

# Kuwait, Qatar COVID-19 daily cases soar past previous highs

Author:

Sun, 2022-01-09 23:32

DOHA: Daily coronavirus infection rates reported by Kuwait and Qatar have soared past previous peaks recorded in the summers of 2021 and 2020 respectively, as cases rise across all Gulf states.

Kuwait on Sunday reported 2,999 new cases of COVID-19, its fourth day of case numbers exceeding a high of 1,993 seen in July last year.

Kuwait had seen below 50 daily cases during the last quarter of 2021.



Qatar, with a population of around 2.8 million, on Saturday reported 3,487 new cases – almost 10 percent of those tested – outpacing a previous high of 2,355 seen in May 2020.

On Saturday, Qatar reintroduced a set of rules limiting home gatherings to 10 vaccinated people, barring unvaccinated people from entering malls and restaurants and reducing capacity limits for some commercial establishments. Schools in Qatar have reintroduced distance learning until at least January 27.

To relieve pressure on Qatar's testing infrastructure authorities on Wednesday urged travelers and some symptomatic people to take rapid antigen tests, which don't need to be processed in a laboratory, rather than PCR tests.

[pic.twitter.com/tTmYkeMVuB](https://pic.twitter.com/tTmYkeMVuB)

– وزارة الصحة العامة (@MOPHQatar) [January 9, 2022](#)

It also opened a new 10-lane drive-through PCR testing station to sample up to 5,000 people a day.

Saudi Arabia, the largest Gulf state with a population of some 30 million, has also seen a rapid increase in cases since the start of the year. The Kingdom registered 3,460 new infections on Sunday, still below a peak of more than 4,700 in June 2020.

In the UAE, the Gulf's tourism and commercial hub, the past three weeks also brought a surge in cases as the country hosts a world fair during its peak tourist season.

Authorities on Sunday reported 2,759 new infections, as it hosts a world fair during its peak tourist season.



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Saudi Arabia records 3,460 new COVID-19 cases, 1 death  
Kuwait reimposes social distancing measures for mass events, mosque prayers

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## [Lebanon goes dark after bungling protesters disable key power plant](#)

Sun, 2022-01-09 22:35

BEIRUT: The Lebanese population was subjected to collective punishment on Saturday night after protesters stormed a key power station and tampered with the electrical equipment, inflicting power cuts on the whole country for hours.

Protesters stormed the main power station in the Aramoun area, 22 km from Beirut, and tampered with its contents to secure electricity for their neighborhoods, causing a problem that affected all power generation plants.

They claimed that there is discrimination in the distribution of electricity. They said that “the electric current is available to areas under the authority of the Free Patriotic Movement, while it is totally absent from areas that are considered an incubator environment for the movement’s opponents.”

The owner of a private electric generator in the Choueifat area near Aramoun said that as electricity supplies on Sunday morning returned to the same rationing levels in the Lebanese regions, resentment over what is happening could break out at any time.

Nabih Al-Durra told Arab News that “one hour in the morning and another hour at night is the total electrical energy provided by Electricite du Liban (Lebanon’s state electricity company) to people.”

The rest is provided by private generators, which are too expensive for many people and are also facing difficulties.

Al-Durra said that the number of subscribers had fallen by 25 percent because people are unable to pay LBP 7,100 (\$ 4.72) for a kilowatt of electricity.

Electricite du Liban said in its statement that some protesters had broken into its Aramoun power station – “endangering their personal safety and the safety of the station’s workers.”

Their activities in the power station led to disturbances in the electrical network, which in turn disconnected all power production plants around the country, leading to a national blackout, Electricite du Liban said.

The company renewed its appeal to “all authorities and security forces about the necessity of protecting all the establishment’s facilities from any other attacks and restoring control over the substations outside its control.”



