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Rouhani meets Iraq's top cleric Sistani



president.ir

Political Desk

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani Wednesday met Iraq's top Shia authority Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani in the Iraqi holy city of Najaf, the first such meeting for an Iranian head of state.

Rouhani sat down with Sistani at his residence on the last day of his visit to the neighboring country after paying a visit to the holy shrine of Imam Ali (PBUH) – the first Imam of Shia Muslims.

Rouhani briefed Sistani about his negotiations with Iraqi officials during his three-day trip to Iraq, a statement released by the top Iraqi cleric's office said.

According to the statement, Grand Ayatollah Sistani welcomed "any step toward strengthening Iraq's relations with its neighbors within the framework of mutual interests and based on respecting

national sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs of each other."

He also thanked "Iraq's friends" for helping the country defeat the Daesh terrorist group.

Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, Rouhani's Chief of Staff Mahmood Vaezi and Ambassador to Baghdad Iraj Masjeidi were also present at the meeting.

Sistani is known as the spiritual leader of Iraqi Shia Muslims. His fatwas have significantly contributed to shaping Iraq's political structure in the wake of former dictator Saddam Hussein's overthrow.

In June 2014, when Daesh unleashed its campaign in Iraq, Sistani called on his followers to rush to the military's help in the fight against the terrorist outfit.

The fatwa helped bring together Shia fighters, Sunni tribesmen as well as

Christian and Izadi volunteers under the umbrella of the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) to reverse Daesh's gains and ultimately end the terror group's territorial rule in Iraq in late 2017.

Rouhani visited the holy shrines of Imam Hussein (PBUH), the third Shia Imam, and his half-brother Abbas ibn Ali (PBUH), in the holy city of Karbala on Tuesday.

Heading a high-ranking delegation, Rouhani began his official Iraq visit on Monday, which featured several meetings and the signing of memorandums of understanding for the expansion of bilateral ties in various fields.

In a joint statement, the two neighboring states hailed Rouhani's Iraq visit as a "turning point" in efforts to strengthen "strategic" cooperation based on non-interference in each other's internal affairs.

Press TV contributed to this story.

Iran to overtake Qatar in South Pars with new gas phases



Iran on Sunday will launch four new development phases of the world's largest gas field at South Pars with a capacity to produce 112 million cubic meters per day, the Ministry of Oil said.

President Hassan Rouhani will travel to Bushehr on the Persian Gulf to inaugurate two refineries built with \$10 billion of investment. With their launch, Iran's daily gas production will surpass that of Qatar with which it shares the offshore field, reported Press TV.

The \$5 billion refinery for Phase 13 is fully operational, with the first shipping of its gas condensate delivered on March 11 for export, the project's operator Payam Motamed said. Another refinery for phases 22, 23 and 24 will come online Sunday.

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Iran warns of firm response if Israel acts against its oil shipments



Iran will respond firmly to any Israeli naval action against its oil sales, Iran's defense minister said on Wednesday, in comments that came a week after Israel said its navy could act against Iranian oil "smuggling" to enforce US sanctions.

Brigadier General Amir Hatami said Iran has the military capabilities to confront any Israeli intervention, and said the international community would also not accept such action.

Hatami said such confrontation would be considered as "piracy" and warned that "if it happens, we will firmly respond."

"Certainly, if they (the Israelis) have such an intention, the issue would constitute piracy and an [instance of] international insecurity," he told IRNA.

"The Iranian Armed Forces have certainly the capabilities to protect the country's shipping lines in the best way against any possible threat," Hatami said.

US President Donald Trump last year quit the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran and reimposed some sanctions, aiming to cut Tehran's oil exports to zero. Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu told naval officers last week that Iran was still resorting to clandestine measures to ship crude.

Netanyahu threatened to stop what he called Iran's "covert" oil shipments over maritime routes meant to "circumvent" US sanctions.

"As these attempts expand, the navy will have a more important role in efforts to block these Iranian actions," Netanyahu said.

Iran's Navy has extended its reach in recent years, dispatching vessels to the Indian Ocean and the Gulf of Aden. Iranian warships stepped in on Friday to repel pirates who attacked an Iranian oil tanker in the Gulf of Aden.

An Islamic Revolution Guards Corps commander also said on Wednesday that enemies will regret any confrontation with Iran.

"We never welcome any war, but we are ready to respond to any invasion. We hope the aggressors do not need to understand this point by trying it and paying a high price," Major General Gholamali Rashid said.

The Israeli Navy is mostly active in the Mediterranean and Red Sea.

Iran has one of the world's biggest tanker fleets in the world.

