

Should the Beirut port blast site be turned into a place of remembrance?

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DUBAI: For Sultan El-Halabi, Aug. 4, 2020, began like any other day in Beirut. He was driving with his mother from their hometown of Chouf to the Lebanese capital, where they checked into a sea-facing hotel to rest.

But shortly after 6 p.m., El-Halabi's mother said she felt a strange rumbling sensation. El-Halabi crossed the room to the balcony to investigate the cause when all of a sudden, the entire window frame flew off, collapsing right in front of him. They were both lucky to escape uninjured.

"No one could have expected that to happen," El-Halabi, a 23-year-old architecture graduate, told Arab News from his base in Dubai, more than a year on from the Beirut port blast – a disaster that killed over 200 people and left some 300,000 homeless.



The scars from the blast remain visible on the city skyline. (AFP)

"I remember the view of the city afterward. They were warning people at the hotel to stay indoors because acid or chemicals could be in the air. The sky started changing color. It was more reddish. It was like a war zone.

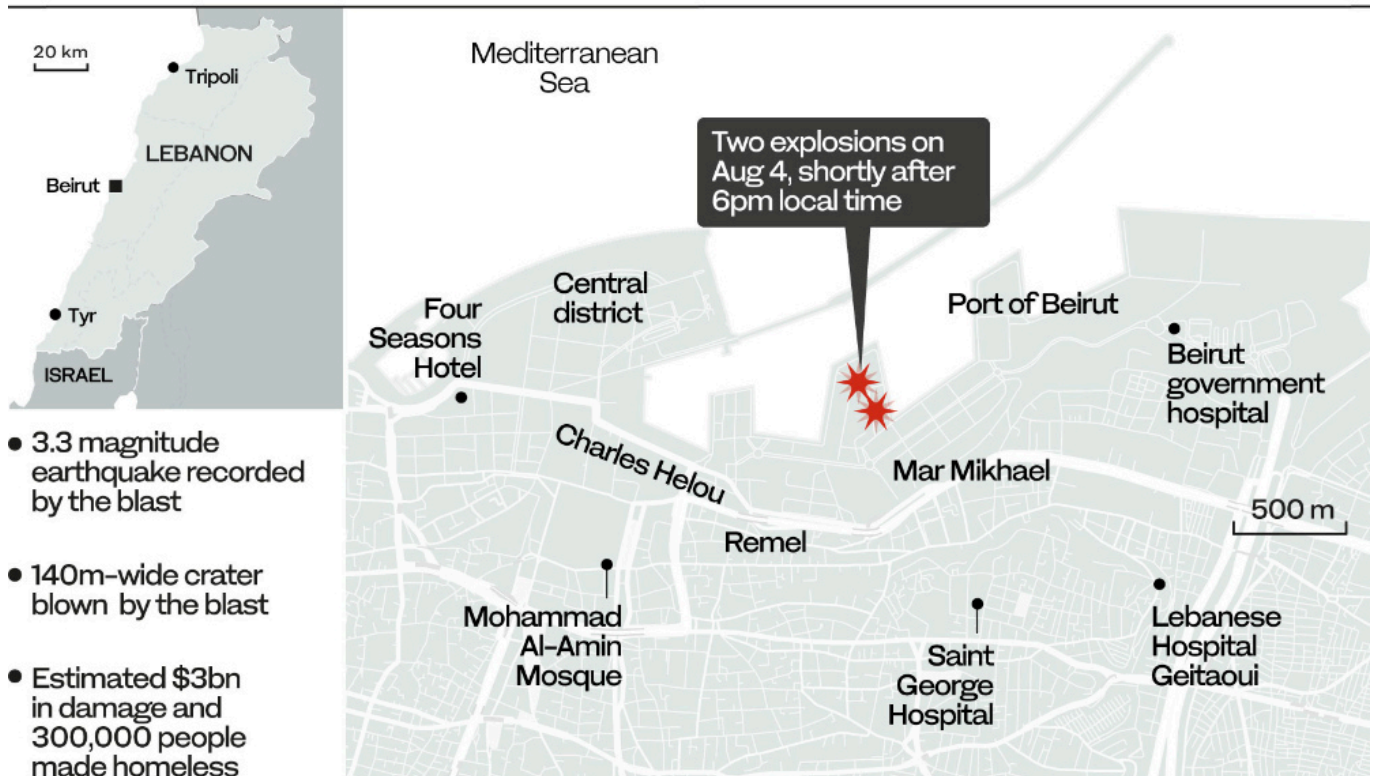
Everything, in just one second, was completely gone.”