# The forgotten Arabs of Iran

A century ago, the autonomous sheikhdom of Arabistan was absorbed by force into the Persian state. Today the Arabs of Ahwaz are Iran's most persecuted minority

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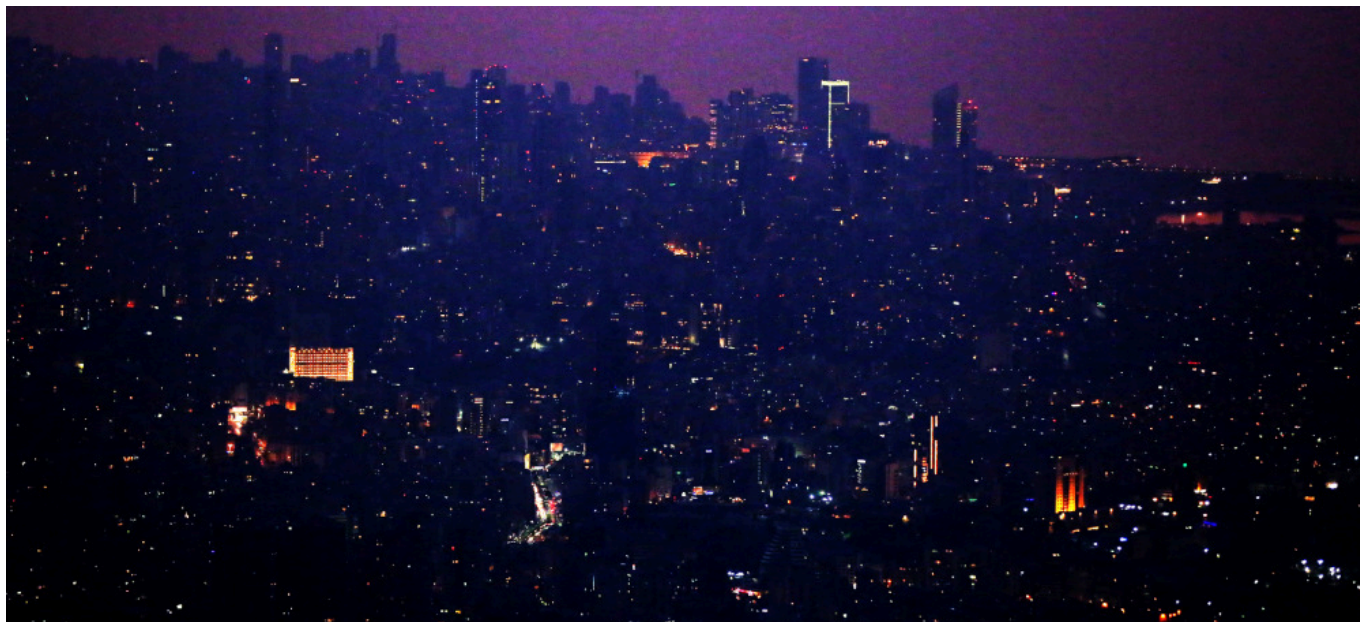
It pointed out the strategic importance of the main Aramoun station. This station is the main linking station between Al-Zahrani power plant and the rest of the electrical network.

Meanwhile Patriarch Bechara Boutros Al-Rahi reiterated his concern on Sunday over the current political and economic crisis.

"It is unacceptable for the Cabinet to remain suspended, especially since any agreement with the International Monetary Fund requires the approval of the Council of Ministers as a whole," he said in his Sunday sermon.

He stressed that "Lebanon's Arab affiliation is in harmony with its natural surroundings and the interaction of the Lebanese and Arab civilizations throughout history. This is what determines its existence, not the regional conflicts, nor any sectarian project."

He spoke as the official dollar exchange rate broke the LBP 30,000 barrier on Sunday. The Lebanese pound lost about 95 percent of its value against the dollar since November.



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Lebanon power company says protesters behind national blackout  
General Labor Union president warns against 'certain catastrophe' in Lebanon amid economic crises

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## [Taliban FM visits Iran for talks on trade, border and refugees](#)

Sun, 2022-01-09 21:19

ISLAMABAD: A delegation led by the Taliban foreign minister is in Iran to discuss border, economic and refugee issues, a senior foreign ministry official in Kabul said on Sunday.

It is the first time that a high-profile delegation from Kabul is visiting the neighboring country after the Taliban took control of Afghanistan in August last year.

Taliban Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi is accompanied by the ministers of economy and commerce, as well as the governor of Afghanistan's central bank.

The delegation arrived in Tehran on Saturday, on the invitation of the Iranian government.

"During this visit, very important issues, including the border and crossing points, refugees, the economy and strengthening political relations with Iran



will be discussed,” Waliullah Shaheen, director of the Institute of Strategic Studies at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Kabul, told Arab News.

“We at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Afghanistan believe that Iran is an important neighbor for Afghanistan, especially at this time.”

