

# Palestinians urge Pompeo to call off settlement visit

Author:

Wed, 2020-11-18 02:05

GAZA CITY: Israeli plans to build 1,257 settlement units south of occupied Jerusalem have been condemned by Palestinian experts, who say the move will “kill the two-state solution.”

The settlement plans come on the eve of a tour of the region by US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, who is expected to visit an Israeli settlement built on Palestinian land in Ramallah.

The new announcement is in line with Israel’s large settlement project, a plan it has tried to implement for three decades. It aims to link the settlement of Givat Hamatos, which is built on Palestinian land in the towns of Beit Safafa and Beit Jala – part of which is owned by the Lutheran Church in Jerusalem – with other settlements in the West Bank.

Khalil Tafakji, a map and settlement expert, said the new plans are dangerous because they form a “link in the chain” of settlements in the Jerusalem 2020 Project, through which Israel aims to completely isolate Jerusalem from its Palestinian surroundings.

“Israel aims to establish what can be called a ‘Jewish Bethlehem’ by linking the settlement of Gilo and Jabal Abu Ghneim, and establishing about nine hotels to seal the entire closure of Jerusalem from the southern side and the towns of Sur Bahir, Beit Safafa and Al-Sharafa, which will completely isolate from the cities of Beit Sahour and Bethlehem,” Tafakji told Arab News.

Israel seized the areas in the 1990s and allowed the Ethiopian Jewish community to move and build there. The country has since faced several obstacles that prevented the launch the settlement project, but it is exploiting the “unlimited support” it receives from US President Donald Trump to move forward with the ambitious plans, Palestine experts said.

“In contrast to the raging Israeli policy of demolition against Palestinian homes and facilities in Jerusalem, Israel’s plans include building more than 58,000 settlement units by 2030,” Tafakji said.

More than 600,000 settlers reside in Israeli settlements that are classified as illegal according to international law, of which about 200,000 live in settlements in occupied East Jerusalem, which Palestine views as the potential capital of a future state.

Israeli anti-settlement organization Peace Now said that the settlement project in Givat Hamatos would “severely impede the prospects of a two-state solution.”

The organization accused the Israeli government of “using the last weeks of the Trump administration to impose facts on the ground.”

A similar sentiment was expressed by Palestinian Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh, who said in a Monday meeting that “what is going on is an escalating and intense attack plan for the next 10 weeks, in a race against time to impose a new status quo before Trump leaves the White House.”

During his four years in office, Trump showed strong and unprecedented support for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and approved of Israel’s settlement projects, including the “annexation plan” to control vast swathes of land in the West Bank.

Peace Now said that settlement numbers in the Palestinian territories doubled one-and-a-half times during the Trump presidency.

Pompeo’s visit to a West Bank settlement during his upcoming tour will be the first by a US secretary of state, with experts warning that it will give Israel tacit approval to continue annexation efforts.

Spokesman for the Palestinian presidency Nabil Abu Rudeineh said the new decision is a continuation of Israel’s attempts to “kill the internationally supported two-state solution” and deny international decisions that confirm the settlements are illegal.

Although many Palestinians see Trump’s election loss as a “gain” for them, they are doubtful of “major change” arriving in the form of President-elect Joe Biden, experts say.

Head of the Palestinian National Initiative Mustafa Barghouti said that Trump’s disappearance does not mean the disappearance of the “deal of the century,” and Israel will use every minute to move forward with its implementation.

“Israel is racing against time and is working to anticipate the changes in the US in light of Trump’s loss. He was the US president who was most supportive of its aggressive settlement policies,” Barghouti told Arab News.

EU Special Representative for the Middle East Peace Process Susanna Terstal said that Israel’s bid to build new settlement units between occupied Jerusalem and Bethlehem is a “very worrying development.”

In a press release, Terstal said: “I visited the region last month and saw on the ground how any settlement building in this prime location would harm prospects for a viable two-state solution with Jerusalem as the future capital of both states. There is an urgent need for Israel to reverse its decision.”

