

Hezbollah: U.S. Pursuing Maximum Pressure Policy on 'Axis of Resistance'

BEIRUT (Dispatches) – The secretary general of Lebanon's Hezbollah resistance movement says the United States is pursuing the policy of maximum pressure and sanctions against its opponents in the Middle East region, holding Washington chiefly responsible for the worsening financial crisis in the Arab country.

"The United States is pursuing the policy of maximum pressure and economic sanctions against the countries and nations that are part of the Axis of Resistance, like the Islamic Republic of Iran, Syria and Yemen. These nations' financial problems are due to the fact that they do not want to surrender to Washington's diktats," Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah addressed a ceremony in the Lebanese capital city of Beirut on Thursday evening.

He added, "It is regrettable that some people in Lebanon deny the existence of an economic siege. They believe that the blockade of Lebanon would happen only if a battleship is moored off the coast of the country. This is while the policies and actions of US administrations vis-à-vis our country are a testimony to such a fact."

Nasrallah noted that Washington has been behind the decades-long economic woes in Lebanon, adding that the U.S. obstructs financial aids to the country in one way or



Secretary General of Lebanon's Hezbollah resistance movement Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah speaks in a televised speech broadcast live from the Lebanese capital city of Beirut on January 19, 2023.

another, and does not allow any state to offer assistance to Beirut to help it meet its basic needs.

"No one would argue that Lebanon is facing an unprecedented economic crisis. Our country is no exception because many countries in the world are now on the brink of collapse. Despite some evil attempts to spread hopelessness, we must not allow the existing financial problems to drive us to despair," the Hezbollah chief pointed out.

He stressed, "It is utterly unacceptable to remain in a state of confusion, as was the case in the past. A competent authority should somewhere take the initiative to develop a vision aimed at addressing the current economic turmoil. Accordingly, detailed plans and programs can be drawn up to resolve the issue."

"Corruption is a long-standing problem in Lebanon. We would not have encountered the status quo if all factions had done their

share, came up with novel ideas and shouldered their own administrative responsibilities," Nasrallah said.

The Hezbollah leader went on to refer to lack of production, racketeering, absence of sustainable development, political brinkmanship and rivalry among political groups as some of the main reasons behind Lebanon's financial crisis.

"We must build an economy that would ensure food security, and would not depend on foreign aid and assistance," he highlighted.

Elsewhere in his remarks, Nasrallah said, "It is a mistaken belief that the region is heading towards making peace with Israel and embracing the regime. Such a wrong notion has driven us to the current situation."

"Whoever wants to formulate [Lebanon's] new economic policies should abandon the false illusion that regional states are about to make peace with Israel and that the so-called two-state solution is within reach, especially as a corrupt and terrorist Israeli administration is now in place.

In case of a peace with the Zionist regime, "there would definitely be more tensions in the region. There would neither be any settlements nor any scenes of peace. Crises would be rampant across the region," Nasrallah warned.

Global...

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President Ebrahim Raisi said the Europeans had blacklisted the IRGC out of "desperation".

"This move is out of desperation which comes after their failed attempts on the streets to deal a blow to Iranian people," he said, referring to the foreign-backed riots.

Europe thought that it could "stop the Iranian nation" with such measures, he said.

The IRGC, the president said, is an "official force" and part of Iran's armed forces, adding the EU measure contravenes the international law and the UN Charter.

Parliament speaker Muhammad Baqer Qalibaf said the move would turn the European Union into the biggest sponsor of terrorism.

"IRGC is a unique counter-terrorism organization in the region and in the world," he said, warning Europe against carrying out Daesh's wish.

"In case this decision is finalized, the Iranian parliament will certainly adopt a reciprocal action," he warned.

"We would consider European governments as supporters of terrorism and their troops as terrorists and would treat them in a completely different manner in the region."

Back in April 2019, the Iranian parliament passed a law designating American forces in West Asia – known as the United States Central Command (CENTCOM) – as a terrorist organization. The move came as a countermeasure against the U.S. blacklisting of the IRGC.

In a statement, Iran's Army also strongly condemned the illegal move, saying that it exposed the enemies' grudge against the Islamic establishment in Iran.

"The measure of the European Parliament, which claims to be fighting terrorism, against an anti-terrorist institution is out of their desperation and failure in supporting recent riots in Iran," read the statement.

The measure, it continued, comes due to "blindly following hostile U.S. policies against the Islamic Revolution" and proves that Europeans submit to the U.S. and "global Zionism."

