

Israel turns swathes of occupied West Bank into 'nature reserves'

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JERUSALEM: Israel's defense minister Wednesday announced the creation of seven nature reserves in the occupied West Bank as part of efforts to maintain Israeli control, weeks before a general election.

The sites are all located in what is known as Area C of the West Bank that includes the strategic Jordan Valley, which Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said in September he planned to annex.

Defense Minister Naftali Bennett, whose rightwing New Right party draws much of its support from Jewish settlers, said last week that the territory belonged to Israel and his goal was to annex it "within a short time."

In his latest move, Bennett said the Israeli-run reserves would be "under the responsibility" of the Jewish state's Nature and Parks Authority.

He also announced the expansion of 12 existing West Bank sites managed by the Israeli authority, including Qumran, where the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered in caves between 1947 and 1956.

Bennett is seeking re-election in the March 2 elections, as part of a far-right alliance.

The Palestinian Authority was quick to condemn the latest move, accusing Bennett of "erecting a new colonial umbrella to fight the Palestinian presence in those areas."

The Palestinian foreign ministry said it would lodge complaints over the "dangerous announcement" at the United Nations and in international courts. According to Israeli settlement watchdog Peace Now, the designated reserves total about 13,000 acres (5,300 hectares), some 40 percent of it under private Palestinian ownership.

Under Israel laws regulating nature reserves, Palestinians would be forbidden to cultivate their own land, the NGO's Hagit Ofran said.

"If it's a nature reserve, then you can uproot their (Palestinians') trees and tell them they need a special permit for any agricultural activity," she told AFP.

"It will be easier now to evict Palestinians from there."

Most of the international community consider settlements on occupied Palestinian land to be illegal.

Washington, however, bucked the consensus in November when Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said settlements were "not, per se, inconsistent with international law."



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Israeli defense minister seeks 'million' settlers in West Bank
US support for Israel's West Bank settlements draws criticisms

[Iranian chess referee fears government retribution after hijab uproar](#)

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LONDON: An Iranian chess referee is scared of returning to her home country after she was photographed at a match in Shanghai with her head uncovered. The photo of Shohreh Bayat, 32, at the Women's World Chess Championship started circulating in Iranian state media. The reports claimed she was not wearing a headscarf and was protesting against Iran's strict hijab law, which requires women to cover their hair and dress modestly.

"I turned on my mobile and saw that my picture was everywhere [in Iranian

media]. They were claiming I was not wearing a headscarf and that I wanted to protest against the hijab,” Bayat told the BBC.

The match was the first time that Bayat was the event’s chief arbiter – an achievement that has been overshadowed by the controversy over her head appearing uncovered.

Bayat told the BBC that although she disagrees with the mandatory hijab law and believes that everyone has the right to dress how they like, she always covers her head at international tournaments and her head was actually covered during the match.

She said Iran’s chess federation instructed her to “write something” in response to the uproar from the media, which she took to mean an apology and a defense of Iran’s dress code. She said she refused.

Bayat is now scared to return to Iran and fears the government will “make an example” of her.

One of only a few top level women arbiters in the world and the only one in Asia, Bayat said she is unhappy at the fact that the focus of Iranian media coverage was on her hijab and not her success as an Iranian woman.

“I can’t think of any Iranian women who have worked at such a high-level tournament. But the only thing that matters for them is my hijab, not my qualification. That really bothers me,” Bayat said.



Bayat’s case comes soon after Iran’s first female Olympic medal-winner defected. Taekwondo champion Kimia Alizadeh posted on Instagram that she had left Iran partly because she was fed up with its mandatory dress code. Alizadeh, who won a bronze medal at the 2016 Rio Olympics, implied in an Instagram post that she had moved to Europe.

“No one has invited me to Europe and I haven’t been given a tempting offer. But I accept the pain and hardship of homesickness because I didn’t want to

be part of hypocrisy, lies, injustice and flattery," she said.

"I am one of the millions of oppressed women in Iran whom they've been playing for years... I wore whatever they told me and repeated whatever they ordered. Every sentence they ordered I repeated," she wrote. "None of us matter for them, we are just tools."

