

Pompeo urges Lebanon to move away from Iran and Hezbollah's 'dark ambitions'

Fri, 2019-03-22 18:19

BEIRUT: US sanctions on Iran and its Lebanese ally Hezbollah are working, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said on Friday on a visit to Beirut, calling on Lebanon to stand up to the Shi'ite group which he accused of "criminality, terror and threats".

Lebanese politicians who met Pompeo, including President Michel Aoun, Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri and Foreign Minister Gebran Bassil – all political allies of Hezbollah – said they had told him the group was part and parcel of Lebanese politics.

Pompeo, touring the Middle East to drum up support for Washington's harder line against Iran, cited a speech by Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah this month asking the group's supporters for funds as evidence US pressure was working.

"Our pressure on Iran is simple. It's aimed at cutting off the funding for terrorists and it's working," he said standing alongside Bassil after their meeting. "We believe that our work is already constraining Hezbollah's activities."

Pompeo said Iran gave Hezbollah as much as \$700 million a year.

The heavily armed Hezbollah has a large militia that has taken part in Syria's civil war alongside President Bashar Al-Assad's government, but it also has elected members of parliament and positions in the national unity government.

The group's influence over Lebanese state institutions has expanded in the last year. Together with allies that view its arsenal as an asset to Lebanon, it won more than 70 of parliament's 128 seats in an election last year.

The group has taken three of the 30 portfolios in the government formed by the Western-backed Prime Minister Saad Al-Hariri in January, including the health ministry – the first time it has held a ministry with a significant budget.

Pompeo said he shared concerns about "external and internal pressures on the government, including coming from some of its own members, which do not serve an independent thriving Lebanon".

The United States would continue to use "all peaceful means" to choke off financing that "feeds Iran and Hezbollah terror operations", he said, pointing to "smuggling, criminal networks and the misuse of government positions".

"Lebanon faces a choice: bravely move forward as an independent and proud

nation, or allow the dark ambitions of Iran and Hezbollah to dictate your future,” he said.

Lebanese President Michel Aoun earlier told Pompeo that Hezbollah was a Lebanese party with popular support, the Lebanese presidency said.

“Preserving national unity and civil peace is a priority for us,” Aoun told Pompeo, the presidency said on its Twitter feed.

Speaker Berri said earlier in a statement that he had told Pompeo that Hezbollah’s “resistance” against Israel was a result of continuing Israeli occupation of Lebanese territory.

Israel, the closest US ally in the Middle East, regards Iran as its biggest threat and Hezbollah as the main danger on its borders.







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Pompeo calls Hezbollah risk to Middle East stability
Netanyahu and Pompeo vow to counter Iranian aggression

[Israel envoy summoned over 'intrusion' at French cultural center](#)

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Fri, 2019-03-22 13:39

PARIS: France's foreign ministry said Friday that it had summoned the Israeli government's representative in Paris over what it called an "intrusion" by Israeli forces at its cultural center in Jerusalem.

In a rare move, police entered the building Thursday to cancel an event with a women's group which Israel claims is sponsored or financed by the Palestinian Authority.

A diplomatic source said France's consul general had immediately protested the police's entry to the center in east Jerusalem, which Israel has annexed in a move not recognized by the international community.

"Such actions are a serious and unacceptable infringement to the functioning of our cultural network in Jerusalem," the foreign ministry said in a statement.

It said the Israeli charge d'affaires had been called to meet with French officials for "necessary clarifications."

"France intends to maintain and develop its deep and longstanding relations with Palestinian civil society," it added.

The French consulate could not confirm Thursday if the women's association was indeed financed by the Palestinian Authority – Israel considers all PA activities in Jerusalem illegal.

But Palestinians who were to participate in the event said the allegation was false.

"It was an event related to Mother's Day" and to sell crafts made by women from Jerusalem, said one of the women who was to participate, declining to give her name.

Similar events occur on a near-monthly basis, she said.