The General Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces said, "In addition to being unprecedented in international rules and regulations, the recent move by the European Parliament will affect regional and global security, tranquility and peace, and the European Parliament must be careful about its consequences."

A number of Iranian professors also said the EU measure arises from European countries' "miscalculations."

In a statement on Friday, the university professors from across the country condemned the "heinous move" while also voicing their support for the "Revolutionary and popular" IRGC.

"European politicians have correctly acknowledged their defeat against the Iranian nation and understood the authority of the IRGC," read the statement.

"The IRGC is a legal and official armed force of the Islamic Republic of Iran," they said. "Designating the army of a country is in contravention of all international rules and norms and is void of any legal and executive value."

The designation will allow Iran to perform a reciprocal action and consider the troops of all hostile countries as terrorists, the academics stated.

"The IRGC has played the most significant role in countering internal, regional, and global terrorists and European governments are indebted to the braveries of the force in the fight against Daesh terrorists," the statement read.

The academics called on the Eu-

ropean politicians to end enmity towards the Iranian nation and "do not beat the drum of war."

Millions...

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for 2024-2030, up from 295 billion euros for the 2019-2025 period.

Macron also said the budget for military intelligence would be increased by 60 percent for the same period, and he hoped to double the country's ability to respond to major cyber attacks.

The presidency has also said France wanted to increase its air defenses by 50 percent.

The new military bill for 2024-2030, that still requires a parliamentary vote, also hoped to boost military equipment production "to respond to the needs of the armed forces" but also "to the expectations of a partner" like Ukraine, the Elysee has said.

Paris has boosted military spending in recent years, but its military capacities have come under scrutiny amid the Ukraine war.

France has delivered weapons to Ukraine since the war, such as the Caesar howitzer artillery system, and created a fund of 200 million euros for Ukraine to buy equipment directly from French manufacturers.

It has also pledged to hand over highly-mobile AMX-10 RC light tanks, which are wheeled rather than tracked but have a much heavier cannon typical of a tank.

Execution ...

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"Regardless of success, the spy made his utmost efforts to play that traitorous role," it said.

It said Akbari's betrayal of his country was the outcome of the "British regime's dirty game" by taking advantage of his weak points and directing him into treason. The ministry said the British regime must be held accountable for Akbari's betrayal, who had acquired British nationality.

This blow damaged the dignity and credibility of a regime that claims to be the oldest spy service in the eyes of the general public and the world's intelligence agencies and caused serious challenges in the motivation of intelligence officers and their spies, it added.

Faced with increasing public pressure due to internal problems, the British government has adopted strategies that are all rooted in its desperation, the statement said, adding that making the US, France and Germany participate in media warfare against Iran is among London's approaches.

"West's crocodile tears for Akbari are under circumstances that Iran's military institutions have always been the target of media and information propaganda of Western countries. So how and based on what justification did they grant residency and citizenship to one of its officials easily and quickly?" it said.

Akbari, who had been sentenced to death on charges of "corruption on earth" and "extensive activities against the country's internal and external security" through espionage for the British government's spy agency, was hanged on January 14.

He was arrested in 2019, had received 1,805,000 euros, 265,000 pounds, and \$50,000 for espionage activities for the United Kingdom.

Saudis Arrest Top Shia Cleric

RIYADH (Dispatches) – Saudi regime forces have reportedly arrested a prominent cleric in the country's oil-rich and Shia-populated Eastern Province, as the kingdom intensifies a heavy-handed crackdown against members of the religious community as well as opponents of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and his policies.

Social media activists reported that the forces detained Sheikh Hassan al-Khuwailidi amid authorities' attempts to silence influential religious scholars, and press ahead with plans aimed at transforming the the cultural setting of Saudi Arabia, which is greatly influenced by the Arab and

Islamic culture, to the Western style.

The report comes as Saudi officials sentenced prominent Shia cleric Sheikh Kadhim al-Amri to four years in prison late last year.

Lebanon-based al-Ahed news website announced that the clergyman – the son of Shia cleric Sheikh Muhammad al-Omari, who is the son of the late Sheikh Muhammad al-Amri and among distinguished religious figures in the holy city of Medina – received the ruling on December 24.

A month earlier, Saudi forces had re-arrested distinguished Shia scholar Sheikh Muhammad al-Abbad in al-Umran city in al-Ahsa province without a warrant, and taken him

away to an unknown location.

Saudi Arabia has stepped up politically-motivated arrests, prosecution, and conviction of peaceful dissident writers and human rights campaigners, in particular in Eastern Province.

