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Sheikh Khalid bin Ahmed Al Khalifa  
comment

**Bahrain defends decision to host White House Mideast meeting**

PA rejects economic conference, part of Trump's 'deal of the century' peace plan, calling it 'financial blackmail,' Bahrain's Sheikh al-Khalifa says only goal is to support 'brotherly Palestinian people'

Associated Press|Published: 05.21.19 , 19:14

Bahrain on Tuesday defended its decision to host a White House-engineered conference to address the Israeli-Palestinian crisis, saying its only objective is to support the "brotherly Palestinian people."

The Palestinian Authority has rejected the economic conference planned for next month, which is part of the rollout of the White House's long-awaited Israel-Palestinian plan, saying any peace effort that ignores the Palestinian people's aspirations for an independent state is doomed to fail. A senior Palestinian official has likened the White House plan to "financial blackmail."

Bahrain's foreign minister, Sheikh Khalid bin Ahmed Al Khalifa, tweeted that his country respects the Palestinian leadership's steadfast position safeguarding Palestinian rights.

He said that both the official and popular position of Bahrain "has been and continues to be championing the brotherly Palestinian people in the restoration of their legitimate rights in their land and an independent state with its capital as east Jerusalem, additionally economically supporting the Palestinian people."

The minister added that "there's no other purpose" in hosting the conference than Bahrain's continued support of the Palestinians.

His comments highlight the uneasy balance some Gulf Arab leaders are attempting to strike as their once quiet ties with Israel grow tighter and more public in the face of shared enemy Iran. The region's public, though, remains sensitive to Israeli security policies and Palestinian demands for independence while the Al-Aqsa Mosque-Temple Mount compound in Jerusalem holds religious significance to Muslims around the world.

In recent weeks, civil society groups in Bahrain took to Twitter to protest a visit to Manama by an Israeli delegation to a global entrepreneurship summit. Bahrain's lower house of parliament also issued a statement rejecting the visit.

Meanwhile, the Trump administration is working to rally key Arab states, like Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, Qatar and others, to help bankroll economic incentives that could get Palestinians to buy into its Mideast plan.

The plan, which has been two years in the making, envisions large-scale investment and infrastructure work in the Palestinian territories. But the central political elements remain mostly unknown. President Donald Trump's senior adviser and son-in-law, Jared Kushner, and Jason Greenblatt, envoy of international negotiations, have been leading efforts to write the plan, but so far, there's been no participation from the Palestinians.

U.S.-based Rabbi Marc Schneier, who was appointed special adviser by Bahrain's King Hamad bin Isa AlKhalifa, said he knows of no other Gulf leader that has been more preoccupied with establishing relations with Israel and bringing other Gulf states onboard. **The tiny island nation of Bahrain is a close U.S. ally and hosts the U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet.**

Schneier said King Hamad told him in a 2016 meeting in the palace that "our only hope for a strong, moderate Arab voice in the Gulf is a strong Israel." He noted that the king also sent an interfaith delegation from Bahrain to Jerusalem not long after the Trump administration moved the U.S. Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem in recognition of it as Israel's capital.

"It's not a question of Bahrain being a participant. They have led this effort, at least since I've known the king for eight years," Schneier said, adding that it's no wonder that the king "would embrace" the opportunity to host the Mideast meeting.

**The conference, running June 25-26 in Bahrain,** will not address the most contentious parts of the conflict: borders, the status of Jerusalem, Palestinian refugees and Israel's security.

Florida Governor Ron DeSantis  
comment

**Florida cabinet meeting in Israel raises questions**

Trade mission part of GOP campaign promise, bid to woo predominantly Democrat Jewish community; visit assumed to be largely symbolic; delegation plans to hold meeting at Jerusalem embassy **but still lacks an agenda**

Associated Press|Published: **05.22.19**, 11:51

Republican Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis is going to Israel with a large contingent of business leaders -- not surprisingly, especially as the GOP woos Jewish voters ahead of the 2020 presidential election. But DeSantis' plan to hold a meeting with his elected

Cabinet while he's there has raised concerns about whether officials are violating the state's open-meeting laws.

When DeSantis first announced the trade mission, he noted that his attorney general, chief financial officer and agriculture commissioner would accompany him, and that the Cabinet would hold a meeting at the U.S. Embassy in Jerusalem during the trip, which runs from May 25 to May 31.

Democratic Agriculture Commissioner Nikki Fried had previously planned a trade mission to the country, but there was no apparent reason why the other two were going, except for the Cabinet meeting.

"I see no reason to hold a Cabinet meeting in Israel," said Barbara Petersen, president of the open-government watchdog group First Amendment Foundation. "And we still don't have an agenda, so I don't know what they will be doing at that meeting."