More than a year later, the scars remain visible on the city skyline. What is less visible are mental scars the blast has left on those who survived and who lost homes, businesses and loved ones.

“In Lebanon now, you should just live your day as if it’s your last,” El-Halabi said. “Always stay connected with your loved ones because you never know what could happen.”

THE BEIRUT PORT EXPLOSIONS

The Aug. 4, 2020 blast was apparently triggered by a warehouse fire



Source: pubchem.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov

ARAB NEWS

The tragedy motivated El-Halabi to base his senior graduation project at the American University in Dubai on restoring the devastated port, transforming it into an accessible, multi-functional and job-creating site that can be “given back to the people.”

His project, named “Repurpose 607,” envisages replacing the five damaged warehouse plots with a memorial museum, a sound-healing therapy space, an amphitheater and an underground parking area.



“Everything, in just one second, was completely gone,” said Sultan El-Halabi, referring to the port tragedy. (Supplied)

The site would also feature a library, offices and a cafe, while a raised,

circular footpath would offer visitors an overview of the port.

Flooded with natural light, the sound-healing therapy building would offer meditation and cognitive behavioral sessions to help those suffering with post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of the blast.

“For many people, until this day, if they hear a slight bang or any weird noise, they would always refer to the explosion or take cover,” El-Halabi said. Sound therapy could help many traumatized Beirut residents find calm and closure.

The proposed memorial museum would include a timeline of Beirut’s history up until the day of the blast and the names of its victims engraved on a large triangulated stone.



The tragedy motivated Sultan El-Halabi to base his senior graduation project on restoring the devastated port. (Supplied)

El-Halabi likens this tribute to how Americans honored the dead in New York following the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

“They did not rebuild where the Twin Towers were located,” El-Halabi said. “They dedicated that plot of land to the people and they transformed it into a beautiful memorial place to make sure that people’s memories would live on forever. It kind of inspired me to do something similar, but for Lebanon.”

The proposed site would have pedestrian paths as well as greenery and seating areas to offer space for quiet reflection away from the city traffic. A basement area would also be built to include a gallery for Lebanese artists to showcase their work.



The proposed site would have pedestrian paths as well as greenery and seating areas to offer space for quiet reflection. (Supplied)

Aesthetically geometric and bold, it is a place designed to benefit the people, to help them “to overcome the trauma and for them to see the beauty in the site rather than always fearing it,” El-Halabi said.

In his design, only one crucial element of the site remains untouched and preserved – the massive grain silos, which experts claim shielded the city from further damage. “It symbolizes strength and empowerment,” El-Halabi said. “It’s proof to the world that we could overcome any obstacle that we face.”

The young architect acknowledges it could take time for traumatized residents of the Lebanese capital to feel emotionally ready to visit a renovated site. “Of course it could be controversial,” El-Halabi said.



Aesthetically geometric and bold, it is a place designed to benefit the people. (Supplied)

“Many people have different opinions and you can’t change them so easily. Everyone has their own freedom to view things the way they’re supposed to. But, I am able to at least enlighten them with the advantages behind this proposal.”

As a student embracing cutting-edge digital technology, El-Halabi admired the ideas of pioneering architects like Antoni Gaudí and Frank Gehry, and especially Santiago Calatrava, who designed the falcon wing-shaped UAE pavilion at Expo 2020 Dubai.



The idea has been called “clever and thoughtful.” (Supplied)

Having lived almost all of his life in Dubai, El-Halabi says he has also been heavily influenced by his ever-evolving urban surroundings – considered one of the world’s most dramatic and experimental cityscapes.

“It all started with dunes,” he said, reflecting on Dubai’s astronomical growth over recent decades. “They were able to convert the UAE into a heavenly place. It inspires me a lot. It shows that, in such a short time, nothing is impossible.”

He also subscribes to the notion that architecture is more than its stylistic elements, and should ultimately work to enhance people’s lives.



