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Palestinian Authority rejects tax money from Israel

After Israel deducts terrorist stipends, PA President Abbas tells visiting U.S. congressmen: "Frankly, if we are left with only 20 or 30 million shekels, which is the sum paid to families of martyrs, then we will pay them to the families of martyrs."

Reuters and Israel Hayom Staff // published on 20/02/2019

PA President Mahmoud Abbas | Photo: Reuters

The Palestinian Authority will no longer accept tax revenues collected on its behalf by Israel following its decision to trim the sum over the PA's financial support of terrorists and their families, PA President Mahmoud Abbas said.

The cash-strapped Palestinian Authority has suffered a series of financial blows in the past year.

Under interim peace deals, Israel collects taxes in the West Bank and Gaza Strip and makes monthly payments to the PA, which says it receives around \$222 million each month.

The Finance Ministry said on Wednesday it collects about 700 million shekels (\$193 million) in Palestinian taxes and transfers around 600 million shekels of that to the Palestinian Authority after deducting payments for electricity, water, sewage and medical treatment services. On Sunday, Israel said it would freeze about 5% of that against stipends the Palestinian Authority pays to families of Palestinian terrorists killed or jailed by Israel.

In remarks made late on Tuesday and broadcast on Palestinian radio on Wednesday, Abbas said the PA would continue to pay out these stipends rather than accept a partial transfer of the tax revenues from Israel.

"We reject the tax, we don't want it," Abbas told visiting U.S. congressmen. "Frankly, if we are left with only 20 or 30 million shekels, which is the sum paid to families of martyrs, then we will pay them to the families of martyrs," he said.

Israel and the United States say the stipend policy fans Palestinian violence while the Palestinians see the slain and jailed Palestinian terrorists as heroes of a national struggle.

The United States last year passed legislation to sharply reduce aid to the Palestinian Authority unless it stopped the payouts. The measure, known as the Taylor Force Act, was named after a 29-year-old American military veteran fatally stabbed by a Palestinian while visiting Israel in 2016.

Last month the Palestinians declined some \$60 million in U.S. annual funding for their security forces, worried about exposure to lawsuits under new U.S. anti-terror laws.

Washington has further slashed hundreds of millions of dollars to humanitarian organizations and U.N. agencies which aid the Palestinians as it seeks to pressure Abbas to enter peace negotiations with Israel. Peace talks have been frozen since 2014.

The Palestinians suspended ties with Washington after U.S. President Donald Trump recognized Jerusalem as Israel's capital in 2017 and opened the new U.S. Embassy in the city in May.

Tuesday 19.02.2019

FM's anti-Semitism remarks anger Poland's Jews

Acting Foreign Minister Yisrael Katz rebuked for saying Poles "suckle anti-Semitism with their mother's milk" • Polish PM brands remarks "racist and unacceptable," cancels participation in Israel summit • PM hosts Czech, Slovakian, Hungarian counterparts.

News Agencies and Israel Hayom Staff // published on 19/02/2019

Minister Katz miffed Poland saying they "suckle anti-Semitism with their mothers' milk" Poland's Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Warsaw, Poland last week | Photo: Associated Press

Acting Foreign Minister Yisrael Katz's claim that Poles "suckle anti-Semitism with their mothers' milk," which created a diplomatic spat between Israel and Poland, has also angered the Polish Jewish community.

Jewish leaders in Poland said on Monday that they were offended by Katz's comment, which he made during the weekly i24NEWS-Israel Hayom election program on Sunday. Katz was quoting a famous statement by former Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir when discussing a controversial Polish law that makes it a civil offense to accuse the Polish nation of complicity in the Holocaust.

The leaders issued a statement Monday saying that accusing all Poles of anti-Semitism slighted thousands of Poles honored by Israel's Holocaust memorial center, Yad Vashem, for helping Jews during the Holocaust.