By law, the state has to post an agenda seven days before the independently elected Cabinet members meet, except during an emergency. As of Tuesday, the Cabinet website not only didn't list an agenda for the meeting, it didn't even have the meeting on the calendar.

DeSantis' office isn't talking about his Israel plans, citing security issues. The Associated Press has made several requests to interview the governor about the trip by phone or in person, and his office said he wasn't available.

Even Cabinet officials said they didn't know what is on the agenda because the meeting is being organized by the governor's office. Fried speculated that it could be largely ceremonial.

"To have all four of us going over to show our support for the state of Israel and economic development between the two countries I think is the bigger picture," she said.

The Cabinet, which also includes Republican Attorney General Ashley Moody and Republican Chief Financial Officer Jimmy Patronis, is scheduled to meet in Tallahassee less than a week after the officials return home -- another sign it will handle state business at home while focusing the meeting abroad on its support for and ties with Israel.

Still, Cabinet meetings are supposed to be accessible for all. But unless they want to pay close to \$2,000 for a round-trip airline ticket, not many regular Floridians will be able to attend -- even if they can figure out when it's going to be held.

The FLORIDA Channel, a state-funded video service run by WFSU-TV that covers state government meetings, plans to travel to Israel, but it is still working out details on how to get the content back to Florida.

"They should have an agenda up and they should be telling people where and when it's going to be," Petersen said of the governor's office. "It's nuts."

DeSantis isn't the first Florida governor to embark on a trade mission to Israel. Former Republican Govs. Jeb Bush, Charlie Crist and Rick Scott all did the same.

The trip could help Republicans politically in a state that is closely divided in presidential politics and where the large Jewish population could be a deciding factor as President Donald Trump tries to win Florida's 29 electoral college votes.

"There's no question it's going to help us," said Sen. Joe Gruters, who also chairs the Republican Party of Florida. "When people are criticizing members of the Jewish faith and Israel, you have a stark contrast in what Ron DeSantis is doing ... letting people know that we do care and that it is a priority for him and the state to be mindful and respectful of the Jews that are living here."

Gruters sponsored a bill recently passed by the Legislature that prohibits anti-Semitism in Florida's public schools and universities. It's possible DeSantis will sign the bill into law while in Israel.

Soon after taking office, the governor pushed for additional money for security at Jewish day schools. He also publicly criticized Airbnb for delisting properties in the disputed West Bank, saying it was a move against Israel, and he persuaded his Cabinet to put the company on a "scrutiny" list for state investments. Before he was elected, he attended the opening of the new U.S. Embassy in Jerusalem.

#### Netanyahu's pre-indictment hearing postponed till October

Attorney General's office says hearing will take place at start of the month; decision comes after prime minister's lawyers request extension on planned July date in order to read prosecution material in three cases likely to result in charges

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Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit said Wednesday that he has postponed a pre-indictment hearing for Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu by three months.

According to Mandelblit's office, the much-anticipated hearing will take place at the beginning of October, after Netanyahu's lawyers asked for an extension to review the

prosecution's material. The Jewish festival of Rosh Hashanah ends on October 1 this year, and Yom Kippur, the holiest day in the Jewish calendar, begins on October 8.

The Justice Ministry has previously said the hearing would take place by July 10.

Mandelblit - who was formerly Netanyahu's cabinet secretary - has recommended pressing charges against the prime minister in three corruption cases, pending the hearing.

The attorney general recommended bribery, fraud and breach of trust charges in Case 4000, in which Netanyahu is suspected of receiving favorable coverage on the Walla! News website in return for regulatory benefits to telecommunications giant Bezeq, which owned the site.

He also called for charges of fraud and breach of trust in both Case 1000, in which Netanyahu and his family are suspected of receiving illicit gifts from wealthy donors such as Israeli Hollywood producer Arnon Milchan, and Case 2000, in which Netanyahu allegedly tried to negotiate favorable coverage in the Yedioth Ahronoth daily (Ynetnews' sister publication) in return for promoting legislation against rival paper Israel Hayom.

The recently re-elected Netanyahu has denied any wrongdoing and has called the charges the product of a media-orchestrated witch hunt to depose him.

