

Iran poses 'major threat' to Middle East and beyond

Fri, 2021-03-19 01:00

CHICAGO: Diplomats at a press conference Thursday hosted by the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI) warned that a buildup of ballistic missiles by Iran poses a "major threat" to the Arabian Gulf, the Middle East and western nations.

NCRI Foreign Affairs Committee spokesperson Ali Safavi, former Italy Foreign Minister Giulio Terzi and Walid Phares, the co-secretary general of the Transatlantic Parliamentary Group on Counterterrorism, said the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), otherwise known as the Iran nuclear deal, has failed to curb Iran's militant attacks through proxy militias in Yemen, Lebanon, Iraq and Syria.

The officials argued that US President Joe Biden and European leaders need to take a "tougher stand" against Tehran and its ongoing nuclear and ballistic missile program.

Phares, who is also an adviser to the anti-terrorism caucus of the US House of Representatives, said that the focus has always been on curbing Iran's nuclear program. But the regime has also built up a formidable arsenal of ballistic missiles that are being used in "four battlegrounds" in Yemen, Lebanon, Iraq and Syria.

"The problem is that over the past five years, the regime has displayed and continues to display a behavior that would endanger Iran, its people, the Middle East, Europe, the US and the international community," Phares said.

"Any return to the Iran deal cannot just go back to Tehran and deal with the technical matter of counting the points that Iran is doing or not doing. It has completely changed. We are talking about the geopolitics of the whole region."

Phares said negotiations must also include a focus on "Iran's behaviors" and its use of militant proxies in the Middle East.

"Through its militias, Iran has established control of Iraq with some exceptions," Phares said. "It has been able to penetrate the country with its own militias. But those militias are not only controlling the government, economy and banks. They are actually engaged – as is the case in Yemen – in suppressing the population."

In Syria, where 700,000 people have been killed and 5 million have been displaced, Phares said the Bashar Al-Assad regime is fully backed by the Iranian regime. He also noted that in Lebanon, Hezbollah has openly touted its allegiance to Tehran.

"What we are dealing with now is an Iranian regime in a quasi-occupation of

four Arab countries. There cannot be a return to an Iran deal without resolving the 'Khamenei imperialism' that is occupying half of the Middle East," Phares said in reference to Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and his foreign intervention policies.

Terzi called the JCPOA, which was signed in 2015 and attempted to restrict Iran's pursuit of a nuclear weapon, a "flawed deal" and "total failure."

He noted that Biden wants to pursue an agreement that will end the attacks from proxy groups like the Houthis and prevent the situation from worsening.

"This is a major issue and a major question mark. We see a cautious approach but up to now, I do not consider it a weak approach by the Biden administration," Terzi said.

"There is a willingness by Biden to deter attacks, especially against American interests. But more in general to avoid at least a scaling up of the existing aggressive strategies by proxies of the Iranian regime."



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France's Macron urges Iran to 'stop worsening' nuclear crisis Election looming, Iran's Rouhani says hardliners sabotage goal to lift sanctions

Minister calls for international action to end Jerusalem eviction of Palestinian families

Thu, 2021-03-18 23:49

AMMAN: Legal battles aimed at preventing the eviction of 28 Palestinian families from their homes in the Sheikh Jarrah district of Jerusalem on Thursday appeared to be heading for defeat.

Israeli courts have given the residents living in the East Jerusalem neighborhood until May to leave in order to allow Jewish settlers to move in.

Fadi Hidmi, the Palestinian minister of Jerusalem affairs, on Thursday called on the international community to intervene and help stop the evictions.

He praised Jordan for its “continuous support for the people of Jerusalem” and noted the country’s “cooperation with the Palestinian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to pass to Jerusalem lawyers authorized original documents that show the rights of the residents of Sheikh Jarrah and debunk Israeli claims.”

Wasfi Kailani, executive director of the Hashemite Fund for the Restoration of Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock, told Arab News that “steadfastness and courage” was required to challenge the replacement policy.

He said Jordan had supplied legal representatives with all available relevant documents relating to the 28 Sheikh Jarrah tenants’ 1956 rental agreements with the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA).

Jessica Montel, executive director of HaMoked, an Israeli human rights NGO working in Jerusalem, told Arab News that the Israeli courts were “an accomplice” to the forced displacement of entire families, with the explicit goal of replacing Palestinians with Israeli settlers.