Iran, like other nations, has so far not recognized the interim government of Afghanistan, formed by the Taliban in September last year.

Since the fall of Kabul’s Western-backed administration on Aug. 15, billions of dollars in foreign assistance to Afghanistan’s aid-dependent economy have been suspended and some \$9.5 billion of Afghan Central Bank assets parked overseas have been frozen.

With aid suspended, its new rulers unrecognized, and the financial system paralyzed, Afghanistan is facing a looming humanitarian crisis.

Iran is a key trade partner to Afghanistan and host to millions of Afghan refugees.

Tensions on its 900-kilometer border with Afghanistan, an active smuggling and human trafficking route, have been a long-standing issue.

In December, Taliban authorities reported the killing of several Iranian border guards following fuel smuggling attempts from the Iranian side to Nimroz Province in southwestern Afghanistan.



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# Iran ups the nuclear ante in search of Vienna negotiations advantage

Sun, 2022-01-09 01:55

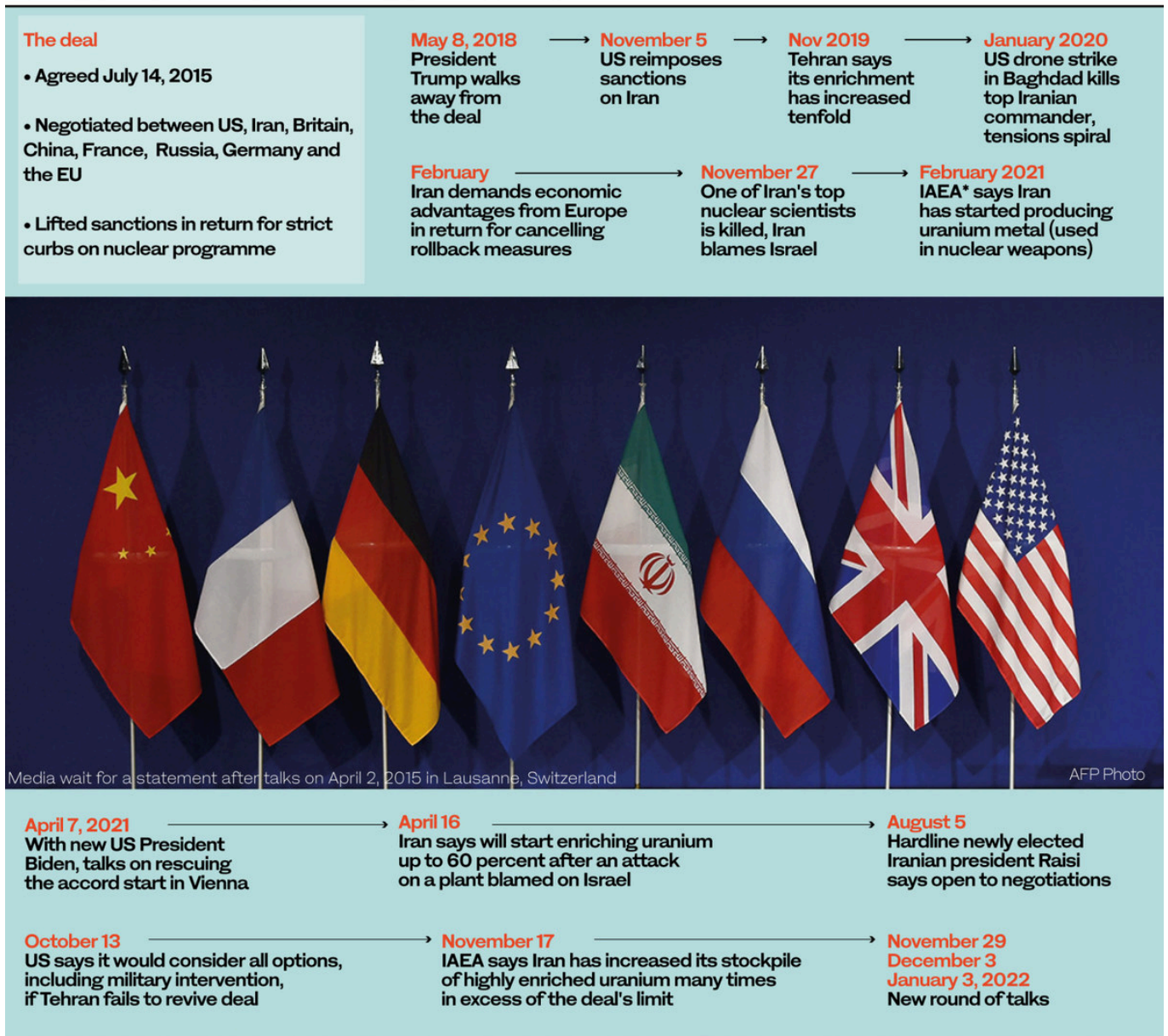
DUBAI: Tehran's proxies have been ramping up their activities on the battlefields of the Middle East in recent weeks. In Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, forces loyal to the Iranian regime have been busy, escalating attacks against US and Saudi targets.

