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Israel & Cyprus Foreign Ministers plan to defuse EU opposition to annexation

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06.23.20

Israel & Cyprus Foreign Ministers plan to defuse EU opposition to annexation

Israel courts Cypriot help on EU opposition to annexation

Foreign Minister Ashkenazi meets counterpart from Nicosia at Ben Gurion Airport, says Israel committed to proceeding ‘in a responsible and coordinated manner’

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The foreign ministers of Israel and Cyprus met Tuesday as Jerusalem seeks to defuse European opposition to its plan to annex parts of the West Bank.

Gabi Ashkenazi met his Cypriot counterpart Nikos Christodoulides at Ben Gurion Airport after plans for a larger delegation led by President Nicos Anastasiades were revised over coronavirus concerns.

"Ashkenazi asked Christodoulides for Cyprus to act as a moderating voice in discourse with European countries," a Foreign Ministry statement said.

U.S. President Donald Trump in January unveiled a controversial plan for Israeli-Palestinian peace, giving Israel a green light to annex West Bank settlements and the Jordan Valley.

Israel has said it **intends to start implementing** the plan from **next month**, triggering widespread concern, particularly in the European Union.

The **Palestinians** have **rejected** the plan **and are trying to rally** international **opposition** to it.

At Tuesday's meeting, the statement said, Ashkenazi told Christodoulides that his country was committed to proceeding "in a responsible and coordinated manner with the various parties in the region."

Jerusalem, he added, would do so "while maintaining Israel's strategic and security interests based on President Trump's peace plan".

France, Germany, Belgium and Estonia last month urged Israel not to make "any unilateral decision that would lead to the annexation of any occupied Palestinian territory".

But **EU states have not taken a united stand against the plan**.

Israeli diplomats are working to **shore up support** in the 27-member union.

Israel last week welcomed a **favorable** European parliament **vote on an aviation treaty** and the overturning of a motion to delay ratification of the accord in protest at the proposed annexation.

It said that had been "made possible by ongoing and intensive diplomatic work" by Israeli ambassadors in Europe.

06.23.20

Gantz: Israel will not wait for the Palestinians, they say no forever to everything

Gantz: Israel will not wait for the Palestinians

Defense Minister signals that he will support unilateral application of sovereignty in the West Bank; Army Radio says Foreign Minister Ashkenazi is working behind the scenes to 'thwart' annexation plans

Yoav Zitun, i24NEWS | Published: **06.23.20**, 18:24

Defense Minister Benny Gantz on Tuesday said that though he **is willing to enter direct talks with the Palestinians**, Israel "will not wait forever", indicating that he could back the unilateral annexation of territory in the West Bank.

"The **Palestinians** continue to **reject dialogue**. **We might have to advance without them**. We won't get into their deep shit," he said.

Gantz's comments came amid a meeting with defense officials who presented him with the various security concerns involving the initiative.

“We won’t take Palestinians into our territory, we won’t harm human rights or the right of movement, we’ll work in coordination with regional countries and we’re in contact with them, we won’t endanger the peace agreements,” he said. Also on Tuesday, Army Radio reported that Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi is working behind the scenes to thwart Jerusalem's plans to annex territories in the West Bank.

Citing a senior United Nations official, Army Radio quoted the source as saying there is “not a single logical reason for Israel to take a unilateral step” toward annexation.

The unnamed UN official reportedly conveyed the same message to senior Israeli politicians. In response, Ashkenazi's office said the Foreign Ministry is fully committed to the Trump peace plan, but any move to extend Israel's sovereignty into the West Bank must be coordinated with Washington and countries in the region. Meanwhile, UN Special Envoy for the Middle East Nickolay Mladenov, who addressed an anti-annexation demonstration in Jericho on Monday, denied that he was the quoted Army Radio's source, according to The Jerusalem Post.

Defense Minister Benny Gantz on Tuesday said that though he is willing to enter direct talks with the Palestinians, Israel "will not wait forever", indicating that he could back the unilateral initiative if there is no progress towards peace. “We won’t continue to wait for the Palestinians. If they say ‘no’ forever to everything then we’ll be forced to move forward without them,” he said.

“We won’t take Palestinians into our territory, we won’t harm human rights or the right of movement, we’ll work in coordination with regional countries and we’re in contact with them, we won’t endanger the peace agreements,” he says in a briefing to reporters.

