

France urges Israel to reconsider settler home approvals in West Bank

Author:

Reuters

ID:

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PARIS: France on Thursday called on Israel to reconsider recently issued approvals for more than 2,000 settler homes in the occupied West Bank, saying they would violate international law.

Israel's Higher Planning Committee approved 2,191 new housing units in Israeli settlements on Dec. 25 and 26, though no building permits have been issued yet.

"France condemns this decision, which expands settlement activity in the West Bank," the French foreign office said in a statement.

The settlements undermined the conditions for a two-state solution, "the only way to ensure a just and lasting peace between Israelis and Palestinians, and heightens tensions" it said, calling on the Israeli authorities to reconsider the decisions.

Some 500,000 Israelis live in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, areas captured by Israel in the 1967 Middle East War that are also home to more than 2.6 million Palestinians.

Settlements are one of the thorniest issues in efforts to restart Israeli-Palestinian peace talks, frozen since 2014.

Most countries consider all settlements that Israel has built in captured territory to be illegal. Israel disputes this and says their future should be determined in peace talks with the Palestinians.

While Israel's settlement projects have regularly drawn condemnation from the Palestinians and in Europe, the US administration under President Donald Trump has taken a largely uncritical public stand.



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Israel army destroys Palestinian attacker's West Bank home
Airbnb to remove listings in West Bank settlements

[Popular former military chief jumps into politics in Israel](#)

Author:

By ARON HELLER | AP

ID:

1545924399741781700

Thu, 2018-12-27 (All day)

JERUSALEM: A popular former Israeli military chief jumped into the political fray Thursday, announcing he would run for office in the upcoming election and instantly injected perhaps the strongest challenge to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's lengthy rule.

Retired Lt. Gen. Benny Gantz has been polling favorably in recent weeks, emerging as a fresh, exciting face in Israel's staid political landscape. By officially registering his new party, "Israel Resilience," Gantz shakes up a snap three-month election campaign that has been widely seen as Netanyahu's to lose.

Even before officially entering the fray, several polls showed Gantz's hypothetical party coming in second only to Netanyahu's ruling Likud in the run-up to the April 9 vote.

Gantz has yet to comment publicly on the party and was not expected to make any statement Thursday.

Though Gantz has yet to lay out his worldview or political platform, he flaunts stellar military credentials – a must in security-centric Israel – and a squeaky-clean image to contrast Netanyahu's corruption-laden reputation.

While still short of the kind of widespread support likely needed to become prime minister, his candidacy captures a yearning in Israel for a viable alternative to emerge against the long-serving Netanyahu, seeking his fourth consecutive term in office.

With a commanding lead in the polls, and a potential indictment looming against him, Netanyahu called early elections this week, seeking to pre-empt corruption charges and return to office to become the longest serving premier in Israeli history.

Police have recommended charging Netanyahu with bribery and breach of trust in three different cases. Netanyahu has denied any wrongdoing, dismissing the allegations as a media-orchestrated witch hunt aimed at removing him from office.

Even with Netanyahu's legal woes, Israel's established opposition parties have remained splintered and have been unable to produce a viable challenger. Gantz seems to be taking votes away from all the major parties and may not tip the scales away from Netanyahu just yet. But the emergence of the tall, telegenic ex-general with salty hair makes things more interesting, as he could spark new alliances with other moderate parties to give the hard-line Likud a good fight.

"It's too early to tell, but he definitely strengthens the center-left camp," said Mina Tzemach, a leading Israeli pollster, whose most recent survey gave Gantz's new party as many as 16 seats in the 120-seat Parliament. "He projects security and integrity. And the fact that he looks good doesn't hurt either."

Gantz, 59, was a paratrooper who rose up the ranks to command special operations units and other various units before becoming Israel's 20th military chief between 2011-2015. His term was marked by two wars with Hamas militants in Gaza and a covert air campaign in Syria against Iranian arms shipments to Hezbollah guerrillas in Lebanon. Since his discharge, he's been highly coveted by several Israeli political parties.



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Israeli parliament approves early elections
Poll shows Israel's Netanyahu
cruising toward re-election

[**Saudi Arabia condemns terrorist attacks in Libya, Afghanistan and Iraq**](#)

Author:

Shounaz Mekky

ID:

1545858438317049900

Thu, 2018-12-27 00:07

JEDDAH: Saudi Arabia condemned in the strongest terms on Wednesday the attack on the Libyan Foreign Ministry building in Tripoli, reported the state run SPA.

An official source at the Saudi Foreign Ministry also condemned the attack on

the Afghan government building in Kabul and Tuesday's car bombing in Iraq's Tal Afar, which caused several casualties. The source reiterated the Kingdom's rejection of terrorist attacks and their violation of all international laws. The source offered condolences, on behalf of the Kingdom, to the families of the victims in all three countries, as well as to their governments and people.



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[Israeli parliament approves early elections](#)

Author:

AFP

ID:

1545852602566820400

Wed, 2018-12-26 19:22

JERUSALEM: Israeli lawmakers on Wednesday voted overwhelmingly to dissolve

parliament and hold snap elections on April 9.

Legislators backed the move 102 for and two against after Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's coalition agreed Monday on early polls.

The premier's coalition was left with a one-seat majority after defense minister Avigdor Lieberman stepped down in November over a controversial Gaza cease-fire deal.

