

With Netanyahu's help, 'racist' aide could become MP

Thu, 2019-04-04 22:56

HEBRON: The bespectacled man was given a hero's welcome when he arrived for the party on the recent Jewish holiday of Purim, with teenagers singing and applauding around him.

Itamar Ben-Gvir was on the streets of Hebron, a flashpoint city in the occupied West Bank, among Israeli settlers reveling while disguised and masked according to Jewish tradition.

The support for him there was a sign of why he may soon become a member of Israel's Parliament as part of an extreme-right party many view as racist – helped along by a deal brokered by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

"No way – there's no way that they're racist," said Yehudit Katz, a resident of another West Bank settlement who came to celebrate for Purim in Hebron.

Several hundred Israeli settlers live in Hebron under heavy military guard – including Ben-Gvir – amidst around 200,000 Palestinians.

"The solution that they have is to keep the people that are not Jewish – the Arabs, whoever – that are loyal to the state of Israel as a Jewish homeland, and there are many Arabs like that," said Katz.

FASTFACT

Opinion polls show the list that Jewish Power is part of winning between five and seven seats in the 120-seat Parliament.

"We don't want terrorists. Terrorists can go live somewhere else," he added.

Ben-Gvir, a 42-year-old lawyer, said "God willing" Jewish Power will make it into Parliament.

It is a prospect that has touched off one of the most intense debates in the campaign ahead of April 9 elections.

Jewish Power's leaders are followers of an assassinated racist rabbi whose group was labeled a terrorist organization by the US, the EU and Israel itself.

Netanyahu's deal that saw Jewish Power join two other far-right parties to run on the same electoral list drew disgust at home and among Jewish communities abroad, particularly in the US.

For Netanyahu, the deal ahead of what is expected to be a close election was pure politics.

He defended it by saying he does not want any right-wing votes to go to waste as he eyes his next coalition.

Running alone, Jewish Power was unlikely to pass the 3.25 percent electoral threshold.

But all has not gone smoothly for Jewish Power, whose leader Michael Ben-Ari was also running but has been disqualified by the Supreme Court for statements it ruled were an incitement to racism.

Ben-Gvir's candidacy was also challenged at the court, but he was allowed to stand, making him the only Jewish Power representative with a chance to make it into Parliament. Jewish Power are followers of late racist rabbi Meir Kahane, whose Kach movement wanted to chase Arabs from Israel.

The ideology of Kahane, assassinated in New York in 1990, also inspired Baruch Goldstein, who carried out a massacre of 29 Palestinian worshippers in Hebron in 1994.

Ben-Gvir acknowledges having a picture of Goldstein in his living room, but has reportedly said it is because he was a medical doctor who rescued Jews targeted in Palestinian attacks.

For Adalah, a rights group for Arab Israelis, Ben-Gvir belongs to a "racist movement recognized as a terrorist organization."

Jewish Power strongly disputes the characterization, with Ben-Gvir telling the Supreme Court it is only against "enemies of Israel" and not Arabs in general.

Opinion polls show the list that Jewish Power is part of winning between five and seven seats in the 120-seat Parliament.

Ben-Gvir is seventh on the list.

Jewish Power advocates removing "Israel's enemies from our land," a reference to Palestinians and Arab Israelis who carry out attacks or who they see as not accepting the Jewish state they envision.

It also calls for Israel annexing the West Bank, where more than 2.5 million Palestinians live.

Ben-Ari was previously a member of Parliament as part of a different right-wing list between 2009 and 2013, but Jewish Power has never passed the electoral threshold.

Ben-Gvir has long been an outspoken member of the far-right.

Indicted 53 times since his youth, he boasts of having been cleared in 46 cases. He decided to study law on the recommendation of judges so he could defend himself.

He defends settlers accused of violence, including those allegedly

responsible for an arson attack that killed an 18-month-old boy and his parents in 2015 in the West Bank, an incident that drew widespread revulsion.

In 1995, when only 19 and in a time of turmoil following the Oslo accords with the Palestinians, he appeared on television with what he said was the stolen emblem from then prime minister Yitzhak Rabin's Cadillac.

Rabin was assassinated by an Israeli opposed to the Oslo accords later that year.

"We got to this symbol. We'll get to him," Ben-Gvir said at the time.



