

Israeli PM: Iran nuke deal will bring 'more violent' Mideast

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AFP

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JERUSALEM: Israel's prime minister on Sunday criticized an emerging deal over Iran's nuclear program, saying it would be weaker than a previous agreement and would create a "more violent, more volatile Middle East."

World powers have been negotiating in Vienna in a bid to revive the 2015 nuclear deal, which was left in tatters after the Trump administration, goaded by Israel, withdrew.

The original deal granted Iran relief from crippling economic sanctions in exchange for curbs on its nuclear program. Israel vehemently opposed that accord and has urged negotiators to take a hard line against Iran in the current round of talks.

In a speech to Jewish American leaders Sunday, Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett warned that Iran has used the interim period to march ahead with its enrichment of uranium to levels approaching weapons grade.

He also noted the 10-year limits on enrichment and other key aspects of Iran's nuclear program in the original deal are set to be lifted in 2025 – just two and a half years from now.

That "leaves Iran with a fast track to military-grade enrichment," Bennett told the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations. In the meantime, he said that lifting sanctions right away will deliver billions of dollars to Iran to spend on hostile proxy groups along Israel's borders.

"For Israel and all the stability-seeking forces in the Middle East – the emerging deal as it seems is highly likely to create a more violent, more volatile Middle East," he said.

Opinion

This section contains relevant reference points, placed in (Opinion field)

He repeated his pledge that Israel will not allow Iran to become a threshold state and said Israel would not be bound by a new deal. "We have a clear and un-negotiable red line: Israel will always maintain its freedom of action to defend itself," he said.

Bennett delivered a similar message earlier in the day during the weekly meeting of his Cabinet.

Israel considers Iran to be its greatest enemy. It strongly opposed the 2015 deal and has watched with trepidation as the current talks have carried on. It says it wants an improved deal that places tighter restrictions on Iran's

nuclear program and addresses Iran's long-range missile program and its support for hostile proxies along Israel's borders, like the Lebanese militant Hezbollah.

Israel also insisted that the negotiations must be accompanied by a "credible" military threat to ensure that Iran does not delay indefinitely. Under the strong encouragement of former Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, President Donald Trump withdrew from the original deal in 2018, causing it to unravel. Since then, Iran has stepped up its nuclear activities – amassing a stockpile of highly enriched uranium that goes well beyond the bounds of the accord.

Despite Israel's support for Trump's withdrawal, prominent voices in the country have said in retrospect that the move was a blunder.

In Iran, meanwhile, the Iranian parliament's news agency, ICANA, reported that 250 lawmakers in a statement urged President Ebrahim Raisi and his negotiating team to obtain guarantees from the US and the three other European countries that they won't withdraw from the deal after it is renegotiated.

Iran's hard-line dominated parliament has the power to approve or reject any proposed agreement between Iran and the other parties in Vienna.

The United States has participated in the current talks indirectly because of its withdrawal from the original deal. President Joe Biden has signaled that he wants to rejoin the deal.

Under Trump, the US re-imposed heavy sanctions on the Islamic Republic.

Tehran has responded by increasing the purity and amounts of uranium it enriches and stockpiles, in breach of the accord – formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA.

Iran long has insisted its nuclear program is peaceful. But the country's steps away from its obligations under the accord have alarmed its archenemy Israel and world powers.

Tehran has started enriching uranium up to 60 percent purity – a short technical step from the 90 percent needed to make an atomic bomb, and spinning far more advanced centrifuges than those permitted under the deal. German Chancellor Olaf Scholz told participants at the annual Munich Security Conference on Saturday that the talks have come a long way over the past 10 months and "all elements for a conclusion of the negotiations are on the table." But he also criticized Iran for stepping up its enrichment and restricting inspections by monitors from the UN nuclear agency.

Iran's foreign minister said that it's up to Western countries to show flexibility and "the ball is now in their court."



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Israel shoots down Hezbollah drone, fails to intercept another

[Libya interim PM, fighting ouster, promises populist spending plan](#)

Author:

Sun, 2022-02-20 00:19

TRIPOLI: Libya's interim prime minister announced a series of populist spending plans as he sought to strengthen his position against a push by the eastern-based parliament to replace him.

Abdul Hamid Al-Dbeibah, who has sworn only to hand over power after an election, pledged help for Libyans buying land and homes, and said he would raise some state salaries and continue to subsidise weddings.

