

Abbas, US speaker Pelosi hold rare West Bank meeting

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RAMALLAH: Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas met with US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi in the Israeli-occupied West Bank Thursday for talks on reviving a two-state solution to the conflict, Abbas's office said.

It was one of the highest-level meetings with an American official in recent years for the 86-year-old Palestinian president.

Abbas urged US action on what he described as "unilateral Israeli practices" that "undermine a two-state solution."

Those included expansion of Jewish settlements in the West Bank and moves to evict Palestinians from various parts of Israeli-annexed east Jerusalem, which Palestinians claim as their future capital.

Relations between the US and the Palestinian Authority effectively collapsed during former president Donald Trump's administration, notably after Trump recognized Jerusalem as Israel's "undivided capital."

There have been a series of US outreaches to Abbas and the PA since President Joe Biden took office last year.

Palestinian opinion polls show that support for Abbas and the PA are at historic lows, especially after the aging president scrapped plans to hold elections last year.

Experts say Washington is keen to work with its staunch ally Israel to bolster the embattled PA, especially as a bulwark against Hamas, the extremist group that controls the Gaza strip.

Hamas is designated as a terrorist organization by much of the West.

Pelosi, who was leading a delegation of eight Democratic party lawmakers to the region, had previously met top Israeli officials, including Prime Minister Naftali Bennett earlier Thursday.

Bennett thanked her for her "ongoing support for Israel."

In talks with Israeli officials, Pelosi and the US delegation affirmed "America's ironclad commitment to the State of Israel," the speaker's office said in a statement.

"We repeatedly reaffirmed America's commitment to a just and enduring two-state solution that enhances stability and security for Israel, Palestinians and their neighbors."





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Iconic Gaza bookstore reopens, months after Israeli strike
Abbas loyalists win top jobs at embattled PLO

[Hamas TV series glorifies fight against Israel](#)

Thu, 2022-02-17 00:37

BEIT LAHIYA, Gaza Strip: The Palestinian militants scrambled out of the tunnel and attacked an Israeli tank in broad daylight as gunfire and explosions echoed across the Gaza frontier.

This time it wasn't the start of another war, but an action scene filmed for a TV series produced by the territory's militant Hamas rulers.

The 30-episode series, titled "Fist of the Free," presents the fighters as scrappy heroes outwitting a better-armed Israeli military. Unlike "Fauda," the hit Israeli drama that deals with some of the same subject matter, it is unlikely to get picked up by Netflix.

It's the latest such production by the media arm of Hamas, which has invested heavily in its offerings despite a crippling Israeli blockade on Gaza since the militant group seized power in 2007.

The shows are aired on Hamas-run TV, and "Fist of the Free" will debut during the upcoming holy month of Ramadan, when viewership soars after the dawn-to-dusk fast and networks across the Muslim world debut big-budget offerings.



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Gaza TV studio produces Hamas response to Israeli hit shows
Four killed in shooting at Palestinian camp in Lebanon, Hamas says

Surprise ruling threatens wedge between Iraq and Kurdish govts

Thu, 2022-02-17 00:20

BAGHDAD: A surprise ruling by Iraq's high court cast doubt on the legal foundations of the independent oil policy of Iraq's Kurdish-run region and threatened to drive a political wedge between the two governments, officials warned Wednesday.

Iraq's Supreme Court on Tuesday struck down the legal justifications for the semi-autonomous region's oil policy, effectively calling into question the future of the region's oil contracts, exports and revenues.

The ruling comes during a politically sensitive time, as efforts have stalled in Iraq to form a government.

"At a time when Iraq is passing through a turbulent political period, it is unfortunate that the ruling of the Federal Supreme Court of Iraq deems the Kurdistan Region's oil and gas law unconstitutional, causing the Kurdistan region great concern," said region President Nechirvan Barzani on Wednesday.

The ruling "will further exacerbate the disputes between the Iraqi federal government and the Kurdistan Regional Government on the issues of oil and gas," he said.

Last week, Iraq's Supreme Court barred the presidential candidate from the Kurdistan Democratic Party – the Kurdish-region's main ruling party – from running for the post.

HIGHLIGHT

Iraq's Supreme Court on Tuesday struck down the legal justifications for the semi-autonomous region's oil policy, effectively calling into question the future of the region's oil contracts, exports and revenues.

The court ruled that Hoshiyar Zebari was not eligible to run amid corruption allegations. It was a blow to populist Shiite cleric Moqtada Al-Sadr, the biggest winner in the October election, who vowed to speedily push through a new government excluding Iran-backed parties.

Under Iraq's governing system adopted in 2005, the prime minister must be a Shiite, the speaker a Sunni and the presidency held by a Kurd. The process to select candidates is typically set back by political deadlock.

It was not immediately known why the ruling, which comes after nearly a decade of delays, came this week.

Tuesday's decision cast into doubt the future of the region's main revenue source.

The region averaged \$750 million per month in oil exports via Turkey in 2021, according to Iraq Oil Report. The region also relies on budget transfers from Baghdad to pay for salaries and debts to traders.

The Kurdish region said the ruling itself was "unjust, unconstitutional" and "unacceptable" in a statement. The region has historically relied on the absence of a federal oil and gas law to justify its independent oil policy.

Iraq's constitution says regions and provinces can have a modicum of independence over oil but that the specifics should be spelled out in a separate law. Such a law has never been passed.

Baghdad filed a lawsuit challenging the region's claims in 2012. The case was suspended in the last known hearing in September 2019 after the judge requested that then-Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi sign off on continuing the legal battle.