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UN Security Council in talks on saving Yemen truce deal

The United Nations Security Council met behind closed doors with the world body's envoy for Yemen on Wednesday in an attempt to salvage a stalled truce deal seen as crucial to diplomatic efforts to end the war.

Yemen's former government and its Saudi and Emirati allies agreed in talks with Houthi fighters nearly a month ago to begin a redeployment of forces from the flashpoint city of Hodeida, but nothing has happened on the ground, AFP reported.

UN Envoy Martin Griffiths had told the council on February 19 that the initial stage of the pullback would happen in the following days, marking the first concrete step toward de-escalation.

The redeployment was initially agreed in December under a cease-fire deal reached in Sweden seen as a breakthrough toward ending the devastating war that has pushed Yemen to the brink of famine.

UN diplomats said the Houthis were refusing to pull away from the ports of Saleef and Ras Issa as agreed due to fears that forces linked to the Saudi-led coalition will move in to take over those facilities.

General Michael Llosgaard, who heads a newly-created UN mission to monitor the redeployment from Hodeida, joined Griffiths in updating the council behind closed doors.

Ahead of the council meeting, the envoy met with ambassadors of the United States, France, Britain, China and Russia, which are the permanent council members.

On Tuesday, the ambassadors of the P5 in Yemen said they were "extremely concerned" that agreements reached in Stockholm had not been implemented and expressed support for UN efforts to "secure the earliest possible implementation of the arrangements" for redeploying forces from the ports and city of Hodeida.

The ambassadors said the pullback should begin "without further delay and without seeking to exploit the redeployments by the other side."

Earlier this week, 12 children and 10 women were killed by strikes in Yemen's northern Hajjah Province that left up to 30 people wounded including 14 children, the UN humanitarian coordinator said.

Later this month, the Saudi-led bombing campaign in Yemen will enter its fifth year, with millions of civilians facing famine.

The conflict has unleashed the world's worst humanitarian conflict.

Ethiopia black boxes bound for Europe, crash pilot had in-plane issues

The Ethiopian Airlines pilot whose jet crashed killing 157 people had reported flight-control problems, the company said on Wednesday, as it prepared to send the black boxes to Europe from a disaster that has rocked the global aviation industry.

The still unexplained crash, which happened just after take-off from Addis Ababa, followed another disaster involving a Boeing 737 MAX in Indonesia five months ago that killed 189 people. Though there is no proof of links, the twin disasters have spooked passengers, led to the grounding of most of Boeing's 737 MAX fleet and hammered shares in the world's biggest plane maker, Reuters reported.

Since the Indonesia crash, there has been attention on an automated anti-stall system that dips the aircraft's nose down. Ethiopia Airlines spokesman Asrat Begawash said it was still unclear what happened on Sunday, but its pilot had reported control issues – as opposed to external factors such as birds.

The pilot reported flight control problems and requested to turn back. In fact he was allowed to turn back," he said. A decision where in Europe to send the black boxes would be taken by Thursday, the airline said.

Multiple nations, including the European Union, have suspended the 737 MAX, grounding about two-thirds of the 371 jets

of that make in operation around the world, according to Reuters calculations.

Many airlines were managing to keep to schedule by using other jets while economic woes meant some may be grateful for a pause. The biggest impact could be on future deliveries given Boeing has nearly 5,000 more 737 MAXs on order.



REUTERS

India said it would not take any deliveries until safety concerns were cleared and Ethiopian Airlines said it would decide whether to cancel orders after a preliminary probe.

Passengers were fretting too, with many seeking reassurances they would not be flying on a 737 MAX. Kayak.com was the first big site to say it would modify filters to allow customers to exclude particular types

of planes from queries.

Nevertheless, the United States held out against suspension and Boeing affirmed its "full confidence" in the model.

Boeing shares have fallen some 11 percent since the crash, losing \$26.65 billion of market value.

More than a dozen relatives of those who perished paid their respects on Wednesday at the rural site where Flight ET 302 came down in a fireball. Workers set up tents decorated with white roses.

Given problems of identification of charred remains, it will take days to start returning them to families, probably weeks for some which will require dental or DNA testing.

The victims came from more than 30 nations.

Of the top 10 nations by air passenger travel, all but the United States and Japan halted the 737 MAX. Egypt, Thailand, Lebanon, Serbia, Kosovo and Uzbekistan joined them on Wednesday.

Resisting pressure, the US Federal Aviation Administration's (FAA) acting administrator Dan Elwell said its review had shown "no systemic performance issues."

The three US airlines using the 737 MAX – Southwest Airlines Co, American Airlines Group Inc and United Airlines – stood by the aircraft.