

The building blocks of a tolerant Middle East

Author:

Sat, 2019-12-21 02:49

DUBAI: Higher education will play a major role in fostering tolerance throughout the world, Arab intellectuals and academics have predicted.

Experts believe the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, which in recent years has been wracked by religious radicalism, violent extremism and sectarian strife, will be one of the major beneficiaries.

Tolerance as a state policy received a big boost in 2019 after the UAE proclaimed it the Year of Tolerance in the country.

The initiative has seen a number of events promoting the UAE as “a global capital for tolerance,” with the emphasis on “legislation and policies aimed at entrenching the values of tolerance, dialogue, coexistence and openness to different cultures, especially among youth, which will reflect positively on society as a whole.”

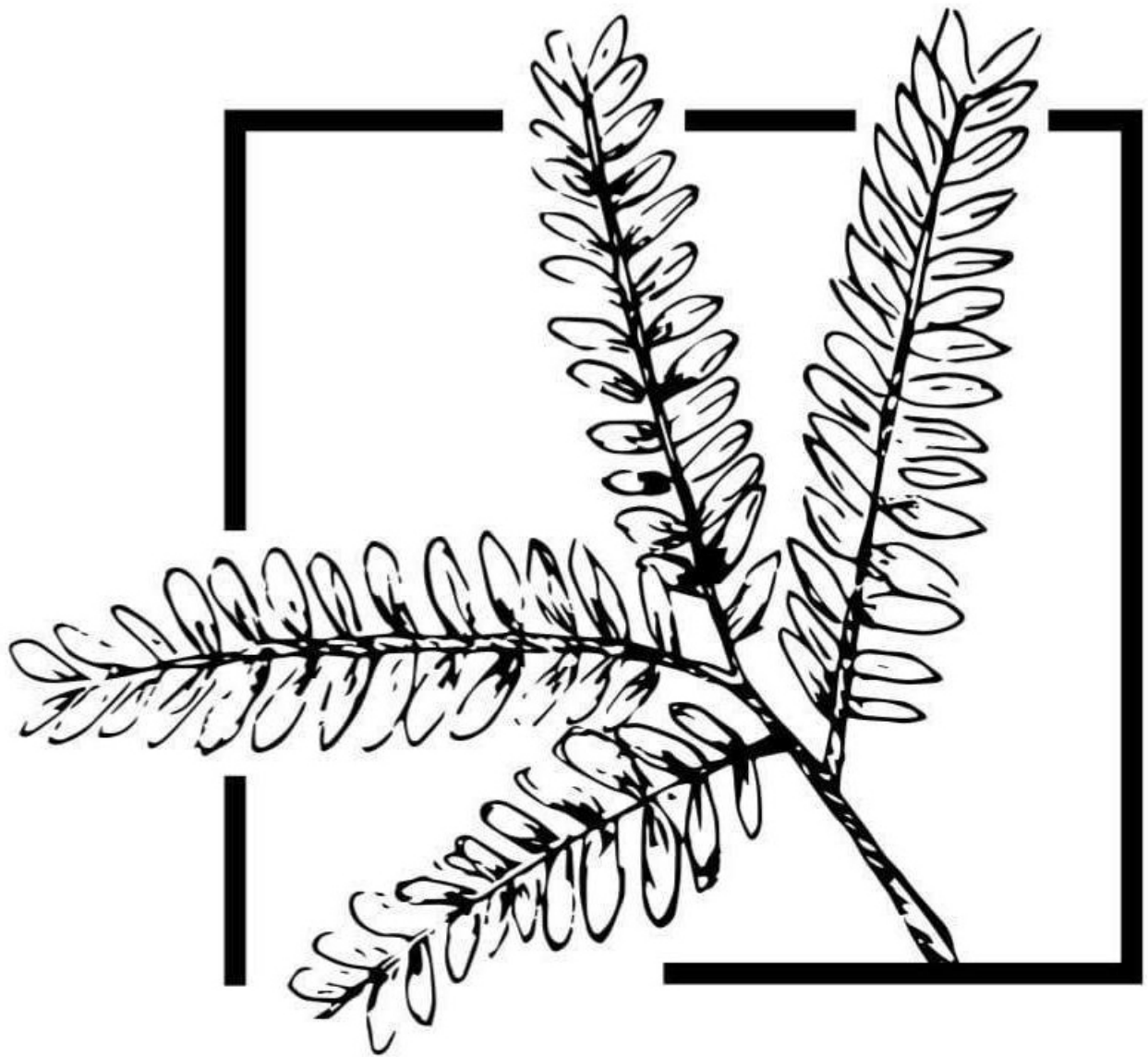
Prof. Einas Sulaiman Al-Eisa, rector at the Princess Nourah bint Abdulrahman University (PNU) in Riyadh, said higher education had a crucial role to play, as it was in a good position to promote tolerant societies.

