russia coordinate their military activity in Syria to avoid accidental clashes.



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Israeli watchdog finds online manipulation favoring Netanyahu ahead of vote
Israel's Netanyahu to meet Putin in Moscow on Thursday