

Palestinian foreign minister urges Israel to return to talks

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CAIRO: The Palestinian foreign minister on Saturday urged Israel to return to talks based on a two-state solution for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, ahead of the transition to a new US administration.

Palestinian Foreign Minister Riyad Al-Malki's comments came in a joint statement with Egypt's Foreign Minister Sameh Shukry and Jordan's Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi.

In a news conference after their meeting, Al-Malki said that the Palestinian Authority is ready to cooperate with US President-elect Joe Biden, on the basis of achieving a Palestinian state with east Jerusalem as its capital on territory Israel captured in the 1967 Mideast war.

"We are ready for cooperation and dealing with the new US administration, and we are expecting that it would re-draw its ties with the state of Palestine," he said.

The Palestinian diplomat said coordination with Cairo and Amman is a "center point" that would establish a "starting point" in dealing with the incoming Biden administration. Egypt and Jordan are close US allies.

In September, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas called for an international conference early next year to launch a "genuine peace process," based on the UN resolutions and past agreements with Israel. The Palestinians urged that the conference be multilateral, since they contend the United States is no longer an honest broker.

Palestinian negotiators have suffered numerous setbacks under the Trump administration, and complained about what they say are biased pro-Israel steps from Washington.

Trump has sidelined the Palestinian Authority, recognized Jerusalem as Israel's capital, moved the US Embassy from Tel Aviv, slashed financial assistance for the Palestinians, and reversed course on the illegitimacy of Israeli settlements on land claimed by the Palestinians.

Israel captured east Jerusalem and the West Bank in the 1967 war. The international community considers both areas to be occupied territory, and the Palestinians seek them as parts of a future independent state.

Israel annexed east Jerusalem and considers it part of its capital – a step that is not internationally recognized.

Israel has built a far-flung network of settlements that house nearly 700,000 Jewish settlers in the West Bank and Jerusalem since their capture in 1967. The Palestinians want both territories for their future state and view the settlements as a violation of international law and an obstacle to peace – a position with wide international support.

Al-Malki also said they have returned to security coordination with Israel, after Israeli authorities sent a "message, for the first time, that they are

abiding to all agreements” made with the Palestinians.

In May, the Palestinian president announced that the PA would cut ties with Israel, including security coordination, following Israel’s pledge to annex large parts of the occupied West Bank.

In a statement following their meeting, the three ministers said they would work to rally international support against Israel’s “illegitimate measures” that include settlements’ expansion, demolishing dozens of Palestinian homes and seizing their land.

“These are illegitimate Israeli actions on the ground that affect all chances to reach a comprehensive peace process that can only happen by the two-state solution,” said Safadi, Jordan’s top diplomat, at the news conference.

The ministers said in their statement that Jerusalem’s status should be resolved in the negotiations, calling for Israel “as the occupying power, to stop all violations that target the Arab, Islamic and Christian identity of Jerusalem and its sanctuaries.”

President Abdel-Fattah El-Sisi also met with the Jordanian and Palestinian ministers, according to the Egyptian leader’s office.

He said in a statement that Egypt has been working toward a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, “taking into account the regional and international changes.”

He was apparently referring to the election of Biden as the US president, and the normalization deals between Israel and four Arab countries including the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco.

That deals, crafted by the Trump administration, dealt another heavy setback for the Palestinians.



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Armenian church leasing land to Israelis causes Palestinian worry
Israeli soldiers who kill Palestinian kids must be held accountable, say UN watchdogs

[EU welcomes formation of Yemeni government, praises role of Saudi Arabia](#)

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Sat, 2020-12-19 23:39

LONDON: The EU welcomed the formation of a Yemeni government on Saturday and praised Saudi Arabia's efforts to achieve the Riyadh Agreement.

"The announcement of a new Yemeni government within the framework of implementing the Riyadh Agreement is a positive step toward a comprehensive political solution for the country," a spokesperson for the European External Action Service said.

The new government will face difficult tasks and it will need to take important and courageous decisions for the sake of Yemen and all of its people, the spokesperson added.

The spokesperson stressed the importance of having more women in political positions and the effective participation of women in governance.