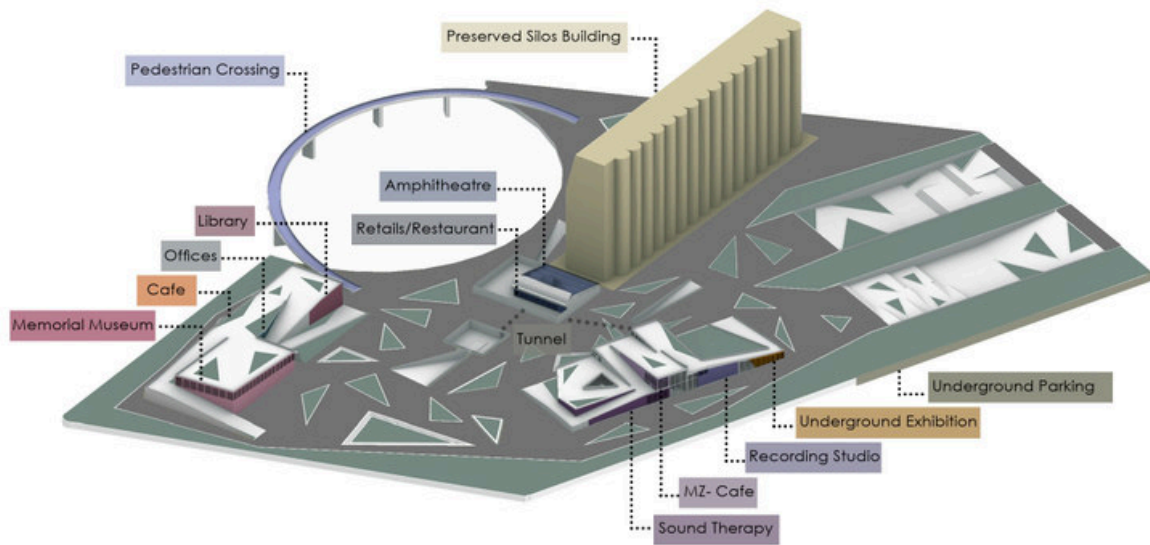
Sultan El-Halabi likens this tribute to how Americans honored the 9/11 terrorist attacks victims. (Supplied)

“It’s about finding the missing satisfaction of what people need and trying to provide it to them,” he said. “Architecture is more than just designing or

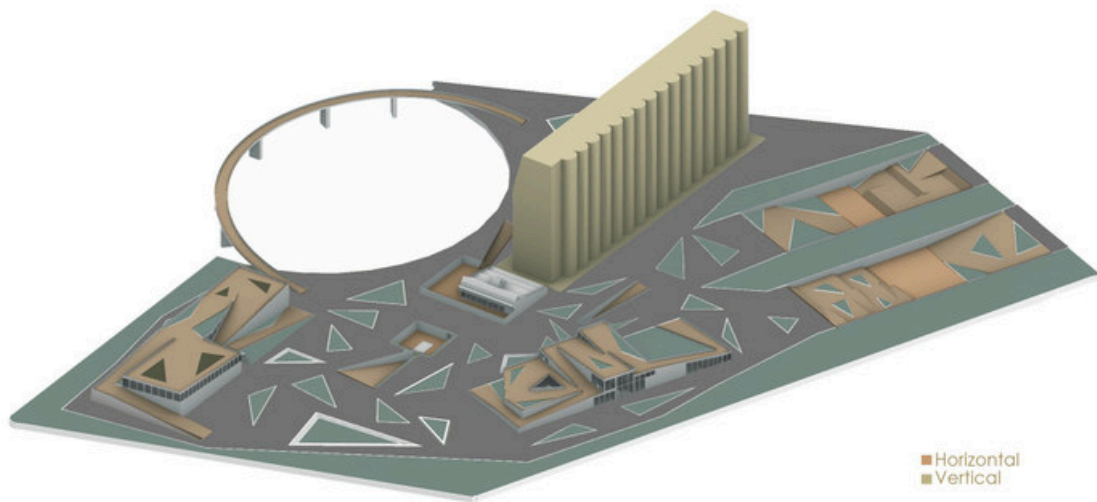
placing a building. You need to take into consideration the people and provide facilities for them. It also needs to fit in perfectly with its surroundings.”

