

Iraq removes blast walls around Green Zone for partial reopening

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Thu, 2018-11-22 13:19

Baghdad: Iraqi authorities began removing cement walls surrounding Baghdad's Green Zone on Thursday in preparation for a partial reopening of the high-security enclave, an Iraqi official and correspondents said.

The Green Zone became home to Iraq's parliament and other government offices, United Nations agencies and western embassies after the US-led invasion of 2003.

The area on the west bank of the Tigris River is ringed by blast walls topped with barbed wire and guarded by Iraqi security forces, but inaccessible for most Iraqi citizens.

On Thursday, reporters saw some walls had been removed.

"Work is ongoing to lift the cement blocks, and a main road will be opened provisionally on Saturday and officially on Sunday," an Iraqi official said.

The official said three entrances into the 10-square kilometer (3.8-square mile) zone would be opened to allow access to a key thoroughfare and therefore relieve traffic clogging other parts of Baghdad.

"The reopening of the road that cuts through the center of the Green Zone came after directions from the prime minister," the official added.

When Adel Abdel Mahdi was appointed premier last month, he called on parliament to open up the area to all as a way to break down barriers between Iraq's citizens.

Abdel Mahdi also moved his government's headquarters outside the Green Zone, in a first since 2003.

Previous prime minister Haidar Al-Abadi had also ordered the zone reopened during his reign, but it was sealed off again after only a few days.

It was rumored at the time that objections by the US embassy – which has the tightest security regulations of all bodies present in the Green Zone – were the reason.



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Iraq to unify customs procedures with Kurdistan, PM says
Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman meets with Iraqi president Salih

[Lebanon celebrates independence without a government](#)

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Thu, 2018-11-22 16:09

BEIRUT: The Lebanese people celebrated the 75th anniversary of their country's independence on Wednesday. On the eve of the traditional military parade in the heart of Beirut, President Michel Aoun told the Lebanese people in a national address that "to be an independent nation, the homeland needs

to be the master of its decisions and its land, and to be able to say 'Yes' or 'No' in all issues relating to its national affairs."

President Aoun's speech came as hopes of forming a new government in Lebanon faded in light of Hezbollah's insistence on the need to represent its six Sunni MPs in the government and the refusal of Saad Hariri, the prime minister-designate, to accept this demand.

The president reminded the Lebanese that "the interference of external elements costs us the ability to decide, wastes the essence of independence, and places sovereignty in danger."

He stressed that "differences should not be over the homeland, but over politics, and my call today to all officials, political factions and sects is to discard our differences and highlight the sense of responsibility toward the people, who are fed up by the indifference of the decision-makers to their fears and broken dreams. It is our duty to reassure them about their future and to work hard to save our country economically, socially and morally."

He said that "the crisis of forming a government is not unique and Lebanon has lived through it before. It may happen in other deep-rooted countries too, but it is costing us precious time and preventing the possibilities of production."

Aoun stressed that "the independence and sovereignty of the homeland must remain outside the equation of opposition and loyalty, and outside the scope of a power struggle."

He promised "not to be lenient in the face of corruption and corrupt people. We will not back down on promises of reform, sustainable development and job creation for our youth."

President Aoun also talked about the issue of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, saying that "there are those who are hindering their return to their country for hidden reasons, whether by talking about voluntary return and using all means of encouragement and intimidation to push the displaced to choose to stay where they are, or try to link the issue to a political solution."



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Lebanon's economy faces stark choice: Reform or collapse
Lebanon can't waste more time on government formation – Aoun

[Atomic watchdog: Iran sticking to nuclear deal amid new US sanctions](#)

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Thu, 2018-11-22 12:10

VIENNA: Iran is implementing its side of its nuclear deal with major powers, the UN atomic watchdog policing the pact reaffirmed on Thursday, two weeks after the latest wave of reimposed US sanctions against Tehran took effect. President Donald Trump said in May he was pulling the United States out of

the 2015 nuclear deal for reasons including Iran's influence on the wars in Syria and Yemen and its ballistic missile program, none of which are covered by the pact.

Germany, France and Britain have been scrambling to prevent a collapse of the deal, under which international sanctions against Tehran were lifted in exchange for strict limits being placed on Iran's nuclear activities.

Many Western companies have canceled plans to do business with Iran for fear of breaching the sanctions Washington has put back in place. That has raised fears that Iran will breach the deal's nuclear limits, which are designed to keep it a year away from being able to build a nuclear weapon if it chose to. "Iran is implementing its nuclear-related commitments under the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action," International Atomic Energy Agency Director-General Yukiya Amano told a quarterly meeting of his agency's 35-nation Board of Governors.

