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Netanyahu in Washington with Golan Heights recognition on tap

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Jim Mannion with Mike Smith in Jerusalem | AFP

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Sun, 2019-03-24 16:54

WASHINGTON: Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu arrived in Washington Sunday, looking for an electoral boost from Donald Trump amid expectations the US president will formally recognize Israel's sovereignty over the Golan Heights.

Trump broke longstanding international consensus last week over the status of the Golan Heights, which Israel seized from Syria in the 1967 Six Day War, saying the US should recognize Israeli sovereignty over the strategic plateau.

Israel's foreign minister said the US president will go one step further on Monday when he welcomes a grateful Netanyahu to the White House.

"President Trump will sign tomorrow in the presence of PM Netanyahu an order recognizing Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights," Foreign Minister Israel Katz wrote on Twitter on Sunday.

Netanyahu has long pushed for such recognition, and many analysts saw Trump's statement, which came in a tweet on Thursday, as a campaign gift ahead of Israel's April 9 polls.

The prime minister is locked in a tough election fight with a centrist political alliance headed by former military chief Benny Gantz and ex-finance minister Yair Lapid.

New opinion polls last week showed Netanyahu losing ground to his electoral rivals, and the Washington visit was seen as an opportunity to regain momentum.

The prime minister has a "working meeting" at the White House on Monday and a dinner on Tuesday.

Also Tuesday, he is to address the annual conference in Washington of the

American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC). Gantz speaks at the high-profile event on Monday.

The Golan Heights decision is the latest major move in favor of Israel by Trump, who in 2017 recognized the disputed city of Jerusalem as the country's capital.

Syria and other states in the region condemned Trump's pledge, saying it violates international law. France said the same.

Israel annexed the Golan Heights in 1981 in a move never recognized by the international community.

Netanyahu phoned Trump to tell him he had made "history," and called the gesture a "Purim miracle," a reference to the Jewish holiday that Israel was celebrating that day.

Although Trump professed no knowledge of the Israeli politics in play, Netanyahu's relationship with the US president has long been a central feature of his campaign.

Trump appears on giant campaign billboards in Israel shaking hands and smiling with Netanyahu, and the premier has shared video of the US leader calling him "strong" and a "winner."

On the same day as Trump's Golan Heights tweet, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo was in Jerusalem, where he joined Netanyahu in a visit to the historic Western Wall, offering his host a prime pre-election photo opportunity.

It was the first time such a high-ranking American official had visited one of the holiest sites in Judaism, located in mainly Palestinian east Jerusalem, with an Israeli premier.

Trump relies on pro-Israel evangelical Christians as part of his electoral base and has moved US policy firmly in Israel's favor.

But Netanyahu has also deployed his considerable powers of persuasion to charm the mercurial president he calls his "friend."

"Trump is very affected by personal things, and Bibi's stroked him a lot," said Jonathan Rynhold, a political science professor at Israel's Bar-Ilan University, using Netanyahu's nickname.

"I'm sure he's also very affected by the last thing that was said to him, so whispering in his ear is (Trump's son-in-law Jared) Kushner, who's got a good relationship with Bibi."

There has been talk in recent weeks about similarities in style between Trump and Netanyahu – although there are key differences.

Michael Oren, a former Israeli ambassador to the United States and now a deputy minister for diplomacy, said "they share a disdain for political correctness."

Using phrases that echo Trump's, Netanyahu has castigated the corruption investigations into his affairs as a "witch hunt" and a plot aimed at forcing him from office.

He has sought to demonize his enemies and brokered a deal with an extreme-right political party many view as racist.

Like Trump, he has employed the phrase "fake news" to combat tough coverage of him.

But, as Rynhold points out, underneath the rhetoric the 69-year-old Netanyahu is an "extremely cautious politician," intensely attuned to the direction of the electoral winds.

He has been prime minister for a total of 13 years and will be on track to

surpass founding father David Ben-Gurion as Israel's longest-serving premier if he wins next month.



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[US clinches strategic port deal with Oman](#)

Sun, 2019-03-24 19:36

WASHINGTON: The United States clinched a strategic port deal with Oman on Sunday which US officials say will allow the US military better access to the Gulf region and reduce the need to send ships through the Strait of Hormuz, a maritime choke point off Iran.

The US embassy in Oman said in a statement that the agreement governed US access to facilities and ports in Duqm as well as in Salalah and "reaffirms the commitment of both countries to promoting mutual security goals."

The accord is viewed through an economic prism by Oman, which wants to develop Duqm while preserving its Switzerland-like neutral role in Middle Eastern politics and diplomacy.

But it comes as the United States grows increasingly concerned about Iran's expanding missile programs, which have improved in recent years despite sanctions and diplomatic pressure by the United States.

A US official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said the deal was significant by improving access to ports that connect to a network of roads to the broader region, giving the US military great resiliency in a crisis. "We used to operate on the assumption that we could just steam into the Gulf," one US official said, adding, however, that "the quality and quantity of Iranian weapons raises concerns."

