

UN chief says cross-border aid to Syria rebel bastion vital

Author:

Thu, 2021-12-16 00:01

NEW YORK: Cross-border humanitarian aid to Syria remains vital, the United Nations Secretary-General said in an internal report Tuesday, as a UN authorization allowing aid into rebel-held areas in the country's northwest without approval from Damascus is set to expire.

A rare moment of cooperation between the US and Russia in July allowed for a six-month extension of activity at Bab Al-Hawa, the only border crossing through which aid reaches the rebel stronghold of Idlib province. That authorization is due to expire on Jan. 10.

"Cross-border assistance remains lifesaving for millions of people in need in north-west Syria," Antonio Guterres said in a confidential document obtained by AFP, adding that over four million people were in need of crucial assistance across the country.

The US and several European nations believe the UN authorization for the crossing between Syria and Turkey should renew automatically for an additional six months, without the need for a new vote.

But Russia, a key ally to the Damascus regime, has previously opposed the move, invoking Syrian sovereignty.

Moscow has linked any potential extension to Tuesday's report, as well as a possible new vote.

The cross-border mechanism has been operating since 2020 through Bab Al-Hawa, after the Russian-imposed removal in 2019 of three other access points in Syria.

BACKGROUND

A rare moment of cooperation between the US and Russia in July allowed for a six-month extension of activity at Bab Al-Hawa, the only border crossing through which aid reaches the rebel stronghold of Idlib province. That authorization is due to expire on Jan. 10.

In Tuesday's document, the UN chief refers to another project for humanitarian operations, this time across the front lines, to reach Idlib.

"If implemented, this plan will make operations across the front lines more predictable and effective," Guterres noted.

However, he insisted upon the importance of the Bab Al-Hawa crossing.

“At this point such cross-line convoys, even if deployed regularly, could not replicate the size and scope of the cross-border operation,” he said.

Guterres said some 4.5 million people in Syria need help this winter, up 12 percent from the previous year, because of the economic crisis and the global pandemic.

Only 2.9 percent of the Syrian population is fully vaccinated, according to the report.

More than 3 million people live in Idlib province, much of which is controlled by jihadists and allied rebels.

In June, the UN said around 2.4 million people there were in need of humanitarian aid.



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Syria state media say US forces 'kidnapped civilians' near Deir Ezzor
Israeli official says Syria must not have chemical weapons

Lebanese purchasing power continues to shrink amid financial collapse

Wed, 2021-12-15 23:53

BEIRUT: The Lebanese pound hit record lows this week, trading at almost LBP29,000 to the US dollar, leading to an intervention from the Banque du Liban that allowed the exchange rate to drop to LBP27,000.

This spurred self-employed professionals to call for a national state of emergency to be declared, while the transport sector announced that Thursday would be a “day of anger.”

Further exacerbating the situation in Lebanon, the director-general of telecom company Ogero, Imad Kreidieh, said he had applied for an urgent advance to purchase fuel to continue operating the electrical generators for telecom networks.

“But President Michel Aoun refrained from signing decrees since the Cabinet is not convening, which may lead to the suspension of our services and interruption of internet services,” he added.

In light of Lebanon’s increasing financial challenges, the purchasing power of Lebanese citizens has shrunk by 95 percent, while the minimum wage has become the equivalent of about \$24.

The head of the Syndicate of Food Importers, Hani Bohsali, said: “The situation is too dangerous. It is not limited to the exchange rate or price increase. Food security is in danger. Regardless of the ability to secure dollars for imports, the problem has become in the consumer’s ability to purchase goods. Chaos is pervading markets.”

The heads of professional syndicates met on Wednesday and expressed “deep concerns about the comprehensive deterioration that has crossed the line and is now threatening the country’s foundations.”

The syndicates called for the need to declare a national state of emergency, accompanied by “vigorous work” to initiate a political solution to save the country and put in place a clear and effective rescue plan, especially “in the absence of serious solutions” for social and economic issues.

