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Posted

Iran insists UK rein in 'political forces' over seized tanker that damaged a Pirating ship

Iran: UK must rein in 'political forces' amid tensions over seized tanker

Britain said planning sanctions on Tehran in aftermath of seizure of British-operated tanker; all 23 crew of vessel are safe, Iranian TV says; Stena Bulk, the ship's Sweden-based owner, says it is preparing a formal request to visit the crew

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DUBAI - Iran's envoy to Britain on Sunday urged the UK to contain "domestic political forces" which he said wanted to escalate tension between the two countries amid the capture of a British-flagged tanker in the Gulf by Iran.

Britain has denounced Iran's seizure of the oil tanker in the Gulf on Friday as a "hostile act," rejecting Tehran's explanation that it had seized the vessel because it had been involved in an accident.

"UK government should contain those domestic political forces who want to escalate existing tension between Iran and the UK well beyond the issue of ships. This is quite dangerous and unwise at a sensitive time in the region," Hamid Baeidinejad tweeted.

"Iran however is firm and ready for different scenarios."

The crew of the British-flagged Stena Impero tanker seized by Iran's Revolutionary Guards are all safe, the head of the Ports and Maritime Organization of Iran in Hormozgan Province told state TV earlier Sunday.

"All 23 crew members aboard the ship are safe and in good health in Bandar Abbas port," Allahmorad Afifipour said.

Stena Bulk, the vessel's Sweden-based owners, said on Saturday they were preparing a formal request to visit the crew, who are from India, Latvia, the Philippines and Russia.

Stena said in a statement that Iran had asked that a formal request be made for the visit.

Britain, a party to Iran's 2015 multinational nuclear deal, is planning to target Iran with sanctions in the aftermath of the tanker seizure, the Daily Telegraph newspaper reported on Saturday.

The seizure follows weeks of threats from Tehran to retaliate for Britain's seizure of the Iranian tanker Grace 1 near Gibraltar on July 4 which it suspected was violating sanctions on Syria.

Quoting Afifipour, Iran's Far news agency said Saturday that the detained tanker was in an accident with an Iranian fishing boat and ignored its distress call.

"It got involved in an accident with an Iranian fishing boat... When the boat sent a distress call, the British-flagged ship ignored it," Afifpour told Fars.

"The tanker is now at Iran's Bandar Abbas port and all its 23 crew members will remain on the ship until the probe is over," he said.

The Stena Impero was taken to Bandar Abbas on Friday night by the Revolutionary Guards naval forces and the investigation into the accident began on Saturday, Afifpour said, according to Fars.

Britain said earlier it was urgently seeking information about the tanker, which had been heading to a port in Saudi Arabia and suddenly changed course after passing through the strait at the mouth of the Gulf.

Demolition in Sur Baher

Posted

Supreme Court approved removal of 12 Palestine buildings straddling the West Bank  
Israeli crews demolish Palestinian homes on outskirts of Jerusalem

Estimated 20 people have already been evacuated from mostly abandoned village, containing at least 12 buildings; court ruled last month the structures were built illegally and violated a construction ban

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Israeli work crews have begun demolishing dozens of homes in a mostly abandoned Palestinian village located on the outskirts of east Jerusalem.

Monday's demolitions cap a years-long legal battle over the buildings in Sur Baher, which straddle the city and the West Bank.

Israel says the buildings were built illegally too close to its West Bank separation barrier. Residents say they have nowhere to build and getting permits to build homes legally is impossible.

The demolitions, which began overnight, have already destroyed several of the more than 72 apartments in 12 buildings, most of which are not occupied.

"Since 2am they have been evacuating people from their homes by force and they have started planting explosives in the homes they want to destroy," said Hamada Hamada, a community leader in Sur Baher.

The United Nations estimates about 20 people are believed to live in the buildings and some 350 property owners who have not yet moved in will be affected.

Hussein al-Sheikh, head of the civil affairs department of the Palestinians Authority, called Monday's demolition a "crime" and demanded international intervention.

The Supreme Court ruled in June that the structures violated a construction ban. The deadline for residents to remove the affected buildings, or parts of them, expired on Friday.

The village's political geography is complicated by the fact that parts of it lie outside the municipal boundaries of east Jerusalem but on the Israeli side of the barrier, cutting it off from the rest of the West Bank.

#### White House's Kushner to finalize Palestinian economic plan on Middle East tour

Palestinians poured scorn on the Trump administration's \$50 billion investment plan to help achieve Middle East peace, but U.S. Gulf Arab allies said the economic initiative had promise if a political settlement is reached

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White House senior adviser Jared Kushner will lead a U.S. delegation on a tour of the Middle East to finalize details of his proposed \$50 billion economic development plan for the Palestinians, Jordan, Egypt and Lebanon, an administration official said on Sunday.

Kushner, Middle East envoy Jason Greenblatt, State Department official Brian Hook and Kushner aide Avi Berkowitz are expected to make stops in Israel, Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, the official said.

They leave late this month and return to Washington in early August.