PNU is the largest university for women in the world, with 59,000 students and more than 2,000 faculty members. Speaking at the recently held World Tolerance Summit in Dubai, Al-Eisa noted that encouraging tolerance, among other values, was deeply rooted in the university.

“Most of our efforts were scattered and fragmented up until the launch of Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030, which placed tolerance, among others, at its root,” she said. “We took these values to heart and rose to the challenge of promoting tolerance.”

Through different approaches, the university has been spreading the theme. “If you have an inclusive agenda across all faculties in your admission policies, are merit-based in your recruitment, and hire talent irrespective of their backgrounds, then you are heading in the right direction.

“It’s a journey from admissions to graduation across academia, a prejudice-free curriculum, and programs instilling values and skills,” she added.



عام التسامح YEAR OF TOLERANCE

Al-Eisa highlighted the role of a global citizen education, in which education empowered learners to become active promoters of sustainable, tolerant, inclusive, safe and secure societies.

By 2020, PNU aims to send every student on campus on one experience abroad, she said.

Recently, a group of students from the university took part in a female scouts program, joining an international community as the first girls from a

Gulf nation. "We can never underestimate the role of sports in promoting tolerance," Al-Eisa added.

"We are now running an ambitious program across the campus using cognitive behavioral theory to promote positive behavior, exhibiting true values. From the beginning, students are tested for certain skills, and there are customized activities for promoting these skills until they graduate."

The rector described Saudi Arabia's leadership as supportive, committed and visionary in spreading the value of tolerance.

The UAE, home to more than 200 nationalities and a multi-religious expatriate community that outnumbers the population of Emirati nationals, is viewed as a beacon of tolerance and peaceful coexistence for millions of people in the Middle East.

The year 2019 saw the UAE create a special Ministry of Tolerance, establish the International Institute for Tolerance, introduce an anti-discrimination and hate act, and set up centers against extremism and terrorism.

Speaking at the World Tolerance Summit, Dr. Abdulatif Mohammed Al-Shamsi, president and CEO of the Higher Colleges of Technology (HCT) in the UAE, said: "Sheikh Zayed (founding father of the UAE) built the basis of the country on tolerance.

"Back in 1974, he ordered the building of three churches in the UAE, and there are many examples. Being open and welcoming is in the DNA of Emiratis."



The ghaf was chosen as a symbol of the Year of Tolerance by the UAE because of its great significance as an indigenous tree. (SPA)

Al-Shamsi pointed out the need for such sentiments to be carried on through today's youth and delivered via the academic system, particularly in the age of social media and fake news.

"The HCT have 23,000 students and 84 different nationalities who teach our students," he told conference delegates. "We conduct different activities and practices all year round (related to tolerance)."

In recent years, the concept of tolerance has expanded regionally to include women's issues, with many Arab countries working to ensure that women can find representation in leading positions. But more work in this area still needs to be done.

Al-Eisa said Saudi university campuses were mainly populated by young men and women born after 1980 who were diverse, open-minded and community spirited.

"So, the challenges in universities are even greater. It's not just promoting values; it's how you assess the progress of those students with these values so we can design (suitable) policies and activities. Because, without measuring the impact, we cannot move forward."

The PNU aimed to produce critical and independent thinkers, innovators and creators, she added. "Compassion, empathy and gratitude is what we need to focus on."

"Half of our faculty is millennials, which is a strength because they are the most open-minded. But we can't marginalize others; we have to be very conscious of our unconscious biases to eliminate them."

In order to contain radicalism, experts stress the need for a positive vision of commonalities rather than differences, given that the human mindset is instinctively drawn to disparities.

"Don't repeat German history in your country," said Dr. Hubertus Hoffmann, president and founder of the Global Tolerance Institute in Germany, speaking at the World Tolerance Summit.

