

TEHRAN (Press TV) -- Saudi Arabia's Specialized Criminal Court has sentenced five anti-regime dissidents from the kingdom's oil-rich and Shia-populated Eastern Province to death, as a crackdown led by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman against pro-democracy campaigners, Muslim preachers and intellectuals continues in the country. The London-based and Arabic-language Nabaa television news network, citing social media activists, reported that the Riyadh-based tribunal passed the verdicts against Mahmoud Issa al-Qallaf, a resident of Ash Shweikah neighborhood in Qatif region, and four others from the town of al-Awamiyah, who were identified as Mohammed Ali al-Aqili, Ahmed Mohammed Abu Abdullah and his brother Amir, and Musa Jaafar al-Samkhan.

TEHRAN (Dispatches) -- An Iranian general has warned that Iran's missile arsenals are aimed at 21 American military bases in the Middle East and the country is prepared for "the greatest war against the greatest enemy". Noorollahi serves as a top adviser to the commander of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps Officers College. "Iran is the world's fourth (strongest) missile power after the U.S., Russia, and China," he said. Noorollahi said the NATO military alliance had warned that Iran could launch as many as 20,000 missiles per day, but that the number could actually be higher in a future conflict with the United States. "Unfortunately, some Persian Gulf countries have become (Continued on Page 7)

Viewpoint
Nigerians Warn Buhari on 3rd Ann. of Judiciary's Unfulfilled Verdict on Sheikh Zakzaky

'Magralen' Crowned Best Short Film at Golden Knight Malta

Akram Afif, Saki Kumagai Win Asian Player of the Year Awards

Palestinians Blame U.S. for New Zionist Settlement

Leading American News Provider Bloomberg: Arab Allies of U.S. Backpedalling on Iran

DUBAI (Dispatches) -- An expanded soccer tournament, a direct flight, clandestine meetings and a pledge to release prisoners of war; diplomacy is breaking out as Persian Gulf Arab nations back away from a Donald Trump-inspired confrontation with Iran. And the signs are everywhere, according to American news provider Bloomberg.

Last week, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain played their first games of the 2019 Persian Gulf Cup in Qatar after a last-minute decision to take part -- an apparent breakthrough in a 30-month feud that saw them halt trade and flights over Qatar's links with Iran.

Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia that has waged a war on Yemen since 2015 began releasing jailed Houthis, as efforts to end the conflict gather momentum. Oman is quietly hosting high-level meetings, according to people familiar with the matter, and even Iranian President Hassan Rouhani has hinted at direct channels with the UAE.

Spooked by the prospect of a catastrophic war with Iran, Persian Gulf monarchies are in the midst of a strategic rethink, Bloomberg said.

"The UAE, whose economic model relies in large part on its international links, quickly realized it had most to lose from a military escalation. It had removed most of its troops from Yemen by the end of a turbulent summer that saw oil tankers targeted and a U.S. drone downed in the Persian Gulf without significant American response," it said.

"While the humanitarian catastrophe unleashed by the Yemen war trained an unwelcome spotlight on Saudi Arabia, it took a brazen strike on Saudi oil installations -- which knocked out half the country's crude production -- to ram home the risks and prove that Trump was not about to ride to his allies' rescue," it added.

"The attacks shattered any illusion of this magical U.S. security umbrella," said David Roberts, an assistant professor at King's College London who studies the Gulf.

According to Bloomberg, there's an increasing recognition among the Persian Gulf Arab states that no one stands to gain from a military escalation in the world's top oil-exporting region.

In a Nov. 10 speech, Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Anwar Gargash said he saw "a path to a deal with Iran that all parties might soon" be ready to embark on if Tehran demonstrated commitment.

In search of a breakthrough, Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan, a former cricketer elected with the backing of a powerful army that provides extensive sup-

port for the Saudi military, shuttled between Tehran and Riyadh in October. He met Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei and Rouhani, as well as Saudi Arabia's King Salman and Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman, describing talks as "encouraging".