“BDL and the Association of Banks in Lebanon ought to take urgent measures to make it easier for the professional syndicates to withdraw their deposits in Lebanese and foreign currencies as soon as possible,” the syndicates demanded, threatening to sue BDL and ABL, and carry out massive protests.

HIGHLIGHT

Self-employed professionals called for a national state of emergency to be

declared, while the transport sector announced that Thursday would be a 'day of anger.'

There are no prospects of the Cabinet convening any time soon, as Hezbollah and the Amal Movement insist on removing Tarek Bitar, the judge leading the probe into the Beirut port blast, before attending any sessions.

Bitar has reiterated his demand for the arrest of former finance minister, MP and leader in the Amal Movement, Ali Hassan Khalil.

Some political observers interpreted these developments as "new means of pressure against the continuous disruption of Cabinet sessions by Hezbollah and the Amal movement," while other pro-Hezbollah observers believed this was "a new American means of pressure to besiege the party."

Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri, an ally of Hezbollah, told his visitors on Wednesday: "99 percent of our suffering in Lebanon stems from internal disputes."

He accused Aoun and the Free Patriotic Movement of opposing the Taif Agreement and abstaining from implementing laws, especially the law on electricity which, he said, was to blame for over 45 percent of the state's financial deficit.

Berri said that he and Hezbollah did not want Bitar to be removed from the port probe. Rather, they were demanding that the investigation abide by the law and constitution.

"The law granted judges the right to be tried before a special tribunal, as well as it granted MPs, presidents and ministers the right to be tried before a parliamentary body. Why were these rules and principles not adhered to?"



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Lebanon looks to keep COVID-19 cases down over the holidays Lebanese caught between old and new \$100 banknotes

[What the growing US-Israel rift means for the Iran nuclear issue](#)