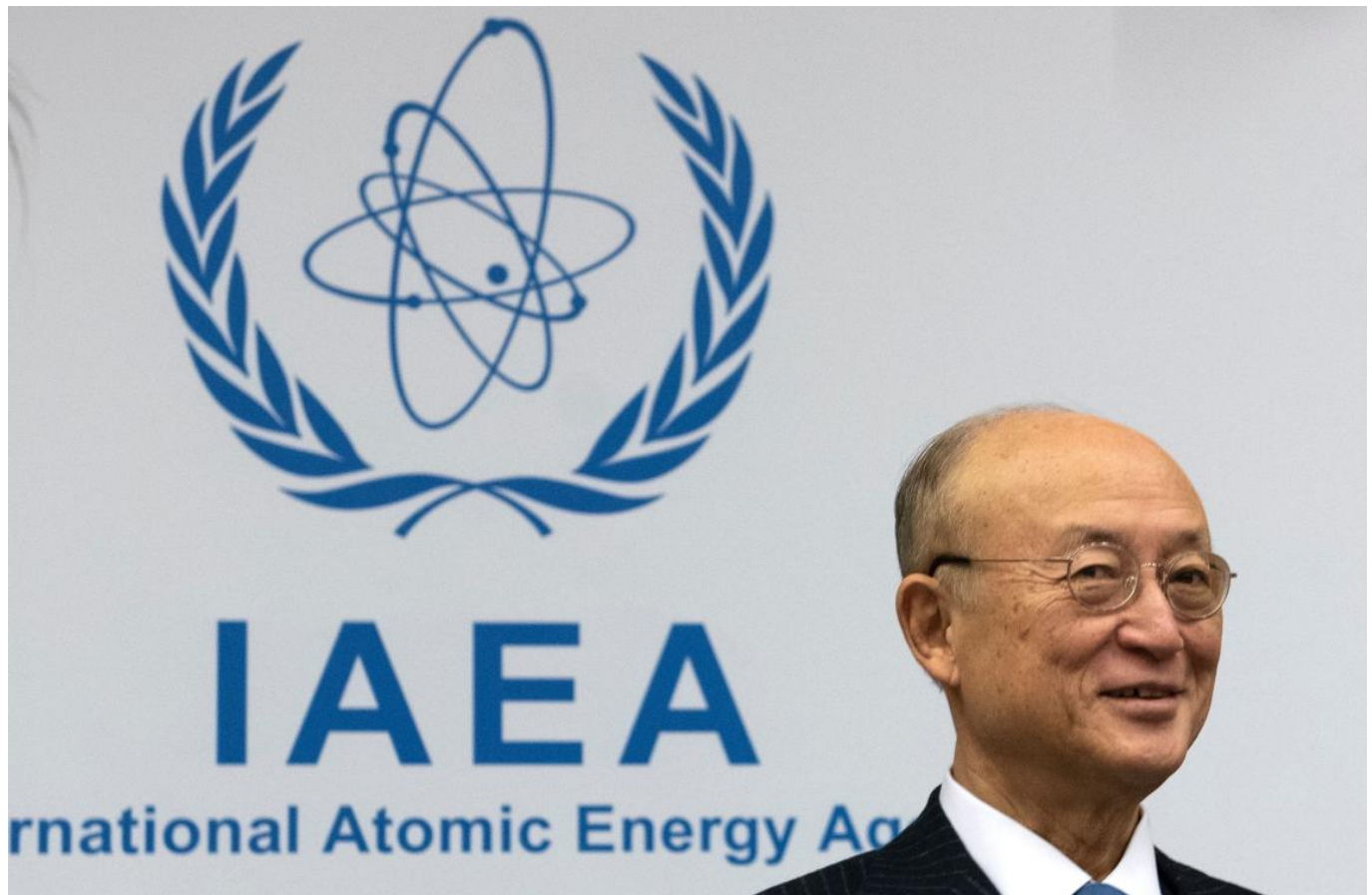
The JCPOA is the official name of the nuclear accord.

"It is essential that Iran continues to fully implement those commitments," he added, confirming the findings of a confidential report to IAEA member states last week.

Amano did not comment on the broader impact of US sanctions, the latest round of which took effect on Nov. 5. Iran has warned it could scrap the deal if signatories France, Britain and Germany and their allies fail to preserve the economic benefits promised by its terms.