Khan said he traveled at the request of Trump and Saudi Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Adel al-Jubeir said the diplomacy wasn't prompted by the kingdom. But deepening unease in the Persian Gulf catalyzed the effort.

The UAE broke with the U.S. and Saudi Arabia by not naming Iran as the culprit behind attacks in May and June on oil tankers as they sailed toward the Strait of Hormuz, the world's foremost oil shipping chokepoint.

It sent coast guard officials to Iran for the first time in six years and Rouhani hinted at other meetings with senior UAE officials. "We're moving toward improved relations," he said Oct. 14. According to Bloomberg, Saudi Arabia is catching up.

For Rouhani, the case for regional engagement is obvious. Several officials have confirmed that Kuwait has conveyed Rouhani's proposal for collective security efforts in the region.

"Don't you know that Iran is going to stay here and we will remain neighbors throughout history?" he has said, referring to Iran's Arab neighbors. "Trump will only be around for a few years and will go back to whatever it was he was doing."

Oman's Foreign Minister in Tehran Persian Gulf De-Escalation on Track



Iran's Foreign Minister Muhammad Javad Zarif (L) and Oman's Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Yusuf bin Alawi bin Abdullah smile to photographers during their meeting in Tehran, Dec. 2, 2019.

TEHRAN (Dispatches) -- Iran's top diplomat Muhammad Javad Zarif voiced support on Monday for reducing tensions in the Persian Gulf as he hosted his counterpart from Oman for talks in Tehran.

The visit by Oman's minister of state for foreign affairs, Yusuf bin Alawi, came a week after he held a meeting in Washington with U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo.

It is the second time since late July that bin Alawi has been sent to Iran by the sultanate, a past mediator in the Middle East.

The Iranian foreign ministry said Zarif, in talks with bin Alawi, had "emphasized the necessity of reducing tensions

in the region".

Zarif said Iran was serious about a plan -- dubbed the Hormuz Peace Endeavour -- that it has put forward to reduce regional tensions.

President Hassan Rouhani announced the peace plan at the UN General Assembly in September, calling on Arab nations in the Persian Gulf, including Saudi Arabia, to join it.

In a tweet, the Omani foreign ministry said that bin Alawi and Zarif had "discussed bilateral relations and regional issues".

The Omani minister's trip to Iran comes a week after he met Pompeo during an official visit to the United States.

Long-fraught relations between Tehran and Washington plunged to a new low last year when the U.S. unilaterally withdrew from an international accord with Iran.

Secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) Ali Shamkhani told bin Alawi on Monday security of the Middle East can be only guaranteed through the establishment of regional collations without foreign interference.

"Only those coalitions, which are free from influence and interference of foreigners, can solve problems, restore security and last," Shamkhani said.

Last month, Iran denounced the U.S.

move to create a coalition for naval patrols in the Persian Gulf, saying it would only exacerbate insecurity and instability across the world.

Shamkhani said, "A country that is not committed to any of its obligations, whether in connection with Iran or in exchanges with other countries, cannot be trusted."

The countries, which have played a leading role in creating tension and insecurity in the region and caused chaos by waging different wars and spreading terrorism, have never been after stability and security in the Persian Gulf and only seek to serve their own interests and plunder the region, he added.

Shamkhani hit out at the ongoing Saudi war on Yemen, saying it exposes the warmongering nature of arrogant powers and their stooges in the region.

"The continuation of this genocide will only serve the interests of the enemies of regional peace and security such as the U.S. and Israel, and Saudi Arabia needs to yield to the demands of the resilient Yemeni people to stop posing further danger to regional stability and security."

The Omani foreign minister, for his part, hailed regular consultations between Tehran and Muscat on regional and international issues and said any tension in the region would not be beneficial to any Persian Gulf littoral states.