06.23.20

West Bank leaders complicate annex saying they would be at greater risk of attack

In West Bank, settler leaders complicate annexation plan

Local officials oppose Trump's calls for future Palestinian statehood that would envelop at least 15 settlements, despite U.S. guarantees of protection for and access to the future 'enclaves'

Reuters| Published: 06.23.20 , 17:47

Settler leaders who resist the creation of a Palestinian state are complicating Israel's plans to annex scores of settlements in the West Bank under U.S. President Donald Trump's peace blueprint.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's cabinet is due next month to discuss the annexation plan, under which Israel would apply sovereignty over 30% of the West Bank - in areas where most of its about 130 settlements are located.

The plan is opposed by the Palestinians, who seek a state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, with East Jerusalem as its capital. Most world powers agree. The plan also faces resistance from settler leaders who oppose Trump's calls for a future Palestinian state that would envelop at least 15 settlements - despite U.S. guarantees of protection for, and access to, the future "enclaves."
"We're talking about strangling a community," said Hananel Elkayam, mayor of the settlement of Itamar, one of the 15 named in the plan.

In misgivings echoed in the other 14, Elkayam predicted residents would be unable to commute to jobs through territory that would be in a new Palestinian state, would be denied construction, and would be at greater risk of attack than now.
"I would tell (Trump): Thanks very much for the plan, thanks very much for the great affection for the Jewish people (but) we'll set our own destiny," Elkayam said.

Keeping the door to diplomacy open

U.S. officials will this week discuss whether to give Israel the green light for annexation moves seen by the Palestinians and many other countries as illegal land-grabs.

Israel's West Bank settlements were built by successive governments on land captured from Jordan in the 1967 Six-Day War. More than 400,000 Israelis now live there, with another 200,000 in East Jerusalem, which was also captured in 1967.

A Direct Poll survey last week found 56.8% of settlers support the Trump plan, more than the Israeli average.

Elkayam and other settler leaders say that backing is for annexation - on condition that plans for Palestinian statehood are scrapped.

Israeli and U.S. officials want to be seen as keeping a door open to diplomacy. Where that door might lead worries Yochai Damri, head of a regional council that includes four of the 15 listed settlements.

Damri sees Palestinian statehood becoming more likely if the Republican president is defeated by Democrat Joe Biden in November's U.S. election, and if, or when, Netanyahu is succeeded by Benny Gantz, the premier's partner in a fragile unity government.

The Trump plan says residents of the future enclaves can stay put "unless they choose otherwise."

Damri and other settlers hear in that a hint that they should quit to make way for Palestinian territorial contiguity.

06.22.20

Friedman, Pompeo, Kushner, Berkowitz, Trump meeting this week on annex plan

U.S. officials to meet this week on Israel annexation plan

Senior administration official says U.S. Ambassador to Israel Friedman will be in Washington to discuss contentious plan; U.S. President Trump may also join
Reuters| Published: 06.22.20 , 22:52

U.S. officials will gather this week to discuss whether to give Israel a green light for its plan to annex Jewish settlements in the West Bank, as Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's target date of July 1 approaches.

A senior administration official said on Monday that U.S. Ambassador to Israel David Friedman will be in Washington to meet officials including Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, senior White House adviser Jared Kushner, and Middle East envoy Avi Berkowitz. President Donald Trump could also join in.

Under President Trump's Middle East peace proposal, unveiled in January, it is envisaged that the United States would recognize the Jewish settlements - built on land that the Palestinians seek for a state - as part of Israel.

The proposal would create a Palestinian state as part of a broader peace plan, but impose strict conditions on it. Palestinian leaders have dismissed the initiative entirely.

Encouraged by President Trump's push, Prime Minister Netanyahu has set July 1 as the date to launch his project of extending sovereignty over the settlements and the Jordan Valley, hoping for a green light from Washington. Most countries view Israel's settlements as illegal, and Palestinian leaders have voiced outrage at the prospect of annexation.

"Ultimately, as the team approaches this thought of annexation, the main thing going through our heads is, 'Does this in fact help advance the cause of peace?' And therefore that is what will help drive a lot of the discussion," the official said.

LIMITED ANNEXATION FIRST?

Among the main options expected to be considered is a step-by-step process in which Israel would initially declare sovereignty over several settlements close to Jerusalem instead of the 30% of the West Bank envisaged in Prime Minister Netanyahu's original plan, according to a person familiar with the matter.

The source said the Trump administration has not closed the door to a larger annexation, but fears that allowing Israel to move too fast could kill any hopes of eventually drawing the Palestinians to sit down to discuss President Trump's peace plan.

