

Israeli PM Netanyahu sparks anger with vow to annex Jordan Valley

Tue, 2019-09-10 18:36

JERUSALEM: The United Nations on Tuesday warned Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu that his plan to annex the Jordan Valley in the occupied West Bank if re-elected would have no "international legal effect." Netanyahu issued the deeply controversial pledge as he gears up for September 17 elections. He also said Israel would move to annex Israeli settlements throughout the West Bank.

Such moves could effectively kill any remaining hopes for a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, long the focus of international diplomacy.

"The secretary-general's position has always been clear: unilateral actions are not helpful in the peace process," UN spokesman Stephane Dujarric said. "Any Israeli decision to impose its laws, jurisdictions and administration in the occupied West Bank is without any international legal effect," the spokesman added.

"Such a prospect would be devastating to the potential of reviving negotiations, regional peace, and the very essence of a two-state solution." "There is one place where we can apply Israeli sovereignty immediately after the elections," Netanyahu said in a televised speech.

"If I receive from you, citizens of Israel, a clear mandate to do so ... today I announce my intention to apply with the formation of the next government Israeli sovereignty over the Jordan Valley and northern Dead Sea."

Following the announcement, a US official said Washington's policy toward Israel and the Palestinian territories remains unchanged.

"There is no change in United States policy at this time," a Trump administration official said when asked whether the White House supported Netanyahu's move.

"We will release our Vision for Peace after the Israeli election and work to determine the best path forward to bring long sought security, opportunity and stability to the region."

The Jordan Valley accounts for around one-third of the West Bank, which Israel occupied in the 1967 Six-Day War – a move never recognized by the international community.

The prime minister also reiterated his intention to annex Israeli settlements throughout the West Bank if re-elected, though in coordination with US President Donald Trump, whose long-awaited peace plan is expected to be unveiled sometime after the vote.

Those moves could effectively kill any remaining hopes for a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, long the focus of international diplomacy.

Senior Palestinian official Hanan Ashrawi said Netanyahu was "not only destroying the two-state solution, he is destroying all chances of peace." "This is a total game changer," she told AFP.

The Jordan Valley accounts for around one-third of the West Bank and Israeli

right-wing politicians have long viewed the strategic area as a part of the territory they would never retreat from.

Israeli settlements are located in what is known as Area C of the West Bank, which accounts for some 60 percent of the territory, including the vast majority of the Jordan Valley.

Netanyahu said his annexation plans would not include Palestinian cities, such as the Jordan Valley's Jericho.

Netanyahu, who used a map of the Jordan Valley to illustrate his plans, said Trump's peace parameters "will place before us a great challenge and also a great opportunity."

"This is a historic, one-time opportunity to apply Israeli sovereignty on our settlements... and other places of importance to our security, our heritage and our future."

Trump has thrown US support overwhelmingly in favor of Israel since taking office, including by recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's capital and cutting hundreds of millions of dollars in aid to the Palestinians.

Ahead of April elections, Trump recognized Israeli sovereignty over the occupied Golan Heights, seized from Syria in the 1967 Six-Day War.

It is unclear if Trump, who made clear before April's vote that he would like to see Netanyahu win, will follow up with any further expressions of support before next week's election.

Netanyahu along with his right-wing and religious allies won a majority of seats in April polls, but he failed to form a coalition and opted for an unprecedented second election in five months.

He is again facing a difficult challenge from ex-military chief Benny Gantz and his centrist Blue and White alliance.

Right-wing nationalist votes will be key to Netanyahu's efforts to continue his reign as Israel's longest-serving prime minister.

He is also facing a potential indictment for corruption pending a hearing scheduled for early October.

Israel occupied the West Bank in the 1967 Six-Day War in a move never recognized by the international community.

Its settlements there are considered illegal under international law and major stumbling blocks to peace as they are built on land the Palestinian see as part of their future state.

Israel says the Jordan Valley is vital to its security.