However, his position and that of the internationally recognized Government

of National Unity that he represents hangs in the balance with the parliament tasking former Interior Minister Fathi Bashagha to form a new administration.

Dbeibah, who outlined the plan in a speech marking the anniversary of the 2011 uprising that forced out Muammar Qaddafi, says he does not recognize the validity of Bashagha's appointment.

Bashagha has been holding consultations with political and regional factions and is due to propose a new Cabinet next week – a moment that may determine the success or failure of the parliament's push to replace Dbeibah.

It comes at a key moment in the fragile attempt to wrest Libya from more than a decade of chaos and violence after the collapse in December of a planned national election, as many Libyans fear the new political crisis could trigger new strife.

The parliament, which mostly sided with eastern forces in the civil war that started in 2014, moved to seize control of the political process after the elections collapsed.

Parliament Speaker Aguila Saleh said the GNU was no longer valid and the chamber set a roadmap that involved redrafting the temporary constitution, appointing a new interim government and pushing back elections.

Critics of Saleh accuse him of seeking to postpone elections that would replace the parliament and of abusing parliamentary processes to push through Bashagha's designation as prime minister, both of which he denies.

Dbeibah has said that eight years after the parliament was elected, its legitimacy has expired and he has promised to issue his own roadmap in the coming days for national elections in June.



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Arab League chief urges Libyan political consensus UN adviser tells Libya it must preserve calm, stability

[How political dysfunction precipitated Lebanon's healthcare collapse](#)

Sun, 2022-02-20 00:08

LONDON: Lebanon's health system is in a precarious state following wave upon wave of political and economic crisis. As the country reels from medical supply shortages, COVID-19 case surges and an exodus of skilled medical professionals, the urgency of the sector's need for outside help is no longer a matter of debate.

In most countries, it might seem reasonable to look to the government to implement reforms to rescue the health system from collapse. But in Lebanon, where it is arguably politics itself that is making the nation sick, the embattled state is unlikely to offer solutions.

A new study led by King's College London and the American University of Beirut suggests Lebanon's health system is in decline thanks in large part to

the same disastrous political decisions and systemic problems that led to the country's 2019 economic collapse.

The study, "How politics made a nation sick," conducted by the Research for Health in Conflict-MENA project (R4HC-MENA), shows how a series of politically driven disasters has created a crisis state that is unprepared to deal with a deepening public-health emergency.

LEBANESE ECONOMY

Nation trapped in worst economic crisis since 1975-1990 civil war



Source: IMF, UNHCR, Lebanese government

ARAB NEWS

Dr. Adam Coutts, one of the R4HC-MENA project leads, describes the health situation in Lebanon as "a slow moving trainwreck, which sped up in the pre-pandemic period when the economy collapsed in 2019."

Ever since the end of Lebanon's civil war in 1990, sectarianism, clientelism and corruption have dominated political life and driven the country into successive bouts of unrest and instability.

Corruption, hyperinflation and the 2019 banking sector collapse have plunged Lebanon into the worst economic crisis in its modern history. The arrival of millions of refugees from neighboring Syria has only compounded the strain on its creaking infrastructure.

About 19.5 percent of Lebanon's population of 7 million are refugees from

neighboring countries. Already living precariously in impoverished communities, few of them have the means or the connections to obtain vital medications at a time of scarcity.



Protesting pharmacists (above) hold signs saying “no gasoline = no ambulance,” denouncing the critical condition facing the country’s hospitals while grappling with dire fuel shortages. (AFP)

Meanwhile, the drastic devaluation of the currency has made health insurance unaffordable for many Lebanese.