"The EU appreciates facilitation efforts made by Saudi Arabia, and encourages all actors to ensure the prompt and full implementation of all stipulations of the Riyadh Agreement," the European spokesman said.

France also praised the role played by the Kingdom to facilitate the Riyadh Agreement and implement it.

A statement issued by the foreign ministry said that the formation of a new government in the war-torn country is an important step that would contribute to preserving Yemen's unity and territorial integrity.

The ministry stressed the importance of ending the conflict in Yemen which requires a cessation of hostilities and the resumption of discussions under the auspices of the UN to reach a comprehensive political agreement.



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Implementation of Riyadh Agreement praised, raises hopes of ending Yemen conflict
Yemen will fight corruption and currency woes, says prime minister

[Armenian church leasing land to Israelis causes Palestinian worry](#)

Author:

Sat, 2020-12-19 23:21

AMMAN: A previously unknown agreement to turn sensitive land in the old city of Jerusalem into a parking lot – largely for the exclusive use of Jewish residents of the old city – is causing concern for the Palestinian leadership and members of the tiny Armenian community.

The contract, a copy of which is with Arab News, will take effect on Jan. 1, 2021.

Officials of the Armenian Patriarchate confirmed the agreement but insisted that the contract with the Israeli Jerusalem municipality and the Jewish-centric Jerusalem Development Authority (Harali) does not constitute selling or leasing land but is simply a financial operation.

The Armenian Patriarchate said that removal of all earth from the plot of land, which will cost about \$2 million, was “a financial obligation that the Patriarchate by itself doesn’t have the capacity to undertake,” according to a statement by the real estate department of the Armenian Patriarchate. The statement said that efforts to get support from “multiple governmental bodies” had run “into obstacles.” In return, the municipality and Harali will have access to 90 parking spots.

But the five-page contract notes (Article 2a) that the cost of lifting the rubble will be considered “a loan” that the church will have to pay back. The Higher Presidential Committee of Church Affairs in Palestine wrote to Armenian Patriarch Nourhan Manoogian reminding him that the Armenian quarter is part of occupied Palestinian territories where UN resolutions, including the 2017 UNSC Resolution 2334, apply. The letter also noted that the agreement between Jordanian King Abdullah and President Abbas in 2013 was set to regulate Christian and Muslim holy places in Jerusalem.

The letter, signed by Ramzi Khoury, the director of the committee, called on the Armenian Patriarchate “to abide by international law” and said that Israel has “expansionist ambitions,” especially in the area of the Omar Bin Khatab Square and the Armenian quarters” in the old city. Palestinian sources have said that President Arafat refused to concede the Armenian quarter during the 2000 negotiations at Camp David.

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The Higher Presidential Committee of Church Affairs in Palestine wrote to the Armenian Patriarch Nourhan Manoogian reminding him that the Armenian quarter is part of occupied Palestinian territories where UN Resolutions, including the 2017 UNSC resolution 2334, apply.

A well-respected Palestinian source from the Armenian community said that he “smells a rat,” adding that the current Armenian Patriarchate is not to be trusted. “I think that this is not the first time that the Armenian Patriarchate has tried to sell land and the people of Jerusalem to the Israelis and the people of the city stood up to him,” said the Palestinian leader, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

The Palestinian/Armenian source denied claims that the church had no choice but to go to the Israelis after repeated requests for financial support from the Palestinian government and others were turned down: “This is not true. The EU was interested in fixing the parking lot in a way that would allow its parking lot income to support the church while allowing all the people of the old city to use it but the church refused the offer. A 10-point official statement issued by the real estate department of the Armenian Patriarchate states that the parking lot will remain private and that the management, ownership of the parking lot will remain in the hands of the Patriarchate.” The statement also highlights that “within the next 10 years, once the

Patriarchate has finalized and received all construction permits, in agreement with the municipality, the Patriarchate will begin a new construction that will benefit the Armenian community.” The Patriarchate is hoping to get permission to build a hotel. Armenian clergy have frequently complained about religious Jews spitting on them. In March 2020 the Israeli police, and for the first time since 1967, fined a young Jewish man 1,500 Israeli shekel (\$463) for spitting at an Armenian bishop a year earlier. Palestinians have boycotted the “unified” Jerusalem municipality since 1967 and consider the Jerusalem Development Authority an arm of radical Jewish groups that intend to Judaize the old city of Jerusalem at the expense of the indigenous Arab Palestinians.