"We have to contain radicalism early. If we let them grow, the major problem is the passive majority. So, we have to stand up for our values."

Education led efforts, but more investment was needed for the promotion of tolerance, he said.

"To have real peace, you need reconciliation and dialogue," Hoffman added. "Without this, there is no peace strategy. You need hard and soft factors and we tend to invest in hard factors."

"However, it's not enough to have peace in this region and elsewhere. If we are passive, we won't succeed. But I am an optimist."

Halfway across the world, in Colombia, a country torn apart by a drug war and conflicts with leftist groups, work is underway through Movilizadorio, a laboratory that aims to build movement, engagement and participation in peacebuilding.

"We saw the need for it because we knew that the youth needed to be actively participating in the process we are going through in our region," said Juliana Uribe Villegas, Movilizadorio's CEO and founder.

"Technology is such an important tool right now, but it doesn't have value. We need to give value to it and bring tolerance and peace-building value to technology and that's what we're doing."

The company works with young people building platforms to promote peaceful dialogue.

"Tolerance and peace need to be intentional at this time across the world, but we're not being invited by social media platforms to learn from others," Villegas said. "Instead, we are being driven to confirm our own biases."

"So intentionally, we need to build a culture and a way of communication which is open to different cultures, dialogue and participation in different things happening in different regions."

Technology was described as a double-edged sword by Al-Shamsi, because of its potential for enabling radical groups to disseminate negative values.

“It’s becoming more demanding for us as educators to pay attention to the youth and remind them of the great passion of our ancestors of how tolerance was a practice. Technology spreads a lot of junk, but we have to promote values,” he said.

By creating new norms and living and exhibiting them through student contributions and science, Al-Eisa spoke of a changing world. “This is where we’re heading. I prioritize the role of universities because they lead change in the community.”

Hoffmann said a structure to prevent hate, of the kind afflicting countries as far apart as Yemen and Colombia, was of the essence.

“It’s unfortunately very easy to incite hate. The cost of recovering from this hatred was enormous. We know it in Europe. So, we have to give young people the oxygen of freedom as well.

“They must have the freedom to express criticism or it doesn’t work. The main tool is dialogue. You must listen. It’s the mother tongue of humanity,” he added.



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Four countries discuss 'tolerance in multiculturalism' at UAE summit
UAE launches global tolerance initiative for youth
King Abdul Aziz Center for National Dialogue takes part in tolerance summit in Dubai
Saudi Arabia urges UN for zero-tolerance justice policy

[Russia, backed by China, casts 14th UN veto on Syria](#)

Fri, 2019-12-20 23:57

NEW YORK: Russia, backed by China, on Friday cast its 14th UN Security Council veto since the start of the Syrian conflict in 2011 to block cross-border aid deliveries from Turkey and Iraq to millions of Syrian civilians.

The resolution drafted by Belgium, Kuwait and Germany would have allowed cross-border humanitarian deliveries for a further 12 months from two points in Turkey and one in Iraq.

But Syrian ally Russia only wanted to approve the two Turkish crossings for six months and had proposed its own draft text.

Russia and China vetoed the text drafted by Belgium, Kuwait and Germany. The remaining 13 members of the Security Council voted in favor. A resolution needs a minimum nine votes in favor and no vetoes by Russia, China, the US, Britain or France to pass.

US Ambassador Kelly Craft told the council after Russia and China's vetoes that she was in a state of shock as the consequences "will be disastrous." She described Russia and China's opposition as "reckless, irresponsible and cruel."

The council then voted on the rival Russian draft resolution that would have approved the two Turkish crossing points for six months, but it failed with only five votes in favor, six against and four abstentions.

"Who won today? Nobody. Who lost? The Syrian people," Russia's UN Ambassador Vassily Nebenzia told the council. He had argued that the humanitarian situation in Syria has improved dramatically and that the council had to recognize that change. "Do not attempt to shift blame for this on us," he

said.

Deputy UN aid chief Ursula Mueller had warned the council on Thursday that without the cross border operations “we would see an immediate end of aid supporting millions of civilians.”

“That would cause a rapid increase in hunger and disease, resulting in death, suffering and further displacement – including across borders – for a vulnerable population who have already suffered unspeakable tragedy as a result of almost nine years of conflict,” Mueller said.