Poland's chief rabbi, Michael Schudrich, and Union of Jewish Religious Communities head Monika Krawczyk said Shamir and Katz's comments "were unjust already when they were first said, in 1989."

Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki branded the remarks "racist and unacceptable" and said he would not send his foreign minister to the Visegrád Group summit that was scheduled to take place in Israel this week.

Instead, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu hosted his Czech, Slovakian and Hungarian counterparts Tuesday in a series of sit-downs that replaced the high-profile summit in Jerusalem.

The first gathering outside Europe of the Visegrád Group was supposed to be a crowning achievement for Netanyahu in his outreach to central and eastern Europe to counter the traditional criticism Israel faces in international forums. But it dramatically unraveled over a bitter exchange between Poland and Israel over how to characterize Polish behavior toward its Jewish community during and after World War II.

In place of the summit, Netanyahu held back-to-back meetings with Slovakian Prime Minister Peter Pellegrini, Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babiš and Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán before hosting all three for lunch at his official residence.

In the wake of Poland's decision, the prime ministers of the other three countries will hold bilateral meetings with Netanyahu in Jerusalem but no official summit will be held.

Meanwhile, the American Jewish Committee expressed hope on Monday that years of reconciliation work between Poland and Israel would not be undone by a new dispute over the Holocaust.

American Jewish Committee CEO David Harris said Monday that "competing historical narratives" had strained the two countries' relations before.

Harris says such disputes usually result from "varying assessments of the magnitude of anti-Semitism in Poland, especially before and during World War II."

The latest tension with Poland comes just days after Netanyahu caused a stir while visiting Warsaw. During that visit he was quoted as saying that "the Poles" collaborated with the Nazis during the Holocaust, leading to outrage among local officials. Netanyahu later issued a clarification saying that he was misquoted and that he actually said "Poles."

Monday 18.02.2019

Palestinians, Jordan join forces to torpedo 'deal of the century'

King Abdullah issues instructions to expand joint council for the management of the Temple Mount to include PA, Fatah officials • Palestinians: Israel could block move but fears crisis with Jordan • Analyst Yoni Ben-Menachem: Move violates Oslo Accords.

Daniel Siryoti // published on 18/02/2019

The Temple Mount | Photo: Oren Ben Hakoon

The Palestinians and the Jordanians have established a joint council to manage the Temple Mount and holy sites in Jerusalem as the first step of a plan to torpedo the Trump administration's "deal of the century" for peace between the Palestinians and the Israelis, Middle East analyst Yoni Ben-Menachem of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs has discovered.

Ben-Menachem calls the decision a "move that violates the Oslo Accords and strikes a dangerous blow to Israeli sovereignty in Jerusalem."

Senior officials in Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas' office and the Fatah movement confirmed to Israel Hayom that cooperation with Jordan has been stepped up recently, ahead of the expected publication of U.S. President Donald Trump's peace plan.

A senior Palestinian official told Israel Hayom that the joint council was a step taken in response to understandings reached between King Abdullah of Jordan and Abbas in August 2017, following the metal detector crisis on the Temple Mount.

A few days ago, under instructions from Abdullah, the Jordanian government approved an increase in the number of council members. It will now number 18 instead of 11. In addition, with Jordan's approval, the council will now include senior Palestinian political officials and Fatah members.

Palestinian officials said Israel could prevent the expansion of the council, but thus far had refrained from doing so. The officials said Israel did not want a diplomatic crisis with Jordan just before the Trump peace plan was due to be presented.

According to the Palestinian official, Ramallah is hailing the council as a "historic change" to Jordan's policies. Jordan has not taken any similar step since the Oslo Accords were signed in 1994.

Fatah officials said that Jordan and the Palestinians were afraid that the Trump peace plan would transfer responsibility for what is known as the "holy basin" of Jerusalem – the Old City and its surroundings – to a joint Arab Islamic authority while giving the Saudis special status at Al-Aqsa mosque.