Tehran has in the past threatened to block the Strait of Hormuz, a major oil shipping route at the mouth of the Gulf, in retaliation for any hostile US action, including attempts to halt Iranian oil exports through sanctions. Still, the US official noted that the agreement would expand US military options in the region for any kind of crisis.

Duqm is an ideal port for large ships. It is even big enough to turn around an aircraft carrier, a second official said.

"The port itself is very attractive and the geostrategic location is very attractive, again being outside the Strait of Hormuz," the official said, adding that negotiations began under the Obama administration.

For Oman, the deal will further advance its efforts to transform Duqm, once just a fishing village 550 km (345 miles) south of capital Muscat, into a key Middle East industrial and port center, as it diversifies its economy beyond oil and gas exports.

The deal could also better position the United States in the region for what has become a global competition with China for influence.

Chinese firms once aimed to invest up to \$10.7 billion in the Duqm project, a massive injection of capital into Oman, in what was expected to be a commercial, not military, arrangement.

"It looks to me like the Chinese relationship here isn't as big as it appeared it was going to be a couple of years ago," the second official said. "There's a section of the Duqm industrial zone that's been set aside for the Chinese ... and as far as I can tell so far they've done just about nothing." Still, China has in the past shown no qualms about rubbing up against US military facilities.

In 2017, the African nation of Djibouti, positioned at another geostrategic choke-point, the strait of Bab Al-Mandeb, became home to China's first overseas military base. The US military already had a base located just miles away, which has been crucial for operations against Daesh, Al-Qaeda and other militant groups.



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[Syria's return to Arab League not on summit agenda: spokesman](#)

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Sun, 2019-03-24 13:12

CAIRO: The Arab League said Sunday it was not planning to discuss reinstating Syria's membership at a summit later this month, more than eight years after suspending it as the country descended into war.

The pan-Arab bloc, which is set to hold its annual summit in Tunisia on March 31, froze Syria's membership in November 2011 over a bloody government crackdown on protestors.

But several of the bloc's other 21 members have recently renewed ties with the regime of President Bashar al-Assad, and some have called for Syria to be re-admitted to the league.

"The issue of Syria's return to the Arab League has yet to be listed on the agenda and has not been formally proposed," said the League's spokesman Mahmoud Afifi.

He noted that the "Syrian crisis" however still tops the agenda, along with the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the situation in Yemen and Libya.

Syria's conflict flared in 2011 with anti-government demonstrations that sparked a brutal regime crackdown.

It has since drawn in regional powers, killing 370,000 people and displacing millions.

But the regime, backed by allies Russia and Iran, has since re-conquered much of the territory it had lost to rebels and terrorists, and now controls some two-thirds of the country.

Syria's Kurds, which declared victory over Daesh on Saturday, control much of the oil-rich northeast, which the regime has hinted it may seize back in a military operation.

Earlier this month, Syrian officials attended a meeting of Arab states in neighbouring Jordan for the first time since the country's Arab League membership was suspended.

Sudanese President Omar Al-Bashir in December made the first visit of any Arab leader to the Syrian capital since 2011.

The same month, Egypt hosted Syria's national security chief and top Assad aide Ali Mamluk.

The UAE also reopened its Damascus embassy in a major sign of a diplomatic thaw.

Arab states have also slammed US President Donald Trump's call for recognition of Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights, a strategic territory the Jewish state seized from Syria in 1967.



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Syria Kurds urge world to take back foreign militants Trump declares all Daesh-held territory eliminated in Syria but SDF continue fighting

[Stopping Israeli violence, promoting regional security vital: Egypt, Jordan, Iraq](#)

Sun, 2019-03-24 15:59

LONDON: Stopping escalation of Israeli violence in Jerusalem and violations against the Al-Aqsa mosque is necessary, Egypt and Jordan said in a joint statement Sunday.

A further statement issued by Egypt, Jordan, and Iraq said that the countries support Palestine and its claim to East Jerusalem as its capital.

The three countries held an economic cooperation summit in Cairo on Sunday.

President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi hosted the summit that was attended by Jordan's King Abdullah II and Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi. The statement issued by the trio also emphasized the need to fight against terrorism in all its forms and confronting all those who provide terrorism with funds, arms, and media platforms. Egypt, Jordan and Iraq called for coordination with other Arab countries to restore stability in the region. They also emphasized the independence of Arab countries and the importance of preventing external intervention in their internal affairs. The statement stated the concept of the nation state must be strengthened in order to confront terrorism and sectarian strife. Support for Iraq's efforts to complete reconstruction and help displaced people return to their homes after the defeat of Daesh was also expressed by the three countries. On Saturday, Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi met with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi during his first trip abroad since taking office in October. During the meeting, Abdul Mahdi sought Egypt's support for efforts to tackle extremist militants in the region, and highlighted "the importance of drying up the sources of terrorism." He said "cooperation between Egypt and Iraq will be essential for this matter," according to an official statement.



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Iraqi parliament sacks local governor after Mosul boat capsizing Security tops agenda as Iraqi PM visits Egypt in first foreign trip