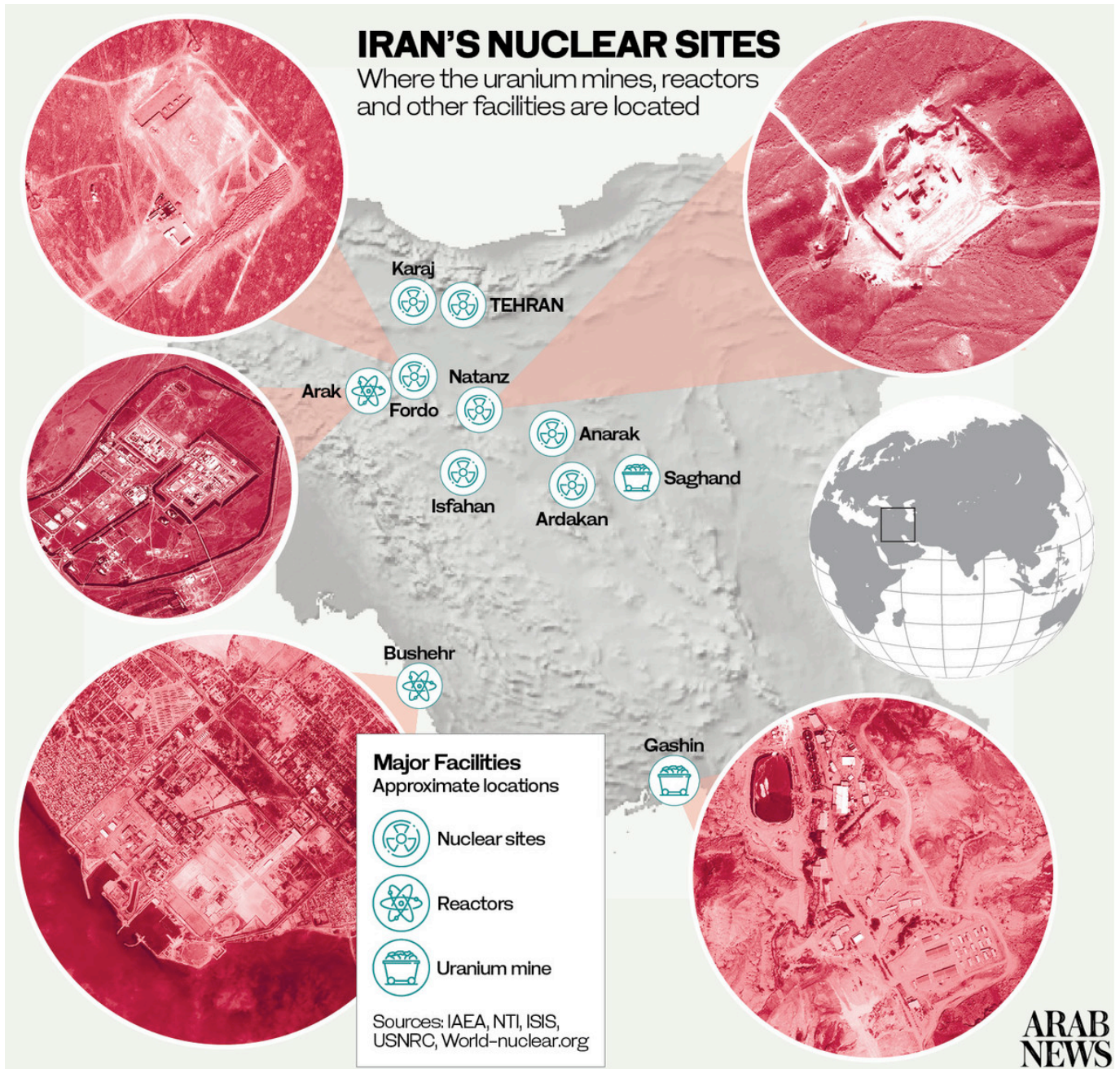
Wed, 2021-12-15 22:57

WASHINGTON: Talks to revive the Iran nuclear deal, which could see stringent sanctions on Tehran lifted in exchange for guarantees to halt its uranium enrichment program, resumed in Vienna at the end of last month.

However, delays and obstructions by the hard-line government of Iran's President Ebrahim Raisi, Israeli attacks on Iranian targets in Syria, and increasingly combative rhetoric from Tel Aviv have collectively cast doubt on the success of the renewed dialogue.

Jean-Yves Le Drian, the French foreign minister, told a parliamentary committee on Dec. 7 that he fears the Iranians are playing for time in an attempt to water down the terms of the deal.

“We have the feeling the Iranians want to make it last and the longer the talks last, the more they go back on their commitments and get closer to capacity to get a nuclear weapon,” Le Drian was quoted by the Reuters news agency as saying.



Soon after the talks resumed, the head of Israel’s intelligence agency Mossad, David Barnea, vowed that Israel will never allow Iran to acquire nuclear weapons, indicating that the Naftali Bennett government is losing patience with diplomatic efforts and is increasingly willing to use force.

Indeed, on Dec. 7, Israel launched a rare airstrike against Syria’s main port of Latakia. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a UK-based conflict monitor, the strike destroyed an Iranian weapons shipment. Israel’s military is yet to comment on the attack.

“Iran will not have nuclear weapons – not in the coming years, not ever,” Barnea said at an agency awards ceremony in early December. “This is my

personal commitment: This is the Mossad's commitment."

"Our eyes are open, we are alert, and together with our colleagues in the defense establishment, we will do whatever it takes to keep that threat away from the state of Israel and to thwart it in every way."

Barnea and Benny Gantz, Israel's defense minister, made a rare joint trip to Washington last week where they reportedly pressed senior White House officials on the need to seriously consider joint strikes on key Iranian military and nuclear targets.