One spark for this intensification may be the second anniversary of the assassination of Qassem Soleimani, the Iranian general who set in motion much of the chaos still ravaging the region. But some analysts believe the prime reason is the Iran-US nuclear talks that have resumed in Vienna.

As the talks progress, albeit painstakingly, Iran's officials have been increasingly upbeat, believing it is on the verge of salvaging a deal that would ease crippling US sanctions on its financial institutions and political bodies.



## TIMELINE OF IRAN NUCLEAR ACCORD



Source: \*International Atomic Energy Agency

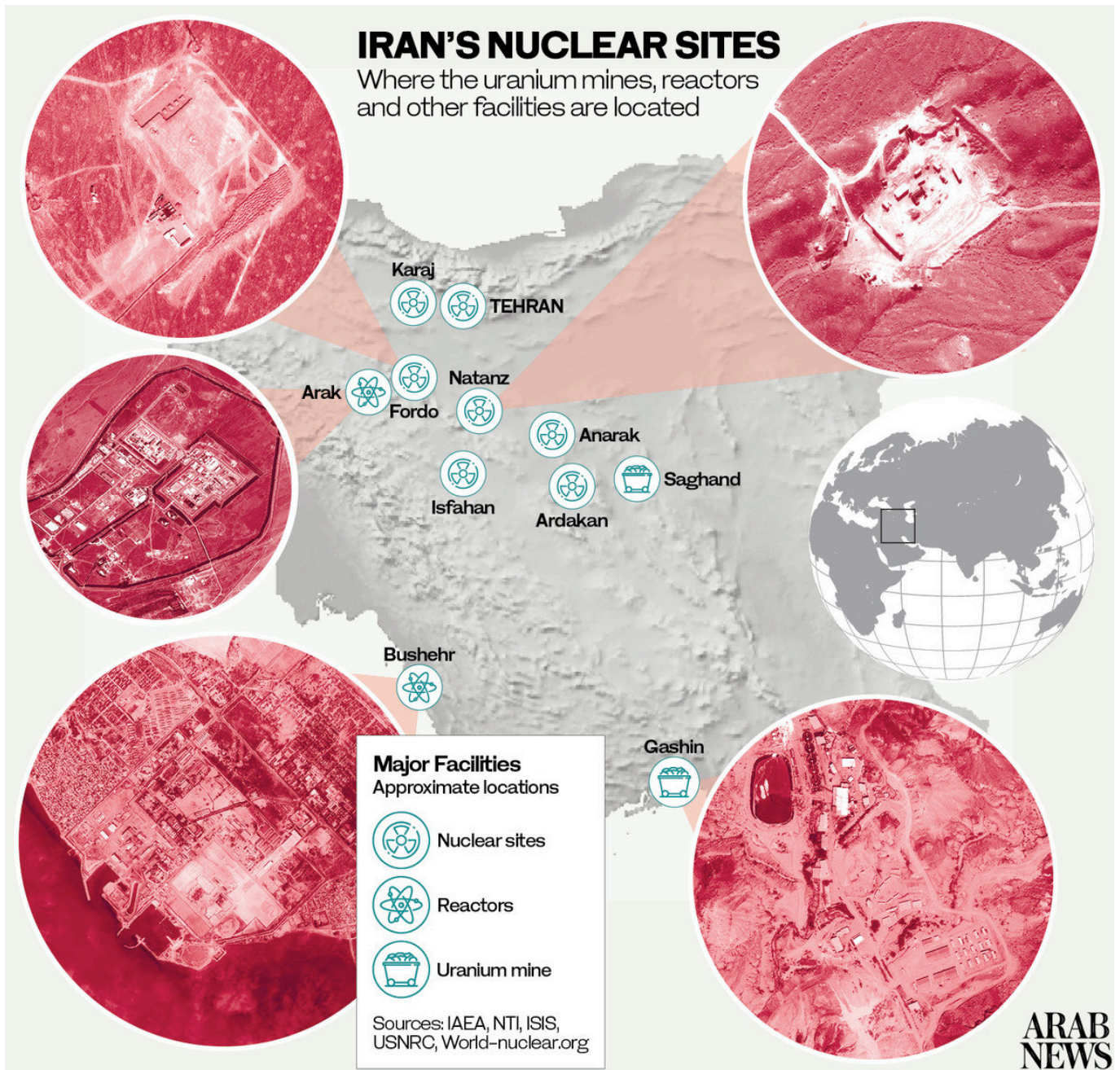
ARABNEWS

An informed source has told Arab News that the nuts and bolts of a new arrangement between Washington and Tehran are now primarily in place.

One remaining obstacle is a demand by Iran that the next US president should not walk out of any new deal. Whether the US could honor such a pledge remains unclear. In 2018, US President Donald Trump scorned and abandoned the “one-sided deal.” Iran responded by ceasing its cooperation with international inspectors that kept tabs on its nuclear infrastructure and ramping up its enrichment efforts.

The current president, Joe Biden, has staked much of his first term foreign policy legacy on reinstating the deal, formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action with Iran. This has earned the opprobrium of regional allies as his officials persist with talks with Iranian hardliners.





Entifadh Qanbar, a former Iraqi spokesperson, said: “Iranians like to twist arms in negotiations. Robert Malley seems to be trying hard to appease the Iranians and, unfortunately, has the upper hand in the Biden administration when it comes to the negotiations. The Biden administration is coming off weak, especially in light of the chaos in Afghanistan after the US withdrawal.”

Dr. Ras Zimmt, an expert on Iran at the Institute for National Security Studies in Israel, said: “Looking at the recent attacks on Syria and Iraq, one of the main reasons it happened, I believe, is the second anniversary of the killing of Qassem Soleimani.” He said this hung a pall over the negotiations from the Iranian side.

