

# Yemen's Houthis to Allow UN to Inspect Ships in Hudaydah

SANAA (Dispatches) – Yemen's Houthi Ansarullah movement and the United Nations have agreed on a mechanism to inspect ships docking at Hudaydah following the group's withdrawal from three Red Sea ports under a UN-sponsored deal, a Houthi official and a UN source said.

The Houthis' unilateral pull-out last month from the ports of Saleef, used for grain, Ras Isa oil terminal and Hudaydah, the main entry point for commercial and aid imports, represented the only progress in implementing the deal reached last December.

"We agreed with the UN on a mechanism to inspect ships docking in the ports of Hudaydah and its implementation will start in the coming days," Houthi transport minister Zakaria Shami was quoted as saying on Tuesday by the group's Al Masirah TV.

A United Nations source confirmed that an agreement has been reached with UN inspection body, the Verification and Inspection Mechanism for Yemen (UNVIM). UNVIM still needs to sign a separate agreement with the Saudi-led military coalition that monitors



Displaced Yemenis from Hudaydah fill water containers at a makeshift camp in a village in the northern district of Abs in the country's Hajjah province, on May 9, 2019.

ships on the high seas heading to Yemen.

Under the deal, representatives from the Houthis and Yemen's ex-president Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi agreed to withdraw their troops from Hudaydah's main port and two other nearby ports, as well as Hudaydah city and allow deployment of UN monitors.

Meanwhile, an unnamed United Nations source confirmed that an agreement had been reached with

UN inspection body – the Verification and Inspection Mechanism for Yemen (UNVIM).

UNVIM still needs to sign a separate agreement with the Saudi-led alliance.

Last month, Ansarullah fighters unilaterally pulled out of the ports of Saleef, used for grain, Ras Isa oil terminal and Hudaydah, under the first phase of the Stockholm peace deal.

Under the first phase, the Houthis

were expected to pull back five kilometers from the three ports, while Saudi-backed pro-Hadi forces were required to be stationed four kilometers from Hudaydah.

A second phase of withdrawal is scheduled to follow in which both sides pull their troops 18 kilometers outside of Hudaydah and heavy weapons 30 kilometers away.

Saudi Arabia and a number of its regional allies launched a devastating campaign against Yemen in March 2015, with the goal of bringing the government of Hadi back to power and crushing the Houthi Ansarullah movement.

The US-based Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), a nonprofit conflict-research organization, estimates that the Saudi-led war has claimed the lives of over 60,000 Yemenis since January 2016.

The war has also taken a heavy toll on the country's infrastructure, destroying hospitals, schools, and factories. The UN says over 24 million Yemenis are in dire need of humanitarian aid, including 10 million suffering from extreme levels of hunger.

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amid serious questions raised even by the United States' close allies.

The U.S. decision to send more troops came a day after Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said the United States does not want to go to war with Iran.

"President Trump has done everything he can to avoid war. We don't want war," Pompeo said in an interview with "Fox News Sunday".

The new U.S. deployment is in addition to a 1,500-troop increase announced last month in response to mysterious tanker attacks in May. Washington previously tightened sanctions, ordering all countries and companies to halt imports of Iranian oil or be banished from the global financial system.

Ryabkov said if Washington did not want war it had to show it. "If that's really how it is then the U.S. should step back from reinforcing its military presence."

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov called for restraint, saying he learned of the U.S. troop escalation from media reports.

"We call on all parties to exercise restraint," Peskov said. "We would prefer not to see any steps that may escalate tensions in a region where the situation is already tense."

China also warned against opening a "Pandora's box" in the Middle. Foreign Minister Wang Yi told reporters in Beijing that the United States should not use "extreme pressure" to resolve issues with Iran.

"In particular, the United States should change its practice of extreme pressure," Wang said during a joint press conference with visiting Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Muallem.

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The sanctions were imposed by the Labour government under former prime minister Gordon Brown, claiming Bank Mellat engaged in conduct that supported and facilitated Iran's nuclear and ballistic missile programs.

In 2013, Britain's Supreme Court threw out the allegations and quashed the curbs which had limited UK-based entities from dealing with Bank Mellat and its subsidiaries.

The sanctions – part of the 28-member European Council's freeze of the funds of Iranian financial entities from 2010 – were not lifted before 2016 when an international nuclear deal with Iran came into effect.

In February 2014, the bank filed a damages claim in London's High Court. In 2016, the European Court of Justice also ruled in favor of Bank Mellat.

"Since all the measures concerning Bank Mellat have been annulled, its funds are deemed not to have been frozen between 26 July 2010 (date of first freezing measure) and 16 January 2016 (date on which the freeze was lifted)," the court said.

Zaiwalla said at the time that the judgment would strengthen \$4 billion claim for damages, indicating that the Iranian lender also considered litigations against the European Council for compensation.

The rulings have allowed other Iranian firms to launch suits. In 2015, the EU's General Court annulled sanctions on Bank Tejarat and a series of shipping companies. Despite the legal victories, Iran's banking sector is still struggling under the impact of unilateral U.S. sanctions imposed last year. Global transaction network SWIFT which had reconnected a number of Iranian banks to its system, allowing them to resume cross-border transactions with foreign banks, has again cut off them from the network.

European powers have been tinkering with a much-hyped special trade vehicle known as INSTEX that purports to circumvent U.S. sanctions and keep some semblance of business channels open to Iran.

France, Germany and Britain, however, have been struggling to operationalize it, raising serious doubts about their determination to compensate for last year's unilateral U.S. pullout from an international 2015 nuclear deal Iran.

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confrontation, adding that Washington should not underestimate Iran's determination to defend itself.

