

Israel to withhold \$138 mln from Palestinians over prisoner payments

Sun, 2019-02-17 19:39

JERUSALEM: Israel said its security cabinet on Sunday decided to withhold \$138 million (122 million euros) in tax transfers to the Palestinian Authority over its payments to prisoners jailed for attacks on Israelis. A statement from Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's office said the withheld cash would be equal to that paid by the PA last year to "terrorists imprisoned in Israel, to their families and to released prisoners."

Israel alleges the payments encourage further violence.

The PA says the payments are a form of welfare to the families who have lost their main breadwinner and denies it is seeking to encourage violence.

Many Palestinians view prisoners and those killed while carrying out attacks as heroes in their conflict with Israel. Palestinian leaders often venerate them as martyrs.

Senior Palestine Liberation Organization official Ahmed Majdalani accused Israel and the United States, which has cut hundreds of millions of dollars in Palestinian aid, of an attempt at blackmail.

US President Donald Trump's White House is expected to release its long-awaited peace plan later this year that the Palestinians believe will be blatantly biased in favor of Israel.

The Palestinians cut off contact with the White House after Trump's 2017 declaration of Jerusalem as Israel's capital.

"The occupation government is seeking to destroy the national authority in partnership with the US administration of Donald Trump," Majdalani said in a statement.

The move to withhold the money comes in response to an Israeli law passed last year allowing it to do so.

Israel collects around \$127 million a month in customs duties levied on goods destined for Palestinian markets that transit through Israeli ports, and then transfers the money to the PA.

Netanyahu is running in an election scheduled for April 9, and has been seeking to shore up his security credentials in the eyes of voters ahead of polling day.

Earlier Sunday, Netanyahu said "today I will submit for cabinet approval the (legislation on) deducting of the terrorists' salaries from the Palestinian Authority funds."

"Security officials will brief the cabinet on the scope of the funds. This is an important law which we have advanced, and today we will pass it exactly as I promised."

The \$138 million will likely be deducted incrementally over a 12-month period, according to local media reports.

Sponsors of the July law on Palestinian funds wrote at the time that the PA paid around \$330 million a year to prisoners and their families, or seven percent of its budget.

It was not clear what caused the reduction in the amount.

The Palestinians have already facing a cut of more than \$500 million in

annual aid by Trump's administration, mostly to the UN agency for Palestinian refugees.

The Palestinian Authority also said in January it will refuse all further US government aid for fear of lawsuits over alleged support for terrorism due to a recently passed US law.

Israel has withheld payments in the past, notably in response to the Palestinians' 2011 admission to the UN cultural agency UNESCO as a full member.

The PA, which has limited sovereignty in parts of the occupied West Bank, relies heavily on outside financial aid.



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[Libyans, to varying degrees, celebrate 2011 uprising](#)

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Sun, 2019-02-17 13:53

BENGHAZI: Libyans are celebrating the eighth anniversary of their 2011 uprising that led to the overthrow and killing of longtime ruler Muammar Qaddafi, with the varying intensity of festivities underscoring the split between the country's east and west.

Hundreds of people reveled Sunday in the western cities of Tripoli, Misrata and Zawiya, where bands played national songs and flags lined the streets. But festivities were much more subdued in the country's east, with only a few people gathering at the central courthouse in Benghazi, a city that has billed itself as the birthplace of Libya's uprising.

Libya remains largely a chaotic patchwork of territory run by militias and gangs, with rival administrations in Tripoli and the east.



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[Netanyahu gives up role as Israel's foreign minister](#)

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Sun, 2019-02-17 13:48

JERUSALEM:Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Sunday handed over his role as foreign minister to intelligence minister Israel Katz, giving up the portfolio he has held since 2015.

Netanyahu's decision to appoint Katz as acting foreign minister came after an advocacy group, the Movement for Quality Government, went to court to press the prime minister to stop serving as foreign minister as well.

Government officials said Katz, who will remain intelligence minister and

also serves as transport minister, will hold the foreign affairs portfolio through the upcoming parliamentary election on April 9. Katz is a member of Netanyahu's right-wing Likud party, In addition to the premiership, Netanyahu still holds the defense portfolio, which he assumed after his former far-right coalition partner Avigdor Lieberman quit that post in November. Netanyahu is also health minister. The advocacy group that pushed for a new foreign minister had argued that Netanyahu's workload was untenable and further harmed a foreign ministry beset by budget disputes. Netanyahu's defenders have noted his personal rapport with the US and Russian leaders and regular tours abroad. "Together with the prime minister we will continue to lead the State of Israel's foreign policy to new achievements," Katz, 63, said on Twitter.



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[Erdogan offers seminary exchange for Greek mosque minarets](#)

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Sat, 2019-02-16 15:09

ANKARA: Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on Saturday suggested the mosque in Athens should open with minarets if the Greek premier wants to reopen a seminary in Istanbul.

Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras was in Turkey this month and visited the disputed landmarks of Hagia Sophia and the now-closed Greek Orthodox Halki seminary.

