

New Lebanese prosecutor to lead probe into Beirut blast

Fri, 2021-02-19 22:52

BEIRUT: Lebanon's top judicial body on Friday named a new judge to lead the investigation into last year's massive explosion at Beirut's port, officials said, a day after his predecessor was removed following legal challenges by senior officials he had accused of negligence that led to the blast.

The High Judicial Council named judge Tarek Bitar as the new prosecutor after he was proposed for the post by Minister of Justice Marie-Claude Najm, said the officials. They spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak to the media.

Despite the fast appointment of Bitar, who has been described by colleagues as respectable and having no political leanings, the removal of his predecessor by the country's top court this week will likely further delay the investigation into the horrific explosion that killed 211 people, wounded over 6,000 and damaged large parts of Beirut.

Families of the victims and survivors of the Aug. 4 blast have accused the ruling political class of corruption and negligence that led to the explosion of ammonium nitrates, a highly explosive material used in fertilizers that had been improperly stored in the port for years.

"Tarek Bitar is a young judge who is competent and enjoys a good reputation," tweeted lawyer Nizar Saghieh, who usually deals with anti-corruption cases. "The test will be whether he will be allowed to carry out his mission without interference or pressure."

Earlier on Friday, families of the victims rallied near the justice ministry in Beirut, denouncing the removal of Judge Fadi Sawwan from the probe and calling it an "execution of justice" by a politicized judiciary.

The families read a statement, burned tires and said the new judge will have to read "thousands of papers" in order to get up to speed on what Sawwan had done over the past six months.

Sawwan's removal came after legal challenges by senior officials he had accused of negligence that led to the blast, considered one of the largest non-nuclear explosions in history. Sawwan was formally notified earlier on Friday that he would no longer lead the probe.

The families' spokesman Ibrahim Hoteit, whose brother Tharwat was killed by the blast, said the removal blew up "what remains of conscience and confidence between us and this rotten judiciary."

The Beirut port explosion has been one of the most traumatic national experiences the Lebanese have faced and families of those killed are skeptical that any investigation into the explosion can be transparent and independent in a country where a culture of impunity has prevailed for decades.

Judge Sawwan had accused and summoned for questioning Lebanon's caretaker prime minister and three former ministers on suspicion of negligence that led to the deadly explosion. Two of the former ministers challenged him in court in December, accusing him of violating legal and constitutional procedures and asking that he be recused, a challenge that brought the probe to a halt.

At the Beirut rally, the victims' families also warned that in the future, they would resort to the street to pressure the judiciary to do its work, as well as politicians who refuse to show up for questioning.



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Prosecutor in Lebanon's port blast summons former army chief
Lebanon MPs bicker over World Bank loan for the poor

[Briton held in Iran 'completely shut off' after losing phone access](#)

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LONDON: A British-Iranian dual citizen being held prisoner in Iran has lost

access to a phone, depriving him of his lifeline to sanity and the outside world, according to his wife.

Anoosheh Ashoori “is completely shut off, and the daily phone conversations were his route to sanity and what was going on in the world, including how the campaign was going for his release. He is completely dependent on those calls,” his wife Sherry told [The Guardian](#) newspaper.

Ashoori, 66, is serving a 10-year sentence for allegedly spying for Israel – charges he denies. The father of two insists he is being held hostage and has attempted suicide in jail.

He previously sent pleas to British Prime Minister Boris Johnson to do more to secure his release from Evin prison – infamous for its role in holding political prisoners and foreign nationals.

While detained, Ashoori has given first-hand accounts of a typical day in Evin, and also spoken out about the spread of coronavirus in the prison. Iranian authorities are said to have strongly objected to a message he sent out in December that was picked up by Persian media and touched on the pandemic and his treatment.

He had recorded two other messages that discussed the impact of prison on dividing families, and the lavish lifestyles of Iranian officials’ children living abroad – though his wife did not distribute them to protect his safety. It is possible that authorities heard those recordings.

Rights groups and the UN have long criticized Tehran’s seemingly arbitrary detention of foreigners and dual nationals.