(With AFP and Reuters)



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Jordan summons Israeli ambassador after citizens detained Israeli PM's bid to place cameras at polling stations fails

[Report: Over 120 Syrian churches damaged by war since 2011](#)

Author:

Associated Press

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Mon, 2019-09-09 17:33

BEIRUT: A Syrian war monitor associated with the opposition said Monday that over 120 Christian places of worship have been damaged or destroyed by all sides in the country's eight-year conflict.

Some of the attacks were deliberate, such as the Daesh group using bulldozers to destroy the ancient Saint Elian Monastery in Homs province in 2015. The majority, however, were caused by front-line combat, shelling or rockets. Christians made up about 10 percent of Syria's pre-war population of 23 million, who co-existed with the Muslim majority and enjoyed freedom of worship under President Bashar Assad's government.

Most have left for Europe over the past 20 years, with their flight significantly gathering speed since the start of the current conflict.

Around half of all Syrians are now either internally displaced or have left the country.

The report by the Qatar-based Syrian Network for Human Rights, which collects statistics on the war, said government forces were responsible for 60% of the 124 documented attacks since fighting erupted in March 2011. The rest were blamed on Daesh militants, the Al-Qaeda-linked group Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham and other factions of the armed opposition.

There was immediate comment from the government, which rarely comments on reports from foreign organizations.

"Targeting Christian places of worship is a form of intimidation against and displacement of the Christian minority in Syria," said Fadel Abdul Ghany, the founder and chairman of SNHR.

The report said Daesh was behind 10 attacks on Christian sites, five of which were in the northern city of Raqqa, once the extremists de-facto capital. The group was known for displacing and killing Christians in areas it controlled and confiscating their properties.

Hardest hit was the northern province of Aleppo, with 34 attacks, 24 by rebels and six by the government.

The highest number of attacks by government forces – 27 out of 29 – was in the central province of Homs.

SNHR's report also placed blame on Syrian government allies Russia and Iran, but did not specify how many of the attacks they'd caused.



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Air strikes kill 18 pro-Iran fighters in east Syria

[Israel exposes fresh secret Iranian nuclear site](#)

Mon, 2019-09-09 18:46

JERUSALEM: Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said on Monday that Iran had been developing nuclear weapons at a secret site near the city of Abadeh, but that Tehran destroyed the facility after learning it had been exposed.

It was the first time Netanyahu had identified the site, which, he said, was discovered in a trove of Iranian documents Israel previously obtained and disclosed last year.

“In this site, Iran conducted experiments to develop nuclear weapons,” Netanyahu said in broadcast remarks, showing an aerial picture of several small buildings, including their coordinates, that he said were taken at the Abadeh facility late in June 2019.

“When Iran realized that we uncovered the site, here’s what they did,” he said, showing a picture from a month later in which the buildings no longer appeared. “They destroyed the site. They just wiped it out.”

Netanyahu's comments followed a Reuters report revealing that the International Atomic Energy Agency found traces of uranium at a different site in Iran that the Israeli leader had first pointed to during a speech last year at the United Nations.

Iran had yet to explain the traces of uranium at that site, though it denies ever having sought a nuclear weapon.

Netanyahu, who strongly opposed a 2015 nuclear deal between Iran and world powers, made the remarks in a televised speech about a week before a general election in Israel in which he is in a tight race to win another term.

"I call on the international community to wake up, to realize that Iran is systematically lying," Netanyahu said. "The only way to stop Iran's march to the bomb, and its aggression in the region, is pressure, pressure and more pressure."

However, Iran rejected Netanyahu's claims saying he was seeking a "pretext for war."

"The possessor of real nukes cries wolf," Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said in a tweet, making reference to Israel's own presumed nuclear arsenal.