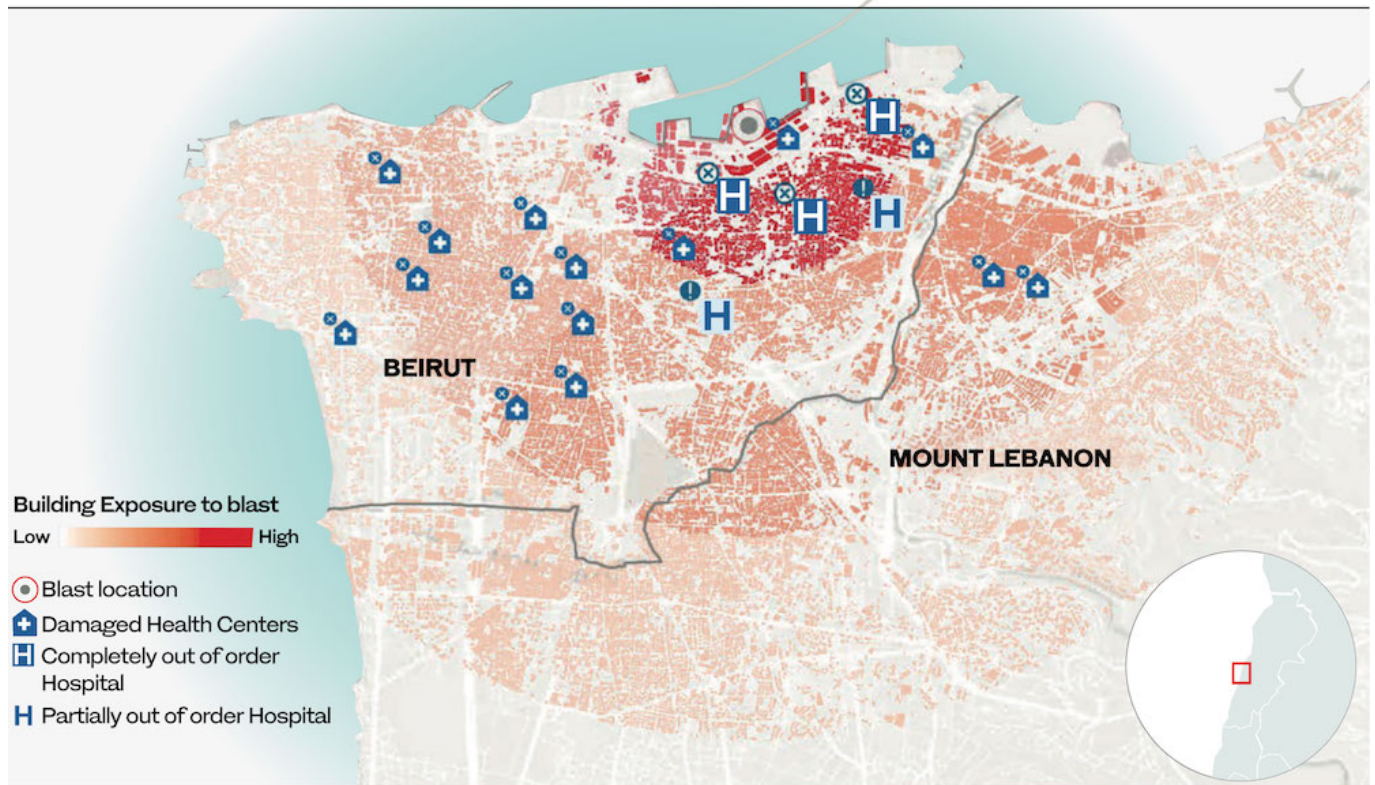
“The social and economic situation in Lebanon right now is dire,” said Dr. Coutts. “We have been working on health, economic and social issues in Lebanon for ten years and have never seen it this bad.”

The steady depletion of foreign-currency reserves has made it difficult for Lebanese traders to import essential goods, including basic medicines, and has led banks to curtail credit lines – a disaster for a nation that depends so heavily on imports.

Furthermore, patients have been left struggling to access appointments and surgeries as medical staff flee the country in droves.

According to the R4HC-MENA study, about 400 doctors and 500 nurses out of the country’s 15,000 registered doctors and 16,800 registered nurses have emigrated since the onset of the crisis.