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Iraqi federal court deems Kurdish oil and gas law unconstitutional
Iraq's \$27bn Total deal stuck over contract wrangling

Former US Yemen envoy calls for Houthi terrorist listing

Author:

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AL-MUKALLA, Yemen: A former US ambassador to Yemen and veteran analyst has urged the Biden administration to redesignate the Houthi militia as a terrorist organization for resisting peace efforts to end the war and staging attacks on neighboring countries.

Writing for the US-based War on the Rocks platform on Tuesday, Gerald Feierstein said that the Biden's administration should consider redesignating the Houthis as a Foreign Terrorist Organization since it is the only option available to pressure the Houthis to stop hostilities on the ground and comply with peace initiatives.

The former ambassador, who until now had opposed the proposed designation, added: "But, in the absence of other viable options to pressure the Houthis to abandon their military campaign and seek a peaceful political outcome to the war, it would be foolhardy not to consider the possible use of a terrorist designation as a tool in America's kit."

The senior vice president and senior fellow at the Middle East Institute in Washington, DC was among 100 former US diplomats and military officials who signed a letter in 2020 to the then US secretary of state Mike Pompeo arguing against adding the Houthis to the terror list.

Feierstein also opposed the designation in an interview with Arab News in March 2020, arguing that the militia should be treated and "defeated as an anti-Yemeni movement."

But after a surge in fighting over the past year and renewed Houthi missile attacks on neighboring countries, Feierstein has argued that the US has little choice but to reclassify the militia.

"While the designation would still lack tangible, immediate effects on Houthi leadership, it would nevertheless send a powerful, symbolic message that delegitimizes the Houthi movement as a participant in Yemen's political future," he said, adding: "The past year has demonstrated that the Houthis will not return to the negotiating table until they accept that there is no alternative to a political resolution."

FASTFACT

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redesignating the Houthis as a Foreign Terrorist Organization since it is the only option available to pressure the Houthis to stop hostilities on the ground and comply with peace initiatives.

Feierstein is among many experts and Yemeni government officials who have warned against tolerating the powerful and radical Iran-backed Houthi movement. The militia's arsenal of advanced ballistic missiles and long-range drones are being used to kill Yemeni civilians and target neighbouring countries, analysts have warned.

"As a member of Iran's 'axis of resistance,' uncontested Houthi control of Yemen would pose an enduring challenge not only to the well-being of the Yemeni people but also to vital US interests, including stability in the Arabian Peninsula, freedom of navigation in the Red Sea and Bab Al-Mandeb, and even to Israeli security as the Houthis expand their missile and drone capabilities to reach as far as southern Israel," Feierstein said.

To address the possible repercussions of designating the Houthis, the US should talk to international aid organizations that operate in Yemen, international monetary institutes, companies and other parties who might be impacted by the decision, Feierstein added.

"If the administration decides to pursue the option, it should discuss the terms of the designation with international humanitarian organizations, banks, commercial enterprises and others who might be affected by it to ensure that it's crafted in a way to minimize unintended consequences," he said.

The former US ambassador weighed in as the Houthis on Wednesday demanded that the Arab coalition end military operations and "the blockade and aggression" in order for peace talks to begin.

Responding to the UN Yemen envoy's call for all factions in Yemen to accept UN-brokered peace efforts, Hussein Al-Azi, a Houthi official, said that the Arab coalition should lift restrictions on airports and seaports, and stop airstrikes on Houthi territory.

"Yes, addressing the humanitarian and economic aspect represents the only gateway to serious and real peace in Yemen," Al-Azi said on Twitter.

Briefing the UN Security Council on Tuesday night, Special Envoy for Yemen Hans Grundberg said that he is working on a plan to revive peace efforts with the aim of reaching a political settlement in Yemen that would address the interests and concerns of the country's warring parties.

"I count on the support of this Council to encourage all actors to participate constructively without delay. This is a real opportunity for Yemeni parties to shift gear and charter a peaceful way forward," he said.



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Coalition carries out strikes on Houthis in Marib and Hajjah UAE envoy criticizes UN for failing to stem Houthi escalation

[Lebanese judge sues police chief over central bank governor](#)

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BEIRUT: An investigative judge on Wednesday sued Lebanon's police chief after accusing him of preventing security forces from bringing in for questioning the central bank governor, who is accused of corruption.

The move by Judge Ghada Aoun came a day after she said that a police force prevented members of State Security, an intelligence agency, from bringing central bank governor Riad Salameh from his home for questioning.

Aoun said Tuesday that she has sent a formal letter to Internal Security

Force chief Maj. Gen. Imad Osman, asking for an explanation regarding the incident. She said fighting authorities and preventing the implementation of a judicial order as Osman did, is an offense.

It was not immediately clear if Osman will show up for questioning by a Lebanese judge next week.

Salameh, who is accused of corruption and dereliction of duty during Lebanon's historic economic meltdown, is being sued by a Lebanese anti-corruption group. The value of the national currency has plunged, foreign reserves are running low and the highly indebted government has been unable to agree on an economic recovery plan.

Salameh is also being investigated in several countries including Switzerland, Luxembourg and France for potential money laundering and embezzlement.

The division between Internal Security Forces and State Security mirrors the rivalry between the country's politicians. Osman is considered close to former Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri, who quit politics last month, and was a main opponent of President Michel Aoun, who backs the head of State Security.

The judge has been also been blamed of being close to the president. They are both from the same family but not related.



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