

Netanyahu, Gantz make final pitches before Israeli vote

Author:

AFP

ID:

1554747925033528000

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JERUSALEM: Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu sought to energise supporters on the eve of Tuesday's elections with warnings and controversial promises, while his centrist challenger urged voters to tell the premier the country has had enough.

The general election – in which Netanyahu is seeking to extend his 13 years in office despite corruption allegations against him – is expected to be close, as ex-military chief Benny Gantz poses a serious challenge.

The two men spent the campaign's final hours exhorting voters with two different strategies: Netanyahu repeatedly warned that his Likud was at risk of losing, while Gantz made the case that Israel was on the verge of historic change.

The truth was more complicated, with opinion polls giving Netanyahu's Likud and Gantz's Blue and White a similar number of seats in the 120-seat parliament.

Under those polls, both would fall far short of an outright majority and would need to pull together a coalition.

If polling trends hold, Netanyahu would be best placed to build an alliance thanks to smaller right-wing parties close to him.

But there have been repeated warnings about opinion polls' historical unreliability and the fact that many voters say they remain undecided.

Netanyahu's claims that Likud may lose were widely seen as a way to encourage his base to turn out.

Netanyahu has made last-minute appeals to the right, issuing a deeply controversial pledge to annex settlements in the occupied West Bank.

If done on a large-scale, applying Israeli sovereignty there could extinguish remaining hopes for a two-state solution with the Palestinians.

In an interview on Sunday, Netanyahu said US President Donald Trump, who is expected to release his long-awaited deal for Israeli-Palestinian peace sometime after the election, was aware of his plans.

Netanyahu said he planned to apply sovereignty gradually, and that he did not differentiate between Israel's large West Bank settlement blocs and the isolated ones located deep in the territory on land the Palestinians see as part of a future state.

"Who else can do this? Who can do this? Come on. Honestly," Netanyahu said, making the case as he has throughout the campaign that he is Israel's essential statesman.

"Who can stand in front of the world? Who can stand in front of the American Congress? Who can move public opinion in that direction?"

Gantz has called Netanyahu's pledge an "irresponsible" bid for right-wing votes.

He says he favors a “globally backed peace agreement” that sees Israel hold on to the large settlement blocs in the West Bank and maintain security control over the territory.

Gantz has also highlighted his security credentials while saying he will heal divisions he accuses Netanyahu of exacerbating.

“There’s a need for change and an opportunity for change,” Gantz told Israel’s army radio on Monday.

“Israel needs to choose a direction of unification, connection and hope – or of extremity.”

The two were also engaging in typical pre-election campaigning, including Gantz riding a motorcycle to his rally on Sunday and Netanyahu visiting Jerusalem’s main market on Monday.

“The only way to close the gap and to ensure that Likud will form the next government for sure is to have a big Likud,” Netanyahu told supporters at the market.

Gantz said Monday at his party headquarters in Tel Aviv that supporters had to make sure “everyone goes to the polling stations because we are going to serve all voters from the right and from the left, all of the Israeli citizens.”

Netanyahu will be on track to surpass founding father David Ben-Gurion as Israel’s longest-serving prime minister should he win on Tuesday.

But even if he triumphs, he faces the prospect of becoming the first sitting prime minister to be indicted.

The attorney general has announced he intends to indict Netanyahu for bribery, fraud and breach of trust pending an upcoming hearing.

The premier’s opponents have seized on the allegations to argue that the 69-year-old Netanyahu has lost his way and must go.

But the premier has been defiant, calling the investigations a “witch hunt” and denouncing journalists reporting on them – similar to the tactics used by his ally Trump.

While the threat of indictment hangs over Netanyahu, he has also built a reputation as guarantor of Israel’s security and economic growth.

He has repeatedly claimed Trump’s recognition of the disputed city of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital and Israel’s sovereignty over the Golan Heights as two of his major accomplishments.

Gantz has sought to overcome that in part by allying with two other former military chiefs of staff and ex-finance minister Yair Lapid.



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Anger over Netanyahu pledge to annex illegal settlements
Palestinian Authority unsustainable if Netanyahu wins election, says chief negotiator

[Israel jails French consulate worker for gun smuggling](#)

Author:

Mon, 2019-04-08 18:28

BEERSHEBA, Israel: An Israeli court on Monday sentenced a former French consulate worker to seven years in prison for smuggling guns from the Gaza Strip after a plea bargain.

Romain Franck, who worked as a driver for the consulate, went on trial after being accused of exploiting reduced security checks for diplomats to smuggle 70 pistols and two automatic rifles from the Gaza Strip to the Israeli-occupied West Bank.