There are also concerns about opposition to annexation from Jordan, one of only two countries that have a peace treaty with Israel, as well from Gulf states that have quietly expanded engagement with Israel in recent years.

Washington has also made clear it wants Israel's unity government, which has been divided on the issue, to reach a consensus before going ahead with any actions, the source said. Blue & White Chairman and Defense Minister Benny Gantz has so far been reluctant to back Likud-leader Netanyahu's plan.

Berkowitz has been fielding calls about the Trump plan from European and Arab nations, but the U.S. side has privately expressed frustration that they are not offering constructive ideas on how to amend it, a source familiar with the issue said.

06.21.20

Bolton & Trump endorsed Israeli strike on Iran nuclear sites & harsh sanctions

Bolton: Trump was prepared to endorse Israeli strike on Iran's nuclear sites
Multiple reports claim Netanyahu considered preemptive military actions against Iran's uranium development program, which he describes as posing an existential threat to Israel

i24NEWS| Updated: 06.21.20 , 19:36

US President Donald Trump wholeheartedly endorsed a potential Israeli military attack targeting Iran's nuclear installations, according to the controversial new book of his former national security advisor.

On Saturday, a US judge rejected a White House request to halt the release of John Bolton's tell-all book, which paints an unflattering picture of the Trump administration. In "The Room Where It Happened: A White House Memoir," the famously hawkish Bolton wrote that "On Iran, I urged that he press ahead to withdraw from the nuclear agreement and explained why the use of force against Iran's nuclear program might be the only lasting solution. 'You tell Bibi [Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu] that if he uses force, I will back him. I told him that, but you tell him again,' Trump said, unprompted by me."

Over the years, multiple reports said Israel seriously considered preemptive military actions against Iran's uranium development program, which Netanyahu has consistently described as posing an existential threat to the Jewish State. Netanyahu fiercely opposed the 2015 nuclear deal between Iran and world powers, which granted Iran license to pursue limited uranium enrichment, saying that the constraints put on the Islamic Republic were unenforceable.

Washington withdrew from the Iran deal in 2018, reimposing a series of harsh economic sanctions against Tehran.

06.21.20

Soros theories surge as protests sweep US, he donated billions to liberal terrorism

Soros conspiracy theories surge as protests sweep U.S.
Jewish investor and philanthropist has donated billions of dollars of his personal money to liberal and anti-authoritarian causes around world, and has been subject of anti-Semitic attacks and conspiracy theories for decades

Associated Press| Published: 06.21.20 , 18:06

They say he hires protesters and rents buses to transport them. Some say he has people stash piles of bricks to be hurled into glass storefronts or at police.

George Soros, the billionaire investor, and philanthropist who has long been a target of conspiracy theories is now being falsely accused of orchestrating and funding the protests over police killings of Black people that have roiled the United States. Amplified by a growing number of people on the far right, including some Republican leaders, online posts about Soros have skyrocketed in recent weeks.

They have been accompanied by online ads bought by conservative groups that call on authorities to "investigate George Soros for funding domestic terrorism and his decades-long corruption."

Soros, 89, has donated billions of dollars of his personal wealth to liberal and anti-authoritarian causes around the world, making him a favored target among many on the right. The Hungarian-American, who is Jewish, has also been the subject of anti-Semitic attacks and conspiracy theories for decades.

Such hoaxes can now travel farther and faster with social media.

Over just four days in late May, negative Twitter posts about Soros spiked from about 20,000 a day to more than 500,000 a day, according to an analysis by the Anti-Defamation League.

The Institute for Strategic Dialogue, a London think tank focused on extremism and polarization, found an even more pronounced jump on Facebook, where there were 68,746 mentions of Soros in May. The previous record of 38,326 Soros mentions was in October 2018, when angry posts alleged he was helping migrant caravans headed to the U.S.

The new wave began as nationwide demonstrations emerged over George Floyd's death at the hands of Minneapolis police. Some insist Soros financed the protests, while others say he colluded with police to fake Floyd's death last month. But all available evidence suggests the protests are what they seem: gatherings of thousands of Americans upset about police brutality and racial injustice.

"I think partly it's an attempt to distract from the real matters at hand -- the pandemic, the protests or the Black Lives Matter movement," Laura Silber, chief communications officer for Soros' philanthropic Open Society Foundations, said of the theories. It's pretty demeaning to the people out there protesting when someone says they're all paid. It's insulting."

A look at some of the claims:

-- Soros pays protesters. No evidence has been presented to suggest demonstrators were paid by Soros or his organizations. It's a new take on an old hoax: past versions claimed Soros paid for a long list of other events, including the 2017 Women's March held just after President Donald Trump's inauguration.