In a 2019 report, the UN special rapporteur on human rights in Iran, Javaid Rehman, expressed deep concern about the continued “arbitrary arrest, detention, ill-treatment and denial of appropriate medical treatment of dual and foreign nationals.” He said they are often subject to sham trials and used to obtain “diplomatic leverage.”

Iran is currently detaining a number of dual nationals. British-Iranian Nazanin Zaghari-Ractliffe is nearing the end of her five-year sentence, but has previously been threatened with fresh charges. Her husband says Tehran is holding her hostage.

German-Iranian Nahid Taghavi has been held in Evin since October 2020. She has serious medical conditions, including diabetes and high blood pressure, putting her at high risk from COVID-19.

Amnesty International has called her detention “arbitrary,” saying: “She is a prisoner of conscience and must be immediately and unconditionally released.”



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Watchdog slams Iran's suppression of journalists IAEA found uranium traces at two sites Iran barred it from: Sources

[IAEA found uranium traces at two sites Iran barred it from: Sources](#)

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Fri, 2021-02-19 17:59

VIENNA/PARIS: The UN nuclear watchdog found uranium particles at two Iranian sites it inspected after months of stonewalling, diplomats say, and it is preparing to rebuke Tehran for failing to explain, possibly complicating US efforts to revive nuclear diplomacy.

The find and Iran's response risk hurting efforts by the new US administration to restore Iran's 2015 nuclear deal, which President Joe Biden's predecessor Donald Trump abandoned.

Although the sites where the material was found are believed to have been inactive for nearly two decades, opponents of the nuclear deal, such as Israel, say evidence of undeclared nuclear activities shows that Iran has not been acting in good faith.

Iran's ambassador to the International Atomic Energy Agency, Kazem Gharibabadi, declined to comment, as did the IAEA itself.

A senior Iranian official said: "We have nothing to hide. That is why we allowed the inspectors to visit those sites."

Iran has set a deadline of next week for Biden to lift sanctions reimposed by Trump, or it will halt snap IAEA inspections under the deal, which lifted sanctions in return for curbs on Iran's nuclear program. Next week is also when the IAEA is expected to issue a quarterly report on Iran's nuclear activities.

Seven diplomats told Reuters the agency will use that opportunity to rebuke Iran for failing to explain to its satisfaction how the uranium particles wound up at two undeclared sites. The rebuke could come either in the quarterly report or in an additional report released the same day.

US intelligence agencies and the IAEA believe Iran had a secret, coordinated nuclear weapons program that it halted in 2003, which Iran denies. The 2015 nuclear deal effectively drew a line under that past, but Iran is still required to explain evidence of undeclared past activities or material to the IAEA.

The material was found during snap IAEA inspections that were carried out at the two sites in August and September of last year, after Iran barred access for seven months.

The Wall Street Journal reported earlier this month that radioactive material was found in the samples taken by inspectors at the two sites, although the newspaper did not specify what the material was.

Four diplomats who follow the agency's work closely told Reuters the material found in those samples was uranium.

Identifying the material as uranium creates a burden on Iran to explain it, as enriched uranium can be used in the core of a nuclear weapon. Iran is obliged to account for all uranium so the IAEA can verify it is not diverting any to a weapons program.

Two of the sources said the uranium found last year was not enriched. But nevertheless, its presence suggests undisclosed nuclear material or activities at the sites, which Iran would have had to declare.

The IAEA's full findings are a closely guarded secret within the agency and only a small number of countries have been informed of the specifics.

Five diplomats said that after the IAEA confronted Iran with the findings it gave unsatisfactory answers. Two of them said Iran told the agency the traces were the result of contamination by radioactive equipment moved there from another site, but the IAEA checked and the particles at the sites did not match.

One diplomat briefed on the exchanges but not the detailed findings said Iran had given "implausible answers," describing Iran's response as "typical delaying tactics."

The agency has said it suspects one of the sites hosted uranium conversion

work, a step in processing the material before enrichment, and the other was used for explosive testing.