The plea bargain reached convicted Franck for smuggling 29 pistols after he confessed to most of what he was charged with.

He was also given a fine of 30,000 shekels (\$8,000, 7,500 euros) and an 18-month suspended sentence.

Franck's lawyer Kenneth Mann said he intended to request that he serve his sentence in France.

Mann said the judge was willing to issue a more lenient sentence than might otherwise have been given because Franck, 24, had shown remorse and was motivated by money, not by solidarity with Palestinian groups.

He had no prior criminal record.

Franck, relying on a court interpreter from Hebrew to French, showed no visible reaction when the sentence was announced.

"This is a very, very difficult thing for the whole family of course, but they understand that this is the law and they hope that their son will be returned to France as quickly as possible," Mann told AFP after Monday's hearing.

Franck was arrested in February 2018 and his trial began the following month at the district court in the southern Israeli city of Beersheba.

Israeli officials have said he acted on his own without the consulate's knowledge and that diplomatic relations with France were not affected.

The Shin Bet internal security agency has said he was paid a total of around \$5,500 for the guns he smuggled for a network involving several Palestinians. Travelers between the two Palestinian territories pass through Israel and are subject to Israeli security controls.



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Israel arrests brother of Palestinian protest icon
Israel's Arab minority urged to boycott election over divisive law

Hamas West Bank leader given six-month detention without trial

Author:

AFP

ID:

1554735399602481700

Mon, 2019-04-08 14:54

JERUSALEM: Israel on Monday handed down a six-month detention order without trial for a West Bank leader of Palestinian group Hamas, his family and an Israeli intelligence service said.

Hassan Yousef, a co-founder of Hamas, was arrested on April 2 at his home in the occupied West Bank, according to the Palestinian Prisoners' Club NGO. He was given a six-month administrative detention order Monday, his family said.

The Israeli Shin Bet intelligence service confirmed the decision.

Yousef had been released from a previous imprisonment in October 2018.

"We condemn this decision. He suffers from diabetes and high blood pressure," his son Owais said, pointing out he had spent around 20 years in prison.

A co-founder of Hamas and a member of the defunct Palestinian parliament, 64-year-old Yousef has been arrested multiple times by Israel.

The administrative detention system allows Israel to detain prisoners for renewable six-month periods without charge.

Israel says it allows authorities to hold suspects to prevent attacks while continuing to gather evidence, but critics and rights groups say the system is abused.

In total around 500 Palestinians are currently being held under administrative detention orders, according to the Palestinian Prisoners' Club.

Israel has fought three wars with Hamas in Gaza since 2008 and considers it a terrorist organization.



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Hamas leader says rocket that hit Israeli house fired in errorDespite setbacks, Hamas' grip on Gaza has never been tighter

[Artificial limbs change lives for wounded Gaza protesters](#)

Author:

Reuters

ID:

1554735436602485300

Mon, 2019-04-08 14:02

GAZA: Walking up and down stairs at a Gaza medical center, Palestinian amputees are learning to use their new artificial limbs after being wounded by Israeli fire at border protests.

The Health Ministry in the Hamas Islamist-run territory said 136 wounded Palestinians have undergone amputations since the demonstrations began in March 2018.

"It was only one bullet, one bullet turned my life upside down," said Abdallah Qassem, 17, struggling to stand steady while trying on his new artificial legs.

Qassem said the bullet struck one leg and then penetrated the other as he sat on the ground with friends at a rally on May 14, the day the United States moved its embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, fueling Palestinian anger. "I had dreamt of becoming a photojournalist but I aim to study computer science," he told Reuters.

The Gaza Artificial Limb and Polio Center is run by the Gaza municipality. On its first floor, technicians were producing limbs with material from the International Committee of the Red Cross.

Protesters at the demonstrations are demanding the end to a security blockade imposed on Gaza by Israel and Egypt, and want Palestinians to have the right to return to land from which their families fled or were forced to leave during Israel's founding in 1948.

Around 200 Gazans have been killed by Israeli troops so far in the protests, according to Palestinian Health Ministry figures. An Israeli soldier was also killed by a Palestinian sniper in July.

UN investigators say Israel has used excessive force. Israel says it has no choice but to use deadly force to protect the border from militants and infiltrators.

In the southern Gaza town of Khan Younis, Suhaib Qudeih and his sister Nazeeha each lost a leg to Israeli gunfire.

"Before the injury, I used to work and make 4,000 shekels (\$1,100 a month). I used to bring the sweetest food to my children. Now I can't get them most of what they ask for," the 33-year-old man told Reuters.