In October last year, as part of Dubai Design Week, “Repurpose 607” was among 60 submissions that made it to the MENA Grad Show, where graduates from across the region present their “design meets purpose” projects that address social, health and environmental issues.

Zoning Diagram



Circulation Diagram

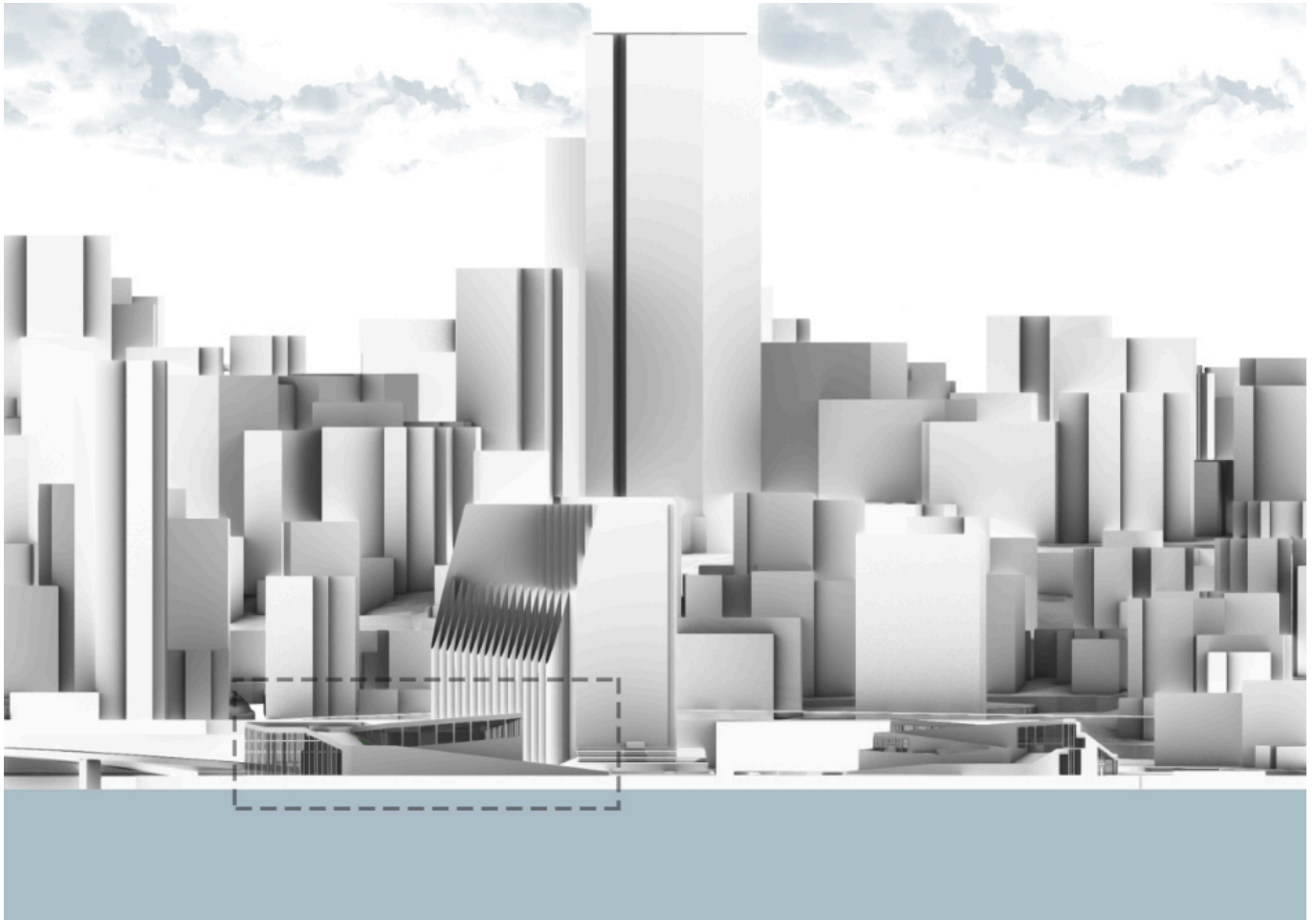


“It’s an architectural solution that goes well beyond architecture,” said

Carlo Rizzo. (Supplied)

Carlo Rizzo, the show's 2021 edition editor, praised El-Halabi's project, describing it as one of the "top entries."