Washington’s response to the attacks on US forces has been a far cry from Trump’s reaction as Iran-backed rioters approached the US embassy in Baghdad two years ago, when he sanctioned the assassination of Soleimani.





Iran's President Ebrahim Raisi (R), accompanied by chief of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran Mohammad Eslami, speaks to the media during a visit to the Bushehr Nuclear Power Plant, southeast of Tehran. (Photo by Iranian Presidency / AFP)

Iranian president Ebrahim Raisi spoke on the anniversary of Soleimani's death at a ceremony in a large prayer hall in Tehran. The president vowed revenge on Donald Trump, calling him the primary "aggressor and assassin."

The Iranian general and his ally, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, who was also killed in the drone strike in January 2020, had been masters of the art of wielding powerful proxy forces in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen and also of bombing the US into concessions with low intensity – but high political impact – rocket fire.



Gen. Hossein Salami (C), head of Iran's Quds Force, attending military exercises dubbed Payambar-e-Azadm held in three provinces last December. (SEPAH NEWS handout photo via AFP)

On Wednesday, an armed pro-Iranian militia called Gasseem Al-Jabarayn claimed responsibility for Iraq's drone and rocket attacks, which caused no casualties. The group posted online that they vow to maintain their attacks until there was a complete US withdrawal from Iraq. This group is believed to be a cover for one of the main Iranian proxies, whose influence in Iraq remains extensive as the central government continues to struggle to assert control.

Analysts in the region say the frequency of attacks in Iraq and Syria tends to increase whenever a weighty political decision draws near. Few such decisions have carried more consequences than whether to re-engage with Iran – an actor widely distrusted by the GCC and the rest of the Middle East.

To do so could be the biggest gamble of Biden's presidency, potentially destabilizing bedrock security arrangements with core US allies, who remain averse to such a move without stringent restrictions to prevent even clandestine efforts to build nuclear weapons.