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to Israeli election

Author:

Wed, 2019-04-03 21:52

JERUSALEM: In a charged election campaign that has been heavy on insults and short on substance, Israel's conflict with the Palestinians has been notably absent from the discourse.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's ruling Likud Party has offered no plan for what many believe is the country's most existential problem.

His main challenger speaks vaguely of "separation," while Netanyahu's hard-line partners speak openly of the once unthinkable idea of annexing all or parts of the West Bank. Talk of a Palestinian state, the international community's preferred solution for the past two decades, is non-existent.

It is a far cry from past elections, when peace with the Palestinians was the central issue for voters. This apparent lack of interest reflects widespread disillusionment in Israel over years of failed peace efforts.

But it also is a testament to Netanyahu's success in sidelining the issue. Capitalizing on internal Palestinian divisions and promoting sometimes contradictory policies, Netanyahu has succeeded in managing the conflict without addressing the bigger issue of how two intertwined peoples will live together in the future. Strong backing from the Trump administration has given him an extra boost.

"The peace track is currently in a coma," said Shmuel Rosner, a senior fellow at the Jewish People Policy Institute. "There's not much hope for a viable solution to be revived in the near future, so people can just keep pushing it aside until someday it comes back to haunt them."

Netanyahu took office in early 2009 and under heavy pressure from then-President Barack Obama reluctantly stated his support for an independent Palestinian state, albeit with many conditions, which were rejected.

Things quickly went downhill, and serious peace talks never took place during Obama's time in office.

Throughout his tenure, Netanyahu has repeatedly cast blame on the Palestinians, accusing President Mahmoud Abbas, who seeks a negotiated settlement with Israel, of incitement and promoting "terror."

At the same time, he has maintained behind-the-scenes security cooperation with Abbas' forces in the West Bank in a joint struggle against the Hamas militant group.

In the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip, Netanyahu has engaged in frequent rounds of fighting, but is also conducting behind-the-scenes negotiations with his bitter enemy in hopes of maintaining calm.

The Trump administration has further sidelined the Palestinians by cutting hundreds of millions of dollars in aid and recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's capital, prompting the Palestinians to sever ties with the US. A long-promised peace plan, which the White House says will be released after the election, faces dim prospects, if it is even released.

With the peace process in a deep freeze, it is perhaps no surprise that none of the major Israeli parties are talking about the Palestinians.

"The Palestinian cause is totally absent in the Israeli elections, and when it comes, it comes only in a negative context," said Ahmed Majdalani, a senior Palestinian official. "This is worrisome, because it tells us that we are going from bad to worse."

The Palestinians seek the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza Strip – areas captured by Israel in the 1967 Mideast war – for an independent state. The so-called two-state solution is widely backed internationally as the best way to end the conflict.

If Israel continues to rule over millions of Palestinians, the thinking goes, the Palestinians will eventually abandon their dream of statehood and instead demand Israeli citizenship and full equality. In such a scenario, Israel would no longer be able to be both Jewish and democratic.

Israelis accuse the Palestinians of rejecting generous peace offers, most recently in late 2008, a narrative the Palestinians reject. The Israelis also point to the 2005 withdrawal from Gaza, which cleared the way for Hamas to seize power from Abbas' forces two years later. Ahead of the election, several religious and nationalist parties, along with individual members of Netanyahu's Likud party, have openly called for annexing parts or all of the West Bank. These plans include a range of proposals for the Palestinians, including nonvoting residency rights, possible citizenship or financial incentives to emigrate.

It remains unclear how hard these parties, all potential coalition partners for Netanyahu, will push, though Trump's recent recognition of Israel's annexation of the occupied Golan Heights has led to stepped-up calls for annexing West Bank territory.

Likud spokesman Eli Hazan said he does not expect annexation to be on the agenda. He said the party "strongly believes" in the status quo. "We are against the one-state solution and two-state solution. Both ways may lead to the end of Israel as a Jewish and democratic country," he said.

Yohanan Plesner, president of the Israeli Democracy Institute and a former lawmaker, said he did not think Netanyahu would give in to the annexation calls. "At the end of the day, West Bank annexation is the prerogative of the prime minister," he said.

Netanyahu's main challenger, former military chief Benny Gantz, has given Israel's "peace camp" some dim hope.

