

Any Israeli annexation a 'crime': Palestinians tell UN

Wed, 2020-06-24 18:31

JERUSALEM: Only a week before Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu intends to kick-start annexation plans in the occupied West Bank, Israel's premier is facing challenges at home and abroad.

When Netanyahu clinched a coalition deal with former rival Benny Gantz, the longtime premier said political steps on annexing Jewish settlements and the Jordan Valley could start from July 1.

The move forms part of a broader US peace plan, which foresees the eventual creation of a Palestinian state but denies their key demands such as a capital in east Jerusalem.

Palestinians reject annexation and thousands took part in a protest Monday in the town of Jericho, although other West Bank rallies have failed to draw large crowds.

For Netanyahu, Washington's plan and its green light provide a "historic opportunity" to "apply sovereignty" over swathes of the West Bank.

The premier has just months left before his pro-Israeli ally, US President Donald Trump, risks being booted out of office in November elections.

Despite a call supported by over 1,000 lawmakers from 25 countries for "decisive" action to prevent annexation, Israel stands to benefit from indecision within the European Union.

The country's top trade partner stands opposed but remains divided on possible retaliatory measures.

Israel's leader must still decide how much territory he intends to annex, according to a European diplomat closely following the developments.

"For Netanyahu it's a question of 'swallowing the elephant', of knowing the size of the piece he'll swallow," he told AFP.

The prime minister has stepped up meetings with leaders from settlements, home to more than 450,000 Israelis who live alongside more than 2.8 million West Bank Palestinians.

Netanyahu faces opposition from some settlement leaders and a scaled-down proposal has emerged, of annexing certain settlements or settlement blocs such as Ma'ale Adumim, Gush Etzion or Ariel.

"The scope of annexation will definitely impact the intensity of the international reaction," said Nimrod Goren from Jerusalem's Hebrew University.

The response from Palestinians would also affect steps taken abroad.

"Whether there will be violence erupting from Gaza or the West Bank, that will lead other countries to step up their response," said Goren, founder of the Mitvim think-tank for regional foreign policy.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has taken a back seat for the past decade, as Middle East leaders have contended with the Arab Spring uprisings and the emergence of the Daesh group.

Israel, for its part, continues to warn of dangers posed by its arch foe Iran and its increased influence in the region.

Netanyahu's government has also sought to improve relations with Gulf states,

notably the United Arab Emirates.

For the first time, an Emirati official published an opinion piece in an Israeli newspaper earlier this month to warn against jeopardizing any warming of ties.

"Annexation will certainly and immediately upend Israeli aspirations for improved security, economic and cultural ties with the Arab world and with the UAE," Yousef Al-Otaiba, Emirati ambassador to Washington, wrote in top-selling daily Yediot Aharonot.

Israel has formal diplomatic ties with only two Arab states, neighbors Jordan and Egypt.

Senior Palestinian official Saeb Erekat told AFP that a "large international coalition" including Arab, African and European countries back the Palestinians against Israel's annexation plan.

In addition to opposition from the international community, Netanyahu must also weigh Washington's position on unilateral annexation.

On Wednesday, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo indicated that the US would not stand in Israel's way.

"Decisions about Israelis extending sovereignty to those places are decisions for the Israelis to make," he said, moments after the UN and the Arab League joined in calls for Israel to abandon its plans.

The UN coordinator for the Middle East, Nickolay Mladenov, said annexation risked "upending more than a quarter of a century of international efforts in support of a future viable Palestinian state."

Any Israeli annexation of Palestinian land would be a "crime," Palestinian representative Riad Al-Maliki told the UN Security Council.

The US peace deal anticipates the move as part of a negotiating process, although Palestinian officials cut ties with Washington in 2017 and have rejected the latest proposals out of hand.

Netanyahu's coalition partner, Defense Minister Gantz, has also warned against taking steps which would damage relations with Amman.

Jordanian Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi last week said annexation posed an "unprecedented danger to the peace process."

Fears of violence have also raised concerns among the Israeli electorate, whose support for annexation has fallen below 50 percent.

With an economic crisis brought on by the coronavirus pandemic and a recent spike in infections, many Israelis are prioritising their daily lives over the annexation plans.



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European MPs reject Israeli West Bank annexation
Jericho Palestinians fear isolation in Israeli annexation

[US terror report: Iran continues to plot global attacks](#)

Wed, 2020-06-24 18:19

LONDON: Iran continues to plot global terrorist attacks and foment violence in the Middle East, a US government annual terrorism report said.

The same report praised Saudi Arabia for its cooperation in tackling terrorist groups and cutting off their funding.