“The hypocrisy is quite blatant: Whereas Jews can reclaim property in East Jerusalem that they owned before 1948, the court has sealed off any option for Palestinians to reclaim property in West Jerusalem,” she said.

The official Palestinian news agency Wafa reported that Hidmi had appealed for “urgent international intervention” to stop evictions in the Jerusalem neighborhoods of Sheikh Jarrah and Silwan.

“The international community is required to intervene immediately and urgently to put pressure on the Israeli government to stop the displacement of Palestinians from their homes in the occupied city, in light of the Israeli governmental and judicial institutions’ insistence on flouting international legitimacy decisions,” he said.

The minister claimed that driving Palestinians out of their homes in the city

was politically motivated and aimed at implementing colonial settlement plans. "What is taking place is a systematic programmed process of replacing the Palestinians expelled from their land and property with foreign settlers," he added.

Dana Mills, director of development and external relations with the Israeli Peace Now organization, said: "The court is only the tool by which settlers with the close assistance of state authorities use to commit the crime of displacing an entire community and replacing it with the settlement."

She pointed out that the Israeli government and settlers had no problem displacing thousands of Palestinians in Sheikh Jarrah and Silwan in the name of "the right of return" to properties before 1948, while they strongly claimed that the millions of Israelis living in Palestinian properties before 1948 could not be evicted.

"Since the evacuation of the Moghrabi (Moroccan Quarter) neighborhood for the purpose of expanding the Western Wall Plaza in 1967, there has been no such deportation in Jerusalem. The government can still stop this injustice," Mills added.

Nabil Abu Rudeineh, spokesman for the Palestinian presidency, condemned "the endless Israeli assaults against the Palestinian people," adding that the measures would "not bring peace to anyone."

Although Palestinians live in East Jerusalem – a part of the internationally recognized Palestinian territory that has been subject to Israeli military occupation since 1967 – they are denied citizenship rights and are instead classified as residents whose permits could be revoked if they moved away from the city for more than a few years.



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Israel resumes plans of east Jerusalem settlement, cuts access for Palestinians
Palestinians in East Jerusalem neighborhood living in constant fear

[Palestinian rivals agree on poll 'code of conduct'](#)

Thu, 2021-03-18 23:24

CAIRO: Rival Palestinian factions ended their talks in Cairo with an agreement on a code of conduct for elections described as a major step on Palestine's "national democratic path."

In their closing statement, Hamas and Fatah delegates praised Egyptian efforts to end Palestine's longstanding divisions, saying the electoral

process “expresses the aspirations of the Palestinian people.”

Palestinians will go to the polls on May 22 to elect a new Legislative Council, a new president on July 31, and members of the National Council on Aug. 31.

Elections were last held in 2006, with Hamas winning a majority, while the most recent presidential poll took place in 2005.

Mahmoud Abbas, president of the Palestinian Authority, announced the election dates in a presidential decree on Jan. 15.

“The meeting discussed all the national issues and the dangers facing the Palestinian issue, as well as ways to strengthen the national partnership,” the factions said in their statement.

FASTFACT

Palestinian factions signed a code of conduct, in which they affirmed their keenness to conduct the electoral process in all its stages with transparency and integrity.

The statement also said that participants had agreed to “conduct the electoral process with high transparency and integrity that expresses the aspirations of the Palestinian people.”

It added: “The Presidency of the Palestinian National Council presented a detailed report on its vision of the status of the council, where those present discussed the mechanisms of forming the new National Council and the number of its members within the framework of strengthening and activating the role of the Palestine Liberation Organization as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people.”

Participants affirmed the legal and political unity of the Palestinian territories.

They also stressed the need for the elections to take place in Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and to confront any obstacles, particularly in Jerusalem.

The closing statement said that the Palestinian factions stressed the necessity of completing the formation of the unified leadership of the comprehensive popular resistance and activating it in accordance with the statement of the recent meeting of secretaries-general.

The factions signed a code of conduct, in which they affirmed their keenness to conduct the electoral process in all its stages with transparency and integrity, and to be dominated by honest competition between the candidate lists in a way that serves and enhances the national unity and the general interest of the Palestinians.

