

Palestinians protest Trump plan, Gaza militants fire rockets

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JERUSALEM: Palestinians held demonstrations across the region Friday to protest President Donald Trump's Middle East initiative, while militants in the Gaza Strip fired rockets and mortar rounds at Israel, drawing retaliatory strikes.

The Palestinians have rejected the Trump plan, which heavily favors Israel and would allow it to annex all of its Jewish settlements, along with the Jordan Valley, in the occupied West Bank. The Palestinians were offered limited self-rule in Gaza, parts of the West Bank and some sparsely populated areas of Israel in return for meeting a long list of conditions.

Israel launched airstrikes on militant targets in Gaza early Friday, shortly after Palestinians fired three rockets into Israel, two of which were intercepted, the military said.

It said Palestinian militants had also launched "explosive balloons" toward Israel and that a sniper had shot an observational antenna. It said it struck targets linked to the Hamas militant group in response, including "underground infrastructure used to manufacture weapons."

Later on Friday, the military said Gaza militants fired three mortar rounds. In response, an Israeli tank fired on a Hamas military post.

No one was wounded in either exchange of fire.

Gaza has been relatively calm in recent months as Egyptian and UN mediators have worked to shore up an informal truce between Israel and Hamas, which rules the coastal territory.

Hamas has curbed rocket fire and rolled back weekly protests along the frontier that had often turned violent. In return, Israel has eased the blockade it imposed on Gaza after the militant group seized power from forces loyal to the Palestinian Authority in 2007.

Hamas rejected the Trump plan and vowed that "all options are open" in responding to the proposal, but the group is not believed to be seeking another war with Israel.

Thousands of people took to the streets after Friday prayers in neighboring Jordan to protest the plan. Jordan, a close US ally and key player in previous peace efforts, has warned Israel against annexing territory. Jordan and Egypt are the only two Arab countries to have signed peace agreements with Israel.

The protesters waved Jordanian and Palestinian flags and burned Israeli flags despite the rainy weather. They chanted "Trump is a coward" and "Here we are, Al-Aqsa," referring to a Jerusalem mosque on a site sacred to Jews and Muslims.

In Lebanon, dozens of Palestinians gathered in the crowded Bourj Al-Barajneh refugee camp after Friday prayers, carrying Palestinian flags and pictures of

the Al-Aqsa mosque. They chanted "We would die for Palestine to live" and "Revolution until we set Palestine free."

"Palestine is not for sale, even if it were for millions upon millions. If (Trump) gave all of his money we wouldn't sell to him," said 58-year-old Fatima Al-Khatib.

The plan anticipates \$50 billion of investment in the future Palestinian state and describes several ambitious development projects, without saying where the money would come from.

Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza have held small, scattered protests in recent days condemning the Trump initiative, and thousands gathered in Gaza on Friday, where they burned US and Israeli flags and portraits of Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

At least 14 Palestinians were wounded by Israeli gunfire in scattered protests along the security fence surrounding Gaza, according to the Palestinian Red Crescent medical service.

There were concerns that larger demonstrations and clashes would break out at the compound housing the Al-Aqsa mosque, but Friday prayers there concluded peacefully. The Islamic trust that manages the site said an estimated 30,000 worshippers attended the weekly prayers.

The site, known to Muslims as the Haram Al-Sharif, or Noble Sanctuary, is the third holiest in Islam, after Makkah and Medina in Saudi Arabia. Jews refer to the site as the Temple Mount because it was the location of the First and Second Jewish Temples in antiquity.

The hilltop shrine is managed by an Islamic trust under Jordanian stewardship, and day-to-day affairs are governed by informal understandings with Israel known as the "status quo." Non-Muslims are allowed to visit during certain hours, but Jews cannot pray there.

In recent years, increasing numbers of religious and ultra-nationalist Jews have visited the site, stoking fears among the Palestinians that Israel intends to one day partition it and igniting clashes between Muslim worshippers and Israeli police. Israel has repeatedly said it has no intention of changing the status quo.

The Trump plan, which heavily favors Israel, says the status quo should "continue uninterrupted."