His Blue and White party's platform devotes just a few sentences to the

Palestinians, promising “an open horizon for political settlement” and pledging to work with Arab neighbors to find a way to “deepen the separation.” It makes no mention of Palestinian statehood, and says Israel will continue to maintain control of parts of the West Bank and never divide Jerusalem.

Ghassan Khatib, a former Palestinian negotiator, said the lack of interest on the Israeli side is harmful to the Palestinians in the short term but much worse for Israel in the long term.

“It means the end of the two-state solution,” he said. “The alternative will be an apartheid system, and this will cause huge damage to Israeli democracy and the image of Israel.”



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Israeli kills suspected Palestinian attacker in West Bank
Palestinian killed in clash with Israeli forces

INTERVIEW: Palestinian ambassador to UK braced for Trump's 'deal of the century'

Wed, 2019-04-03 21:40

LONDON: Like many Palestinian officials, Husam Zomlot is deeply concerned.

The US is close to unveiling its new Middle East peace plan. But all the signs so far have deepened concerns that President Donald Trump's "deal of the century" will be heavily biased toward Israel and offer little to the Palestinians.

The plan is being constructed by Jared Kushner, senior adviser and son-in-law to the president, Jason Greenblatt, US special representative for international negotiations, and David Friedman, US ambassador to Israel. It is expected to be announced after the April 9 Israeli elections, and Kushner said last month it would address all core issues of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, including borders.

Speaking to Sky News Arabia, Kushner added that he wanted to see a unified Palestinian government in the West Bank and Gaza. For Zomlot though, the Fatah member and Palestinian ambassador to the UK, there are warning signs everywhere that the deal weakens the Palestinian position.

"The plan is illegitimate," he told Arab News, "because they did not consult the Palestinian people, the international community, or revert to international resolutions."

In September last year, Zomlot was expelled from the US. The Trump administration shut down the Palestinian diplomatic mission to Washington, and he relocated to the UK the following month to head the mission in London.

Trump piled more pressure on the Palestinians last year by moving the US Embassy in Israel to Jerusalem, and by cutting aid to the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA).

BIO **BORN**

Gaza Strip, 1973

EDUCATION

Doctorate in economics, University of London

CAREER

Ambassador, Head of Palestinian Mission to the UK
Former Head of PLO General Delegation to the US

Strategic Affairs Advisor to the Palestinian President
Economist at the UN and as an economic researcher with London School of
Economics and the Palestine Policy Research Institute

On Monday, Trump recognized Israeli sovereignty over the occupied Golan Heights, seized from Syria in 1967, a move condemned by Arab countries and one that raised concerns in Ramallah over the future of its own territory.

That the deal is being put together solely by lawyers adds to its illegitimacy, Zomlot suggested, adding that the approach being taken was akin to real estate lawyers driving tenants from a building.

“You apply pressure on the tenants to evict them, like cutting water, electricity, heating, parking. This is what they have been doing with us for the last two years, starting with the closing of our diplomatic mission to Washington.”

One of the biggest Palestinian complaints is that they have not been consulted during the process, yet at the same time, the US team have gone out of their way to accommodate Israel.

Saudi Arabia has always unconditionally supported the rights of the Palestinian people, both politically and financially

Husam Zomlot

“It’s only taking into consideration one side, not even that of Israel but of Netanyahu – a clear indication that the Trump administration is supporting him,” Zomlot said.

He added that the US was ignoring decades of “international resolutions, consensus and laws” in the face of growing domestic support for the Palestinian cause. “We see the growing solidarity and awareness in America, and the number of people that voice support from the youth, the Congress, the Jewish community, the media and the intelligence agencies.”

However, the 46-year-old diplomat, who was born in a Gaza refugee camp and later studied in London, appears to feel more at home in the UK, and wants it to spearhead the Middle East peace process, commending Whitehall’s recent decision to double its contribution to UNRWA. “The UK is way more equipped and familiar with the situation than the Trump administration,” he said.

In such uncertain times, though, Ramallah is looking more to its old regional allies, with Zomlot calling Saudi Arabia an “older brother” in his nation’s history.