FACILITIES DAMAGED BY THE BEIRUT PORT BLAST



Source: World Health Organisation

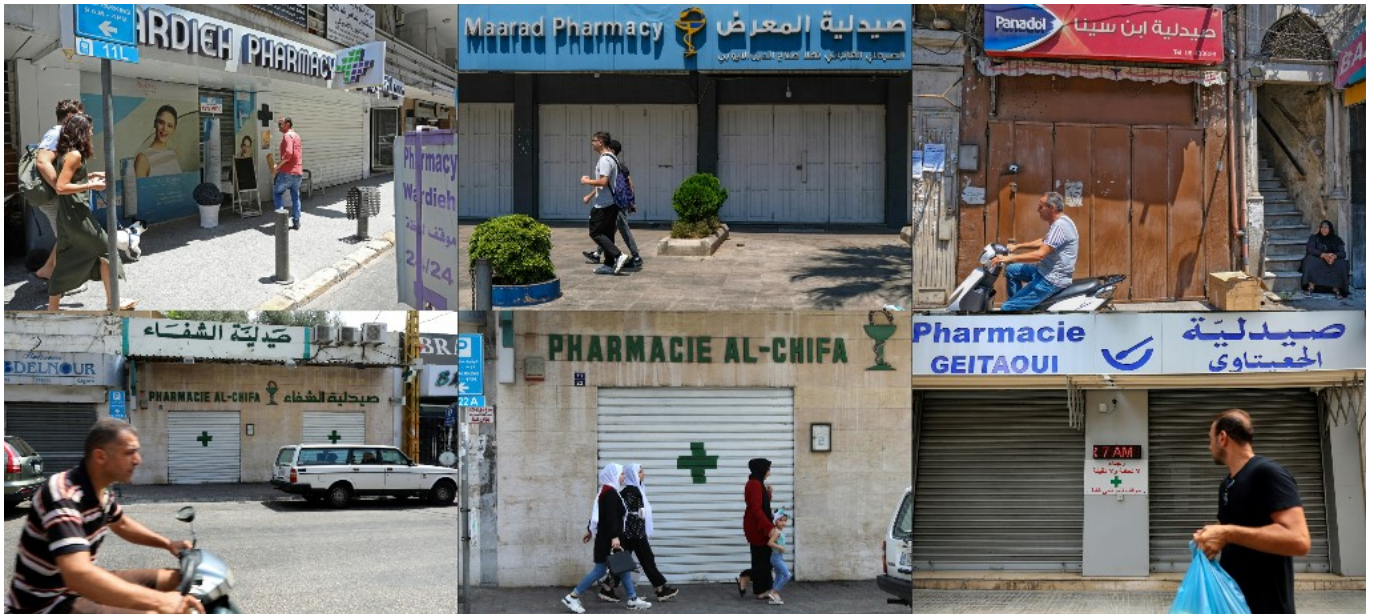
ARAB NEWS

To make matters worse, Lebanon's chronic electricity shortages have forced hospitals to rely on private generators to keep the lights on and their life-sustaining equipment functioning. But generators run on fuel, which is also perennially in short supply.

Despite the severity of the health care emergency, the Lebanese government has been unable to respond, lacking both the financial means and the willpower amid a multitude of overlapping crises.

"Health always seems to be viewed as the poor relation in development and early recovery compared to economic stabilization, education and security," said Dr. Coutts. "The problem is if we continue to neglect health and health systems this leads to even bigger problems in the future."

The COVID-19 pandemic arrived at the worst possible moment for Lebanon, further exposing the health system's weakness and placing additional strain on the country's battered economy.



A combination of images showing shuttered doors of pharmacies in Lebanon during a nationwide strike to protest against a severe shortage of medicine during 2021. (AFP/File Photo)

“As the COVID-19 pandemic shows, if you neglect health systems you cannot respond to health emergencies,” Dr. Coutts said. “Health is a top concern among people. It’s the street-level issue which affects everything in people’s day-to-day lives. Development needs to be about lives and livelihoods.”

While COVID-19 infections are currently falling in Lebanon, successive waves of the virus have exacted a devastating toll on Lebanon’s health system. In December 2020, for instance, about 200 doctors who lacked sufficient protective equipment to avoid infection were placed in quarantine.

The R4HC-MENA study found that successive peaks of the virus overwhelmed hospital capacity and resources, exacerbating shortage of staff, to say nothing of equipment such as ventilators and pharmaceuticals.

“Many private hospitals were reluctant to undertake COVID-19 care for fear of ‘losing’ income from more lucrative services, losing their physician and nursing staff, and lack of trust that they would actually be reimbursed by the government,” Dr. Fouad M. Fouad, R4HC-MENA project lead in Beirut, told Arab News.

Just when it seemed things could not get any worse for Lebanon’s health sector, the Beirut port blast of Aug. 4, 2020 leveled a whole city district.