Alawi added that the establishment of sustainable security in the region calls for consensus among all regional countries and settlement of misunderstandings.

He expressed his country's readiness to make use of its potential to ease ongoing tensions and prepare the ground for constructive dialog among regional states.

Jahangiri: Iran Still Selling Oil Despite Sanctions

TEHRAN (Dispatches) -- Iran is still selling its oil despite U.S. sanctions on Tehran's exports, the country's Vice President Es'haq Jahangiri said Monday, adding that Washington's "maximum pressure" on Tehran has failed.

"Despite America's pressure ... and its imposed sanctions on our oil exports, we still continue to sell our oil by using other means ... when even friendly countries have stopped purchasing our crude fearing America's penalties," Jahangiri said.

"We have to resort to other methods to sell our oil," because "the U.S. has shut down all the main paths of the country's economic activities," Jahangiri said.

Relations between the two countries reached crisis point last year after U.S. President Donald Trump abandoned a 2015 pact with Iran which Tehran accepted to curb to its nuclear program in return for the lifting of sanctions.

Washington has reimposed sanctions aimed at halting all Iranian oil exports, saying it seeks to force Iran to negotiate to reach a wider deal. Tehran has rejected talks unless Washington returns to the nuclear deal and lifts all sanctions.

"They have failed to bring our oil exports to zero as planned," Jahangiri said.

Senior U.S. officials have said Chinese companies continuing oil purchases from Iran are seriously worrying the White House which is warning them to stop the trade.

China has dismissed the sanctions, saying they amount to "bullying" and has defended its trade with Iran as legitimate and legal.

The U.S. government has warned shipping companies, energy companies and port officials to shun trade in Iranian oil, or face sanctions.

Iranian officials say the country has weathered the worst of the storm from the U.S. reimposition of sanctions.

Iran has years of experience dealing with sanctions and is confident it can ride out the economic pain. Officials have said the country will continue to sell its oil no matter what.

The U.S. has aggressively been pushing its oil on customers around the world after sanctioning Iran and Venezuela in what is seen by many observers as an energy war in the wider context of its trade war.

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Gas Flows via Power of Siberia Pipeline: China, Russia Take Strategic Ties to New Level

SOCHI, Russia (Reuters) -- Russian President Vladimir Putin and his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping on Monday oversaw the launch of a landmark pipeline that will transport natural gas from Siberia to northeast China, an economic and political boost to ties between Moscow and Beijing.

The start of gas flows via the Power of Siberia pipeline reflects Moscow's attempts to pivot to the East to try to mitigate pain from Western financial sanctions imposed over its 2014 annexation of Ukraine's Crimea.

The move cements China's spot as Russia's top export market and gives Russia a potentially enormous new market outside Europe. It also comes as Moscow is hoping to launch two other major energy projects -- the Nord Stream 2 undersea Baltic gas pipeline to Germany and the TurkStream pipeline to Turkey and southern Europe.

The 3,000-km-long (1,865 mile) Power of Siberia pipeline will transport gas from the Chayandinskoye and Kovytko fields in eastern Siberia, a project expected to last for

three decades and to generate \$400 billion for Russian state coffers.

"This is a genuinely historical event not only for the global energy market but above all for us, for Russia and China," said Putin, who watched the launch via video link from the Russian Black Sea resort of Sochi.

"This step takes Russo-Chinese strategic cooperation in energy to a qualitative new level and brings us closer to (fulfilling) the task, set together with Chinese leader Xi Jinping, of taking bilateral trade to \$200 billion by 2024."

The new pipeline emerges in Heilongjiang, which borders Russia, and goes onto Jilin and Liaoning, China's top grain hub.

Xi told Putin via a video link on Monday that the newly launched gas pipeline is "a landmark project of bilateral energy cooperation" and an "example of deep integration and mutually beneficial cooperation".

Flows via the pipeline are expected to gradually rise to 38 billion cubic meters

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