The official said the purpose of the trip is to "continue on the momentum that was created at the workshop in Bahrain and finalize the economic portion of the plan."

They will also discuss the possibility of locating the development fund in Bahrain, the official said.

Kushner, U.S. President Donald Trump's son-in-law and the plan's main architect, sought to build support for his ambitious economic proposals for the Palestinian territories at an international meeting in Bahrain in June.

Palestinians poured scorn on the Trump administration's \$50 billion investment plan to help achieve Middle East peace, but U.S. Gulf Arab allies said the economic initiative had promise if a political settlement is reached.

Kushner and Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin last week discussed **creation of the fund with World Bank President David Malpass**, the official said. The World Bank has a role in managing the fund.

The delegation was not expected to discuss Trump's long-awaited political plan for the Middle East, and when it will be released remains unclear.

**In leaky White House, Trump team keeps Mideast peace plan secret**  
Trump expected to release initiative once Netanyahu forms a coalition; plan kept secret with **only Greenblatt, Kushner and Ambassador Friedman having regular access to its details**; Palestinians, angered by Trump's policies, are not expected to be thrilled.

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In a White House where no secret is safe for long, one development has remained stubbornly confidential - the contents of a Middle East peace plan authored by President Donald Trump's advisers Jared Kushner and Jason Greenblatt.

With Trump having delighted Israelis and angered Palestinians by recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's capital in 2017 and moving the American Embassy to the holy city last May, a U.S.-brokered peace deal may seem farther away now than when talks collapsed five years ago.

Then on Wednesday, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu secured a clear path to re-election, only days after proposing to annex Jewish West Bank settlements, traditionally viewed as illegal by much of the world. The Trump administration has yet to comment on the election-eve remarks.

Aides expect Trump to release the plan once Netanyahu forms a government coalition, and officials say that despite criticism of the administration's moves to date, the plan will demand compromises from both sides.

That the peace plan has remained a secret is remarkable in a White House where drafts of executive orders, confidential conversations and internal deliberations all find their way to the front pages.

Kushner and Greenblatt have limited the plan's distribution over the two years they have been crafting it. It has been kept secret "to ensure people approach it with an open mind" when it is released, a senior administration official said.

Only four people have regular access - Kushner, Greenblatt, U.S. Ambassador to Israel David Friedman and Kushner aide Avi Berkowitz, the official said.

Trump is briefed regularly on the contents but is not believed to have read the entire document of dozens of pages.

"He is briefed if something interesting is happening or there is an idea they want to run by him," the official said.

Kushner, a New York real estate developer and husband of Trump's daughter Ivanka, and Greenblatt, a former lawyer for Trump, joined the process knowing little about the tortured, decades-long path in search of Arab-Israeli peace.

Their proposal addresses such core political issues as the status of Jerusalem, and separately aims at helping the Palestinians strengthen their economy.

Cloaked in secrecy is whether the plan will propose outright the creation of a Palestinian state, the Palestinians' core demand.

On Wednesday, Trump's secretary of state Mike Pompeo said the plan would be presented before too long but, when asked, declined to say whether the administration favored a two-state solution, long the basis of Middle East peacemaking.

Not even Trump, who is known to blurt out news whenever he feels like it, has dribbled out details of the peace plan because of the sensitivity.

He tells his Middle East envoys, "If you guys can get this done you're going to be the greatest negotiators in history," said a senior White House official.

When Kushner and Greenblatt began developing their plan in 2017, they asked the parties to look to the future and describe an outcome on each issue that they could accept rather than get locked into historical stances, two officials said.

"You can't let your grandfather's conflict hold back your children's future" was their message to both sides, one official said.

Palestinians reject Trump's pro-Israel policies.

"The extremist and militaristic agenda, led by Benjamin Netanyahu, has been emboldened by the Trump administration's reckless policies and blind support," said PLO Executive Committee Member Hanan Ashrawi.

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence, Pompeo and White House national security adviser John Bolton are all kept up to date on the peace plan, but have kept a hands-off approach to it, deferring to Kushner, two other officials said.

The secrecy maintained by Kushner and Greenblatt, even as they refine and polish the plan, has posed something of a challenge for Gulf governments, who want to know the details before committing resources to a Palestinian fund.

Kushner and Greenblatt toured Gulf states in February to promote the economic part of the plan and get opinions about it, without providing a detailed view of the contents of the more crucial political section.

One of their stops was in Qatar.

Qatari Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Lolwah Al Khater, speaking to a small group of reporters in Washington recently, gave no indication that Kushner and Greenblatt provided much in the way of details on the political plan when they visited.

"I don't think it's still set in stone," she said.

Dennis Ross, a longtime Middle East envoy and now a distinguished fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, said the U.S. team still has "a lot of work to do to make sure that Arab leaders aren't surprised by what's going to be presented, and they need to see it in writing, not verbally."

But he said secrecy at this point is understandable.

"Holding something very close makes sense and it's not taken as a negative by the parties, because in the end, if the content isn't leaking out, it also makes sure that what would be controversial doesn't create an immediate firestorm. There's a logic to that," Ross said.