The damaged Saint George hospital (left) in Beirut more than a week after the port blast of Aug. 4, 2020. Some 43,000 Lebanese emigrated in the first 12 days after the explosion, including skilled workers such as medical staff.
(AFP/File Photo)

More than 220 people were killed in the blast, about 7,000 injured, and some 300,000 left homeless. Within hours of the explosion, people began to pour into the city's hospitals with all kinds of trauma, disfiguring burns and wounds caused by flying glass and masonry.

However, the blast also shattered the city's health infrastructure. According to a WHO assessment, four hospitals were heavily affected and 20 primary care facilities, serving about 160,000 patients, were either damaged or destroyed.

"The explosion generated multiple health and rehabilitation needs among survivors," Rasha Kaloti, research associate on the R4HC-MENA project, told Arab News.

"It also caused many patients to miss routine care for a variety of conditions, including critical care therapy such as cancer treatments, with many having to move to other hospitals, which led to delays and a lack of continuity of care."



Doctors have warned that Lebanon is losing its best and brightest medical staff amid the crisis. (AFP/File Photo)

Meanwhile, the mental health impacts of the blast have only now started to become apparent, with survivors experiencing anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder.

Embrace, a mental health awareness NGO in Lebanon, surveyed about 1,000 people aged 18 to 65-plus in the first 10 days after the blast. It found that 83 percent of respondents reported feeling sad almost every day, while 78 percent reported feeling very anxious and worried every day.

The blast has also accelerated the brain drain of skilled workers, including health staff. According to the R4HC-MENA study, 43,764 Lebanese emigrated in the first 12 days after the blast.

R4HC-MENA outlined several recommendations to help Lebanon salvage its health system. "The first thing that needs to happen is that clear political commitments are given to securing the health and wellbeing of the Lebanese and refugees," said Dr. Fouad.



Despite the severity of the health care emergency, the Lebanese government has been unable to respond, lacking both the financial means and the willpower amid a multitude of overlapping crises. (AFP/File Photo)

“A new social contract needs to be created. Just signing a WHO declaration on Universal Health Care is not enough.”

Indeed, the causes of Lebanon’s health care collapse are largely political. For Dr. Coutts, a good first step might be to redefine the definition of “state failure” to incentivize the international aid community to pour resources into the health system.

“It is hard to see how Lebanon is not a failed state when the health system is on its last legs, half the population cannot afford to access the health system, three quarters of the population are on the World Bank poverty line, and a massive man-made explosion occurred in the middle of the capital city for which no one has been held accountable,” he said.

“If that is not state failure, then state failure needs redefining.”



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Lebanese trust army – not Hezbollah – to secure stability, poll shows
Saad Hariri expects the worse for Lebanon

[Tensions tail off in Lebanon after Hezbollah-Israeli drone stand-off](#)

Author:

Sat, 2022-02-19 22:53

BEIRUT: Tensions between Hezbollah and Israel tailed off on Saturday after a drone was launched on a 40-minute, 70-kilometer reconnaissance mission into Israeli airspace on Friday. It returned to Lebanon as the Israeli Iron Dome failed to down it.

Hezbollah claimed responsibility for launching the "Hassan" drone on Friday and said it carried out its reconnaissance mission over the targeted area despite all attempts to intercept it.

In retaliation, two Israeli warplanes violated Beirut airspace, flying at a low altitude.

Israeli news outlets quoted an Israeli army official as saying: "The Israeli response to the Hezbollah drone was exaggerated," noting that the response achieved the object Hezbollah was aiming for when it boasted about manufacturing drones.

Israel had downed a Hezbollah drone that infiltrated its airspace on Thursday.

The Lebanese authorities took no official stance in response to the Israeli violation of Beirut's airspace, which caused panic among residents since the planes flew very low.

Retired Lebanese Armed Forces Brig. Gen. Hisham Jaber told Arab News: "What happened over the past couple of days can be summarized according to military science as 'show off your strength so you would not have to use it'."

Jaber said Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah's speech on Wednesday about manufacturing drones did not reveal any new information.

"The Israeli enemy knew about this but was not sure it was true. The drone that escaped the Iron Dome was not a combat drone, but rather a recon drone; that's not enough to start a war," he said.

"I do not believe the recent escalation would lead to Hezbollah carrying out any military action on the southern border, because it has no interest in striking the first blow; whoever does so must bear full responsibility for the repercussions."