The charter included several provisions, most notably full compliance with the regulations, instructions and decisions issued by the Central Elections Commission, regarding the conduct of the electoral process in its various stages in a manner that achieves integrity, transparency and the model that speaks for the Palestinian people and their sacrifices.

The factions also stipulated full compliance with the provisions of Law No. 1 of 2007 regarding general elections and its amendments by Decree Law No. 1 of 2021 and the relevant presidential decrees No. 3 of 2021 regarding calling for legislative, presidential and National Council elections.

The charter also stressed the importance of cooperating with the Central Elections Commission in its efforts to organize free and fair elections and respecting the role of the Palestinian police in securing the electoral process in all its stages and adhering to its decisions.

He stressed the importance of respecting the role of local, Arab and international observers and cooperating with them in performing their monitoring role.







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All Palestinian factions attend Cairo dialogue
Palestinian delegations plan to meet in Cairo to discuss elections

[Warnings over Turkish attempts to ban pro-Kurdish party](#)

Author:

Thu, 2021-03-18 23:00

ANKARA: A legal case has been launched to close the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), the third largest parliamentary party in Turkey, provoking strong reactions about the downgrading of political freedom in the country.

The Court of Cassation filed a lawsuit with the Constitutional Court on March 17 asking for the closure of the HDP, alleging it had collaborated with the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) "and aimed to damage and break the unity of the state with the Turkish people."

Prosecutor Bekir Sahin, who was assigned to his post by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan despite ranking fourth out of five candidates, also sought a political ban on more than 600 HDP members and financial restrictions on the party by cutting it off from Treasury aid.

The HDP called Sahin's move a "new coup" against democracy with a governmental attempt to "weaponize the judiciary."

It denies accusations of links to the PKK, and has reached out to all segments of Turkish society in order to differentiate itself from past pro-Kurdish parties. This broader approach has won votes from liberal segments of society, including minorities and white collar workers.

The launch of a legal case to ban the HDP triggered both domestic and international reactions about the downgrading of political freedoms, the rule of law and pluralism in Turkey.

The country was assessed as being "not free" in the Freedom in the World 2021 Index from Freedom House, with a paltry 32/100 score.

"Unapologetically toward the end of pluralism," tweeted Nacho Sanchez Amor, who is the European Parliament's new rapporteur on Turkey. "What reaction does Turkey expect now from the European Union? A positive agenda?"

The US also warned about efforts to dissolve the HDP. President Joe Biden administration's policy will mainly focus on Turkey's democracy deficit and shortcomings in the country's rule of law.

"We are monitoring the initiation of efforts to dissolve the Peoples' Democratic Party, a decision that would unduly subvert the will of Turkish voters, further undermine democracy in Turkey, and deny millions of Turkish citizens their chosen representation," US State Department spokesman Ned Price said.

Several HDP lawmakers, including former co-leaders Selahattin Demirtas and Figen Yuksekdag, are behind bars while 12 have lost their parliamentary seats.

Dozens of HDP mayors have also been booted out of office since elections in March 2019.

Hours before the lawsuit was filed, HDP lawmaker Omer Faruk Gergerlioglu lost his parliamentary seat for a social media post he had shared two years before being elected.

"HDP's senior leaders and spokespeople, through their words and deeds, have repeatedly and consistently proved that they are the PKK's political wing," tweeted Fahrettin Altun, presidential communication chief.

Altun hinted at the possibility of subjecting the HDP to a punitive measure, rather than closure. Cutting the party off from Treasury grants is one of the options being suggested as an alternative to shutting it down.

It is the first time that a closure case has been lodged against a political party since 2008, when Erdogan's own party survived such an attempt.

In 2015 he said: "Individuals should be punished for their mistakes, rather than an entire party."

But his nationalistic coalition partner, Devlet Bahçeli, is known for his staunch criticism of the HDP and has been pushing for its closure for a long time.

"As the famous saying goes, insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results," Necdet Ipekyuz, the HDP deputy for the southeastern province of Batman, told Arab News.

The HDP would be the seventh pro-Kurdish party to be banned from Turkey's political scene, he said, with a new movement emerging each time from the ashes of predecessors.

"The European Court of Human Rights has always condemned Turkey in the past for closing the precedents of the HDP. They cannot ignore the six million votes that were given to the HDP, which has always been a party to favor liberties. What they have to do is to ask why millions of citizens vote for that party and not another."