05.22.19 פרסום ראשון:

Jabari with Amb. Friedman  
comment

Rejecting taboos, Palestinian businessman welcomes US plan

Ashraf Jabari: 'No Israeli PM will ever meet Palestinian demands or vice versa, what have we gained from bloodshed and separation? Nothing, we can't keep waiting for a state, we have to think about this area as one entity'; he believes ordinary Palestinians would support his pragmatic approach to profit from their shared geography with Israel if it weren't for the PA's brainwashing, crackdown on dissent and adherence to a two-state doctrine

Associated Press |Published: 05.22.19 , 19:04

A Palestinian businessman who flouts political taboos by working with Israeli settlers in the West Bank could soon have a role in President Donald Trump's Middle East peace plan.

While Palestinian officials have swiftly rejected next month's planned Mideast conference in Bahrain, Ashraf Jabari says he will be thrilled to attend.

Jabari has forged close ties with U.S. diplomats but is viewed with deep suspicion by his fellow Palestinians. That has raised questions about U.S. attempts to cultivate him and other businessmen as alternatives to the internationally recognized Palestinian Authority.

The U.S. has not yet released an official list of attendees at the June 25-26 conference, which seeks to use economic development to lure the Palestinians to the negotiating table. U.S. officials have said it would convene individual business leaders, including some Palestinians who live outside the Palestinian territories.

"Our economic plan is an ambitious but achievable vision; it presents an alternative path with the potential to unlock a prosperous future for the Palestinian people if they choose to follow it," said Jason Greenblatt, Trump's Mideast envoy.

The Palestinian Authority has said that any plan focusing on economic development at the expense of people's political aspirations is unacceptable. Well-known Palestinian business magnate Bashar Masri, for one, has declined his invitation, vowing not to attend anything that flies in the face of the "Palestinian national consensus."

The Palestinians seek an independent state on territories captured by Israel in the 1967 Mideast war, including the West Bank and east Jerusalem, and the international community overwhelmingly still supports the two-state solution.

But Jabari said it is time for some different thinking, noting a quarter-century of failed negotiations.

"No Israeli prime minister will ever meet Palestinian demands or vice versa," Jabari told The Associated Press. "We can't keep waiting for a state. We have to think about this area as one entity, not two entities and two realities."

Jabari's vision effectively erases Israel's pre-1967 boundary with the West Bank. It is a vision that is shared by Israeli settlers, who reject a pullout from the West Bank on a combination of religious and security grounds.

He says the West Bank's more than 2 million Palestinians should be granted full citizenship rights -- a scenario that would threaten Israel's status as a Jewish-majority democracy.

For now, Jabari's partnership with the settlers, called the "Judea and Samaria Chamber of Commerce," referring to the West Bank by its biblical name, claims not to have a political agenda.

It says it seeks to bring Palestinians and Israeli settlers together, joined by a desire to make money and a shared resentment of the Palestinian Authority and disillusionment over failed peace talks. Its members talk of business ventures springing from unexpected personal relationships and gush about benefits of free trade.

"We're talking about business-to-business relationships, unfolding on a sub-sovereign level to achieve greater regional stability," said Avi Zimmerman, the chamber's co-founder and a spokesman for the settlement of Ariel.

It's a lofty ambition that squares with what Jared Kushner, Trump's son-in-law and senior Middle East adviser, has revealed about his "fresh approach" to the still mysterious U.S. proposal to settle the conflict: it will start out as a business deal more than a political one, focusing heavily on attracting large-scale investment and infrastructure work to the Palestinian territories.

The deal faces major questions. Without an official Palestinian partner in the West Bank, it remains unclear how the U.S. will carry out such large-scale projects there. The Gaza Strip is ruled by Hamas, which Israel and the U.S. consider a terrorist group. And it is hard to imagine donors lining up billions of dollars without an accompanying political plan.

On the Israeli side, newly re-elected Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is in the process of forming a coalition that is expected to be dominated by hard-liners who oppose even minimal concessions to the Palestinians.

Like the architects of the peace plan, the chamber has offered only scant outlines of its projects. It promotes Palestinian-Israeli business partnerships, including plans for a few jointly owned shopping centers along the West Bank's main highway. More broadly, it seeks foreign investment for large-scale infrastructure projects connecting Israeli settlements with Palestinian cities, mutually accessible medical centers and tourism initiatives.

"This is not about Palestinians working in Israeli factories," Zimmerman said of the Israeli-run industrial zones that have long employed low-wage Palestinian laborers near the settlements. "This is about a shared market, what can be gained from doing business with your neighbor."

Its idealistic mission is enough to satisfy David Friedman, the U.S. ambassador to Israel and a long-time supporter of Israeli settlements. Friedman has nurtured ties between the council and the Trump administration.

Friedman has lashed out repeatedly at the Palestinian Authority since it severed most ties with the U.S. after Trump recognized contested Jerusalem as Israel's capital in December 2017.