The province has been the scene of peaceful demonstrations since February 2011. Protesters have been demanding reforms, freedom of expression, the release of political prisoners, and an end to economic and religious discrimination against the region.

The protests have been met with a heavy-handed crackdown, with regime forces increasing security measures across the province.

Ever since bin Salman became Saudi Arabia's crown prince and de facto leader in 2017, the kingdom has arrested dozens of activists, bloggers, intellectuals, and others perceived as political opponents, showing almost zero tolerance for dissent even in the face of international condemnations of the crackdown.

As a result, Islamic scholars have been executed, women's rights campaigners have been put behind bars and tortured, and freedom of expression, association, and belief continue to be denied.

Over the past years, Riyadh has also redefined its anti-terrorism laws to target activism.

Yemen: UAE-Backed Militants Turn Fish Landing Center Into Military Barracks

SANA'A (Dispatches) – Yemen's Ministry of Fisheries has censured the Emirati-backed forces for turning a fish landing center into military barracks in Abyan, saying the move comes within the continuous context of terrorizing Yemeni fishermen.

The so-called Security Belt and Emirati forces fired live bullets at Yemeni fishermen in the area of Abyan, located south of Yemen, and expelled them from their landing center, the ministry said in a statement on Thursday.

The fish landing center in the Al-Matla' Balkwd area in Khanfar district was turned into military barracks for the benefit of the American and British forces, by that depriving thousands of fishermen of their livelihood and displacing them to other fishing grounds in Abyan, Aden and Shabwa, Saba news agency quoted the ministry as saying.

The statement pointed out that the Emirati-backed forces have surrounded the area with a number of bulldozers and military crews, and they are using the building as the headquarters of the hostile occupation forces.

This move, according to the ministry's statement, comes in the context of expansionist ambitions to control the areas bordering the Arabian Sea, the Gulf of Aden, the southern regions of the Red Sea and the northern Indian Ocean.

The ministry also called on the international community, the United Na-

tions and human rights organizations to take a firm stance and pressure the Emirate forces to evacuate the fish landing center.

Coastal communities in Yemen have suffered greatly in the ongoing bloody war on the Arab country, waged by Saudi Arabia and its allies. Fishing boats, ports and processing sites have been destroyed or damaged, and many fishermen have lost their lives. The fishing sector has incurred material losses worth more than 12 billion dollars since the beginning of the Saudi-led aggression.

Before the beginning of the war in 2015, the fishing industry employed more than half a million people and was the country's second biggest export behind oil and gas.

Yemen will be marking the eighth anniversary of the Saudi-led war in March 2023. In 2015, Saudi Arabia launched its bloody war against Yemen in collaboration with a number of its allies and with arms and logistics support from the US and several Western states.

The "forces of aggression", as the Yemeni officials refer to them, have also imposed a tight blockade on Yemen, as a result of which hundreds of thousands of civilians have been killed and the country has been turned into the scene of the world's worst humanitarian crisis.

However, they have failed to achieve their objectives of returning to power the former Riyadh-backed regime headed by Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi and crushing the popular Ansarullah resistance movement.

Freezing Temperatures Kill 78 People in Afghanistan

KABUL (Reuters) – At least 78 people have died of cold in Afghanistan during the country's worst winter in more than a decade, authorities said on Thursday.

Deaths from the cold have been recorded in eight of the country's 34 provinces, officials said.

The coldest winter in 15 years, which has seen temperatures dip as low as -34 degrees Celsius (-29.2 degrees Fahrenheit), has hit Afghanistan in the middle of a severe economic crisis.

Many aid groups have partially suspended operations in recent weeks due to a Taliban ruling that most female NGO workers could not work, leaving agencies unable to operate many programmes

in the conservative country.

"The weather will get colder in the next few days, therefore it is necessary to consider humanitarian aid for affected people," said Abdullah Ahmadi, the head of the operations center for emergency conditions at the Ministry of Disaster Management.

The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (Unocha) said last week that the restrictions on female workers were hampering efforts to deliver aid.

"Humanitarian partners are providing winterization support to families, including heating, cash for fuel and warm clothes, but distributions have been se-

verely impacted by the... ban on female NGO aid workers," it said.

Even in the early part of winter, health workers had reported a sharp increase in the number of young children suffering from serious cases of pneumonia and other respiratory diseases, in part due to worsening poverty that left people unable to properly heat their homes.

Around 77,000 livestock have also died in the past nine days, threatening to deepen the country's food insecurity.

"Lost livelihoods and assets further endanger Afghan families at a time when 21.2 million people urgently need continued food and agricultural support," said Unocha on Twitter.