"Repurpose 607 struck me first of all for its empathy," Rizzo told Arab News. "It's an architectural solution that goes well beyond architecture. It looks at the built environment as a platform for building resilience in our communities and takes mental health and wellbeing as a starting point."



"Repurpose 607" was among 60 submissions that made it to the MENA Grad Show. (Supplied)

"To remember the victims and transform the site into a place of healing is not just a clever and thoughtful idea, but an urgent solution addressing a very real need."

El-Halabi, who currently works for a Dubai-based architectural firm, still hopes to see his Beirut port project brought to life some day.

"I've been to Lebanon two times since the explosion," he said. "Every time I pass by the port, I always picture how it would look in real life, trying to see my project being built there. It could have potential."

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At least 135 killed, 5,000 injured in massive explosions devastating Beirut
Six killed in Beirut clashes as tensions soar over port blast investigation

[Lebanon's Bahaa Rafik Al-Hariri says he will continue his father's journey](#)

Fri, 2022-01-28 20:43

BEIRUT: Lebanon's Bahaa Al-Hariri said on Friday that he would continue the journey of his father, the late Prime Minister Rafik Al-Hariri, and would "enter the battle to take back" the country.

Bahaa's younger brother, Saad, a three times prime minister, announced earlier this week that he was not running in a forthcoming parliamentary election and was stepping back from his role in political life, calling on his political party to do the same.

Bahaa, 55, who has not held public office before and largely kept away from politics, said in a recorded speech sent to news outlets, [including Sawt](#)

[Beirut](#), that he “will fight the battle to restore the country and restore the sovereignty of the country from its occupiers.”

He added that “any misinformation or intimidation” alluding to a power vacuum among Lebanon’s Sunni Muslims “serves only the enemies of the country.”

Saad cited Iran’s influence as one of the reasons he saw little hope of positive change for Lebanon, an influence it wields through Shiite group Hezbollah.

Bahaa has been an open, fierce critic of his brother’s policy toward the Iran-backed group.

“The son of the martyr Rafik Hariri will not leave Lebanon, I am with you and very soon I will be among you,” Bahaa said in his speech.

Full address, as reported by Sawt Beirut:

“My Lebanese brothers and sisters...

Greetings from the heart...

The absence was prolonged, but you were always present in my heart and mind. I will not talk about the seriousness of the stage because you know its dangerousness and the accuracy of the upcoming stage.

First of all, it must be emphasized that neither our religion, nor our morals, nor our upbringing, we, the sons of Martyr Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, allow us to abandon our responsibility and we put all our capabilities for the sake of Lebanon’s renaissance, Lebanon the message, Lebanon the symbol, Lebanon the homeland.

The family of the martyr Rafik Hariri, the small as his big family, did not, does not, and will not disintegrate. In partnership and solidarity, we will fight the battle to restore the homeland and restore the sovereignty of the homeland from its occupiers.

I will continue the path of Martyr Prime Minister Rafik Hariri.

We are continuing what we learned from the parents of the late Prime Minister Rafik Hariri.

We learned that:

We are the people of moderation, not extremism;

We are the people of reconstruction, not collapse;

We are people of citizenship, not discrimination;

We are the people of sovereignty, not dependence;

We are the people of the Arab depth;

The son of the martyr Rafik Hariri will not leave Lebanon, we are with you and very soon we will show you.

Long live free and independent Lebanon.



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Lebanon's finance minister says replacing central bank governor is not 'wise'
Lebanon in power deal with Jordan

[Iran nuclear talks pause as diplomats confer with capitals](#)

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1643390121958003600

Fri, 2022-01-28 16:57

VIENNA: Talks to salvage the tattered 2015 nuclear deal with Iran have paused while diplomats return to capitals for political consultations, European officials said Friday.

“January has been the most intensive period of these talks to date,” British, German and French negotiators said in a joint statement. “Everyone knows we are reaching the final stage, which requires political decisions.”

Russia’s representative at the talks, Mikhail Ulyanov, said the meeting was expected to resume next week.