But the plan also says "people of every faith should be permitted to pray on the Temple Mount/Haram Al-Sharif, in a manner that is fully respectful to their religion, taking into account the times of each religion's prayers and holidays, as well as other religious factors."

The site is part of the famed Old City in east Jerusalem, which Israel captured, along with the West Bank and Gaza, in the 1967 war. The Palestinians view east Jerusalem as their capital and want all three territories to form their future state.

Trump's Mideast plan would situate the Palestinian capital on the outskirts of east Jerusalem, beyond the separation barrier built by Israel. The rest of Jerusalem, including the Old City, would remain Israel's capital.

"A lot of people are still in a state of shock over the proposal," said Christian Saunders, the acting head of the UN agency for Palestinian refugees, which provides basic services to some 5 million Palestinians scattered across the region.

"What will happen after that shock wears off, I don't know. We certainly have serious concerns that it will result in an escalation in clashes and in

violence. We have contingency plans in place in order to support during such times of unrest.”





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Palestinian President Abbas to address UN Security Council on peace plan

[Iraqi cleric Al-Sistani condemns use of force, 11 protesters wounded](#)

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Fri, 2020-01-31 14:20

BAGHDAD: Iraq's most powerful religious figure Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani reiterated Friday his condemnation of the use of force against anti-government protesters as the mass movement enters a critical juncture and

political blocs tussle over naming a new premier.

Meanwhile, influential and radical cleric Muqtada Al-Sadr called for his followers to return to the street, one week after he withdrew support for anti-government demonstrators camped out in Baghdad's Tahrir Square.

Al-Sistani's comments came as unrest continued in Baghdad's Khilani and Wathba squares, where at least 11 demonstrators were wounded Friday by security forces firing tear gas canisters to disperse crowds, according to security and medical officials. The officials spoke on condition of anonymity in line with regulations.

The area has become a flash point in the recent escalation staged by demonstrators to refocus public attention on the demands of the four-month protest movement after a US airstrike that killed a top Iranian general in Baghdad monopolized Iraqi politics.

Protesters called for 1 million Iraqis to take to the streets Friday to revitalize demonstrations and pressure the government to implement a reform agenda after Al-Sadr withdrew his followers from the street last week. Al-Sadr's pullout was followed by a security crackdown on protest camps. Tents were burned and at least four protesters were killed in Baghdad and Iraq's south.

But on Friday, Al-Sadr issued a statement calling on his followers to "renew" the demonstrations and return to the street, amid deadlock over the naming of a new prime minister. He said large demonstrations were necessary to pressure political elites to form a new "non-controversial" government and hold early elections.

A second statement from Al-Sadr said the call was "effective immediately" and he called on protesters to head to Tahrir Square, epicenter of the anti-government protest movement.

Al-Sadr is the head of political bloc Saeroon, which won the most seats in Iraq's 2018 federal election.

Al-Sadr's departure last week had created clear divisions between his followers and other anti-government protesters in the square.

"All those who are already in protest squares are your brothers," Al-Sadr's statement said. "Never be divided in slogans, sayings or deeds."

Al-Sistani reaffirmed his condemnation of the use of violence against demonstrators in his weekly sermon, delivered in the holy city of Karbala through a representative. Al-Sistani's opinion holds sway over many Iraqis and elites.

His stances have often sided with the protesters who first took to the streets Oct. 1 to decry rampant government corruption, poor services and unemployment. Though their demands are varied, most want snap elections, reforms and a change of political leadership.

In his sermon he condemned, "the use of violence against peaceful demonstrators, the assassinations and kidnappings of some of them," and "categorically refused" attempts by security forces to break up peaceful sit-ins using violence and force."

Al-Sistani also reiterated calls on political blocs to name a new prime minister and form a new government "as soon as possible," to avoid political crisis and instability.

Outgoing Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi resigned in December under pressure from protesters. Negotiations among divided political factions have come to a deadlock. President Barham Saleh has given parties until Saturday to name a

candidate or would do so himself.



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[In former Syria rebel stronghold of Maaret Al-Numan, nothing was spared](#)

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Fri, 2020-01-31 11:28

MAARET AL-NUMAN, Syria: Once the throbbing heart of the uprising against Syrian President Bashar Assad's regime, Maaret Al-Numan is an eerie ghost

town where few buildings have been spared by nine years of war.

