

Israeli energy minister on rare visit to Egypt

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CAIRO: Israel's Energy Minister Yuval Steinitz arrived in Cairo on Sunday to attend a natural gas conference in a rare visit to Egypt by an Israeli official, airport sources said.

Jordan and Egypt are the only two Arab states to have full diplomatic ties with Israel, but the relations remain limited and taboo among the general populations.

Egyptians, like most Arabs, are largely opposed to the normalization of ties with Israel in the absence of any resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Steinitz's visit came at the invitation of the Egyptian government, Israel's energy ministry said.

The Israeli minister was set to attend a regional forum on natural gas, which has become a major economic and strategic issue in the eastern Mediterranean. The "development of gas fields has geopolitical and geostrategic value," Steinitz told Israeli army radio ahead of the trip.

"Here you have for the first time real economic cooperation between the axis-of-peace states Israel, Egypt and Jordan, along with European countries."

Egypt has increased its meetings and agreements on natural gas with neighboring countries as of late.

In February 2018, Cairo reached a deal with Israel for the transfer of natural gas from Israel's Tamar and Leviathan reservoirs to Egypt.

"Steinitz's invitation to the conference in Egypt is the positive outcome of the gas agreement," a source close to energy minister told AFP.

The last time an Israeli minister visited Egypt was in November 2017 when Social Equality Minister Gila Gamliel took part in a conference on the promotion of gender equality in Mediterranean states.

Relations between Israel and some Arab countries have warmed in recent months, with Israeli ministers last year visiting the United Arab Emirates and Oman.



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Israel drone maker Aeronautics gets \$232 million buyout offer
Israel finds last tunnel, ending mission on Lebanese border

[Funding shortage leads to World Food Programme cuts for Palestinians](#)

Author:

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Sun, 2019-01-13 15:22

JERUSALEM: The World Food Programme has suspended or reduced aid for some of its Palestinian beneficiaries in the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip due to funding shortages, an official with the organization said Sunday.

Some 27,000 Palestinians are no longer receiving aid through the United Nations program since January 1 in the West Bank, said Stephen Kearney, the organization's director for the Palestinian territories.

Another 165,000, including 110,000 in Gaza, are receiving 80 percent of the usual amount, he said.

The cuts were decided upon after a gradual reduction in donations over the past nearly four years, with US cuts having the biggest effect.

In 2018, the WFP assisted 250,000 people in Gaza and 110,000 in the West Bank.

In the village of Yatta near Hebron in the southern West Bank, Maha Al-Nawajah said she is buying fewer necessities.

"In December, they did not renew my card," said the 52-year-old mother, referring to the WFP card that allowed her to buy groceries for 12 members of her extended family.

She said family members were unemployed.

"My sons do not have permission to enter into Israel and my husband receives it occasionally" and can earn some cash during those times, she said.

The West Bank has an unemployment rate of 18 percent and some Palestinians seek to work in Israel with the hope of earning a higher salary.

But permits are needed to do so and Israel is selective in who is given one.

The WFP launched a funding appeal on December 19 and received additional contributions from the European Union and Switzerland, but the amount remains short, Kearney said.

It said at the time that it was in need of \$57 million. It will now seek contributions from new donors in an effort to fill the gap, he said.

Kearney said there were also concerns that the cuts would affect the local economy since residents used the cards to buy goods in local stores.

In the Gaza Strip, around 80 percent of the two million residents rely on international aid.

The strip has been under an Israeli blockade for more than a decade. Israel and Gaza's Islamist rulers Hamas have fought three wars since 2008.

US President Donald Trump has cut some \$500 million in Palestinian aid.



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Egypt limits Gaza passage after PA quits border crossing
Palestine TV offices in Gaza ransacked by gunmen

[Nuclear chief says Iran exploring new uranium enrichment](#)

Author:

By NASSER KARIMI | AP

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Sun, 2019-01-13 (All day)

TEHRAN: The head of Iran's nuclear program said Sunday that the Islamic Republic has begun "preliminary activities for designing" a modern process for 20-percent uranium enrichment for its 50-year-old research reactor in Tehran, signaling new danger for the nuclear deal.

Restarting enrichment at that level would mean Iran had withdrawn the 2015 nuclear deal it struck with world powers, an accord that President Donald Trump already pulled America out of in May.

However, Ali Akbar Salehi's comments to state television appeared aimed at telling the world Iran would slowly restart its program. If it chooses, it could resume mass enrichment at its main facility in the central Iranian town of Natanz.

"Preliminary activities for designing modern 20 percent (enriched uranium) fuel have begun," state TV quoted Salehi as saying.