She said that while the government exploited her medals politically, officials would humiliate her with remarks such as "It is not virtuous for a woman to stretch her legs!"

The cases come as many high profile Iranians have made outspoken comments against the government as anti-regime protests continue after the country's military shot down a Ukrainian passenger plane.

Taraneh Alidoosti, one of Iran's most popular female actors who has appeared in an Oscar-nominated film and acclaimed TV dramas, wrote in a post on Instagram on Sunday that Iranians are not "citizens" but "captives".

"I fought this dream for a long time and didn't want to accept it. We are not citizens. We never were. We are captives," she wrote

Alidoosti said that she had replaced her profile picture with the color black in mourning for demonstrators shot dead by security forces last November.

Iranian authorities continue to quell protests and fired live ammunition to disperse demonstrators in Tehran on Sunday.

At least two presenters working for state Iranian broadcaster IRIB announced their resignation in the wake of attempts by state officials to deny that Ukrainian jetliner 752 had been shot down by mistake by members of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corp. (IRGC) air defense force.

Zahra Khatami and her colleague Saba Rad resigned from their roles at IRIB, saying they could not continue to work in TV after the jetliner incident.

A third presenter announced she had left her job some time ago after lying on behalf of the state for 13 years. In an Instagram post, Gelare Jabbari apologized for broadcasting "lies" and wrote: "It was very hard for me to believe that our people have been killed. Forgive me that I got to know this late. And forgive me for the 13 years I told you lies."



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Iran's Rouhani threatens European troops amid nuclear pressure Trump agrees with British Prime Minister Johnson on a 'Trump deal' for Iran

Iran's Rouhani threatens European troops amid nuclear pressure

Wed, 2020-01-15 18:19

LONDON: Iran's president issued a warning on Wednesday that European forces in the Middle East could be at risk if their nations joined the US pressure campaign against his country and challenged Tehran over breaking the limits of a 2015 nuclear deal.

"Today, the American soldier is in danger, tomorrow the European soldier could be in danger," president Hassan Rouhani said at a Cabinet meeting without elaborating.

Meanwhile, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif acknowledged on Wednesday during a summit in New Delhi that Iranians "were lied to" for days following the accidental shoot down of a Ukrainian jetliner that killed 176 people.

Rouhani's remarks represent the first direct threat he has made to Europe, while Zarif's admission represents the first time an Iranian official referred to earlier claims from Tehran that a technical malfunction downed the Ukraine International Airlines flight as a lie.

The shoot down – and subsequent days of denials that a missile had downed it – sparked days of angry protests in the country.

The UK, France and Germany have spent several months trying to preserve the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action after US President Donald Trump unilaterally abandoned it in 2018.

But on Tuesday, amid rising tensions between Tehran and Washington, the European Union initiated a dispute resolution mechanism to try to bring Iran back into compliance after it began openly breaching some restrictions last summer.

Iran says it should not be bound to the agreement following a Jan. 3 US airstrike in Iraq killed Iran's top commander – General Qassem Soleimani – especially considering the US has since reimposed crippling sanctions after Iran fired missile at US troops based in Iraq.

After Soleimani's killing, Iran said it would no longer abide by any of the nuclear deal's limits, which had been designed to stop Iran obtaining enough material to be able to build an atomic bomb if it chose.

However, the United Nations' nuclear watchdog would still be allowed access to Iranian nuclear sites, Rouhani said and on Wednesday he reiterated a long-time Iranian pledge that the regime does not seek to build a bomb.

The decision by European nations to trigger the dispute mechanism now starts a process that could result in starting the clock on a process that could result in the "snapback" of UN and EU sanctions on Iran.

Also on Wednesday, France's foreign minister said on Wednesday the only way to resolve the current crisis between the United States and Iran was for Tehran to accept a broad negotiation and Washington to progressively reduce sanctions.

Speaking to lawmakers, Jean-Yves Le Drian said efforts by France and its European partners since September 2017 to open a new negotiation that would include Iran's nuclear activities after 2025, its ballistic missile program and its regional activities in return for a reduction of US sanctions was the only way forward.

