

Netanyahu rejects corruption allegations in live address to Israel

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Mon, 2019-01-07 (All day)

JERUSALEM: Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, contesting an April election under the shadow of possible corruption charges, demanded on Monday to confront the state's witnesses against him.

Announcing on Twitter, three hours beforehand, that he would make a "special announcement" on Israeli TV, Netanyahu – now in his fourth term – touched off a wave of social media speculation that he might resign or even launch legal action of his own to try to stay any indictment.

Instead, he kicked off Israel's main TV evening news programs with an anticlimactic speech in which he again professed his innocence in a series of corruption cases. He contended he was a victim of a political witchhunt and said he was being denied the chance to challenge his accusers face-to-face. "I demand a confrontation with the state's witnesses now. What are they afraid of? What do they have to hide? I am not afraid and I have nothing to hide...As far as I am concerned it can be broadcast live, so the public can see and hear it."

In response, Israel's Justice Ministry said the investigations against Netanyahu – who is now in his fourth term – have been carried out professionally and thoroughly.

Netanyahu's calling of the snap election, ahead of a national ballot due by November, was widely seen as a direct appeal to voters for a fresh political mandate that could help him weather a potential indictment.

Netanyahu, who heads the right-wing Likud party, said investigators had twice turned down his requests to confront the witnesses. At least three ex-Netanyahu confidants have agreed to provide evidence against him, Israeli media reports said.

Netanyahu is enmeshed in three graft cases. He has said he would not bow out of the election race if Israel's attorney-general announces his intention to accept police recommendations to indict him.

Should he decide on an indictment, the attorney-general would, under Israeli law, then hold a hearing with Netanyahu in which the prime minister and his lawyers could make their case against filing charges in court.

There has been mounting speculation in Israel that an indictment decision will be announced in the next few weeks, before election day.

Police have alleged that Netanyahu granted regulatory favors to Israel's leading telecommunications company, Bezeq Telecom Israel, in return for more positive coverage on a news website belonging to the firm's owner.

In a second case, police contend that Netanyahu received expensive gifts from wealthy friends. A third investigation focuses on suspicions that Netanyahu negotiated a deal with one newspaper for better coverage in return for promises to back legislation that would have limited the circulation of a

rival.



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Netanyahu takes aim at graft probes ahead of Israel polls
Israeli PM Netanyahu rules out resignation if prosecutors move to indict him

[Visits to Israel by Iraqi officials stir controversy](#)

Author:

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Mon, 2019-01-07 15:17

BAGHDAD: Visits by Iraqi officials to Israel announced by the Jewish state stirred controversy Monday in Iraq, where the deputy parliamentary speaker demanded a probe to identify those who crossed a "red line."
Israel's foreign ministry said on Twitter on Sunday that three Iraqi delegations visited Israel in 2018, and details were also later released by

media.

Baghdad does not recognize Israel, and is technically in a state of war with it.

First deputy speaker of parliament Hassan Karim Al-Kaabi called in a statement for “an investigation... to identify those who went to the occupied territory, particularly if they are lawmakers.”

“To go to the occupied territory is a red line and an extremely sensitive issue for all Muslims,” the statement said.

Kaabi is close to Shiite leader Moqtada Sadr, whose bloc won the largest number of seats in Iraq’s legislative election last year.

Israel’s foreign ministry said on Twitter that the 15 Iraqi visitors were “influential Shiite and Sunni personalities in the country,” but did not give names.

The ministry said the Iraqi travelers had visited “Israeli officials and universities,” as well as the Holocaust memorial in Jerusalem.

A spokesman for the memorial told AFP that “a group of 10 Iraqis” had “undertaken a guided tour in late December.”

He said he was not able to give details on the identity and roles of the Iraqis.

Private Israeli TV station Hadashot, which described the Iraqis as “local leaders,” said Sunday that they had stressed they were not taking part in an official visit and that secrecy was paramount.

A significant Iraqi Jewish community lives in Israel and regularly calls for a normalization of ties between Baghdad and the Jewish state.

But the question remains sensitive and Israel’s support for an independence referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan in late 2017 provoked Iraqi officials’ ire.

Israel was the only country to back the vote, which Baghdad deemed illegal.