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[Egypt demands Italy hands over ex-diplomats who smuggled antiquities](#)

Author:

Sat, 2020-12-19 22:25

CAIRO: Egyptian Interpol has asked the Italian government to hand over former

members of its embassy in Cairo after they were convicted of smuggling Egyptian artifacts.

Interpol demanded the extradition of Ladislav Otakar Skakal, former honorary consul in Luxor, who was sentenced to 15 years' imprisonment in absentia and a fine of 1 million Egyptian pounds for the smuggling of nearly 22,000 artifacts to Italy from 2016 to 2018 through the containers of the diplomatic mission, with the participation of Massimiliano Sponzilli, former trade commissioner to Egypt.

The case involves other defendants, including the brother of former Finance Minister Youssef Botros Ghaly, who was sentenced in February to 30 years in prison and given a 6 million Egyptian pound fine.

The Egyptian Public Prosecution had ordered the referral of Ghali and others to the International Criminal Court, with the speedy arrest and summoning of the Italian consul and his inclusion on the Interpol Red Notice.

The case dates to May 2018, when Italian media revealed that antiquities found in diplomatic containers in the port of Salerno, Italy, were from Egypt, and Egyptian officials were suspected of smuggling them.

The artifacts consisted of a group of pottery vessels from different periods, parts of coffins and coins, and a few pieces belonging to the Islamic civilization.

The Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs said the Italian side revealed that their contacts with the Customs Department at Alexandria Port indicated that the antiquities and the shipment were not of an Egyptian diplomat but rather related to an Italian citizen who later turned out to be Skakal.

The public prosecutor ordered that all the accused – Medhat Michel Gerges Salib, his wife Sahar Zaki Ragheb, and Boutros Raouf Ghali – be prevented from disposing of their money, and issued a decision to include Skakal on watch lists.

Egypt recovered the smuggled pieces, which consisted of 21,000 coins, 195 artifacts, 11 pottery vessels, 5 mummy masks – some of them gilded – a wooden coffin, two small wooden compounds, two canopy heads and three colored ceramic tiles from the Islamic era.



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[Lebanon police scuffle with students protesting tuition hikes](#)

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BEIRUT: Lebanese riot police on Saturday scuffled with students protesting a decision by top universities to adopt a new dollar exchange rate to price tuition – equivalent to a major fee hike.

Near the entrance of the American University of Beirut (AUB) in the city's Hamra district, security forces fired tear gas to disperse protesters who were trying to approach the main gate.

Students responded by throwing water bottles and other objects at riot police blocking their path.

It was not immediately clear if there were any injuries.

The protest came in response to a decision by AUB and the Lebanese American University (LAU), another top private institution, to price tuition based on an exchange rate of 3,900 Lebanese pounds to the dollar.

The nosediving currency is still officially pegged at around 1,500 pounds to the greenback.

The move has prompted fears that other universities could follow suit, potentially leading to an exodus of students from private institutions while public universities remain underfunded and overstretched.

Hundreds of students had gathered in Hamra earlier Saturday in a protest they billed a "student day of rage."

They chanted anti-government slogans and called for affordable education in a country mired in its worst economic crisis since the 1975-1990 civil war.

Later in the evening, some torched dumpsters to block the street and vandalized banks before security forces pushed them out.

Over the past year, the Lebanese pound has lost up to 80 percent of its value on the black market, where on Saturday the dollar was selling for at least 8,200 pounds.

Universities have struggled to adapt to the de facto devaluation as prices nationwide have soared.

Commercial banks have halted dollar transactions and restricted withdrawals of Lebanese pounds, in moves that have starved many of their savings.

According to the United Nations, more than half of Lebanon's population is now living in poverty.





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