The settlement issue is the most prominent obstacle to a two-state solution, after negotiations for a permanent political settlement between the Palestinian Authority and Israel were suspended in mid-2014.

UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process Nikolai Mladenov said in a statement: “The Israeli settlement projects, if built, would further consolidate a ring of settlements between Jerusalem and Bethlehem in the occupied West Bank.

“It would significantly damage prospects for a future contiguous Palestinian state and for achieving a negotiated two-state solution based on the 1967 lines, with Jerusalem as the capital of both states.

“The construction of settlements is illegal under international law,” Mladenov added.



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[Mike Pompeo](#)

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Palestine’s Mahmoud Abbas asks UN for international peace conference next year  
Palestinian Authority to resume coordination with Israel

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[Yemeni officials repeat warnings over](#)

# Safer oil tanker

Author:

Wed, 2020-11-18 02:00

AL-MUKALLA: Iran-backed Houthi's use of naval mines and bomb boats, and the group's resistance to maintaining the Safer tanker are serious threats to international maritime traffic and ecological life in the Red Sea, senior Yemeni officials warned on Monday.

The officials repeated concerns about the collapse of the tanker, urging the international community to act now to avert a major disaster in the Red Sea.

Yemeni Vice President Ali Mohsen Al-Ahmer said that the Yemeni government is still open to all peace initiatives, but the Houthi's continuing use of land mines and their refusal to allow UN experts to visit the decaying tanker show that they are not serious about peace, state news agency SABA reported.

During a meeting with Gov. of Hodeidah Al-Hassan Ali Taher, Al-Ahmer said that the Houthis pose an "increasing" threat to maritime navigation in the Red Sea through their mines and explosive-laden boats that target commercial ships.

For months, Yemeni government officials and Western diplomats have pressured the Houthis to allow a team of UN experts access to the tanker to conduct vital maintenance, warning the rebels that they would be held responsible if the tanker crumbled and caused a predicted environmental and humanitarian catastrophe.

Loaded with more than 1 million barrels of crude oil, the stranded ship off the western city of Hodeidah has decayed over the last five years due to lack of maintenance.

Yemeni Minister of Planning and International Cooperation Dr. Najeeb Al-Ouj on Monday echoed the same concerns about the crumbling of the tanker and potential environmental disaster.

## **FASTFACT**

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SABA quoted the minister as saying that the international community has an "ethical and moral" responsibility to keep pressure on the Houthis until they allow UN experts to board the tanker and assess the damage.

Al-Ouj repeated local and international experts in saying that an oil spill from the ship would jeopardize ecological life and prevent Yemeni fishermen from working.

Foreign Minister Mohammed Al-Hadrami also told New Zealand's nonresident Ambassador to Yemen James Monroe on Monday that the international community should urgently address the tanker issue by pressuring the Houthis.

### **Commanders killed**

Yemeni President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi mourned the death of a field commander who was killed in fighting with Houthis in the northern province of Jouf.

The official news agency reported that Hadi sent a letter to the family of Brig. Yahiya Al-Bakri, chief of staff of the 1st Mountain Infantry Brigade, who was killed while "resisting the Iran-backed Houthi scheme" in Yemen.

The vice president also mourned the same commander, describing him as a "hero" who led military operations against the Houthis in Marib, Jouf and Sanaa.

Local media reports and government-allied accounts on social media announced the death of Ahmed Hamed Al-Tharhani, chief of 141 Brigade operations, on Monday night following fatal injuries suffered during fighting with Houthis in Jouf.

Dozens of Houthi fighters, including field commanders, were also killed in Jouf during the last couple of days.

Rabia Al-Qurashi, the Yemeni army spokesman in the province, told Arab News on Tuesday that warplanes from the Arab coalition on Monday targeted a gathering of Houthi fighters in an area east of Hazem, Jouf's capital, killing Zayed Ali Al-Marani, the chief of Houthi Preventive Security and a brother of the rebel-allied governor of Jouf.