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UN rights forum condemns Israeli use of force at deadly Gaza protests
Palestinians in financial crisis after Israel, US moves

[US imposes new sanctions on Iran over weapons programs](#)

Fri, 2019-03-22 16:46

WASHINGTON: The United States said on Friday it was imposing sanctions on 14 people and 17 entities connected to Iran's Organization of Defensive Innovation and Research (SPND), a body it said had played a central role in Iran's past nuclear weapons effort.

Among those designated for sanctions was the Shahid Karimi group, which works on missile and explosive-related projects for the SPND, and four associated individuals, the US Treasury Department said in a Statement.

"The US government is taking decisive action against actors at all levels in connection with Iran's Organization of Defensive Innovation and Research (SPND) who have supported the Iranian regime's defense sector," Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin said.

"The United States will continue applying maximum pressure to the Iranian regime, using all economic tools to prevent Iran from developing weapons of mass destruction. Anyone considering dealing with the Iranian defense industry in general, and SPND in particular, risks professional, personal, and financial isolation."

It said the steps targeted current SPND subordinate groups, supporters, front companies, and associated officials. The move freezes any US assets of those targeted and bans US dealings with them.

"Today's action serves as a warning to individuals and entities considering dealing with the Iranian regime's defense sector in general, and SPND in particular: by engaging in sanctionable activity with designated Iranian persons, you risk professional, personal, and financial isolation," the Treasury statement said.

Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said on Thursday that Tehran was determined to boost its defense capabilities despite mounting pressure from the United States and its allies to curb its ballistic missile program.



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France urges Iran to free human rights lawyer Nasrin Sotoudeh
Iran lays false trail to dodge US sanctions

[France urges Iran to free human rights lawyer Nasrin Sotoudeh](#)

Author:

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Thu, 2019-03-21 19:56

PARIS: France on Thursday called for Iranian human rights lawyer Nasrin Sotoudeh to be released and warned Tehran that its adherence to a nuclear accord does not give it a blank cheque on human rights.

"We will do all we can to secure the release of Mrs. Sotoudeh," French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian told the upper chamber Senate.

"She was condemned under astonishing conditions," for "defending the rights of women, in particular those who contest the obligation to wear the Islamic veil," he added.

Sotoudeh's husband Reza Khandan told AFP on Sunday that his wife had been sentenced to a total of 33 years in prison over a case with seven charges, but she is to only serve the longest sentence, 12 years imposed on Sunday for "encouraging corruption and debauchery."

She has also been convicted of espionage.

Sotoudeh has also been sentenced to a total of 148 lashes for appearing in court without the hijab head covering and for another offense.

According to Khandan, Sotoudeh has refrained from choosing a lawyer as attorneys on her previous cases have faced prosecution for representing her.

"We have been making considerable efforts in recent months to preserve the (Iranian) nuclear accord, despite America's withdrawal," said Le Drian.

"We are doing so because we respect our signature, but Iran must also respect its obligations in particular those international agreements relating to civil and political rights," he added.

Last month the UN atomic watchdog said that Iran has been adhering to its deal with world powers on limiting its nuclear program, as diplomatic wrangling continues over the future of the accord.

The latest report from the International Atomic Energy Agency confirmed that Iran was still complying with the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with global powers under which Tehran drastically scaled back its nuclear program in return for sanctions relief.

Last week, European nations rejected a call from US Vice President Mike Pence to follow the US lead in withdrawing from the Iranian nuclear deal.

Le Drian said Thursday: "Our wish to preserve the Vienna accord does not grant carte-blanche to Iran and certainly not in the matter of human rights."

Before her arrest, Sotoudeh, 55, had taken on the cases of several women arrested for appearing in public without headscarves in protest at the mandatory dress code in force in Iran.

Sotoudeh won the European Parliament's prestigious Sakharov Prize in 2012 for her work on high-profile cases, including those of convicts on death row for offenses committed as minors.

She spent three years in prison after representing dissidents arrested during mass protests in 2009 against the disputed re-election of ultra-conservative president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.



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Iran rights lawyer Sotoudeh to face additional 10 years in jail
Iran rights lawyer Nasrin Sotoudeh sentenced to 7 years in jail

[Post-Daesh, north Iraq's minority mosaic blown apart by trauma](#)

Author:

Thu, 2019-03-21 22:36

SINJAR: For decades, his land was his life. Now, like other Sunni Arab farmers in Iraq's diverse north, Mahdi Abu Enad is cut off from his fields, fearing reprisal attacks.