A handout picture provided by the Iranian presidency on Oct. 8, 2021 shows Iran's President Ebrahim Raisi visiting the Bushehr Nuclear Power Plant. (AFP)

Iran has accelerated enrichment since the US withdrew from the accord in 2018, with then-president Donald Trump claiming the deal did not go far enough in curtailing Tehran's atomic ambitions. Iran has long insisted its program is purely for civilian energy purposes.

US President Joe Biden, who helped negotiate the original deal in 2015 as Barack Obama's vice president, wants to rejoin a strengthened nuclear agreement, which co-signatories Russia, China, Britain, France, Germany and the EU have fought hard to salvage.

However, Israel is not convinced that reviving the 2015 deal will curb Iran's nuclear capabilities and its ballistic missile program, to say nothing of its destabilizing influence across the Middle East. Instead, the Israelis want a more forceful deterrent on the table.

The window for reaching a nonmilitary resolution to Iran's nuclear program is closing fast. Israeli intelligence indicates Iranian nuclear scientists are preparing to enrich uranium to 90 percent purity, bringing Tehran closer than ever to building a bomb.

Unless further enrichment is prevented, Iran could stockpile enough weapons-grade uranium in the coming months to produce a viable nuclear weapon with little warning.

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%

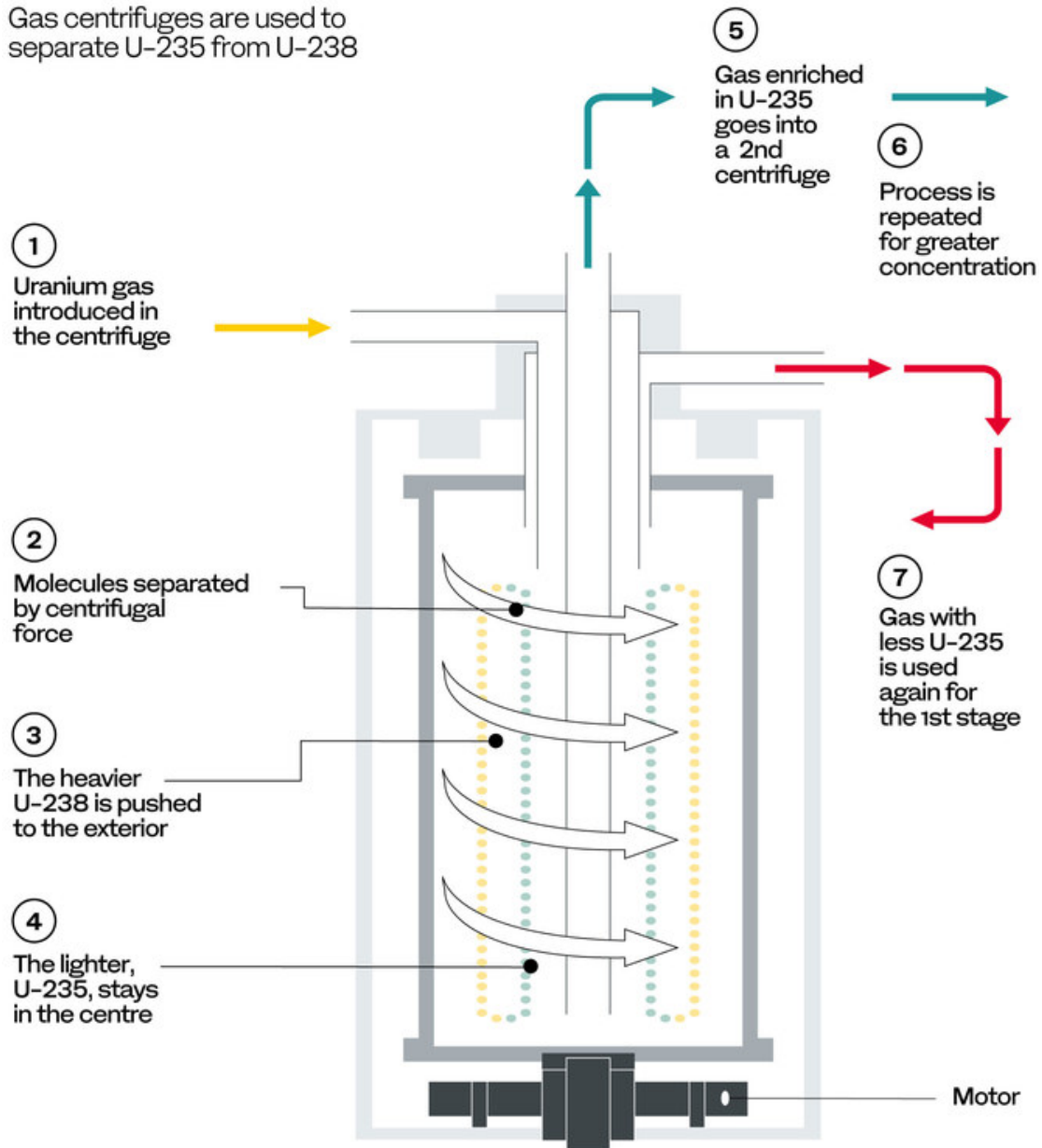
- The enrichment process increases the proportion of U-235 by separating it from U-238