In 2017, a former Miss Iraq sparked a storm when she took a selfie with Miss Israel.



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Israeli military strikes Gaza after overnight rocket fire
Israel arrests Jewish students over Palestinian woman's death

[Hamas says Egypt to close Gaza crossing to Palestinians leaving the territory](#)

Author:

AFP

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Mon, 2019-01-07 12:38

RAFAH: Egypt will bar Gazans from crossing into its territory from Tuesday, after the Palestinian Authority withdrew staff from the border point over alleged abuses.

The partial closure will raise fears over the impact on Gaza's two million residents, for whom a rare opening of the crossing in recent months has provided an opportunity to leave the strip, controlled by Hamas.

A statement late Monday from the Hamas-run interior ministry said Egyptian authorities had informed them the crossing "will be limited to only the arrival of individuals and the entry of goods".

It did not say for how long it was expected to be closed for those leaving, and there was no immediate comment from Egypt.

Rafah – the only way for Gazans to leave the Palestinian enclave that bypasses Israel – was closed Monday due to the Orthodox Christmas holiday but had been expected to reopen both directions Tuesday.

The PA's civil affairs authority on Sunday announced its staff would no longer man the crossing, accusing Hamas of "summoning, arresting and abusing our employees", according to official Palestinian news agency WAFA.

Earlier on Monday Hamas employees retook the post in what they said was an attempt to maintain border control after the shock PA withdrawal.

An AFP journalist saw Hamas officials at the border crossing's main gate and inside accompanying offices in southern Gaza.

Hamas' interior ministry spokesman Iyad al-Bozum said his organisation aimed to "protect the interests of our people."

Hamas seized control of Gaza in 2007 in a near civil war with Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas' Fatah party.

But the PA took control of Rafah in November 2017, as part of a deal for

Egypt to reopen a border that had been entirely shut from August that year and largely sealed for years before that.

The PA's takeover of Rafah in 2017 was seen as a first step towards implementing a reconciliation agreement between it and Hamas.

The deal has subsequently broken down and Abbas' PA has taken a series of measures against Gaza.

Egypt has allowed the border to open regularly since August 2018, providing a lifeline to the enclave's residents.

Israel has maintained a crippling blockade of Gaza for more than a decade, in a bid to isolate Hamas and keep it from obtaining weapons.

Critics say the policy amounts to collective punishment.

Israel and Hamas have fought three wars since 2008.

A planned event commemorating the anniversary of the founding of Fatah – due to take place in Gaza on Monday – was cancelled on Sunday, as organisers said they faced threats.



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Israeli military strikes Gaza after overnight rocket fire
Fatah withdraws officers from Gaza-Egypt crossing

Israel arrests Jewish students over Palestinian woman's death

Author:

Sun, 2019-01-06 21:32

JERUSALEM: Israel has arrested five Jewish seminary students in the occupied West Bank in connection with a fatal rock attack on a Palestinian car that killed a woman, the Israeli domestic intelligence service said on Sunday.

The arrests had led to mounting speculation in the Israeli media, but authorities had refused to comment, citing a gag order on details of the case while the investigation continued.

There was also a protest of several hundred people on Saturday night outside Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's residence over the detention of the Jewish minors.

A number of suspects had been arrested on Dec. 30, more than two months after Aisha Al-Rabi was killed on Oct. 12, Israel's Shin Bet domestic security agency said in a statement after a court order limiting media coverage of the Dec. 30 arrests was lifted.

"The suspects were arrested for serious terrorist offenses, including murder," the Shin Bet statement said.

It added that the stoning took place near the Jewish settlement of Rechalim, close to Rabi's village of Bidiya in the Israeli-occupied northern West Bank.

A mother of nine, Rabi, 47, suffered a fatal head wound from a rock thrown at her car near the Palestinian city of Nablus on Oct. 12 and died later at a hospital in the city, Palestinian official news agency WAFA reported at the time.

Her husband, who was driving the car at the time, escaped with minor injuries, WAFA said.

Palestinian witnesses and security sources cited by the news agency said the stones were thrown by Israeli settlers.

The Shin Bet did not give the number or ages of suspects held, but said they were members of a Jewish seminary in Rechalim.