He added that the move to close the HDP, which has 54 parliamentary seats, was a message to all dissident voices in Turkey.

"Therefore all opposition parties, media and civil society should act in unison against such a politically motivated decision that can never be justified with legal grounds. The government lost all its political, social and economic narrative and it turns toward more polarization by taking the HDP, the third largest party in the parliament, as a useful target."

The fresh crackdown on the HDP coincided with a recently announced human rights action plan by the government in a bid to boost freedom of expression and rule of law.



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EU slams Turkish moves against Kurdish party, legislator Move to ban pro-Kurdish party would 'undermine democracy' in Turkey: US

[Gergerlioglu stripped of MP status in Turkey](#)

Author:

Thu, 2021-03-18 01:42

ANKARA: Turkey's parliament stripped Omer Faruk Gergerlioglu, a pro-Kurdish lawmaker and activist, of his parliamentary status on Wednesday after the country's Court of Appeal upheld a two-and-a-half-year prison sentence.

Gergerlioglu is a deputy in the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), which the government accuses of having links with the outlawed Kurdistan Workers'

Party. His prison conviction was upheld last month on charges of “making terrorist propaganda” for retweeting a T24 news story in 2016 about the Kurdish conflict and the collapse of the peace process.

HDP deputies protested Wednesday’s decision by staging a sit-in protest in the general assembly of the parliament.

“Stripping him of his parliamentary immunity was illegal, immoral and a cowardly act,” Kati Piri, a former EU Rapporteur on Turkey, tweeted.

Gergerlioglu, who was also a member of a government commission responsible for monitoring human rights violations and has consistently drawn attention to allegations of rights abuses, has been a member of parliament since 2018.

“Turkey and the whole world will see what it means to take a deputy away from the people,” he said earlier in the week.

After his sentence was approved last month by the Court of Cassation, Turkey’s high court of appeals, triggering the government to strip him of deputyship immediately, Gergerlioglu applied to the constitutional court but to no avail.

“The lifting of the immunity of the opposition deputy Gergerlioglu because of his unjust conviction is a moment of shame,” Amnesty International’s Turkey campaigner Milena Buyum told Arab News.

“He is a human rights defender who was prosecuted for expressing his peaceful opinion in 2016, two years before he became parliamentarian. Not only should he have never been prosecuted for that tweet, but his relentless pursuit in the defense of people’s human rights should also be heeded if the government is serious about human rights,” she added.

In the controversial news article, the leadership of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) had called on the Turkish state to take steps for peace. The article also included a reaction against that call from Bulent Arinc, who was a deputy for Turkey’s ruling Justice and Development Party at the time.

The website that published the article was never prosecuted and the article is still accessible online, without any court order to block it.

Gergerlioglu, an outspoken rights defender, recently raised the issue of routine strip searches of women taken into custody by police, but the government harshly denied the allegations.

Turkey’s Interior Minister Suleyman Soylu branded him as a “terrorist” for exposing the strip searches claims.

This latest move of the government, supported by the Nationalist Movement Party, is also seen as contradictory to the recently unveiled human rights action plan designed to strengthen the rule of law and democracy in the country.

“The stripping of immunity from this outspoken opposition politician, this

human rights defender can only confirm that the action plan is in fact, sadly, an exercise in window dressing,” Buyum said.

Human Rights Watch also released a statement on Wednesday defending Gergerlioglu.

“Gergerlioglu’s conviction is a blatant violation of his right to free speech and using it as a pretext to expel him from parliament would show deep disdain for democratic norms and the right to political association,” Hugh Williamson, Europe and Central Asia director at Human Rights Watch, said.

“Any move to strip Omer Faruk Gergerlioglu of his parliamentary seat as a prelude to jailing him would look like a reprisal by the Recep Tayyip Erdogan government for his brave and vocal stance in support of thousands of victims of human rights violations.”

Alpay Antmen, a deputy for Turkey’s main opposition Republican People’s Party, said the government aims to divert the attention of the public away from economic problems at home.

“They are not able to govern the country’s economy, and they pursue such anti-democratic moves in order to shape peoples’ perception about the deteriorating economic conditions,” he told Arab News.



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Turkey must end punishment of activists: HRWTurkey logs highest daily rise in

COVID-19 cases this year