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



Israel's frustration with the Biden administration's stance has been steadily building in recent weeks. In a video published on his YouTube channel, Naftali Bennett called on fellow world leaders to not allow Iran to get away with what he called "nuclear blackmail."

Israeli officials are concerned Biden's negotiating team will roll back sanctions on Iran, both nuclear and terrorism-related, thereby releasing billions of dollars that the regime desperately needs, in exchange for only minimal guarantees on curtailing its nuclear program.

Furthermore, Bennett has hinted that Israel is prepared to take matters into its own hands if the US accepts a "less for less" interim deal with Iran that would potentially give the regime sufficient latitude to achieve nuclear weapons breakout in the near future.

Such an incremental deal could end up further emboldening Iran's regional transnational terror network by providing Shiite proxies in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Yemen and beyond with funding previously denied to them under harsh sanctions.



Iranian protesters raise a dummy of US President Joe Biden during a rally outside the former US embassy in Tehran on Nov. 4, 2021, to mark the 42nd anniversary of the start of the Iran hostage crisis. (AFP photo)

"To chase the terrorist du jour sent by the Quds Force does not pay off anymore," Bennet said in a televised conference hosted by Reichman University on Nov. 23. "We must go for the dispatcher."

The US and Israel have traditionally acted in lockstep on the issue of containing Iran, so the recent divergence of opinion and the growing prospect of unilateral Israeli action is raising concerns in Washington.

“Naftali Bennett’s government tried hard to cooperate with the Biden team when they came into office to present a joint front on Iran policy because they genuinely thought it could get the US to listen to them more,” said Gabriel Noronha, executive director of the Forum for American Leadership and previously the State Department’s special adviser for Secretary of State Mike Pompeo’s Iran Action Group.

“They’ve increasingly realized they were naive on this point and have begun speaking out in the press more and more with their complaints, while at the same time US officials are leaking details of Israeli military operations to the press.

“Both Israeli officials and the US military leadership believe there is a need to have a credible military threat to deter Iran’s nuclear program. However, they are at odds with Biden’s political appointees at the State Department, National Security Council, and Colin Kahl – the number three official at the Pentagon – who remain under the delusion that appeasement toward Iran is the best path forward.”



Inspectors of the International Atomic Energy Agency had been repeatedly denied complete access to Iranian nuclear facilities. (AFP file photo)

Noronha warned against downplaying Israel’s complaints in the quest to revive the nuclear deal, arguing that taking the country’s security concerns

seriously might actually enhance US leverage over Iran.

“The US needs to change its approach and recognize that Israel is its best partner against the Iranian threat because its military, diplomatic and economic pressure against the regime gives the US more leverage in negotiations,” he told Arab News.