Since 2014 the UN and aid groups have crossed into Syria from Turkey, Iraq and Jordan at four places annually authorized by the Security Council. In a bid to compromise with Russia, the Jordanian crossing point was dropped by Belgium, Kuwait and Germany from their draft.

The current authorization for the four border crossings in Turkey, Iraq and Jordan ends on Jan. 10, so the Security Council could still attempt to reach an agreement, though some diplomats acknowledged this could now be difficult.

Russia has vetoed 14 council resolutions on Syria since a crackdown by Syria’s Bashar Assad on pro-democracy protesters in 2011 led to civil war. Daesh militants then used the chaos to seize territory in Syria and Iraq.

Indonesia’s U.N. Ambassador Dian Triansyah Djani told the council on Thursday: “The world is watching. The international community is watching. But we are not here to just watch ... we are here to help and take action ... It is not about us. It is all about saving Syrian people on the ground.”

Political blocs are expected to name a new consensus-based candidate for the premiership this week.

Reform measures taken to retire key director-generals over the age of 60 has also caused anxieties for companies who have vested business relationships with bureaucrats. Ironically, the very issues raised by protesters on the street, including corruption, bureaucracy and lack of adequate public services, have long been a factor deterring investment, Sethna said.

Two industry officials who were in the middle of negotiating lucrative energy contracts said they have taken a step back – “until the dust settles,” one said. Both spoke on condition of anonymity to not derail future talks with the government.

Periodic road closures by protesters leading to Iraq’s two main commodities ports in Umm Qasr and Khor Al-Zubair have halted trade activity several times. To compensate, higher volumes of goods were imported through the border cross with Turkey in the north in late November. Hussein Ali, a potato trader, said delays at Umm Qasr cost him up to \$6,000 per container, so he opted for the northern land route. Customs from the ports are an important source of state revenue.

There are no figures to know exact economic losses suffered due to protests, because disruptions, when they occur, are often temporary or reliable data is

hard to come by.

A military spokesperson for the prime minister, Maj. Gen. Abdul Karim Khalaf, said the protests had cost Iraq \$6 billion within the span of a month. This figure is unlikely, since it would require major setbacks in oil earnings, according to calculations by the Associated Press.

The impact has been indelible on Iraq's hobbled private sector.

The World Bank has said developing this sector was key to diversifying the oil-dependent economy and creating much needed jobs. With poor regulations and high start-up costs, however, Iraqis have had little incentive to take the risks associated with entrepreneurship.

As a result, much of the sector remains informal and limited largely to cash-based retailers – who are highly sensitive to any disruptions.

“We have a huge informal sector that has no chance of joining the formal sector – they have no deeds, ownership, just conventions and understandings. If something goes wrong, you are dropped,” said Ahmed Tabaqchali, chief investment officer of AFC Iraq Fund.

At Shorja market, Baghdad's main wholesale market, merchants said they have seen daily earnings drop since protests started in October in part because customers are buying less and in part because of the turmoil at Rasheed Street, where most store their merchandise.

In southern Iraq, a rising number of medium to small businesses owners are defaulting on monthly payments on bank loans, said an official in Iraq's League of Private Banks, who requested anonymity because he was not authorized to speak to media.

Iraq's growing ecommerce sector was decimated by widespread Internet cuts imposed by authorities in October and November in a failed attempt to quell the protests, said Mujahid Waisi, an entrepreneur and founder of KAPITA, an incubator space set to launch early next year.

Even with the Internet restored, “because most of those items are not essential, people fear making purchases because of the situation,” said Waisi. “They want to keep money in their hands.” Moreover, ecommerce startups are hesitant to promote their services online, fearing protesters will criticize them as unpatriotic, he added.

Many cash-strapped merchants have let go of workers because of the escalating crisis.

“It has been 25 days that I haven't worked,” said Mohammed Hamid, a worker in Rasheed Street. He said the shopowner he worked for told him not even to come in – “how am I going to pay your ... weekly salary when I am closed?”



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Russia, Syrian regime enter troubled waters of East MedRussia to invest \$500m in Syrian port, build grain hub -Interfax

[New Lebanese PM asks for chance to form government of independent technocrats](#)

Author:

Fri, 2019-12-20 23:21

BEIRUT: "The revolutionaries are right," Lebanon's Prime Minister Hassan Diab announced on the second day of his new assignment. He added that his approach would be "to form a government of independent technocrats. But give me a chance."