The European powers have been working on setting up a so-called special-purpose vehicle that would act as a kind of clearing house matching Iranian exports with EU exports in what amounts to a barter arrangement to circumvent US sanctions.

But the countries they have approached to host it have declined, diplomats say, delaying the project and deepening doubt as to whether Europeans can counteract the bulk of US sanctions targeting oil and other vital sources of income.



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Iran nuclear accord failure would be 'great loss', IAEA chief says
Saudi Arabia welcomes US withdrawal from Iran nuclear deal

[Egypt offers residency to foreign investors](#)

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Wed, 2018-11-21 19:46

CAIRO: In an attempt to further boost its booming real estate sector and attract foreign investment, Egypt will grant residency permits to foreigners who invest at least \$100,000 in the country's property market. The growth rate of Egypt's property market stands at 133 percent in 2018.

This has been fueled by strong demand for housing, along with the sporadic launch of residential construction projects.

The minimum investment required to obtain a residency permit is \$100,000. A three-year residency is on offer for those who invest \$200,000, and five years for those who purchase property worth \$400,000. The offer also applies to properties that are still under construction.

Khaled Abbas, the deputy minister of housing, said the procedures for the scheme are being set up in consultation with the Passport, Immigration and Nationality Administration.

To begin the process for obtaining Egyptian residency, a preliminary contract must be agreed between the property owner and the foreign investor, and then signed by an authorized body, such as the Urban Communities Authority, the Tourism Development Authority or the governorate in which the property is located. Bank statements must also be provided confirming that the money has been transferred from overseas. The passport office will then approve the period of residence.

Members of the House of Representatives welcomed the announcement as a positive move for Egypt and an incentive for foreign investment, which it is hoped will create jobs and economic opportunities.

Whether the public will be so keen remains to be seen.

"This might be a bit problematic," said Aly Salem, a resident of Cairo. "The housing demand in Egypt is already high, with the surging youth population and more and more people looking to get married each year. Where will they stay, if foreigners start swooping in and acquiring both residency and a huge housing unit with just \$100,000?"

Offering further details, Gen. Kamel Amer, the head of the Parliament's Defense and National Security Committee, said foreigners will not have any political rights for the first five years of residency and they will not be eligible to vote for 10 years. He also said spouses and children of investors will not be granted residency unless they live in Egypt.

Spain and Portugal have implemented similar programs in an attempt to boost their property markets. Previously, a foreigner had to live in Egypt for 10 consecutive years to be eligible for naturalization.

The new residency law is part of the efforts to repair the damage to Egypt's economy caused by severe austerity measures imposed after the \$12 billion loan package from the International Monetary Fund in 2016.

The cost and size of properties in Egypt, which are often large and lavish apartments, compare favorably to those in many other countries. Despite this, few Egyptians can afford to pay for a house upfront, but some private property developers are offering 10-year, interest-free installment plans.



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With new Egypt capital being built, what becomes of Cairo?

[Israeli minister says Trump peace plan a 'waste of time'](#)

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Wed, 2018-11-21 12:33

JERUSALEM: A senior Israeli minister said Wednesday that US President Donald Trump's long-awaited plan for peace with the Palestinians was "a waste of time."

"I think that the gap between the Israelis and Palestinians is much too big to be bridged," Justice Minister Ayelet Shaked said at a conference organized

by the Jerusalem Post newspaper.

"I think personally it's a waste of time," she said when asked what she thought about the peace initiative Trump is expected to unveil in the weeks or months ahead.

Shaked is part of the far-right Jewish Home party, a key member of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's coalition.

She and other members of her party openly oppose a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The Palestinians have already vowed to block Trump's peace plan and severed ties with his administration after his December decision to move the US embassy in Israel to Jerusalem and declare the city Israel's capital.

The Palestinians also see the city as the capital of their future state and international consensus has been that Jerusalem's status must be negotiated between the two sides.

Trump has also cut some \$500 million in aid to the Palestinians, who accuse the White House of seeking to blackmail them into accepting a plan they view as blatantly biased in favor of Israel.

Trump aide Jason Greenblatt said recently in an interview with the Times of Israel news site that the plan would "be heavily focused on Israeli security needs" while remaining "fair to the Palestinians."

While expressing her pessimism on the chances for making peace with the Palestinians for now, Shaked however said she would keep an open mind on the US plan.

"Although I want peace like anyone else, I'm just more realistic, and I know that in the current future it is impossible," she said, speaking in English. "But let's wait and see what they (the US) will offer."



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Israel steps up boycott fight after Airbnb settlement ban Israel joins US, others in rejecting UN migration pact