“Many Israeli officials are incredibly frustrated by Washington’s antagonism toward Israeli policy, which is just trying to ensure its basic security needs are met. Israel can help the US – and its negotiations – by continuing to take covert action against Iran’s oil exports and its nuclear program.

“The US would be wise to share more intelligence with Israel to advance and support its operations, as well as accelerate its military cooperation on a potential airstrike against Iran’s nuclear facilities.”

One area in which the Biden administration sharply differs from Bennett’s outlook is its willingness to accept a “threshold state” when it comes to Iran’s nuclear capabilities.

Indeed, it would appear the Biden White House is prepared to tolerate a status quo in which Iran holds the components for “nuclear breakout,” including the requisite knowledge, military hardware and enrichment capacity, without actually building a nuclear weapon.

By contrast, the Israelis believe such a threshold state is just as serious as Iran actually developing a nuclear weapon.

Ellie Cohanim, who was deputy special envoy to monitor and combat antisemitism at the State Department under the Trump administration, is concerned the Biden administration is not listening to Israeli concerns.



Iran atomic energy chief Mohammad Eslami (L) and Kazem Gharib Abadi (C), Iran's governor to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), depart after attending an IAEA meeting in Vienna, Austria on Sept. 20, 2021. (AFP)

“It seems that, behind the scenes, the differences between the Biden administration and its Iran negotiating team with the Israeli government are growing,” Cohanim told Arab News, adding that the Biden team has failed to replicate the Trump administration’s “zero tolerance” policy.

“Israeli PM Bennett has stated on the record that the US and world powers need to wake up to the fact that the Iranian regime is seeking nuclear weapons, and so it would appear there is a sense of frustration that the Israelis have with the current US administration,” she told Arab News.

“President Donald Trump stated clearly that he would never allow Iran to develop a nuclear bomb on his watch, and it is time for US President Joe Biden to go on the record stating the same.

“The Israelis have demonstrated time and again their premier intelligence capability, especially in relation to Iran. The Biden administration would be well advised to rely on Israeli intelligence data and take any necessary military actions to end Iran’s nuclear weapons activity should Israel ever assess that the Iranians had crossed the line when no further alternatives exist to kinetic activity.”

Where this line is drawn remains a point of contention between Biden and Bennett’s national security teams. Failure to reach a common position could result in unilateral Israeli action against Iran’s nuclear infrastructure. And, yet, the rift seems wider than ever.



US President Joe Biden meets with Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett at the White House on August 27, 2021 in Washington, DC, during talks focused on

Iran. (AFP photo)

“Ever since Prime Minister Bennett’s visit to Washington to meet President Biden, senior Israeli officials have been publicly talking about their displeasure with Biden’s plan to move full steam ahead with diplomacy with the Islamic Republic,” Bryan Leib, executive director of Iranian Americans for Liberty, told Arab News.

“Just a week ago, Biden’s US special envoy to Iran was in Israel meeting with several senior Israeli officials, but it was reported that PM Bennett chose not to meet with him.

“For the last 40 years, the Iranian regime has been censoring, oppressing and murdering its own citizens, while its leaders publicly call for the destruction of the US and the world’s only Jewish nation, Israel,” Leib said.

“Diplomacy with the Islamic Republic will fail once again because they are not rational actors that truly seek peace and a brighter future for their people.”

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Iran lets UN replace nuclear site's damaged cameras: ReportsIran nuclear escalation means 'we are rapidly reaching the end of the road,' warn France, Germany, UK

[Arab coalition airstrikes hit ballistic missile, drone sites in Sanaa](#)

Wed, 2021-12-15 01:45

RIYADH: Arab coalition airstrikes destroyed two caves used to store ballistic missiles and four secret drone facilities in the Yemeni capital Sanaa, the coalition announced early on Wednesday.

The attacks come after Saudi Arabian forces destroyed a ballistic missile launched by Houthi militia and targeting Khamis Mushayt, near Abha in the Kingdom's southwest, on Monday.