The State Department's Country Reports on Terrorism 2019 said the US had managed to constrain some of Iran's activities through its "maximum pressure

campaign” to put overwhelming financial pressure on Iran.

Opinion

This section contains relevant reference points, placed in (Opinion field)

These included a slew of new sanctions on Tehran and its proxy forces in countries like Lebanon, Iraq and Yemen. In April, the US designated Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), including its Quds Force, a foreign terrorist organization.

“The Iranian regime and its proxies continued to plot and commit terrorist attacks on a global scale,” the report said. “The regime was directly involved in plotting terrorism through its IRGC and Ministry of Intelligence and Security, including plots in recent years in North and South America, Europe, the Middle East, Asia, and Africa.”



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Sanctions on Iran have produced 'excellent results' says Brian Hook
US hopeful world will accept extension of UN arms embargo on Iran

[UN chief calls on Israel to abandon West Bank annexation plans](#)

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Tue, 2020-06-23 19:03

UNITED NATIONS, United States: UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has urged Israel to drop plans to annex parts of the occupied West Bank, saying it would be a "most serious violation of international law," in a report made public Tuesday.

The report to the Security Council comes ahead of its twice-yearly meeting on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, set for Wednesday. Several ministers are set to take part at the request of the Arab League.

In the document, Guterres says an Israeli annexation would be "devastating" for hopes of fresh negotiations and an eventual two-state solution.

"I call upon Israel to abandon its annexation plans," the UN chief says in the report, adding that such a move would "threaten efforts to advance regional peace."

"If implemented, this would constitute a most serious violation of international law, including the Charter of the United Nations."

Guterres noted the opposition to annexation, including within Israeli society.

"This would be calamitous for Palestinians, Israelis and the region," he says.

The government of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has said it could begin the annexation process from July 1.

Plans are to annex Jewish settlements in the West Bank as well as the strategic Jordan Valley.

The plan – endorsed by Washington – would see the creation of a Palestinian state, but on reduced territory, and without Palestinians' core demand of a capital in east Jerusalem.

The plan has been rejected in its entirety by the Palestinians.

The Security Council meeting, to be held by video conference, will be the last major international meeting on the issue before the July 1 deadline.

"Any decision on sovereignty will be made only by the Israeli government," Israel's UN Envoy Danny Danon said Tuesday in a statement.

Diplomats who spoke to AFP on condition of anonymity said a vast majority of UN members would again oppose the Israeli plans on Wednesday.

"We must send a clear message," one envoy said, adding that it was "not enough" to simply condemn Israeli policy, and raising the possibility of a

case before the International Court of Justice.

When President Donald Trump shifted US policy by recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's capital, 14 of 15 Security Council adopted a resolution condemning the decision in late 2017 – but the US used its veto.

A similar resolution was then presented in the UN General Assembly, where no nation has veto power – it passed with 128 yes votes, and 35 abstentions. Diplomats, however, seemed to rule out the idea that Israel could face sanctions over the move, as were imposed by certain countries after Russia's annexation of Crimea.

"Any annexation would have quite big consequences for the two-state solution in the peace process," said another ambassador on condition of anonymity. But the envoy said it was not a "simple task" to compare the West Bank with Crimea.

"In one country, you had a neighbor that essentially invaded. In another, you have a very long, ongoing, quite complicated political situation," the envoy said.



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Palestinians welcome opposition to Israel's West Bank annexation plan
Saudi foreign minister declares Israel's plans to annex West Bank a 'dangerous escalation'

Syrians dread impact of Caesar Act sanctions aimed at Assad

Tue, 2020-06-23 20:05

LEEDS, UK: While the coronavirus pandemic and the Black Lives Matter protests in the West monopolize the world's discourse, the plight of Syria's civilian population seems to have been all but forgotten.

Trapped in a country devastated by 10 years of civil war, the lives of ordinary Syrians are being buffeted by a collapsing currency, medicine shortages, skyrocketing inflation and deepening poverty. And, by all accounts, the worst is yet to come.

As the Caesar Act, the tough new Syria-specific US legislation, entered into force on June 17, the official exchange rate for the dollar nearly doubled, jumping from 704 to 1,256 Syrian pounds.



The previous day, the black-market value had fallen sharply, with 2,950 Syrian pounds – instead of 2,850 – fetching \$1.

The Caesar Act seeks not just to prevent members of President Bashar Assad's inner circle from continuing to profit from the war, but also to hold them accountable for crimes against humanity.

While the objective may be to cut off Assad from Iran, Hezbollah and Russia and force him to share power with the opposition, regular people in Syria (and Lebanon) are already feeling the pinch.