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IAEA found uranium traces at Iran 'atomic warehouse' Netanyahu: Israel discovered second atomic storage facility in Iran

[Israeli PM's bid to place cameras at polling stations fails](#)

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By ARON HELLER | AP

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Mon, 2019-09-09 13:13

JERUSALEM: Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu failed on Monday in his eleventh hour bid to legislate that cameras be installed in polling stations to prevent what his supporters claim is voting fraud in Arab districts. After a stormy session, a parliamentary committee voted it down before it reached the plenum with Netanyahu's backers deadlocked with his opponents. The deciding, dissenting vote was cast by a representative of former Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman, an ally-turned-rival of Netanyahu who forced Israel's unprecedented second election of the year and is poised to be the kingmaker again in the vote.

With just a week to go to the repeat election, Netanyahu had sought to pass the controversial legislation amid a scorched earth campaign in which he's accused his opponents of conspiring to "steal" the election.

Netanyahu responded to the setback by slamming the opposition.

"There is no reason for those who really care about the integrity of the election to object to the camera law, which prevents forgeries," he said in a video message to his followers. "There is only one answer to this: Turn out in masses at the ballot box."

Netanyahu insists the proposal was a matter of transparency, but it drew renewed accusations that he was promoting racism and incitement against the country's Arab minority. Critics also said he was preemptively claiming to be a victim of electoral fraud as an alibi, in case he loses.

Mordechai Kremnitzer, a constitutional law expert, wrote in the Haaretz daily that the bill amounted to pointing a "gun at Israeli democracy's head."

With his career on the line, Netanyahu has increasingly been embracing some tactics of President Donald Trump. Netanyahu routinely lashes out at the media, the judiciary, the police and his political opponents, claiming there is a conspiracy of "elites" to oust him.

In a Facebook video Sunday, Netanyahu hinted that Arab forgery prevented him from winning the April vote. Netanyahu's hard-line Likud Party had sent out campaign workers on election day to videotape Arab voters entering polling stations, claiming they were preventing fraud.

A Likud-linked PR agency that spearheaded the campaign later boasted it had

helped suppress Arab turnout, while Arab leaders accused Likud of trying to intimidate voters. Israel's Central Election Commission banned the practice this time around and the fast-tracked legislation was supposed to override that ruling.

Adalah, a legal rights group for Arab minority rights, said even without passing the proposed bill it "has already caused harm by injecting bald-faced lies into the public political discourse under the premise of preserving the 'purity of elections.'"

Stifling Netanyahu once again was his nemesis Lieberman, who said any monitoring should be operated by election officials and not "Netanyahu's private militia."

Lieberman, who was once Netanyahu's chief of staff and a staunch partner, has emerged as his chief rival and critic. He passed up the post of defense minister in Netanyahu's government following April's election, claiming the new coalition would give excessive influence to ultra-Orthodox Jewish parties. The dispute left the prime minister without a parliamentary majority and forced the Sept. 17 do-over vote.

Opinion polls show Likud in a neck-and-neck race with the main challenger, the centrist Blue and White party, with neither side able to secure an outright majority without the support of Lieberman's party. Lieberman is pressing for a unity government between the two parties, but Netanyahu claims the real goal is to oust him from office.



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[Toll of Morocco flood-hit bus rises to 17 dead](#)

Author:

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Mon, 2019-09-09 11:46

RABAT: At least 17 people were killed in Morocco when flood waters overturned their bus in the kingdom's southeast, authorities said Monday in a revised toll.

Rescuers have been searching for bodies since the accident Sunday, when the bus flipped on a bridge in a valley near the city of Errachidia, authorities said.

They said a further 29 passengers, with various injuries but in "stable" condition, had been transferred to a hospital in Errachidia.

Rescuers were continuing their search.

Morocco has been hit by violent storms this summer, sparking flash flooding in its mountainous interior.

At the end of August, a flood hit a football pitch killing eight people in the southern region of Taroudant.

And in July, 15 people were killed in a landslide caused by flash floods on a road south of Marrakesh.

Floods are common in the North African country. In 2014, they killed around 50 people and caused considerable damage.



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