# URANIUM ENRICHMENT

The concentration levels required for civil and military purposes

- Nuclear energy produced from uranium 235, which represents only 0.7% of natural uranium; the rest is uranium 238



**Civil use:** majority in nuclear power stations using uranium enriched with U-235 to 3.5 to 5%

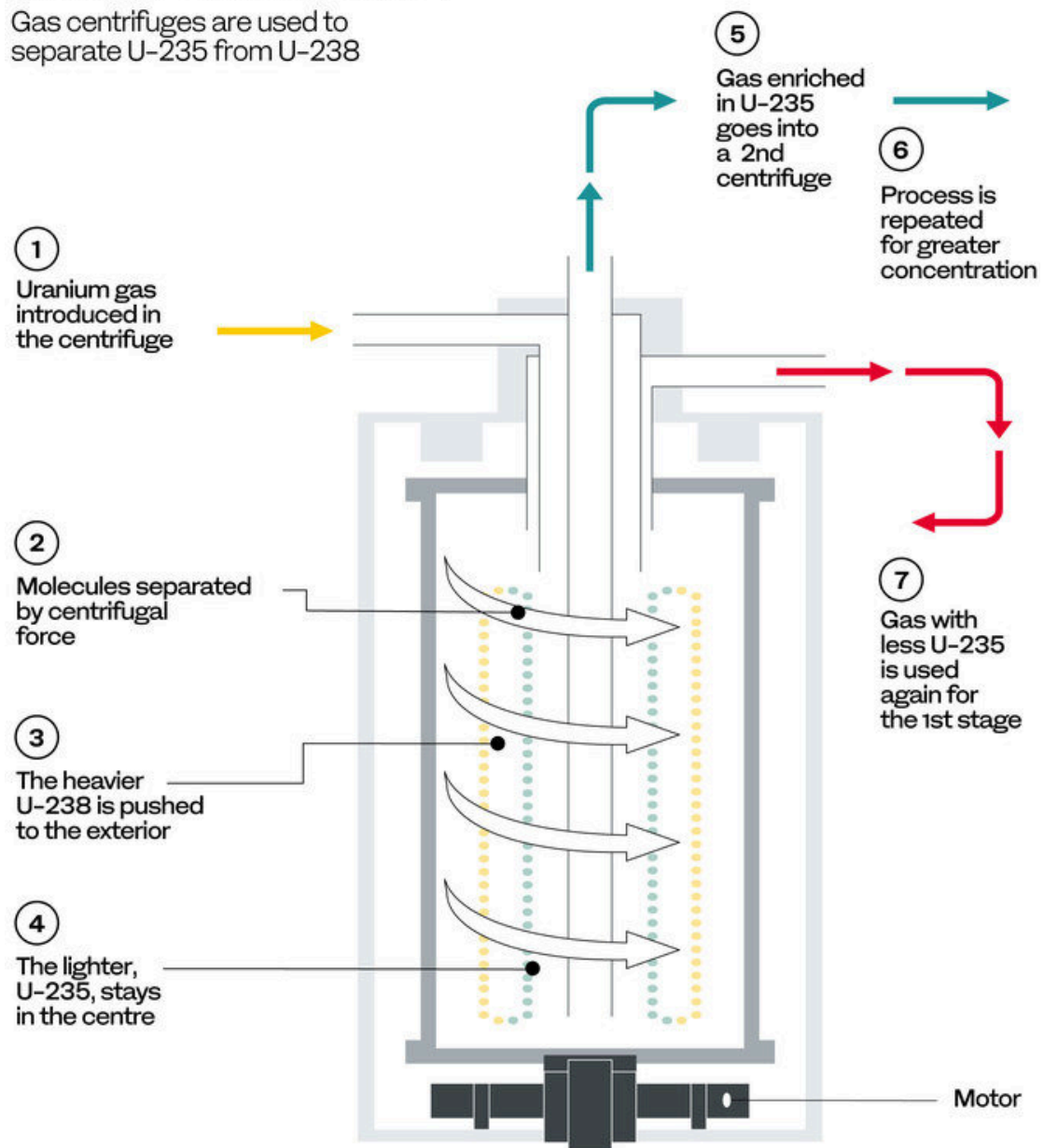
- The enrichment process increases the proportion of U-235 by separating it from U-238



**Military use:** concentration of at least 90% U-235 necessary to produce nuclear weapons

## GAS CENTRIFUGE

Gas centrifuges are used to separate U-235 from U-238



However, other commentators have played down the impact of the attacks on the Vienna talks.