However, a high-ranking Arab diplomat told Israel Hayom that the move was made with the approval of both Jordan and Saudi Arabia, and was actually intended to blunt Palestinian objection to the peace plan.

At the end of February, American advisers Jared Kushner and Jason Greenblatt are expected in the Middle East for a tour to lay down the groundwork for the peace plan, which the administration is expected to roll out after Israel's Knesset election on April 9.

Monday 18.02.2019

Cabinet approves \$138M in cuts to PA tax funds over terror payments

Diplomatic-Security Cabinet implements law allowing Israel to withhold funds used to pay Palestinian terrorists from taxes Israel collects on PA's behalf • Palestinian PM: Israel engaging in "open war" against Palestinian people, attempting to destroy PA.

Ariel Kahana, Associated Press and Israel Hayom Staff // published on 18/02/2019

Family members visit security prisoners | Archives: Moshe Shai

Israel said Sunday it will withhold over \$138 million from the Palestinian Authority for payments given to families of Palestinians who carried out attacks against Israelis. The sum, which comprises about 5% of the PA's revenues, was cut from the taxpayer funds that Israel collects for the PA.

The Diplomatic-Security Cabinet said it is implementing a law passed last year allowing Israel to withhold funds used to pay stipends to Palestinian attackers and their families from taxes Israel collects on the behalf of the PA.

Yesh Atid MK Elazar Stern and Likud MK Avi Dichter, who advanced the law in the Knesset, both welcomed the move.

On Twitter, Dichter said, "The party is over! As I committed to doing in the law I advanced with Elazar Stern, the cabinet announced the implementation of the law to cut terror funds. The law will make it clear to the Palestinian Authority and Abu Mazen [Palestinian Authority President Abbas] – it doesn't pay!"

Dudi Vaaknin

Yesh Atid MK Elazar Stern

Stern congratulated the cabinet on its decision, and said, "There is no doubt that ultimately the implementation of the law will significantly reduce the terror incentive and the number of terrorist incidents."

Abbas said there would be consequences for the move, which he called "completely unacceptable."

In a statement, the Btsalmo organization, which represents families affected by terrorism, said, "We call on the defense minister and prime minister [Netanyahu] to order the transfer of the funds that were deducted to terror victims who have been awarded compensation but have yet to receive one shekel from the terrorists. The transfer of the terror funds to the terror victims will be a tiny amount of justice and will all the terror victims the ability to more easily rehabilitate.

Attorney Maurice Hirsch, who served as the director of the Military Prosecution in Judea and Samaria and now heads Palestinian Media Watch's legal department, called the cabinet's decision "an excellent start. It's just a shame that for six months, Defense Ministry officials couldn't succeed in figuring out the extent of payments to the families of dead terrorists. After we obtained a lot of information on the subject, we expect Defense Ministry officials to quickly complete their evaluations and bring about the deduction of hundreds of millions of additional shekels that the Palestinian Authority pays as encouragement, incentive and payment for terror."

In the past, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has said that the PA actually invests even more in terrorist payments. In an address to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee last year, he said the PA spent some \$350 million on payments to terrorists and their families annually. A number Netanyahu said constitutes a little less than 10% of the entire Palestinian budget.

Abbas spokesman Nabil Abu Rudeineh said in a statement that Israel's action was "a unilateral blow" to bilateral agreements and that any deduction of taxes by Israel was "piracy of the Palestinian people's money."

Palestinian Prime Minister Rami Hamdallah called Israel's action "open war against the Palestinian people" and an attempt to destroy the PA.

Marc Israel Sellem / The Jerusalem Post

Likud MK Avi Dichter

In the past, Palestinian officials have defended the payments by saying those involved in deadly attacks are a small percentage of those aided by the fund, and that the PA has a responsibility to its citizens like any other government.

The freeze comes as the Palestinians face major budget cuts made last year after the United States slashed funding for the U.N.'s Palestinian refugee program UNRWA and for development programs in the Palestinian territories. The U.N.'s World Food Program also cut back services due to funding shortages.