He hails from the mountainous region of Sinjar, which borders Syria and is home to an array of communities – Shiite and Sunni Arabs, Kurds, and Yazidis.

That patchwork was ripped apart when Daesh rampaged across the area in 2014, and has not reconciled even long after Iraqi forces ousted IS in 2017.

Yazidis, whose men Daesh killed en masse and whose women and girls were enslaved by the group, say they have suffered the most.

They accuse their Sunni Arab neighbors of granting the extremists of Daesh a foothold in Sinjar.

Displaced Sunni Arabs, on the other hand, slam the sweeping accusation as unfair and say looting and the threat of retaliatory violence have kept them from coming home.

“We stand accused of belonging to IS (Daesh) because they settled in Sunni areas, but IS doesn’t represent Sunnis,” said Abu Enad, displaced from his hometown to Al-Baaj since 2014.

“We all lost our livelihoods. It’s been four years since we cultivated our land because we fear for our lives,” he said.

In 2017, Human Rights Watch said Yazidi armed groups reportedly abducted and executed 52 Sunni Arab civilians in retaliation for Daesh abuses.

Fearing similar abuses, Abu Enad still lives about 10 km from his farm, and was only able to tend to it during planting season with a paramilitary escort.

“We had to leave at 4:00 p.m. every day because the situation was not safe enough. So how could you come back with your family to resume farming and living here?” he said.

Across Iraq, around a third of the population relies on farming to survive, and the ratio was even higher in Sinjar.

For centuries, the region’s diverse farmers jointly sold their fig and wheat harvests in the provincial capital of Mosul, 120 km to the east.

But in the wake of Daesh, farming equipment was stolen, orchards burned, and rubble stuffed into irrigation wells.

Now, the area’s once-lush farming hamlets have been reduced to ruined ghost towns, with most Arab villages including Abu Enad’s left flattened.

A few kilometers to the north, the main town of Sinjar is also still rubble, with little power, water, or health services available.

A few thousand Yazidi families have come back, but tens of thousands more are still stuck in displacement camps elsewhere in Iraq and Syria, while others fled to Europe.

And more than 3,000 Yazidis remain missing, many of them believed to be women and girls taken as sex slaves.

That has made it difficult for the community to forgive or forget the mass crimes against them.

“The Arabs of Sinjar were involved in the abduction of our women,” said Yazidi cleric Sheikh Fakher Khalaf.

“They betrayed the co-existence we had, so they can no longer live among us,” said Khalaf, who returned home to Sinjar after three years of displacement.

“Those who have done nothing, we respect them. But those who have blood on their hands, they must face justice. Sinjar is not a place for them.”

Several local initiatives have made minimal progress on reconciliation, but efforts have not gone far enough, said the Norwegian Refugee Council.

“We are seeing plans to rebuild and rehabilitate some parts, but we’re not seeing any concrete process toward reconciliations,” said spokesman Tom Peyre-Costa.

He called for more dialogue between communities, transparent and fair trials, and accountability for all perpetrators of crimes.

Iraqi courts have tried hundreds for belonging to Daesh, handing down at least 300 death sentences.

“People who used to be able to live together are not able to do so anymore because of the tension between communities, so this is why reconciliation must be prioritized,” he said.

While the communal fissures in Sinjar are particularly deep, the challenge of rebuilding trust after Daesh is one faced across Iraqi society.

Displaced Sunnis with perceived ties to Daesh undergo tough screening processes to return to their hometowns, where they sometimes face harassment.

Abu Enad, the displaced farmer, still hopes that Sinjar can return to its harmonious past.

“We Sunnis have been hurt by Daesh like Yazidis were hurt,” he said.

“We want to come back to our land so we can farm and live off the fruits of our labor alongside them.”



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Iraq begins exhuming mass Yazidi grave left by Daesh
Iraqi Yazidis celebrate restoration of temple destroyed by Daesh