"To hold the Palestinian people hostage to a political solution to the conflict when business efforts are ripe in front of us is a grave mistake," Friedman said in a speech at the chamber's first international forum in February, drawing fervent applause from an audience of West Bank settlement mayors, ministers and a handful of Palestinian businessmen.

At the forum, Jabari hailed Friedman as his "dearest friend," saying, "We are not afraid. We're ready to accept Jews in our houses and in our factory plants."

Jabari often hosts Israeli settlers at his home in the West Bank city of Hebron. At a recent "iftar" dinner during Islam's holy month of Ramadan, Jabari served kosher food for his Jewish guests.

While welcomed by the settlers, Jabari is seen much differently by fellow Palestinians. His embrace of the settlers has confined him to the political fringe, reviled by fellow Palestinians who regularly tar him as a "collaborator" -- an insult that bears threats of violence.

His iftar meal drew harsh criticism and even death threats on Palestinian social media. Prominent Palestinian activist Issa Amro called Jabari "notorious" for befriending Hebron's ultranationalist settler community.

And Ahmed Majdalani, a senior Palestinian official, declared that any Palestinian who participates in the Bahrain conference "is no more than a collaborator."

Jabari responded: "The Palestinian Authority is the only collaborator, working with the Israeli government since the Oslo accords."

He believes ordinary Palestinians would support his pragmatic approach to profit from their shared geography with Israel if it weren't for the authority's "brainwashing," crackdown on dissent and adherence to a two-state doctrine he says is increasingly divorced from reality

UN agency aiding Palestinians rejects US bid to strip it of mandate

UNRWA chief rejects call by US envoy Greenblatt for host countries to take over cash-strapped agency's services: 'Not up to one or two states to decide mission' of agency which aids Palestinian refugees and their descendants across the Middle East

Reuters | Published: 05.23.19 , 21:56



The head of the United Nations agency that has supported Palestinian refugees for seven decades hit back on Thursday at a U.S. proposal to have host countries take over the services it provides across the Middle East.

The suggestion, from U.S. Middle East envoy Jason Greenblatt at a U.N. Security Council meeting on Wednesday, that UNRWA should be effectively dismantled was the latest U.S. attack on an agency that began operations in 1950.

Formerly UNRWA's largest donor, the United States halted its funding to the agency in 2018, deeming its fiscal practices "irredeemably flawed" and stoking tensions between the Palestinians and U.S. President Donald Trump's administration.

"We need to engage with host governments to start a conversation about planning the transition of UNRWA services to host governments, or to other international or local non-governmental organizations, as appropriate," Greenblatt said after the Security Council was briefed by UNRWA chief Pierre Krahenbuhl.

Asked at a Gaza news conference on Thursday about Greenblatt's remarks, Krahenbuhl said UNRWA's mandate was a matter for the entire U.N. General Assembly to consider, not by "one or two individual member states".

"Therefore, Palestinian refugees should remember that the mandate is protected by the General Assembly, and of course we will engage with member states to ensure what we hope is a safe renewal of that mandate," Krahenbuhl said.

UNRWA's mission is due to come up for renewal later this year in the General Assembly, where support for the agency has been traditionally strong and the United States would likely face an uphill battle to change or cancel its mission.

Greenblatt said UNRWA was "currently running on fumes, surviving on a surge in foreign donations in 2018", and it was time for the international community to address the needs of Palestinians in refugee camps in a sustainable way.

More than half of the 2 million Palestinians in the Islamist Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip, which is under Israeli blockade, to prevent heavy weaponry from reaching Hamas and other terror organizations, receive food aid from UNRWA.

"UNRWA's business model, which is inherently tied to an endlessly and exponentially expanding community of beneficiaries, is in permanent crisis mode," Greenblatt said.

Since Trump assumed office in 2017, Palestinians have grown concerned that he intends to bring about UNRWA's demise.

Israel says the work of UNRWA - short for United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East - only perpetuates the plight of Palestinians.

"Year after year, Palestinians in refugee camps were not given the opportunity to build any future; they were misled and used as political pawns and commodities instead of treated as human beings," Greenblatt told the Security Council.

UNRWA says it provides services to about 5 million registered Palestinian refugees across Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and the West Bank and Gaza, and that it safeguards and advances their rights under international law.

Most are descendants of about 700,000 Palestinians who were driven out of their homes or fled fighting in the 1948 war that led to Israel's creation and claim a right of return to the lands they left.

Israel has ruled out such an influx, fearing the country would lose its Jewish majority. Palestinian leaders reject settling refugees in host countries, saying their presence there should be considered temporary. Palestinians in host countries complain of restrictions on jobs and benefits there.