-- Soros pays to transport protesters. Last week, a photo claiming to show two buses emblazoned with the words "Soros Riot Dance Squad" got widespread attention. The photo was cited as proof of Soros' involvement in the protests, but it was bogus. The original photo showed two unmarked buses; someone later doctored it to add the language supposedly implicating Soros.

-- Soros organizes stashing piles of bricks near protests. Several false claims involving stockpiles of bricks have been debunked, and no evidence has turned up showing they were purposefully placed.

Experts who study conspiracy theories say the new claims about Soros are a way to delegitimize the protests and the actual reasons behind them. Some see anti-Semitism or a new spin on the age-old hoax that a shadowy cabal of rich men -- whether it's the Illuminati, the Rothschilds, the Rockefellers, Bill Gates or Soros -- is manipulating world events.

The theories have had real-world consequences. In 2018, amid news of caravans of migrants making their way toward the U.S.-Mexico border, online misinformation about Soros was linked to violence. Cesar Sayoc, a Florida man who was obsessed with Trump, mentioned Soros dozens of times on social media before mailing pipe bombs to newsrooms, top Democrats and Soros himself.

Despite significant scrutiny, no evidence was ever found to tie the caravan to Soros. Trump, however, helped fan the flames when asked whether Soros was involved.

"I wouldn't be surprised. A lot of people say yes," the president said.

Still, some Republicans have begun pushing back on false claims of Soros' connection to the protests and those spreading the rumors. After several Republican Party chairpeople in a Texas county shared posts claiming Soros was behind the demonstrations, the state party leader called on them to resign.

Experts say conspiracy theories can become a problem when they lead to threats of violence or cause people to lose trust in important institutions. They can fade into the background only to reemerge at times of crisis.

"Conspiracy theories are like themselves viruses," said Josh Introne, a Syracuse University information studies professor who researches conspiracy theories. "The characters may change a little, and the theory itself may mutate. But they stick around."

06.23.20

US Caesar Act, of June 17, punishes any company assisting Assad efforts in Syria

Syria refuses to 'bow' to U.S. sanctions

FM Muallem decries Caesar Act as an attempt to undermine support for dictator Assad and force him to 'abandon' his alliances, 'normalize relations with Israel'

AFP| Published: 06.23.20 , 19:50

Syria refuses to "bow" to Washington's demands under the latest U.S. sanctions, Foreign Minister Walid Muallem said Tuesday, charging that the sole aim was to undermine support for President Bashar al-Assad.

"If they (Washington) dreamt that Syria and its people would bow to their conditions, then I would say let them keep dreaming because this will never happen," Muallem told a news conference in Damascus, nearly a week after the Caesar Act came into force.

The sanctions laid down in the law, according to U.S. officials, aim to force Assad to accept UN Security Council Resolution 2254 of 2015 that calls for a ceasefire, elections and political transition in Syria.

But the real objective is "to influence upcoming presidential elections" in Syria scheduled for next year, Muallem said, and weaken support for Assad ahead of polling.

"President Assad will remain as long as the Syrian people want him to," the foreign minister stressed.

The Caesar Act, which took effect last Wednesday, punishes under US law any company that works with Assad, casting a cloud over efforts to rebuild Syria.

It seeks to prevent any normalization with Assad's regime without accountability for human rights abuses, and also blocks U.S. reconstruction assistance.

The first designations target 39 people or entities, including Assad and his wife Asma - the first time she has been slapped with U.S. sanctions.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo called the sanctions "the beginning of what will be a sustained campaign of economic and political pressure to deny the Assad regime revenue and support it uses to wage war and commit mass atrocities against the Syrian people".

Muallem said such comments were part of a "chorus of lies", arguing that "those seeking the interests of the Syrian people wouldn't conspire against their livelihoods".

Syrians should try to use the latest sanctions as an "opportunity to advance the national economy, achieve self-sufficiency, and deepen our cooperation with friends and allies", he said.

Assad, backed by Russia and Iran, has won back control of most of Syria after a nine-year war that has killed more than 380,000 people and displaced over half of the country's pre-war population.

Muallem said the latest sanctions would fail to pressure Syria into "abandoning our alliances and our support for the resistance and to embark on the path of normalization with Israel".

Syria is in the grips of a severe economic crisis compounded by sanctions.

On the same day that the Caesar Act came into force, Syria's central bank devalued the pound after the currency had depreciated for weeks on the black market in anticipation of the U.S. measures.