Fighting has raged in Jouf over the last couple of months as Yemeni government forces and the Houthis push to make territorial gains in the strategic province.



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Yemeni bank reopened after Houthis raid in Sanaa Officials discuss ties for Yemen relief projects

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## [Rocket attack on Baghdad's Green Zone kills child](#)

Author:

By QASSIM ABDUL-ZAHRA | AP

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Tue, 2020-11-17 20:05

BAGHDAD: Rockets struck Iraq's capital Tuesday with four landing inside the heavily fortified Green Zone, Iraq's military said, killing a child and wounding at least five people, signaling an end to an informal truce announced by Iran-backed militias in October.

Two Iraqi security officials said one of the rockets that hit the Green Zone struck close to Iraq's National Security Service, just 600 meters from the American Embassy. Some of the rockets were intercepted by the C-RAM air defense system installed by the U.S. earlier this year, they said.

Iraq's military said three rockets landed outside the Green Zone, one hitting close to Baghdad Medical City hospital, one at the gate of a public park, and a third exploded in the air. One child was killed and five civilians were wounded, the military statement said.

Officials said two Iraqi security forces personnel were also wounded inside the Green Zone. They spoke on condition of anonymity in line with regulations. There was no immediate claim of responsibility.

The military said the incident would not go without "prosecution and accountability."

US troops invaded Iraq in 2003 and left in 2011 but returned in 2014 after the Islamic State group overran large parts of Iraq.

Frequent attacks targeting the US Embassy and vehicles transporting equipment for U.S. troops have led Washington to threaten to close its Baghdad diplomatic mission and sparked a diplomatic crisis prior to the U.S. presidential election.

The attack comes after a recent announcement by the Pentagon that it would reduce troop levels in Iraq from 3,000 to 2,500.

In mid-October, Iran-backed, mostly Shiite, militia groups said they would temporarily halt attacks targeting the American presence in Iraq, including the embassy. That came with the condition that U.S.-led coalition troops withdraw from the country in line with a non-binding resolution passed in the Iraqi Parliament in January.

The resolution was passed by mostly Shiite lawmakers and urged the government to take action and expel US-led coalition troops from the country.

The resolution followed the Washington-directed airstrike that killed top Iranian Gen. Qassem Soleimani, the head of Iran's elite Quds Force, and powerful Iraqi militia leader Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, outside Baghdad airport. US officials, supportive of withdrawals in principle, have insisted they take place based on a scheduled timeline. Most Iraqi government officials agree with a gradual drawdown and face pressure from Iran-aligned groups who prefer an immediate exit.

A planned drawdown has been underway in Iraq for months, with coalition troops withdrawing from several Iraqi bases.

Iraqi forces have increasingly been conducting anti-Daesh operations without U.S. assistance, triggering the coalition to begin a scheduled drawdown in March that was conceived late last year. Assistance has become increasingly limited to high-level capabilities that Iraqi security forces lack, such as surveillance and air support.



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Pentagon to cut troop levels to 2,500 in Iraq, Afghanistan Iraqi PM and Pompeo discuss cooperation against Daesh

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## [Pentagon to cut troop levels to 2,500 in Iraq, Afghanistan](#)

Author:

By ROBERT BURNS and LOLITA C. BALDOR | AP

ID:

1605641280287008400

Tue, 2020-11-17 19:22

WASHINGTON: The US will slash troop levels in Afghanistan and Iraq to their lowest levels in nearly 20 years of war after President Donald Trump pledged to end conflicts abroad, the Pentagon announced Tuesday.

Acting Defense Secretary Chris Miller said around 2,000 troops would be pulled from Afghanistan by January 15, and 500 more would come back from Iraq, leaving 2,500 in each country.

The moves reflect Trump's policy "to bring the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq



to a successful and responsible conclusion and to bring our brave service members home," Miller said.

Miller said the US had met its goals, set in 2001 after the Al Qaeda attacks on the United States, to defeat Islamist extremists and to help "local partners and allies to take the lead in the fight."