"If they wrongly enter into a conflict, they would be very sorry about that, because we are fully prepared" said the senior diplomat, stressing, "We would not be submitting to the will of United States."

He also dismissed a claim by the United States that Iran attacked two oil tankers in the Sea of Oman and questioned the American assessment and intelligence on Iran's alleged role in the incident.

"The question is that what are these assessments based on. You can have your assessment. I have my assessments. People on the streets can have their own assessments. Assessment is reliable when it is based on evidence, on the facts. We have not been facing with any kind of evidences or facts till now," he said.

The Iranian envoy further described as "distorted" footage released by the U.S. as supposed evidence of Iran's alleged involvement in the attacks.

"We should see who have the interest to disrupt security in the region. You know that there are countries in the region and beyond the region who have invested heavily billions of billions of dollars to trap the United States in a military conflict with Iran," he said.

One Japanese-owned and one Norwegian-owned tanker were struck by explosions near the strategic Strait of Hormuz on Thursday morning. Tokyo said both vessels were carrying "Japanese-related" cargo.

# Syria Says Does Not Want to Fight With Turkey

BEIJING (Dispatches) – Syria does not want to see fighting with Turkey, its foreign minister said on Tuesday, after Turkey said one of its observation posts in Syria's Idlib region was attacked from an area controlled by Syrian government forces.

Russia, which supports Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in the foreign-backed war in the country, and Turkey, long a backer of militants, co-sponsored a de-escalation pact for the area that has been in place since last year.

But the deal has faltered in recent months, forcing hundreds of thousands of civilians to flee. Idlib is the last remaining bastion of terrorists after eight years of war.

"We hope that our military and the Turkish military do not fight. This is our principled stance," Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Moualem told reporters in Beijing, standing alongside the Chinese government's top diplomat, State Councilor Wang Yi.

"What we are fighting is terrorists, especially in Idlib, which is Syrian territory, part of our country," Moualem said in Arabic comments translated into Chinese.

The dominant force in the Idlib region is the Tahrir al-Sham terrorist group, the latest incarnation of the former Nusra Front that was part of al-Qaeda until 2016. Others, including some with Turkish backing, also have

a presence.

"The question now is, what does Turkey want to do in Syria? Turkey is occupying part of Syrian soil, and has a military presence in certain parts of Syria," Moualem added.

"Are they protecting the Nusra Front? Are they protecting certain terrorist forces including the East Turkestan Islamic Movement?" he said, referring to a terrorist group China blames for attacks in far western Xinjiang with operations elsewhere.

"This question needs to be asked of Turkey, what are their actual aims? We are fighting those terrorist groups and organizations. The whole world

believes those people we are fighting are terrorists."

On Monday, the Syrian foreign minister held talks with Chinese Vice President Wang Qishan.

China has said it would help with reconstruction efforts in Syria, which has seen massive destruction as a result of eight years of armed conflict.

Earlier in March, Chinese Assistant Foreign Minister Chen Xiaodon held a meeting with the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in Damascus, where the two sides affirmed the need to bolster coordination between China and Damascus in "political, military, economic, cultural, and technological" fields.

# New Zealand Gov't Website Removes 'Israel' From Map

AUCKLAND (Dispatches) – An official website of New Zealand's government has published a map of the Middle East that only shows Palestine and doesn't recognize 'Israel'.

The website Immigration New Zealand posted the map as part of a fact sheet that provided information about Palestinian immigrants to New Zealand.

The page referred to the "massive repression of Palestinians" caused by the Zionist regime during the Second Intifada (uprising). It also pointed out the occupying regime's "economic sanctions and a blockade on Hamas-controlled Gaza."

The fact sheet even identified East al-Quds as "the designated capital of the State of Palestine."

The web page was removed after it sparked some complaints on social media.

The Israel Institute of New Zealand urged the country's immigration minister to "immediately apologize for the offending image and confirm that it does not reflect Government policy."

Gaza has been under the regime's siege since June 2007, which has caused a decline in living standards. The Zionist regime has also launched three major wars against the enclave since 2008, killing thousands of Gazans each time and shattering the impoverished territory's already poor infrastructure.

Gaza has also witnessed tensions since March 30, 2018 which marked the start of the Great March of Return protests, with participants demanding the right to return for those driven out of their homeland.

Zionist troops have killed at least 305 Palestinians since the beginning of the rallies and wounded more than 17,000 others, according to the Gazan Health Ministry.

# Lebanon's Hariri Calls for Cabinet Solidarity in Budget Debate

BEIRUT (Reuters) – Lebanon Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri on Tuesday called for parliament to quickly approve the country's 2019 budget and urged his coalition government to avoid internal disputes.

The cabinet this month agreed a budget plan that shrinks the projected fiscal deficit by 4 percentage points from last year to 7.6% by cutting spending and raising taxes and other fees.

"What I want during the debate is for us to be responsible and united, and not contradictory," Hariri said in a statement, addressing cabinet ministers as to their commitment during the parliament debate.

Parliament is mostly composed of parties that are also present in the coalition government and which supported the budget there.

Since the budget was agreed there have been fierce arguments between parties in the coalition over several subjects, though these have not targeted the budget.

Lebanon has one of the world's heaviest debt burdens, equivalent to about 150% of GDP, and the International Monetary Fund has urged it to cut spending.

"We have held 19 cabinet meetings to agree on this draft budget and these sessions were not for fun, but for deep, detailed debate over every clause and every idea," Hariri said.

"For this reason, I consider it the responsibility of each of us in government to have ministerial solidarity...to defend in parliament the decision that we have taken together," he added.

After the 2019 budget is agreed, the cabinet must quickly start working on the 2020 budget and on approving the first phase of a program of investments toward which foreign donors have offered \$11 billion in project financing.