Diab met with former prime ministers – Salim Hoss, Fouad Siniora and Tammam Salam – on Friday, as well as Hariri. His tour came in the wake of pro-Hariri

protests held by Sunni Muslims in Beirut, Tripoli and parts of the Bekaa on Thursday night and Friday morning. Those protests escalated into violence, and at least four soldiers from the Fourth Intervention Regiment (the riot squad for the Internal Security Forces) were wounded as protesters threw stones at them.

One woman told Arab News: "Diab does not represent us. We are with the return of Hariri as prime minister." She accused those in the government of "obstructing Hariri's work toward achieving the reforms he wanted."

Hariri quickly called on his supporters to leave the streets immediately "if they loved him."

After his meetings, Diab said, "There is a positive atmosphere with everyone" and said Hariri had "expressed his willingness to cooperate to form a government."

"I am an independent technocrat, and my approach is to form a government of independent technocrats to serve the country and solve the problems (which have been) known for some time," he continued.

Diab said that the country had reached this crisis point after three decades of bad policies. "I understand the protesters' demands, but they must give us the chance to be able to form an exceptional government to tackle the thorny issues, and we will be one team, regardless of our affiliations," he said, adding that he expects to form his government within four-to-six weeks.

Against this background, US Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs David Hale arrived in Lebanon on Friday.

After meeting President Michel Aoun, Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri, and Hariri, Hale said his visit reflected "the strength of the partnership between (our) two countries."

He added that US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo had asked him to meet with Lebanese leaders and urge them to "commit to meaningful and sustainable reforms that can lead to a stable, prosperous, and secure Lebanon."

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Hassan Diab, Lebanese prime minister

Hale said: "It is time to put aside partisan interests and act in the national interest, advancing reforms and forming a government that is committed to undertaking those reforms and capable of doing so. We have no role in saying who should lead and comprise such a Cabinet. Or indeed any Cabinet."

“The unified, non-sectarian, and largely peaceful protests over the last 65 days reflect the Lebanese people’s longstanding and, frankly, legitimate demand for economic and institutional reform, better governance, and an end to endemic corruption,” he continued.

“America calls on the security forces to continue to guarantee the safety of protesters as they engage in peaceful demonstrations, and for restraint by all. Violence has no place in civil discourse. America wants Lebanon and its people -- all of its people – to succeed, and we will remain a committed partner in that effort.”

Aoun reportedly told Hale that protesters were being provided with “the necessary protection to ensure their freedom of expression without blocking roads, which conflicts with the international laws and norms that guarantee the freedom of others.”

Aoun stressed, according to his media office, that “the anti-corruption march continues intensely.”

The president also called on the US to renew its efforts to “persuade Israel to commit to the demarcation of maritime borders to establish calm and stability in the South.”



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[Beirut](#)

Lebanon's new PM says he plans a government of experts
Regional pop-culture highlights from a poetic take on Lebanon's protests

Ankara, Moscow to discuss Libya settlement

Author:

Fri, 2019-12-20 23:17

ANKARA: Turkey will dispatch an official team to Russia for extensive talks on Libya ahead of the Berlin Libya Conference in January 2020.

Turkish diplomatic, security, and intelligence officers are expected to visit Moscow amid rising tensions in the East Mediterranean.

Experts caution this might signal growing differences between Ankara and Moscow, two proactive powers involved in the issue, over the North African country.

Yury Barmin, Middle East and North Africa director at the Moscow Policy Group, thinks the talks between Turkey and Russia may be a positive sign, but that discussions alone would not be enough to bridge the emerging gaps between them.

“Libya is not Syria. It is a very different and complex environment. Rules of engagement are very different, and there are so many actors that can really derail the whole peace process in Libya,” he told Arab News.

Emad Badi, a nonresident scholar at the Middle East Institute, said: “The reality is they (Turkey and Russia) can shape the contours of the military landscape surrounding Tripoli and can therefore dictate what comes next politically speaking.”

Barmin thinks that there is a need to include the US, France, Gulf countries and other relevant parties in broader discussions, and that the Berlin conference, which aims to facilitate peace in the region, could be a pathway to that.