Their parents and lawyers have been protesting since the arrests over what they said was their sons' detention in an undisclosed location without access to lawyers.

Israeli investigations into "Jewish terrorism" – as such cases are often referred to by Israeli media – are highly sensitive.

Israeli authorities have been accused by rights activists of dragging their feet in such cases in comparison to investigations into Palestinian attacks, while far-right Israelis say suspects have undergone coercion and torture.

The Shin Bet said the five detainees, who it did not name, attend a seminary in Rehelim, a neighboring Jewish settlement. They are all under the age of 18 and have not been formally charged.

The Shin Bet said in its statement the detainees had been questioned in accordance with the law.



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Israeli settlement activity surges in Trump era
Israel opposition in dramatic split ahead of election

Rival powers vying for space to grab in Syria's east

Author:

Sun, 2019-01-06 21:22

BEIRUT: The planned US troop withdrawal opens up a void in the north and east of Syria, and the conflicts and rivalries among all the powers in the Middle East are converging to fill it. The sudden American decision to pull out its 2,000 troops has forced a reassessment of old alliances and partnerships. The Syrian government, the Kurds, Russia, Iran, Israel and Turkey have all had a hand in the country's nearly eight-year war – each in a way, fighting its own war for its own reasons within Syria. Now all of those conflicts play out in the territory being abandoned by the Americans, creating new tensions, potential chaos and bloodshed. Here is a look at what is at stake.

The territory

The area up for grabs is around a third of Syria, forming a rough triangle. To the north is the border with Turkey, to the east the border with Iraq, and the third side is the Euphrates River. This was the heart of the Daesh foothold in Syria until the US partnered with a Kurdish militia, creating a force of some 60,000 fighters – including some Syrian Arabs and Christian Assyrians – that wrested it away from the militants.

The territory is strategically important. For the Syrian regime of Bashar Assad and its allies Russia and Iran, regaining it means re-establishing sovereignty. The territory was once the source of Syria's wheat and barley, its dams generated electricity and it holds some of Syria's richest oil resources. Without it, Assad will have a harder time with reconstruction and operating long term. For the same reasons, it's been a source of income for the Kurdish militia.

Assad and Russia

Without the Americans, the door opens for Assad and his Russian backers to move in.

“The only obstacle preventing Assad from gaining control of the east was the US presence and the cover that it provided to the (Kurdish militia).

“With that gone ... there is simply no real challenge that would prevent the regime from re-establishing control over those areas,” said Ayham Kamel, of the Eurasia group.

Abandoned by the US, the Kurdish fighters are forced to move toward Russia and Assad for protection against their more feared enemy, Turkey.

Syrian officials boast that the withdrawal is a defeat to America. Controlling the east would help seal Assad's victory in the civil war. The American move also accelerates a trend by Arab states to normalize relations

with Assad, whom they shunned for years. The UAE, a close US and Saudi ally, recently reopened its embassy in Damascus.

Turkey vs. Kurds, Russia and Assad

Turkey's military, along with some 15,000 allied Syrian opposition fighters, is poised to launch an offensive in the east to break Kurdish control over the border.

But an offensive risks creating friction with Russia. In particular, it could wreck a cease-fire agreement the two reached over Idlib, the northwestern province held by rebels and extremist militants where Turkey has influence – enabling a Syrian government assault on the province. Russian and Turkish officials have been holding talks, trying to avert tensions.

Iran and Israel

A Syrian government move east means the spread of Iran as well. It will dramatically widen the land corridor where Iran enjoys free rein for its allied fighters, weapons and supplies across Iraq and Syria to Lebanon.

Already, Iranian-backed militias have expanded control over areas near Syria's border with Iraq and freely cross back and forth. That has alarmed Israel. The likely result will be increased Israeli airstrikes against suspected Iranian-linked targets in Syria.

US, Turkey and Daesh

President Donald Trump dismissed the idea that the US needs influence in the conflict, saying Syria was nothing but "sand and death." He claims the US mission there – to fight Daesh – has largely been completed. But Daesh still holds pockets and US-led coalition officials warn it could surge again.

There has also been growing unrest among Arab tribes in the east, disgruntled by the Kurdish-led administration. They too are likely to be a source of tension and may be leveraged by the different players for their own advantages.



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