"With the blessings of providence in the coming year, we will finish this generational war and bring our men and women home," he said.

"We will protect our children from the heavy burden and toll of perpetual war, and we will honor the sacrifices made in the services of peace and stability in Afghanistan, Iraq and around the world."

The announcement came 10 days after Trump fired defense secretary Mark Esper, who had insisted on the need to keep 4,500 troops in Afghanistan to support the Kabul government while it negotiates a peace deal with the Taliban insurgents.

US troops had already been cut by nearly two-thirds from about 13,000 this year, following the February 29 peace deal between the United States and the Taliban.

The two sides agreed that the Taliban would then negotiate a peace pact with the Afghan government, and that US troops would be gone by May 2021.

But until Esper's replacement with Miller, Pentagon generals had said that the Taliban had not lived up to pledges to reduce violent attacks on government forces, and that further reductions would take pressure off them to negotiate.

The announcement came over the objections of allies and senior US politicians worried that the reductions would leave the Afghan and Iraq governments vulnerable to extremist groups.

"Afghanistan risks becoming once again a platform for international terrorists to plan and organise attacks on our homelands," NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg warned Tuesday.

"And ISIS (the Islamic State group) could rebuild in Afghanistan the terror caliphate it lost in Syria and Iraq," he said.

On Monday US Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell warned the Afghan cuts could lead to a debacle like the US withdrawal from South Vietnam and be a propaganda victory for Islamic extremists.

"The consequences of a premature US exit would likely be even worse than president Obama's withdrawal from Iraq back in 2011, which fueled the rise of ISIS and a new round of global terrorism," McConnell said on the Senate floor.

"It would be reminiscent of the humiliating America departure from Saigon in 1975."

But Trump, who lost his bid for reelection on November 3 to Democrat Joe Biden, has been determined to make good on a campaign pledge made in 2016 to bring US troops home and end costly wars abroad.



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NATO chief warns of high price if troops leave Afghanistan  
Trump to order troop reductions in Afghanistan, Iraq

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## [HRW slams lack of accountability for Iran's 2019 crackdown](#)

Tue, 2020-11-17 22:06

LONDON: One year since anti-regime demonstrations rapidly engulfed Iran, Human Rights Watch (HRW) on Tuesday slammed Tehran for having “failed to provide any real measure of accountability for the violent crackdown” that resulted in the deaths of hundreds of protesters.

Demonstrations began in November 2019 over a large and abrupt increase to the price of fuel, but rapidly morphed into popular discontent with Tehran’s repression and corruption.

At least 304 people were killed in what HRW dubbed Iran's "most brutal crackdown against protesters in decades."

Its condemnation comes one day after Amnesty International decried Tehran's use of internet shutdowns to hide human rights abuses and the killing of protesters.

HRW said: "People interviewed and videos on social media indicated that in several instances, security forces shot people who were fleeing the scene of protests. Also, family members and people with close knowledge of cases of people killed said that victims died from gunshots to the head and/or chest."

It added: "The authorities have not published any detailed investigation or held anyone accountable for the alleged abuses."

Tara Sepehri Far, HRW's Iran researcher, said: "One year after the November crackdown, Iranian authorities have avoided any measure of accountability and continue to harass the families of those killed during the protest."

The authorities are "systematically repressing efforts of those seeking justice for the bloody November crackdown," she added.

HRW said Iranian authorities have acknowledged the deaths of 230 protesters, but are steadfastly refusing to investigate whether their killings were justified.

"Families of hundreds of victims, most of them from the more vulnerable segments of Iranian society, deserve to see those responsible for the serious rights violations held accountable," Sepehri Far added.

Sadeq Saba, an editor at Persian-language media organization Iran International, told Arab News that despite the killings, and due to the lack of accountability, the country is likely to face yet more unrest in the future.

"The troubles inside the country – the regime has no solution for them, no way of making people happy. Because of this, the Iranians are looking for an alternative," he said.



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Iran protests point to turmoil in the future  
Turmoil at memorial for man killed in Iran protests