Following a major ground offensive, the Syrian army captured the town in the northwestern province of Idlib on Wednesday, a key prize in its push to reconquer the country's last rebel enclave.

A day after government forces moved into the deserted town and set up their first checkpoints there since 2012, the landscape was one of desolation. Maaret Al-Numan, home to around 150,000 people four months ago, is now a field of levelled or gutted buildings, where shops' iron shutters are riddled with bullet holes and shrapnel scars.

The only people left in the once-bustling town are a handful of soldiers taking up positions on the rubble-littered streets.

Majed Marahesh, 27, remembers the day he first visited Maaret Al-Numan 13 years ago with his classmates and teacher. Now he has traded his schoolbooks for a rifle.

"I remember its beauty and refinement," he tells AFP. "I remember the mosaics in its museum. I am back 13 years later but it's not the town I knew."

Maaret Al-Numan is nestled in a UNESCO-listed region of ancient villages and its mosaics museum had achieved international renown.

The museum, housed in an Ottoman-era caravanserai, was seriously damaged in a government barrel bomb attack in 2015.

"Many antiquities have been stolen," Marahesh says, looking at the devastation around him. "There was a lot of damage to the museum."

Among the museum's most prized works is a depiction of the birth and life of Hercules, according to former Syrian antiquities director Maamoun Abdul Karim.

As the conflict escalated, volunteers did their best to preserve the Roman and Byzantine-era mosaics from air strikes and shelling, including by heaping sandbags against them.

Some of the mosaics have survived but the museum needs to be rebuilt.

After waves of air strikes prepared the ground for the Syrian ground offensive, the army faced limited resistance as it closed in on Maaret Al-Numan last week.

The extremist and rebel forces that controlled the town eventually pulled back to regroup in some of the other towns in their ever-shrinking Idlib bastion, home to around three million people.

"Sweeping operations are over and workshops will soon be opened to start rehabilitating the town's infrastructure, so that civilians can come back," Marahesh says.

The ongoing operation in Idlib province has displaced 388,000 people since December, with most retreating to areas closer to the Turkish border.



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Russian strikes kill 10 civilians in Syria's Idlib: monitor
Syrian troops capture key town in rebel-held Idlib province

[Oman advises against travel to China due to coronavirus outbreak](#)

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DUBAI: Oman's health ministry on Friday advised against travel to China because of the coronavirus outbreak.

“It is advisable not to travel to China unless it is absolutely necessary,” the ministry said in a Twitter posting.



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Pakistan halts China flights amid coronavirus outbreak

[**OIC rights' body rejects Trump's Middle East peace plan**](#)

Author:

Thu, 2020-01-30 23:19

JEDDAH: A human rights body at the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) has rejected US President Donald Trump's Middle East peace plan.

His plan includes a Palestinian state and the recognition of Israeli sovereignty over West Bank settlements. The US leader said Jerusalem would remain Israel's "undivided" capital, but that the Palestinian capital would

“include areas of East Jerusalem.”

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called it the “deal of the century.”

Trump’s plan has been rejected by Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and Hamas, which rules Gaza.

The OIC’s Independent Permanent Human Rights Commission (IPHRC) said that a peace initiative would only succeed when it followed the “inalienable right to self-determination” of Palestinians guaranteed by international law and UN resolutions. Any peace process needed to have the full involvement of the Palestinians, who were the aggrieved party, it added.

It reiterated its view that any unilateral act to alter the demographic, geographic and historical status of Al-Quds (Jerusalem) not only contravened international law including the Fourth Geneva Convention, it would go against against several UN Security Council, General Assembly and Human Rights Council Resolutions, which affirmed the status of Al-Quds as an occupied territory under Israel since 1967.

The commission welcomed statements from the UN and the OIC, giving its full support to a two- state solution that must help Palestinians to establish their own independent, viable and contiguous state in pre-1967 borders, with Jerusalem as its capital including their “unquestionable right” to return to their homes and property, as decided in UN resolutions and guaranteed by international law.



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