"This platform is still there and is possible," he said. "Today, it is the only solution to get out of the crisis."

UK foreign secretary Dominic Raab told parliament on Tuesday that the European nations felt compelled to act, despite objections from Russia and China, because every violation of the deal reduces the so-called "breakout time" Iran needs to produce a nuclear bomb. Under the deal's limits, experts believed Iran needed a year to be able to have enough material for a weapon.

European countries have troops in Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere in the Middle East, where they mainly operate alongside much larger US deployments.

European troops based in Iraq

Britain, France and Germany are all part of the US-led coalition that is fighting Daesh. The UK has about 400 troops based in Iraq while Germany has nearly 450 troops deployed to counter Daesh and to train Iraqi forces.

Germany "temporarily" withdrew 35 of its troops from Iraq after Soleimani. Most were flown to Jordan, where Germany also has troops involved in reconnaissance and refueling flights for the anti-Daesh coalition. France has about 1,000 troops in the region to help combat Daesh in Iraq and Syria.

The EU as a bloc has several dozen personnel in Baghdad working on security sector reform and advising the Interior Ministry. European Commission spokesman Peter Stano said officials are aware of the threats, but that "we, as the EU, are not leaving Iraq."

The Gulf

The UK operates a naval base in Bahrain that can house up to 500 British military personnel and is focused on maritime security. It also has a joint training base in Oman. France has a naval base known as Camp Peace in Abu

Dhabi's Port Zayed, which houses some 700 French troops. Britain and France also station troops at US bases in the region.

Lebanon

Several European countries contribute forces to the UN peacekeeping mission in southern Lebanon, which patrols the tense frontier between Israel and the Iranian-backed Hezbollah militant group. France contributes about 700 troops. Germany provides more than 100 forces to the peacekeepers' maritime mission.

Afghanistan

The NATO mission in Afghanistan consists of about 17,000 troops from 39 allied and partner countries. The alliance formally concluded its combat mission at the end of 2014 and provides advice and training to Afghan forces. Britain has nearly 1,000 troops in Afghanistan and Germany has about 1,100.

(With AP and Reuters)



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US-Iran war would bring 'untold chaos' warns Jordan's King Abdullah II Trump agrees with British Prime Minister Johnson on a 'Trump deal' for Iran

[Egypt orders retrial of monks sentenced to death for bishop's murder](#)

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CAIRO: Egypt's highest civilian court on Wednesday ordered a retrial of two monks sentenced to death for murdering a bishop at a Coptic Christian monastery, two judicial sources said on Wednesday.

The 2018 killing of 64-year-old Bishop Epiphanius, at Saint Macarius Monastery in the desert, rattled Egyptian Coptics who make up about 10 percent of the predominantly Muslim population.

Wael Saad, known by his monastic name Isaiah Al-Makari, and Ramon Rasmi Mansour, known as Faltaous Al-Makari, were convicted by a criminal court last year. Both had pleaded innocent.

Prosecutors said Saad, who had a history of differences with superiors, struck the bishop three times in the back of the head with a steel pipe while Mansour stood guard outside.

But the judicial sources told Reuters the cassation court abolished the death sentence after an appeal from the monks and will hear the case itself next April. Its rulings are final.

At the first trial, prosecutors and witnesses said Saad had been investigated for breaking monastic rules, including by trying to buy and sell land. He was defrocked in 2018.

After the murder, both men tried unsuccessfully to commit suicide, Saad by poisoning himself and Mansour by jumping off the monastery roof.



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[Rockets target Iraq air base hosting US forces: military](#)

Tue, 2020-01-14 21:25

BAQUBA, Iraq: Katyusha rockets targeted an Iraqi air base north of Baghdad hosting US-led coalition forces, the Iraqi military said on Tuesday, in the latest attack on installations where American troops are deployed. The statement from Iraq's military did not say how many rockets had hit Camp Taji but reported that there were no casualties.

Developing...



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Influential Iraqi cleric Sadr calls for anti-US demonstrations US troops clear rubble from Iraq base days after Iran strike