Sunday 17.02.2019

Hezbollah leader blasts Trump over fight against ISIS

Victory declaration against ISIS will be made by "the biggest hypocrite in the world, American President Donald Trump," says Hassan Nasrallah, who also denies his group has cells in Venezuela • Trump urges Europeans to "take back" ISIS fighters, try them.

News Agencies and Israel Hayom Staff // published on 17/02/2019

Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah | Photo: Reuters

Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah on Saturday blasted U.S. President Donald Trump ahead of his expected declaration of victory against the Islamic State group in Syria.

Nasrallah said that had it not been for the U.S., Syrian government forces supported by Hezbollah fighters on the ground would have defeated the extremists a long time ago.

Syrian forces captured all areas west of the Euphrates River from ISIS by late 2017, while on the eastern side, U.S.-backed Kurdish-led fighters are expected to conclude their battle against ISIS in the coming days.

Nasrallah said the victory declaration against ISIS will be made by "the biggest hypocrite in the world. American President Donald Trump."

The terrorist leader also denied U.S. assertions that the group has cells in Venezuela, saying the Latin American nation "does not need them."

His Iran-backed organization is in "solidarity with the political leadership and state of Venezuela against the American aggression," Nasrallah said.

U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said last week that "Hezbollah has active cells" in Venezuela and "Iranians are impacting the people of Venezuela and throughout South America."

Last week, a senior member of Venezuela's opposition, which supports interim President Juan Guaidó, told Israel Hayom that the presence of Iran, Hezbollah and other Arab terrorist elements in the country "is very concerning" to the democratic opposition and will pose an "immense challenge" to the new government after the socialist regime of Nicolás Maduro is ousted.

"We are presently formulating policy pertaining to defending Venezuela's internal security and are looking for help and advice," the senior official said. "And Israel can help us establish the necessary apparatuses to contend with this problem when the political change in Venezuela realized."

Meanwhile, the commander of the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces in Syria, Jiya Furat, said Saturday that his forces were poised to capture Islamic State's last, tiny enclave on the Euphrates.

"In the coming few days, in a very short time, we will spread the good tidings to the world of the military end of [ISIS]," Furat said.

Trump on Saturday said the caliphate was "ready to fall and that the United States was asking European allies to take back more than 800 Islamic State fighters captured in Syria and put them on trial.

Written in Log:

Trump asks Europe allies for Trial of 800+ Islamic State fighters captured in Syria

"The United States is asking Britain, France, Germany and other European allies to take back over 800 ISIS fighters that we captured in Syria and put them on trial," he said on Twitter. "The Caliphate is ready to fall. The alternative is not a good one in that we will be forced to release them..."

"The U.S. does not want to watch as these ISIS fighters permeate Europe, which is where they are expected to go. We do so much, and spend so much – Time for others to step up and do the job that they are so capable of doing. We are pulling back after 100% Caliphate victory!"

As the SDF advanced under heavy U.S. airstrikes in recent days, a stream of civilians fled the few square miles of hamlets and farmland that remain within the ISIS "caliphate," along with defeated jihadists trying to escape unnoticed.

All that remains, said Furat, is an encircled pocket some 700 square meters (7,500 square feet) in size. "Thousands of civilians are still trapped there as human shields," he said.

The SDF had caught several militants trying to flee among the civilians. Others had handed themselves over, the SDF said.

Their fate, and that of their families, has befuddled foreign governments, with few ready to repatriate citizens who pledged allegiance to a group sworn to their destruction, but who might be hard to legally prosecute. The SDF does not want to hold them indefinitely.

On Friday U.S. Army General Joseph Votel, who oversees U.S. forces in the Middle East as head of Central Command, said the end of the territorial caliphate would lead to a more dispersed, harder-to-detect network of fighters waging guerrilla warfare.