The seven diplomats said they expect the agency to call Iran out for having failed to explain the traces found at the two sites, as well as over its continued failure to explain material found previously at another site in Tehran, Turqzabad.

Diplomats said it remained unclear whether the IAEA's 35-nation Board of Governors, which meets the week after the quarterly report, would take action condemning Iran. Several said the focus was on efforts to salvage the 2015 deal by bringing Washington back into it.

"Everyone is waiting on the Americans," one diplomat said.



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Biden: US must address Iran's 'destabilizing activities' EU aims for meeting on Iran nuclear deal with US, official says

Biden: US must address Iran's 'destabilizing activities'

Fri, 2021-02-19 19:47

JEDDAH: President Joe Biden said on Friday it is imperative that the US works with other global powers to curb Iran's "destabilizing activities."

Addressing the Munich Security Conference, he also said his administration is "prepared to re-engage in negotiations" with the UN Security Council on Tehran's nuclear program.

"We must address Iran's destabilizing activities across the Middle East," Biden said. "We will work with our European, and other, partners as we proceed."

Earlier, his administration said it was ready to engage in talks with Iran and world powers to discuss a return to the 2015 nuclear deal, more formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. Former President Donald Trump withdrew the US from the deal in 2018.

Hamdan Al-Shehri, a Saudi political analyst and international relations scholar, told Arab News that it appears there is a tacit agreement between the US and Iran about the nuclear issue.

"In fact, what we see today is that the US administration is lenient and is giving no weight to its allies in the region," he said.

Al-Shehri added that the current US administration is repeating the same mistakes made by the Obama administration, and warned that this would create a trust deficit between the US and its regional allies.

"It will also lead to a nuclear arms race in the region, as no country would accept seeing Iran having a nuclear weapon while that country does not," he said. "Saudi Arabia, for instance, has made it clear that if Iran developed a nuclear bomb, it would follow suit the next day."

Al-Shehri also criticized the decision to lift a ban on many Iranian diplomats entering the US, which was imposed by the Trump administration, and the removal of the Houthi militias from Washington's list of terrorist organizations.

Meanwhile, inspectors from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the UN's nuclear watchdog, found uranium particles at two sites in Iran that they were able to inspect after months of stonewalling, diplomats said.

Although the sites where the particles were found are believed to have been inactive for nearly two decades, opponents of the nuclear deal, including Israel, say it is evidence of undeclared nuclear activity and shows that Iran has not been acting in good faith.

Next week, the IAEA is expected to issue a quarterly report on Iran's nuclear activities. Seven diplomats told Reuters the agency will use that opportunity to rebuke Iran for failing to explain to its satisfaction how the uranium particles came to be at the two undeclared sites. The rebuke, which could come either in the quarterly report or a separate document issued the same day, might complicate US efforts to revive its nuclear diplomacy with Tehran.

UK authorities said that Iran must return to full compliance with the 2015 nuclear deal and that the West must not give the impression that it is prepared to ignore Tehran's breaches of the accord.

"I don't think that we should be sending a signal that we are going to overlook this noncompliance or just brush it under the carpet," James Cleverly, Britain's junior foreign minister with responsibility for the Middle East and North Africa, told the BBC.



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EU aims for meeting on Iran nuclear deal with US, official says
Watchdog slams Iran's suppression of journalists

[Jordan says troops kill 2 drug smugglers near Syria border](#)

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AMMAN: Jordanian troops clashed with drug smugglers on the border with Syria on Friday, killing two people and seizing a shipment of hashish and amphetamines, the military said.

The military said it thwarted two attempts to “infiltrate a group of people and smuggle quantities of drugs” into Jordan. The statement said “rules of engagement were applied, which resulted in the killing of two people and the arrest of a third.” It said the others fled back into Syria following the incident.

The amphetamines were labeled captagon, the street name for a drug whose chemical base is fenethylline.

Jordan is a close Western ally and has long been seen as an island of stability in a turbulent region. The kingdom hosts more than 650,000 Syrian refugees.



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