Salehi said adding the "modern fuel" will increase efficiency in Tehran research reactor that consumes 20-percent enriched fuel.

"We are at the verge" of being ready, he said, without elaborating.

In June, Iran informed the UN's nuclear watchdog that it will increase its nuclear enrichment capacity within the limits set by the 2015 agreement with world powers. Iran continues to comply with the terms of the deal, according to the UN, despite the American pullout.

Salehi heads the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran, whose Tehran campus holds the nuclear research reactor given to the country by the US in 1967 under the rule of the shah. But in the time since that American "Atoms for Peace" donation, Iran was convulsed by its 1979 Islamic Revolution and the subsequent takeover and hostage crisis at the US Embassy in Tehran.

For decades since, Western nations have been concerned about Iran's nuclear program, accusing Tehran of seeking atomic weapons. Iran long has said its program is for peaceful purposes, but it faced years of crippling sanctions. The 2015 nuclear deal Iran struck with world powers, including the US under President Barack Obama, was aimed at relieving those fears. Under it, Iran agreed to store its excess centrifuges at its underground Natanz enrichment facility under constant surveillance by the UN nuclear watchdog, the International Atomic Energy Agency. Iran can use 5,060 older-model IR-1 centrifuges at Natanz, but only to enrich uranium up to 3.67 percent.

That low-level enrichment means the uranium can be used to fuel a civilian reactor but is far below the 90 percent needed to produce a weapon. Iran also can possess no more than 300 kilograms (660 pounds) of that uranium. That's compared to the 10,000 kilograms (22,046 pounds) of higher-enriched uranium it once had.

Trump, who campaigned on a promise to tear up the nuclear deal, said he ultimately pulled America out of the accord over Iran's ballistic missile program and its malign influence on the wider Mideast.

In an interview in September with The Associated Press, Salehi warned that Iran could begin mass production of more advanced centrifuges if the deal collapses.

"If we have to go back and withdraw from the nuclear deal, we certainly do not go back to where we were before," Salehi said at the time. "We will be standing on a much, much higher position."



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Iran protests to Poland over Iran-focused summit
Iraq brush past Yemen to set up Iran decider

[Israel tried to wiretap Hamas in botched mission, group says](#)

Author:

By FARES AKRAM | AP

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Sat, 2019-01-12 (All day)

GAZA CITY: Gaza's ruling Hamas said Saturday that Israeli undercover forces had attempted to install equipment to monitor the group's landline communications network during a botched mission in November. The findings of a lengthy investigation were announced by the Hamas military

wing, known as the Qassam Brigades, in a pre-recorded TV statement. Hamas presented surveillance footage, as well as photos of drills, chain saws and two pistols with silencers, to back up its claims. Hamas thwarted an attempt to "plant spying devices in the Gaza Strip," a Qassam spokesman, identified only as Abu Obeida, said in the statement. Israel's military has not released details about the operation which went awry Nov. 11, leading to the heaviest round of cross-border fire, including Hamas rockets and Israeli airstrikes, since a 2014 war between the two sides. The Hamas statement described an Israeli mission that allegedly spanned close to a year.

Abu Obeida said Israel brought equipment and vehicles into Gaza through a commercial crossing point between January and October. Fifteen members of the unit entered Gaza on a foggy night through the perimeter fence a few days before Nov. 11, the spokesman said.

A woman working with the Israeli unit entered Gaza several times, disguised as an employee of a humanitarian organization, the spokesman said. Members of the unit used forged IDs of local Gazans and the documents of a charity group, he added.

On Nov. 11, the unit was detected by Hamas fighters as it drove near the town of Abassan in southern Gaza. The discovery sparked a firefight, in which a member of the undercover unit and two Hamas gunmen, including a local commander, were killed. Five other militants were killed in airstrikes as Israeli aircrafts provided cover to airlift the force, including the dead officer.

In the televised statement, Hamas showed low-resolution surveillance camera footage purportedly showing two vehicles being used by the undercover squad. The footage showed some faces of the occupants of the vehicles and what Hamas said was the moment its gunmen searched the van.

According to the investigation, which confirmed previous reports, the firefight began when a local Hamas commander, Nour Baraka, ordered the detention of the occupants of the van who then shot him with silencer pistols. In the exchange of fire, a member of the Israeli force and another Hamas gunman were also killed before the van sped away.

Hamas said the slain Israeli commander of the group was an Arab with the rank of lieutenant colonel.