Jaber said: "Hezbollah will not violate the status quo unless Israel does so first. Meanwhile, Israel will not carry out any aggression now, because the US has previously prevented it from attacking Iran since all Iranian wings in Syria and Lebanon would respond. In addition, Israel's friend Russia, which is present in Syria, will not allow such an escalation."

Lebanese newspapers criticized "the absence of an official Lebanese position regarding recent developments and Nasrallah's Wednesday speech."

Some opposition newspapers wrote that Hezbollah has stripped the state of all strategic powers in deciding the country's fate.

Nasrallah had boasted on Wednesday about "the resistance having the capability to convert its missiles into precision missiles.

He said: "In Lebanon, for a long time, we have started to manufacture drones. Whoever wants to buy them can place an order."

Hezbollah MP Ali Fayyad said on Saturday: “The resistance’s strength and deterrence power, be it by land, sea or air, will force the Israelis to retreat.

“The balance of power is tilting day after day in favor of the resistance because the enemy is unable to adapt to its rules and logic.”

Walid Jumblatt, head of the Progressive Socialist Party, tweeted on Saturday: “I suggest investing the depositors’ money in locally made drones, missiles or explosives, as they have better returns for Lebanon.”

Samir Geagea, head of the Lebanese Forces Party, spoke of the recent developments during the announcement of his party’s candidates for the upcoming parliamentary elections.

Geagea said: “The Lebanon we want is not the Lebanon of illegitimate drones. It is not the Lebanon of mines and assassinations. The Lebanon that we want is the Lebanon of development, progress, science and success.”

He believed that the alliance forged between President Michel Aoun’s team and Hezbollah “has destroyed Lebanon, brought hell upon it, and yet they are still shamelessly carrying on with their agreement as if nothing had happened.”

Geagea mocked those who defend such an agreement and claim it has spared Lebanon civil war.

“I never understood this. Are they saying either we proceed according to Hezbollah’s wishes, or it wages a civil war against us? This logic is unacceptable, and no one can subdue anyone in Lebanon,” he said.



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Israel shoots down Hezbollah drone, fails to intercept another Israel shoots down alleged drone launched by Hezbollah

[Western hostages hope for freedom as part of new Iran nuclear deal](#)

Sat, 2022-02-19 17:34

LONDON: Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, the British-Iranian woman held in Iran, could soon be freed alongside other prisoners as hopes rise that Tehran may soon reach a new agreement with major powers over its nuclear program, The Times reported on Saturday.

Officials have suggested that a draft deal has been drawn up following months of talks in Vienna after the US withdrew from the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action in 2018.

Iran's economy has been devastated by sanctions imposed after the US withdrawal, and has increased its nuclear activity.

The new deal will see the lifting of sanctions, with Tehran reducing its program to levels agreed under the terms of the JCPOA, and downsizing its uranium-enrichment capabilities.

The election of hardliner Ebrahim Raisi as Iran's president in June 2021 had led to fears that the new talks could collapse, but there is new confidence that a deal might be struck in the coming months.

US Special Representative for Iran Robert Malley has said it is "hard to imagine" a nuclear deal being struck with Washington while its citizens, such as Morad Tahbaz, remain incarcerated in Tehran.

Those citizens could well be freed under the terms of the proposed deal in return for a lifting of US sanctions. That has prompted hope that other Westerners could also be freed if the deal is reached.

The daughter of imprisoned British Iranian Anousheh Ashoori told The Times that Western prisoners held in Tehran's notorious Evin prison are "cautiously optimistic" that they might be freed soon.

“Everyone knows that many times we’ve reached a crucial stage like this and nothing has come of it, so they are, as well as us, just waiting to see how the events unfold,” she said.

Zaghari-Ratcliffe’s husband Richard Ratcliffe said: “Nazanin is quite hopeful, in a way that she wasn’t at Christmas. Who knows what will happen, but it feels that we will either get good news or we won’t. Before, it was ‘we will either get bad news or no news’.”

Iran, though, will not receive a guarantee under the terms of a fresh deal that the US will not withdraw, as it did in 2018.

A source told The Times: “There is a sense that this text is it, that it’s time for a political decision to be made in Tehran. The Americans have made a very fair offer and I don’t think the Iranians will get a better one.”



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Husband of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe ends 21-day hunger strike
Husband of detained Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe urges PM to challenge Iran
British police allegedly tried to remove protesting husband of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe
UK marks 2,000 days since Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe detained in Iran