The United States pulled out of the Vienna accord in 2018 under then-President Donald Trump and reimpose heavy sanctions on Iran. Tehran has responded by increasing the purity and amounts of uranium it enriches and stockpiles, in breach of the accord.

US President Joe Biden has signaled that he wants to rejoin the deal, which is still supported by Russia, the three European powers and China.



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Coalition: Saada prison was not targeted, facts will be provided

Author:

Arab News

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Fri, 2022-01-28 02:44

RIYADH: The Coalition to Restore Legitimacy in Yemen on Friday denied targeting a prison in Saada and accused the Houthi militia of trying to mislead the public.

In a statement carried by Al-Ekhbariyah TV, the coalition said its Joint Forces Command "applies the highest targeting standards" and excludes prisons from its list of targets.

Houthi officials on Thursday claimed that coalition air strikes last week killed around 90 people and wounded more than 200 at Saada prison.

"What the terrorist militia said is an attempt to mislead public opinion about the true activity of the site," the coalition said.

"Saada prison was not targeted and we will provide all the facts and detailed information to the joint team" investigating alleged air strikes on detention centers in Yemen.

Fighting has escalated in recent weeks, with more air strikes on what the coalition says are Houthi military targets.

The Iran-aligned Houthi movement has stepped up missile and drone attacks on the United Arab Emirates and cross-border launches on neighbouring Saudi Arabia.

The coalition had previously accused the Houthis of using civilian centers as a shield against legitimate strikes.



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Houthi missile strike kills 5 civilians, wounds 23 in Yemen's MaribCoalition:
Nearly 200 Houthis killed in airstrikes on Marib, Al-Bayda, and Taiz

[Qatari official's Iran visit gives hope for talks breakthrough](#)

Author:

Fri, 2022-01-28 00:59

DUBAI: Qatar's top diplomat visited Iran on Thursday, days before Qatar's emir holds talks in Washington at a crucial time for efforts by Tehran and major powers to revive a 2015 nuclear pact. The visit by Qatari Foreign Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani comes after his Iranian counterpart Hossein Amirabdollahian on Monday said Tehran is ready to consider direct talks with Washington if it feels it can get a "good nuclear deal."

However, Iran's state news agency IRNA said the visit was not intended to help set up direct talks with Washington.

"Although Doha and Tehran are experiencing good and close relations, this visit ... has fueled some misconceptions. Some are fabricating it to facilitate direct talks with the United States," IRNA said.

The US and Iran have held eight rounds of indirect talks in Vienna since April aimed at reinstating the pact that lifted sanctions against Tehran in exchange for restrictions on its nuclear program.

After then-US President Donald Trump quit the nuclear deal in 2018 and reimposed harsh sanctions, Iran gradually started violating the pact's nuclear curbs.

BACKGROUND

The US and Iran have held eight rounds of indirect talks in Vienna since April aimed at reinstating the pact that lifted sanctions against Tehran in exchange for restrictions on its nuclear program.

Significant gaps remain about the speed and scope of returning to the deal, including Iran's demand for a US guarantee of no further punitive steps, and how and when to restore curbs on Iran's atomic work.

Qatar's emir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, will hold talks with US President Joe Biden on Jan. 31. They will include efforts to salvage the pact. The minister, Sheikh Mohammed, is expected in Washington on Friday in advance of the emir's visit.

Iran's hard-line President Ebrahim Raisi emphasized the importance of "deepening ties between regional countries" in a meeting with Sheikh Mohammed, who invited the president to attend the Gas Exporting Countries Forum summit in February in Doha.

The lead US nuclear negotiator told Reuters on Sunday that securing the nuclear deal is unlikely unless Tehran releases four US citizens Washington says it is holding hostage.

While ruling out any US preconditions, Iran said on Monday that Tehran and Washington can reach "a lasting agreement on both separate paths (the Vienna talks and the prisoner exchange) if the other party has the will."

Iranian officials have refused to comment on the matter, but Tehran has repeatedly said it is ready for a full prisoner exchange with Washington. Tehran denies holding people for political reasons. It has accused many of the dual-nationals and foreigners in its jails of espionage.

Tehran says Iranians detained in the US, mostly for breaking sanctions, are being unjustly held.



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Iran nuclear agreement unlikely without release of US prisoners – Malley