FASTFACT

Turkish diplomatic, security, and intelligence officers are expected to visit Moscow amid rising tensions in the East Mediterranean.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan recently expressed readiness to send troops to Libya if requested by the country’s Government of National Accord (GNA) with whom he recently signed two controversial deals, one on security and military cooperation, and another on the delimitation of maritime borders in the East Mediterranean.

The agreement on security and military cooperation allows Turkish deployment in Libya to provide technical and military support. It also allows weapons sales to the GNA despite a UN arms embargo.

Turkey's Parliament will vote on the deal on Saturday, while the GNA unanimously approved it on Thursday. Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said that no request from the GNA for assistance had been made yet.

Seth J. Frantzman, executive director of the Middle East Center for Reporting and Analysis, said Turkey wanted to work with Russia on Libya, even if the two were backing different sides, because of previous cooperation in Syria.

"Turkey's goal is to use leverage over the Tripoli GNA government to achieve economic gains and influence. Turkey is happy to achieve a foothold and work with the Russians toward legitimizing it as a major player in Libya," Frantzman told Arab News.

"Libya will help (Turkey) repair its image and power in North Africa, and also frustrate Egypt. Turkey doesn't want to commit many troops – just a token presence using Turkish technology. As one of the main opponents of Egypt, Turkey will see any role as a victory," he added.



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Ankara searches for Moscow support for Libya cause

International prosecutor from ICC preparing to open Palestine war crimes probe

Author:

By MIKE CORDER and JOSEPH KRAUSS | AP

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Fri, 2019-12-20 15:49

THE HAGUE: The prosecutor of the International Criminal Court took a major step Friday toward opening an investigation into alleged war crimes in the occupied Palestinian territories, asking judges exactly what territory a future investigation could cover.

The announcement ended years of preliminary investigations into alleged crimes by both Israeli forces and Palestinians and signaled that Prosecutor Fatou Bensouda is preparing to open a formal probe.

It drew swift condemnation from Israel, with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu calling it “a dark day for truth and justice.”



The rebirth of ALUla

Hegra, ancient city of the Nabataeans in Saudi Arabia's historic ALUla Valley, is emerging from the mists of time to take its rightful place as one of the wonders of the world

Enter

The Palestinian Ministry of Foreign Affairs welcomed it as "a long overdue step to move the process forward toward an investigation, after nearly five long and difficult years of preliminary examination."

While Israel is not a member of the court and does not recognize its jurisdiction, Palestinians have been recognized as a member state and requested an investigation. Even though Israel is not a member of the court, its citizens could face international arrest warrants if the ICC investigation indicts them for war crimes.

"I am satisfied that there is a reasonable basis to proceed with an investigation into the situation in Palestine," Bensouda said in a statement. She said she is "satisfied that ... war crimes have been or are being committed in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip."

Bensouda said she has now asked judges to outline the geographic scope of an investigation.

"Specifically, I have sought confirmation that the 'territory' over which the Court may exercise its jurisdiction, and which I may subject to investigation, comprises the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and Gaza," she said.

Netanyahu said Bensouda's decision "has turned the International Criminal Court into a political tool to delegitimize the State of Israel. The prosecutor has completely ignored the legal arguments we presented to her." At the Palestinians' request, Bensouda opened a preliminary investigation in 2015 into alleged violations of international law following the 2014 war between Israel and Palestinian militants in the Gaza Strip.

With the peace process at a standstill for more than a decade, the Palestinians have in recent years sought to hold Israel accountable for alleged violations of international law, including the construction and expansion of Jewish settlements in the West Bank and east Jerusalem. Israel seized those territories along with the Gaza Strip in the 1967 Mideast war. The Palestinians want all three to be part of their future state.

In a legal opinion released Friday, Israel's Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit said the Palestinians do not meet the criteria of statehood because they do not have sovereignty over defined borders. Citing past peace agreements, Israel said the two sides had agreed to resolve their territorial dispute in negotiations.

"By approaching the ICC, the Palestinians are seeking to breach the framework agreed to by the parties and to push the Court to determine political issues that should be resolved by negotiations, and not by criminal proceedings," the legal opinion said.

The Palestinians insisted they are a fully-fledged member of the court and that the court has jurisdiction.



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Envoy: Saudi Arabia will remain a pioneer in its support for Palestine refugees