Tsipras said during the visit to the seminary located on Heybeli island off Istanbul on February 6 he hoped to reopen the school next time with Erdogan. Future priests of the Constantinople diocese had been trained at the seminary, which was closed in 1971 after tensions between Ankara and Athens over Cyprus.

Erdogan on Saturday complained that the Fethiye Mosque in Athens had no minarets despite Greek insistence that it would open.

The mosque was built in 1458 during the Ottoman occupation of Greece but has not been used as a mosque since 1821.

"Look you want something from us, you want the Halki seminary. And I tell you

(Greece), come, let's open the Fethiye Mosque," Erdogan said during a rally in the northwestern province of Edirne ahead of local elections on March 31. "They said, 'we are opening the mosque' but I said, why isn't there a minaret? Can a church be a church without a bell tower?" he said, describing his talks with Tsipras.

"We say, you want to build a bell tower? Come and do it... But what is an essential part of our mosques? The minarets," the Turkish president added. Erdogan said Tsipras told him he was wary of criticism from the Greek opposition.

After the independence war against Ottomans began in 1821, the minaret is believed by some to have been destroyed because it was a symbol of the Ottoman occupation.

Ankara had returned land taken from the seminary in 1943 but there is still international pressure on Turkey to reopen it.

Erdogan has previously said that its reopening is dependent on reciprocal steps from Greece to enhance the rights of the Turkish minority.





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Turkey bans rally for Kurdish MP on hunger strike
Turkey detains three over Istanbul building collapse

[Syria stuck with Assad for now, says UK minister Jeremy Hunt](#)

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Sat, 2019-02-16 19:24

LONDON: Syria has no future under Bashar Assad but is stuck with the president due to Russian support, Britain's top diplomat has said. Jeremy Hunt, the UK foreign secretary, said that Assad is likely to remain in his position "for the short-term and possibly longer," and called on Moscow to come forward with a solution.

"Assad ... is a truly horrific man who has shown that he won't hesitate to

butcher his own people in order to prolong his hold on power. And what future would a country like Syria have with a leader like that?," Hunt said in an interview with Asharq Al-Awsat newspaper.

"But the reality is because of Russian support, he is there and he is likely to stay for the short-term and possibly longer. It is for the Russians now to come forward with their solution because they have chosen to intervene in the way they have."

Hunt said it was "impossible" for Syria to have a bright future with Assad still in power.

"This is a man who mercilessly gassed his own people in the most brutally possible way against all international norms, and the Russians chose to prop him up. So it is for Russia now to show they are going to create peace and stability in Syria," he said.

Hunt added that the UK has "no plans" to reopen diplomatic relations with Syria.

The British official said the US withdrawal from eastern Syria should not take place in a way that harms "our allies like the SDF (Syrian Democratic Forces) in Syria who fought very bravely along Western troops for many years."

Asked about Britain's role following the US pullout from Syria, Hunt said: "There is no prospect of British troops going in to replace the American troops leaving, but of course we had discussions with the United States on an ongoing basis and when I was in Washington a couple of weeks ago about how we stabilize the situation in Syria."

Hunt also spoke about the territorial defeat of Daesh in Syria and Iraq – but cautioned that was not the same as crushing the mindset behind the terror group.

"We have not yet eliminated the cause of the Daesh movement which is so evil and so destructive and there is a lot more work left to do," he said.

"It is very important that the global coalition does not hang its hat up and say we are done now, because if we do that there is a very good chance that Daesh will be back."

"There (is) some evidence now in parts of Iraq that (Daesh is) regrouping and regathering strength."

On Yemen, Hunt underlined the need for a comprehensive solution that would prevent Iran from using the country as a base to destabilize neighboring states.

Asked about his recent participation in the Warsaw Conference on the Middle East, the British foreign secretary said that the meetings went beyond the Iranian role in the region to touch on reshaping alliances in the Middle East.

He added that he attended a "very productive meeting about Yemen," in the presence of US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, Saudi Foreign Minister Adel Al-Jubeir and his UAE counterpart Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed.

"We spent a long time talking about what is necessary to get peace over the line in Yemen," he said.

In this regard, Hunt affirmed that a comprehensive settlement in Yemen could only be reached through "a government of national unity in which the Houthis have a stake in which the security of all communities in Yemen is assured, in which Iran is no longer using Yemen as a base to destabilize Yemen's neighbors, and in which we can end the terrible humanitarian crisis which is

the worst humanitarian crisis in the world right now.”

According to Hunt, the problem lies in how to achieve a final solution and to build trust, in particular the importance of implementing the Stockholm Agreement and withdrawal from the city of Hodeidah “so that we can open up the Red Sea Mills,” where 51,000 tones of UN wheat is stored.

He noted that he held a lengthy discussion with Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammed Javad Zarif about this issue.

According to Hunt, he was told by Zarif that Iran wants to play its part in finding a solution. “We took those commitments at face value but we do now need to see that translated into the Houthis leaving the Port of Hodeideh.”

“All of us know that if that does not happen soon, we are going to see a return to hostilities and that would be an absolute tragedy to the people of Yemen,” Hunt said.

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