Syrians in Suwayda chant anti-government slogans as they protest the deteriorating economy and corruption. (AFP)

The Syrian exchange rate has been fluctuating since the beginning of June, forcing many shops in Damascus to put up the shutters as it became difficult for traders to set prices.

The latest shockwaves come even as the full impact of the coronavirus crisis on the economy is yet to be felt.

R.K., 54, a working-class mother of three, said she was sent home when the lockdowns started in March without her last salary.



Hyperinflation and an eroding currency mean a normal weekly wage now lasts three days for some Syrians. (AFP)

“If not for the money I received from friends abroad, I have no idea how my family would’ve survived, especially with my son being badly injured and my two daughters unemployed,” she told Arab News.

“We used my husband’s last paycheck to pay the rent, and were left with only a few potatoes and no cash.”

M.H., a 30-year-old resident of Damascus who works in drama productions, complained about the pernicious effects of stagnant and meager wages on top of an eroding currency and hyperinflation.



A displaced Syrian girl waits for customers bringing chickpeas to grind for a fee, at the Washukanni camp for the internally displaced in Syria's northeastern Hasakeh province on May 10, 2020. (AFP/File Photo)

"My salary lasted only a week or 10 days before the coronavirus lockdown. Now, although the lockdown has ended in Damascus, my salary barely lasts three days," she told Arab News.

Referring to the Caesar Act, whose sanctions provisions are now fully in effect, she said she has no idea what to expect other than that "definitely, there will be no substantial pay raise."

FASTFACTS

IN NUMBERS

- 44% Fall in Syrian pound's value before sanctions
- 3x Rise in food prices in Syria in one year

M.H. summed up the prevailing mood of doom and gloom thus: "I suggest, instead of all these sanctions, which are slowly draining life out of people in Syria, how about they execute us by firing squad?"

Reacting to the situation more matter-of-factly, Amina F., 31, a Damascus-based content writer and e-marketing professional, said: "Proactive measures

should've been taken to mitigate the effects of the Caesar Act.”

The Syrian capital probably does not even typify the worst impact of the economic crisis. Deteriorating living conditions left residents of Suwayda, a government-controlled region mainly populated by Druze, with no option but to take to the streets earlier this month in large numbers.



A handout picture released by the official Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA) on March 5, 2020 shows President Bashar Assad speaking during an interview with Russia Today in Damascus. (AFP/File Photo)

In its “Syria m-VAM” survey report, released in April, the World Food Program (WFP) noted that “the availability of food in markets is diminishing and prices are rising as a result of the depreciation of the Syrian pound.”

The report tallied the losses caused by the forced suspension of many economic activities, as well as the partial curfews imposed by the government to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

The report said the restrictions took their toll on jobs and earnings, with 67 percent of households interviewed in Suwayda reporting the loss of one or more sources of income.



A woman walks past shops at the main market of the Kurdish-majority city of Qamishli in Syria's northeastern Hasakeh province on May 19, 2020. (AFP/File Photo)

Assad issued a decree on June 11 firing Prime Minister Imad Khamis and naming Hussein Arnous, the water resources minister, as his successor.

The order did not cite any specific reason for the dismissal of Khamis, who had been appointed to the top job in 2016.

Just days earlier, in a post on his official Facebook account, Ghassan Fattoum, a former head of the Syria Journalists Union, wrote: "It is strange that there are still those who import and experiment with solutions in hopes of finding the right solution, but we did not and will not reach (a solution) if we continue to churn out a traditional vision that lacks creative solutions for managing the state's resources in an optimal way."



People shop for produce at al-Shaalan market in Syria's capital Damascus on June 10, 2020. (AFP)

Kevin DeJesus, assistant professor at the John Hazen White College of Arts and Sciences at Johnson and Wales University, said he has no doubt that "Syria's already vulnerable population will suffer further" due to the Caesar Act.

"We'll witness a deepening and more complex crisis in the country as these sanctions will have economic and humanitarian repercussions," he told Arab News.

"As time marches on, the effects of this crisis will mirror the dire humanitarian effects of the US sanctions strategy in Iraq, which devastated civilian life while Saddam Hussein retained power."



People wave Syrian national flags and pictures of President Bashar al-Assad as they gather for a demonstration in support of Assad and against US sanctions on the country, at the Umayyad Square in the centre of the capital Damascus on June 11, 2020. (AFP)

Not even the deadly coronavirus pandemic prompted the West to lift or ease sanctions targeting the Assad regime.

If there is a compelling new case for the same governments to walk their policy back, it has yet to be made by Damascus.

The European Commission published on May 12 a report on its official website that ruled out any negative impact on Syria's medical response to COVID-19.