Party leaders have failed to agree on a key bill regulating drafting ultra-Orthodox Jews to the army, and that was the immediate reason to move toward elections.

Analysts, however, say that Netanyahu wanted the polls before Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit announces his decision on whether to indict the premier in three different corruption cases.

While no official timeframe has been given, reports say such an announcement could come in mid-April.

With politicians now entering campaign mode, Netanyahu met in Jerusalem on Wednesday with leaders of Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank and made his pitch for why they should stick with him.

Netanyahu's current coalition is seen as the most right-wing in Israel's history.

"We'll see an attempt by the left-wing to overthrow our rule with the help of the media and others," he said.

"They can't succeed, because if they do – that will pose a clear danger to the settlement movement."

Calling on their support in the elections, Netanyahu told the settler leaders they should not take the fate of their enterprise for granted.

"We had to work hard, with the current American administration as well, for the great achievements we brought the settlements," he said in remarks relayed by his office.

While Netanyahu portrays himself as the champion of the settlements, settler leaders say he has not done enough, with three prominent heads of West Bank settlements boycotting the Wednesday meeting in protest.

Key members of his coalition are however strong settlement backers and oppose a Palestinian state.



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Poll shows Israel's Netanyahu cruising toward re-election
Israel to hold early elections in April

[President Trump makes surprise visit to Iraq](#)

Wed, 2018-12-26 22:22

AL-ASAD AIRBASE, Iraq: President Donald Trump made an unannounced visit to Iraq on Wednesday, leaving behind a partially shuttered US government to greet American troops helping hold off extremists in a country where thousands of Americans died during the recent war.

It comes a week after Trump stunned his national security advisers by announcing that he would withdraw US troops from neighboring Syria where they have been fighting Daesh militants. Defense Secretary Jim Mattis abruptly resigned following the announcement, and Trump's decision rattled allies

around the world, including in Iraq.

Trump's trip was shrouded in secrecy. Air Force One flew overnight from Washington, landing at an airbase west of Baghdad under the cover of darkness Wednesday evening. It is his first visit with troops stationed in a troubled region.

Fifteen years after the 2003 invasion, the US still has more than 5,000 troops in Iraq supporting the government as it continues the fight against remaining pockets of resistance by Daesh. The group has lost a significant amount of territory in Iraq and Syria but is still seen as a threat.

Trump, who speaks often about his support for the US military, had faced criticism for not yet visiting US troops stationed in harm's way as he comes up on his two-year mark in office. He told The Associated Press in an interview in October that he "will do that at some point, but I don't think it's overly necessary." He later began to signal that such a troop visit was in the offing.

Trump had planned to spend Christmas at his private club in Florida, but stayed behind in Washington due to the shutdown. It's unclear whether his trip to Iraq was added after it became apparent that the government would be shut down indefinitely due to a stalemate between Trump and congressional Democrats over the president's demand for a wall along the US-Mexico border. Adding to the tumult, the stock market has been experiencing heavy losses over concerns about a slowing global economy, Trump's trade war with China and the president's public slamming of the Federal Reserve and its chairman over interest rate hikes by the independent agency.

Trump's visit comes at a time when his Middle East policy is in flux. He went against the views of his top national security advisers in announcing the Syria withdrawal, a decision that risks creating a vacuum for extremists to thrive.

There are dire implications in particular for neighboring Iraq. The Iraqi government now has control of all the country's cities, towns and villages after fighting its last urban battles against Daesh in December 2017. But its political, military and economic situation remains uncertain, and the country continues to experience sporadic bombings, kidnappings and assassinations, which most people attribute to Daesh.

Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi recently said Iraqi troops could deploy into Syria to protect Iraq from threats across its borders. Iraq keeps reinforcements along its frontier to guard against infiltration by Daesh militants, who hold a pocket of territory along the Euphrates River. Trump campaigned for office on a platform of ending US involvement in foreign trouble spots, such as Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq. The Syria decision will ultimately affect all of the approximately 2,000 troops deployed in the war-torn country. The Pentagon is also said to be developing plans to withdraw up to half of the 14,000 American troops still serving in Afghanistan.

During the presidential campaign, Trump blamed Democrat Hillary Clinton for the rise of Daesh, due to the withdrawal of US troops from Iraq at the end of 2011 during her tenure as secretary of state.

President George W. Bush is the one who set the 2011 withdrawal date as part of an agreement with the Iraqi government to gradually shrink the US footprint and slowly hand off security responsibilities to the government and Iraqi security forces.

His successor, President Barack Obama, wanted to leave a residual force in

Iraq to help the government manage ongoing security challenges. But he ultimately went ahead with the scheduled pullout in 2011 after Iraqi's political leaders rejected terms the US sought for legal protections for the US troops that would have remained.

Two of Trump's recent predecessors visited Iraq early in their terms. Bush visited Iraq in November 2003, about eight months after that conflict began. Due to security concerns, Bush waited until 2006 to make his first visit to Afghanistan.

Obama visited Iraq in April 2009, the first year of his eight years in office, as part of an overseas tour. He visited Afghanistan in 2010.

Vice President Mike Pence visited Afghanistan in December 2017, not long after Trump outlined a strategy to break the stalemate in America's longest war. Pence met with Afghan leaders and visited with US troops stationed in the country. Trump has not visited Afghanistan.







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