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Hamas says Egypt to close Gaza crossing to Palestinians leaving the territory
Fatah says Hamas arrests members in Gaza ahead of rally

[Key powers stick with Bashir despite mounting protests in Sudan](#)

Sat, 2019-01-12 21:37

KHARTOUM /CAIRO: The death toll from protests in Sudan that began last month has risen to 24, the head of the Sudanese government fact-finding committee Amer Ibrahim said on Saturday.

But key powers were standing by the ruling regime to ensure stability in a strife-torn region even as angry protests piled pressure on Sudanese President Omar Bashir to step down, analysts say.

Demonstrations that erupted in the provinces last month after the government

tripled the price of bread have escalated into nationwide protests that analysts say pose the biggest challenge to Bashir since he took power in 1989.

Amnesty International has estimated that at least 40 people have died in the protests.

Despite the bloodshed, outside players including major powers China, Russia and the US all see an interest in the 75-year-old staying at the helm.

"All camps in the region are at each other's throat, but somehow they agree on Bashir," said Abdelwahab Al-Affendi, author and an academic at the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies.

"They seem to favor continuity. They believe that any other alternative might not be favorable to them and to the region."

Egypt, which has deep historical ties with Sudan, has called repeatedly for stability in its southern neighbor, with its commanding position on the Nile on whose waters they both depend.

"Egypt fully supports the security and stability of Sudan, which is integral to Egypt's national security," President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi told a top Bashir aide who visited Cairo last week.

Days earlier, Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry expressed confidence that Sudan would "overcome the present situation."

Relations between Cairo and Khartoum had deteriorated sharply in 2017 over territorial disputes, but in recent months the two governments have ironed out their differences, with Sudan even lifting a 17-month ban on Egyptian agricultural produce.

Arab governments have scrambled to provide support, anxious to avoid any repetition of the upheavals that rocked the region in 2011.

"There has been evidence of tangible support to Bashir... be it from Egypt, Saudi or Qatar," said Affendi.

"These allies are against any kind of successful uprising. They feel that if it happens, then they will be next," he said, adding that the Arab Spring has not been forgotten.

Qatar's ruler, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, called Bashir just days after the protests erupted to offer his support.

During his long years in power, Bashir has built up relations with all of the region's bickering diplomatic players, through a string of sometimes spectacular foreign policy twists.

Just days before the protests erupted, he traveled to meet Syrian President Bashar Assad in the first visit to Damascus by any Arab leader since the Syrian civil war erupted in 2011.

“His foreign policy is in all directions driven by economic pressures,” said a European diplomat on condition of anonymity. The regime hosted Al-Qaeda founder Osama bin Laden in the 1990s, and then developed ties with Iran before severing them in 2016.

In October 2017, increased cooperation with Washington helped Khartoum get a decades-old US trade embargo lifted.

Washington has still kept Sudan on its blacklist of “state sponsors of terrorism” along with Iran, North Korea and Syria.

And although the US and the EU do not openly back Bashir, who is wanted by the International Criminal Court on war crimes charges including genocide in Darfur, they work with Khartoum to ensure that “Sudan remains stable,” the diplomat said.

Any kind of instability in Sudan could trigger a new wave of Sudanese migrants headed toward Europe, he added.

Sudan’s strategic location in the Horn of Africa is a blessing for Bashir, said Amal El-Taweel of the Cairo-based Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies.

“I think the international and regional powers will not allow Sudan to fall,” she told AFP.

“But a lot depends on how the balance of power shifts on the streets,” she added.

Bashir surprised the West when he dumped Tehran for Riyadh in 2016. The Sudanese leader also sent hundreds of troops to join the Arab coalition battling Iran-linked Houthi militants in Yemen.

“The world also doesn’t want to see another new bastion of hard-liners that might be created if something like this happens.”

The shift was not just diplomatic. The Sudanese leader also sent hundreds of troops to join the Arab coalition battling Iran-linked Houthi militants in Yemen, in what he called an “ideological” decision.

By doing so, Bashir signaled to Gulf Arab monarchies that he was an asset in their struggle against Shiite Iran.

“In return Saudi and the United Arab Emirates have given Bashir just about enough to stay afloat, although no announcements have been made,” said Affendi, referring to financial aid to Khartoum.

For international powers like China, which has reportedly invested billions of dollars in Sudan, the country offers a gateway to the rest of the continent.

“For countries like China and Russia, Sudan is an entry gate to Africa,” the foreign diplomat said.

“Be it them or the West, nobody wants Sudan to crumble.”

(With AFP)



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Police tear gas Sudanese protesters calling for government to resign Sudan
police use tear gas as protests kill three