“Saudi Arabia has always unconditionally supported the rights of the Palestinian people, both politically and financially,” he said, citing King Salman’s defiance of the US embassy move by renaming the Saudi-hosted Arab

League Summit the “Jerusalem Summit” last year.

One issue most Palestinians agree on is the need for a unified position – something that came to an end when Hamas seized Gaza in 2007. The hard-line group remains in control while in the West Bank, the Palestinian Authority is viewed as increasingly ineffective under the leadership of the aging President Mahmoud Abbas.

Last month, Abbas named Mohammad Shtayyeh prime minister, and Zomlot claimed the veteran politician had the ability required “to form a national government backed by all parties.”

He said now, more than ever, the Palestinians required “a strong government capable of engaging with the international community and dealing with the reality of colonialism that is not interested in a two-state solution.”

In a matter of weeks, when the Trump administration reveals its “deal of the century,” Abbas, Shtayyeh, Zomlot and others will face one of their greatest tests yet.



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‘I wish that everybody could just tell the truth.’ – Palestine’s youngest journalist
Saudi Cabinet reaffirms support for Palestine

[Iraqi PM to make first Iran visit on Saturday](#)

Wed, 2019-04-03 22:19

BAGHDAD: Iraqi Premier Adel Abdel Mahdi will travel to Iran on Saturday, a member of his office said, in his first official visit to the country rivaling Washington for influence over Baghdad.

The US reimposed tough sanctions on Tehran's energy and finance sectors last year but has granted Baghdad several exemptions to keep temporarily importing Iranian gas and electricity, crucial to Iraq's faltering power sector.

Abdel Mahdi, 77, has repeatedly said Iraq wants good ties with both the US and Iran.

The prime minister would spend two days in the Islamic republic, a member of his office said on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak to the press.

He was expected to discuss "the issue of trade outside the framework of sanctions" in addition to "the rapprochement and the convergence of views between Iran and Arab countries," the official said.

Iran is the second-largest supplier of imported goods to Iraq and also enjoys vast political influence in the country, particularly among Iraq's Shiite parties.

Those factions credit Iran for helping Iraqi armed forces defeat the Daesh group in a fierce three-year battle that ravaged much of the country. Since declaring victory over Daesh in 2017, Iraq has strived to make a diplomatic comeback as a mediator among regional rivals.

A string of top officials have visited the Iraqi capital in recent months, including Iranian President Hassan Rouhani in March, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in January, and a host of Arab leaders.

During his weekly press conference on Tuesday, Abdel Mahdi said he was planning trips to Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the US, without specifying dates.

The premier has rarely traveled since coming to power in October, making his first trip abroad in late March to Egypt.

There, he met Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi and King Abdullah of Jordan.

Last month, Iraq's Speaker of Parliament Mohammed Al-Halbusi traveled to the US, where he said his country would need to rely on Iranian gas and electricity for another three years.



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Security tops agenda as Iraqi PM visits Egypt in first foreign trip
Iraqi, Jordanian leaders join Egypt at Cairo summit

[Four suicide bombers hit Syria's Raqqa – SDF](#)

Author:

Reuters

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Wed, 2019-04-03 14:11

BEIRUT: Four suicide bombers struck in Syria's Raqqa on Wednesday, a spokesman for the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) which controls the city said in a message to journalists.

A string of bombings have in recent months targeted the northeastern corner

of Syria held by the SDF, even after its capture of the last Daesh enclave in the area.

Daesh has claimed responsibility for several of those attacks, underscoring its continued threat after its territorial defeat last month at Baghouz on the Euphrates at the Iraqi border.

In January, the group targeted a restaurant in Manbij, a flashpoint city held by a militia allied to the SDF near areas controlled by the Syrian government and Turkey-backed rebels, killing four Americans.

“Four suicide bombers blew themselves up,” said Mustafa Bali, head of the SDF’s media office, in an online chat when asked about blasts in Raqqa.

The SDF drove Daesh from Raqqa in 2017 but the fierce military campaign there, including intensive air strikes from a US-led coalition, left much of the city in ruins.

Daesh fighters are still holding out in a remote area of the Syrian desert and security officials say others have gone under ground in Iraqi cities.

Spearheaded by the Kurdish YPG militia, the SDF’s hold over northeastern Syria, including much of the border with Turkey, alarms Ankara which regards it as a terrorist group.



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