He needs more surgery to make sure an artificial right leg can fit well. His sister has already had her artificial limb fitted.

The World Health Organization said 6,872 Gazans suffered gunshot wounds, mostly to the limbs, in the past year of protests.

With funding from the European Union, the WHO is helping Palestinians set up a limb reconstruction unit in Nasser hospital in southern Gaza. It is expected to open as early as next month.

"This center is focused around restoring people's lives, preventing amputations, and making sure that they are able to move again," Sara Halimah, WHO trauma manager, said.

Halimah said each of the patients will need up to two years of treatment.

"If this center is not established and if we don't have the correct treatment centers for controlling the infection rates, then we will see this amputation rate go through the roof, it will skyrocket," Halimah told Reuters at Nasser hospital.





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[US designates Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps a terrorist organization](#)

Mon, 2019-04-08 17:16

WASHINGTON: President Donald Trump announced Monday that the US is designating Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps a "foreign terrorist organization" to help stabilize the Middle East and bring maximum pressure on Tehran.

In an important step to counter the Iranian regime's terrorism, the U.S. has designated the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, incl. Qods Force, as a Foreign Terrorist Organization. We must help the

people of Iran get back their freedom. pic.twitter.com/T65CxJjRrr

– Secretary Pompeo (@SecPompeo) [April 8, 2019](#)

Trump said the “unprecedented” move “recognizes the reality that Iran is not only a State Sponsor of Terrorism, but that the IRGC actively participates in, finances, and promotes terrorism as a tool of statecraft.”

“The IRGC is the Iranian government’s primary means of directing and implementing its global terrorist campaign,” Trump said.

It is the first time the United States has designated part of a foreign government a terrorist organization, rather than guerrilla groups or other more informal entities.

The move comes on top of Trump’s decision to pull the United States out of an international deal with Iran that was meant to lift crippling economic sanctions in return for the government allowing its nuclear technology to be restricted and kept under close supervision.

The Trump administration argues that Iran’s government, which is locked in a deeply hostile standoff with top US ally Israel, cannot be trusted and should face “maximum pressure.”

Israeli’s prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, warmly welcomed the move by his “dear friend” Trump. The terrorist designation for the Revolutionary Guards is meant to strike at the heart of the Iranian government’s power structure.

The elite force was formed after the 1979 Islamic revolution with a mission to defend the clerical regime, in contrast to more traditional military units that protect borders.

At home, it has amassed strong political and economic influence.

Abroad, the Guards’ Quds Force supports Iranian allies, including Syrian President Bashar Assad and Lebanon’s Hezbollah.

Addressing reporters following Trump’s announcement, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo warned all banks and business of consequences to dealing with the Revolutionary Guards from now on.

“The leaders of Iran are racketeers, not revolutionaries,” Pompeo said.

“Businesses and banks around the world now have a clear duty to ensure that companies with which they conduct financial transactions are not conducted with the IRGC in any material way.”

Brian Hook, the State Department’s special representative for Iran, said the Middle East can not be more stable without weakening the IRGC. “It is the blunt instrument of Iran’s foreign policy,” he added.

A senior Trump administration official said the new measure would criminalize contact with the Guards and “enable our prosecutors to bring charges to those that bring material support to the IRGC.”

“The IRGC is interwoven into the Iranian economy... The safest course is to stop doing business with the IRGC. If you do business with the IRGC you run the risk of bankrolling terrorism,” said the official, speaking on condition of anonymity.

Another official said the force has “been a principal driver of violence on a vast scale for many decades” in an attempt “to reshape the Middle East in Iran’s favor.”

The dramatic escalation of Washington's attempt to undermine Iran's leaders comes on the eve of Israeli elections where close Trump ally Netanyahu is seeking to extend his 13 years in office.

"Thank you, my dear friend, US President Donald Trump, for having decided to declare Iran's Revolutionary Guards a terrorist organization," Netanyahu said in a statement issued minutes after the White House announcement.

"Thank you for responding to another important request of mine, which serves the interests of our countries and countries of the region."

Iran's parliament has vowed to retaliate by passing an urgent bill putting American troops on its own terrorism blacklist.

"Even though we believe one should not play along with America's extreme acts, the reality is that we must retaliate," the head of Iran's influential national security and foreign policy commission, Heshmatollah Falahatpisheh, told ISNA.

A statement signed by a majority of lawmakers in support of the bill said any action against Iran's national security and its armed forces was "crossing a red line" and the US administration would "regret" its decision.

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EU extends sanctions against Iran until 2020 Iran will retaliate in kind if US designates Guards as terrorists