Opinion

This section contains relevant reference points, placed in (Opinion field)

“EU sanctions do not prohibit the export to Syria of respirators, disinfectants, hand sanitizers or detergents used to respond to COVID-19,” the report said, adding that traders need to make sure that these goods “will not be used for military purposes or internal repression.”

Syrian Health Minister Nizar Yazigi said the Caesar Act will impede the supply of medical equipment and medicines for chronic diseases by not exempting the Ministry of Economy and Foreign Trade, which is responsible for

importing medicines.

At the same time, he added: "There is no shortage of any drug substance (and) although there might be a shortage of certain brands, there are alternatives."



Syrians walk past a second-hand clothes at shop in front of a flea market in the capital Damascus on May 17, 2020, amid severe economic crisis that has been compounded by a coronavirus lockdown. (AFP/File Photo)

Whatever the truth, residents of Damascus have been complaining of medicine shortages since early June, prompting some activists to start a Facebook group titled "Together better," whose members share the medicines they have but do not use and are willing to give away.

The "Syria m-VAM" report of April noted that "only 57 public hospitals are functioning and there are significant shortages of trained health workers."

Against a backdrop of what looks like a looming humanitarian crisis, DeJesus believes the tide will turn against the US sanctions.



Syrian pounds are pictured at a currency exchange shop in the town of Sarmada in Syria's northwestern Idlib province, on June 15, 2020. (AFP)

"The world will grow alarmed at the deepening hunger, unemployment, collapse of social structures and, crucially, the inability of the large Syrian diaspora to send remittances and development resources to people back home," he said.

On a geopolitical level, he added, a year from now the US will have further ceded influence to China and Russia.

"Criminal syndicates and black-market economies will flourish, and the network around the Syrian president, which has protected his power, will only hold tighter to that power as they weather this considerable, but not insurmountable, challenge," DeJesus said.



Syrians walk in old Damascus in front of a portrait of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, on June 16, 2020. – The Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2019, a US law that aims to sanction any person who assists the Syrian government or contributes to the country's reconstruction, is to come into force on June 17. (AFP)

Camille Otrakji, a Syrian-Canadian analyst, believes the Caesar sanctions will not force Russia to abandon Syria.

“To fully reinstate its superpower status, Russia will need a diplomatic success like a deal to end the decade-long war in Syria,” he told Arab News.

“The Trump administration is saying, both publicly and privately, that it's interested in a deal, but some US officials are insisting on terms that the authorities in Damascus aren't willing to accommodate.

“A withdrawal of all foreign troops – except those of Russia – is one possibility. Iran understands that a deal would have to include some degree of attenuation of its presence in Syria.”

Looking to the future, Otrakji said: “There are two significant milestones to watch within the next year: The US presidential elections in November 2020, and the Syrian presidential elections in July 2021.”

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Caesar Act sends Syria's Bashar Assad a stark reality check
Lebanon's financial chaos spikes as US Caesar Act looms

[Sudan says near settlement with US for 1998 embassy bombings](#)

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Tue, 2020-06-23 12:21

KHARTOUM: Sudan is close to finalizing a deal with the United States to compensate the victims of 1998 embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania that killed 224 people, Foreign Minister Asma Abdalla said Tuesday.

"The final touches of a settlement with victims of embassy bombings in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam are being finalized," Abdalla told AFP in an interview.

"We now have a delegation in Washington negotiating with the victims' lawyers and officials at the US Department of State."

The twin bombings took place in August 1998 when a massive blast hit the US embassy in downtown Nairobi, shortly followed by an explosion in Dar es Salaam.

The attacks claimed by Al-Qaeda killed a total of 224 people and injured around 5,000 – almost all of them Africans.

The US has accused Sudan of aiding militants linked to the jihadist bombings and demanded compensation for victims' families.

Sudan has since August been led by a transitional administration following the military ouster of president Omar Al-Bashir in the wake of mass protests against his rule.

Under Bashir's 30-year rule, the country adopted a more radical course of Islam, hosting Al-Qaeda founder Osama bin Laden between 1992 and 1996.

This strained ties with the US, which blacklisted Sudan as a state sponsor of terrorism.

The post-Bashir government has sought to boost the country's international standing and rebuild ties with the US.

In February, Sudan had to compensate families of victims of the USS Cole bombing in 2000 in Yemen's Aden harbor, for which Al-Qaeda also claimed responsibility.

Khartoum had always denied any involvement but agreed to the settlement to fulfil a key US condition to remove it from Washington's terrorism blacklist.

After the deal on the embassy bombings, Sudan “will have fulfilled all the requirements” to be removed from the US blacklist of state sponsors of terrorism, Abdalla said.



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Sudan finds mass grave of conscripts killed during Bashir's rule Sudan wants PMs to solve Nile dam deadlock