"Destroying capabilities and neutralizing the threat requires the operation to continue to achieve its goals," the Arab coalition said a statement on Al-Ekhbariya.

Bahrain and Kuwait have condemned Houthi militia attempts to attack civilians and civilian buildings in Saudi Arabia with a ballistic missile on Monday.

In separate statements, both countries labeled the missile attack as a "flagrant violation of international humanitarian law."

The coalition has stepped up operations targeting Houthi military sites after an increase in cross-border attacks in recent days aimed at Saudi Arabia.

The militia, which seized the Yemeni capital in 2014, has been fighting the internationally recognized government, which is supported by the Saudi-led Arab coalition.



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Arab coalition carries out strikes on Marib, kills more than 200 Houthi militants
Over 190 Houthis killed as Arab coalition targets militants in Marib

[Lebanon looks to keep COVID-19 cases down over the holidays](#)

Author:

Wed, 2021-12-15 01:05

BEIRUT: The Lebanese Ministry of Health fears a surge in COVID-19 cases in the coming weeks, which would force Lebanon to face a repeat of last year's scenario.

Health Minister Dr. Firass Abiad said Tuesday: "Cases are on the rise. More patients are being admitted to hospitals every day.

"We have been working to ensure hospitals are ready to receive patients; the occupancy rate has risen to 76 percent, which is a cause for concern," Abiad added.

The Ministry of Health is racing to stop the new wave by holding open vaccination campaigns every weekend, or what is known as the “Pfizer marathons.”

On Monday, the ministry reported 787 new COVID-19 cases and 12 deaths.

Abiad said that three cases with the omicron variant had been registered in Lebanon. “Omicron cases are expected to rise in Lebanon, like in other countries.”

So far, 40 percent of those registered on the vaccination platform, or about 2.2 million people, have received the first vaccine shot, 34 percent (nearly 1.9 million) have received the second one, while only 11 percent have had the booster shot.

MP Assem Araj, a cardiologist who heads Parliament’s health committee, stated that “after last year’s holidays, we had between 1,600 and 1,900 daily cases.

“We do not want the same scenario this year. People are not adhering to precautionary measures, so we asked the Minister of Health and all concerned ministries, namely the ministries of tourism and interior, to be strict in applying preventive measures. We have a sufficient number of vaccines and the number of vaccinated people has reached 150,000 last week. This is a good number and we have to stay on this path because there is no excuse for not being vaccinated. We do not want history to repeat itself because we cannot face another outbreak and vaccines are available for everyone,” Araj said.

The committee that follows up on COVID-19 preventative measures issued a decision to “impose a limit of 50 percent capacity at any venue.” There are no indications of a lockdown yet.

Araj urged people to “abide by the precautionary measures during the holidays,” pointing out that about 2,000 nurses have left the country, which means Lebanon is facing a severe shortage of medical staff.

Doctors fear that last year’s scenario will be repeated more tragically amid the shortages in the medical sector.

The Syndicate of Owners of Restaurants, Cafes and Nightclubs in Lebanon announced that it is “aware of the recent increase in COVID-19 cases and the search for the best preventive methods is underway, especially during the upcoming holidays.”

Although many Lebanese expats are returning home for the holidays, Pierre Al-Ashkar, the head of the Syndicate of Hotel Owners in Lebanon, described the atmosphere as “gloomy and not quite festive.”

He said: “The tourism sector is in freefall. The main problem is that the Ministry of Health focuses on monitoring restaurants and hotels without monitoring homes, chalets, and private parties.

“If we tell customers that we cannot exceed a certain number of attendees,

they will automatically resort to holding a New Year's party, for example, at a chalet they rent. Yes, overcrowding in homes and chalets exists and is many times greater, and it's even less expensive than going out."



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Lebanon's public sector falls further into chaos and corruption
Lebanon's top patriarch says cabinet should reconvene