Mohanad Hage Ali, director of communications and fellow of Carnegie Middle East Center, said: "These attacks are directed to serve an internal (Iranian) purpose and have little military significance given the absence of serious casualties. They are more useful in justifying the lack of reprisals for major attacks against Iranian forces and their militias.

"I see them as ineffective in pushing for a change in Vienna as compared to the actual progress in Iran's nuclear program."

Rasha Al-Aqeedi, an Iraqi researcher on militancy and ideology, said: "The recent attacks are unlikely to achieve concessions given their marginal impact on US personnel and facilities."





Iraqi troops inspect an un-fired Katyusha rocket during a rocket attack on a military base hosting US forces near Baghdad's international airport on Jan. 5, 2022. (Iraqi Media Security Cell/Handout via REUTERS)

Pentagon press secretary John Kirby blamed the attacks combine on the



hostility toward Washington's continued presence in Iraq and the anniversary of Soleimani's death.

Whether the rocket fire improves Iran's hand is open to contention. However, even the perception Iran aims to create of being able to bomb itself into a better bargaining position acts as a fillip to the country's negotiators, who have long touted the virtues of "strategic patience" over the capriciousness of US policy.

As the latest round of talks resumed, the US Special Envoy for Iran was in Saudi Arabia this week to talk with senior officials. Gulf countries retain a skeptical line on Iran, despite having embarked on a series of regional discussions at an intelligence level last year.

Central to Saudi concerns is that Iran has refused to use the Vienna talks to discuss its ballistic missile program or its interventions across a region still reeling from decades of war and insurrection – much of it Iranian-led.

"If the US does not maintain a tough hand, the region will sink further," said a senior Iraqi official, "This is not a time for weak hearts."







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Iran displays missiles amid nuclear talks with world powers  
How Iran's Ahwazi Arabs, betrayed, fell victim to oppression that continues to this day

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## [Turkish defense minister warns Athens not to test Ankara's patience](#)

Sun, 2022-01-09 02:10

ANKARA: Greece should refrain from testing Turkey's patience with provocations, including with a threat to extend its territorial waters in the Aegean, Turkey's defense minister warned on Saturday.

Speaking to a group of journalists in Ankara, Hulusi Akar also said Turkey wanted to resolve disputes with neighbor and fellow NATO member Greece through dialogue and turn the Aegean into a "sea of friendship" but accused Athens of pressing ahead with what he said were provocative actions, including militarizing islands close to mainland Turkey, in breach of international agreements.

"They (Greece) should not miscalculate and think it's the right time (to extend the territorial waters to) 12 miles," Akar said. "They should not test us in any way, and should not embark on such an adventure. I hope they don't make such a mistake."

He added: "Let the two sides benefit from the riches, let both the Turkish people and the Greek people live happily and prosperously."

Greece and Turkey have long been at odds over a series of disputes, including territorial rights in the Aegean Sea and energy exploration rights in the eastern Mediterranean. Tensions flared in the summer of 2020 over exploratory drilling rights in areas in the Mediterranean where Greece and Cyprus claim their own exclusive economic zone.

Greece says it maintains its right to extend its territorial waters from the current six to 12 nautical miles around its Aegean islands. Turkey has long said it would consider the move – which would block its own access to the Aegean – as a cause for war. Last year, the Greek parliament voted to extend its waters along its western coastline, on the other side of the country, to 12 miles.

Athens has recently called on Turkey to revoke the decision to consider an extension of the territorial waters as a cause for war if it wants to normalize ties. It has also urged Ankara to end what it also terms as provocations in the Aegean and the eastern Mediterranean.

Commenting on the NATO alliance, meanwhile, Akar lamented what he said was an "open or covert" arms embargo by some NATO allies on Turkey. He said those countries were "weakening" the alliance by not selling defense components to Turkey.



The US slapped sanctions on some Turkish defense officials and expelled Turkey from the US-led F-35 fighter jet program after Turkey purchased Russia's advanced S-400 long-range missile defense system, over concerns that the Russian technology would put the safety of the fighter jets at risk. Canada canceled export licenses for drone technology to Turkey in April last year after finding the equipment had been used by Turkey's ally Azerbaijan in the conflict with Armenian forces in Nagorno-Karabakh five months earlier. Arms control advocates had claimed the UAVs were using imaging and targeting systems produced by a Canadian company.



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Turkey pursues new mechanism with US to consolidate ties Saudi Arabia, Greece discuss Iran, Middle East security