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Israeli envoy blasts European Parliament member's 'Israel obsession'

Ambassador Aharon Leshno-Yaar accuses Spanish MEP Elena Valenciano of criticizing Israel's planned demolition of illegal Bedouin encampment Khan al-Ahmar for political points • Valenciano's silence on growing anti-Semitism in Europe "deafening," he says.

Ariel Kahana

Vice Chair of the Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament Elena Valenciano

Israel's Ambassador to the European Union Aharon Leshno-Yaar leveled harsh criticism against a Spanish member of the European Parliament, accusing her of criticizing Israel in an effort to score political points.

Elena Valenciano, the vice chair of the Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament, has been an outspoken critic of Israel's planned demolition of the illegal Bedouin encampment of Khan al-Ahmar in the West Bank. She has publicly issued numerous letters to Israel's EU representative condemning the move.

In a letter to Valenciano, published on the Israeli delegation the EU's social media accounts, Lehno-Yaar noted two of Valenciano's latest letters to him on Khan al-Ahmar

"were sent just a few minutes before you and your group published a press release on the matter, stating that a letter was sent to me. Evidently, your actions are cynical and political and do not represent a genuine interest in dialogue."

While Valenciano issued four press releases critical of Israel in recent months, more than any other country in the Middle East, Leshno-Yaar noted that "at the same time, there are no statements from you on the plight of the Palestinians in Syria, the situation in Idlib, neither on the Iranian entrenchment in Syria and the entire Middle East region, not on its threats to annihilate Israel.

"This odd obsession with the Jewish state is manifested by the symbolic timing in which you found it appropriate to send me the letter; on a Jewish holiday, Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish new year."

Leshno-Yaar said Valenciano's conduct demonstrated "a genuine lack of understanding of basic facts on the ground and intentionally disregard the ongoing democratic debate in Israel. It also shows complete ignorance regarding the Israeli laws and Basic Laws that have been legislated. In addition, you are mixing Palestinians living in the Palestinian Authority and Arab-Israeli citizens of Israel."

He said Valenciano's silence on the growing number of anti-Semitic incidents in Europe and reports of Iranian intelligence gathering on Jewish sites was "deafening."

"Instead of dealing with this tough and painful issue, you are adopting a narrative that has only one aim – to smear the democratic state of the Jewish people," he said.

Valenciano pushed back against Leshno-Yaar's accusations.

"There is no obsession with Israel, a country I respect and admire," she said, only sharp criticism of the Netanyahu government.

Doubling down on her criticism, Valenciano then issued a statement decrying the "radical policies" of the Netanyahu government.

"Our commitment as a socialist group continues to be respect for human rights and international law, and therefore we maintain our determination to defend a two-state solution as the only way to a future of justice, peace and freedom for Israelis and Palestinians. The demolition of Khan al-Ahmar would mean a very hard blow to this solution. We defend Israel's right to its security, but we cannot remain silent in the face of the nationalist and racist policies of its current government, or the occupation and fragmentation of the West Bank, the segregation of Arab citizens or the oppression of minorities, such as the Bedouin."

Socialist members of the European Parliament have issued 10 statements critical of Israel in the past six months, four of them in the past 60 days.

Israeli diplomatic officials believe the increased condemnation is aimed at drumming up support ahead of elections for the European Parliament in April.

Located some 6 miles east of Jerusalem, between the Israeli communities of Maaleh Adumim and Kfar Adumim, Khan al-Ahmar is home to some 180 Bedouin who live in tin and wood shacks.

The United Nations, the European Union and others have expressed concern over the fate of Khan al-Ahmar, but Israel maintains the village was illegally built and has offered to resettle residents 7 miles away.

Israel says the structures that make up Khan al-Ahmar, which include an Italian-funded school, pose a threat to residents because of their proximity to a highway. Critics have dismissed this claim as a ploy to remove the village's residents.

Palestinians claim that Israeli building permits have been impossible to get for Khan al-Ahmar.

The High Court of Justice rejected an appeal to block the demolition, lifting an injunction set to expire in a week. No date has been set for the demolition at this time.

IDF closes clinic at Golan Heights border, that treated Syrians & provided massive aid

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After caring for thousands of wounded Syrians, IDF closes aid unit

With the return of the Assad regime to the Golan Heights border, Israeli military shuts down the Good Neighbor Directorate after two years of operations • IDF closes day clinic it has run near the border for the past year, which treated some 7,000 Syrian children.

Lilach Shoval

An IDF soldier feeds a Syrian child with a bottle | Photo: IDF Spokesperson's Unit

With the Syrian regime again in control of its side of the Golan Heights border, the IDF on Thursday said it would shut down its Good Neighbor Directorate after two years of operations during which it provided humanitarian aid to Syrian civilians across the border.

The military also shuttered a day clinic it had operated near the border for the past year, which treated some 7,000 Syrian children.

The IDF said the humanitarian aid provided by the directorate to Syrian civilians was "a gesture of goodwill."

According to the military, its humanitarian operation was "further expression of its values, which include lending a helping hand in times of need to needy civilians, beyond Israel's borders as well."

Among other things, the IDF transferred 630 tents, 40 vehicles, 20 generators, some 8,200 diaper packages, around 1,700 tons of food, 26,000 boxes of medical supplies and some 350 tons of clothes.

Kushner says US Aid cuts to Palestinians won't undermine peace efforts

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Aid cuts to Palestinians won't undermine peace efforts, top US official says

Tough U.S. policies improve chances for peace by debunking "false realities" of Middle East peacemaking, White House adviser Jared Kushner says • "Nobody is entitled to America's foreign aid," he asserts • Envoy: U.S. peace plan is the "best way forward."

News Agencies and Israel Hayom Staff

U.S. presidential adviser Jared Kushner | Photo: AFP

Senior White House adviser Jared Kushner on Friday defended the latest in a series of punitive measures taken by the Trump administration against the Palestinians, saying that none of these measures had diminished the chances of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process being crowned a success.

In an interview with The New York Times, Kushner said that U.S. President Donald Trump's tougher policies had actually improved the chances for peace by stripping away the "false realities" that surround Middle East peacemaking.

U.S.-Palestinian ties have been severely strained since Trump took office.

The American president's hard-line policy toward the Palestinians, which so far has seen Washington suspend its multimillion-dollar contribution to the U.N. aid agency to the Palestinians, shutter the PLO's mission in Washington, and recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, has prompted Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas to declare he will not engage with any of Trump's envoys.

Abbas has also declared that given its policies, the U.S. cannot be seen as an impartial mediator in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

"There were too many false realities that were created – that people worship – that I think needed to be changed," Kushner said Friday. "All we're doing is dealing with things as we see them and not being scared out of doing the right thing. I think, as a result, you have a much higher chance of actually achieving a real peace."

Kushner lambasted the Palestinians for maligning the Trump administration in the wake of the aid cuts, saying that Palestinian leaders "deserved to lose aid after vilifying the administration. And much of the money that the United States poured into the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees and other Palestinian causes had been misspent anyway."

"Nobody is entitled to America's foreign aid," he stated.

In the case of the Palestinians, Kushner argued, U.S. funding had "evolved into a decadeslong entitlement program with no plan to make them self-reliant."

Still, he insisted that the rift between Ramallah and Washington was not unbridgeable.

"In every negotiation I've ever been in, before somebody gets to 'yes,' their answer is 'no.'"

Kushner said he was unfazed by Abbas' posturing, saying that if the latter was a serious leader, he will study the administration's peace plan carefully after it is released, rather than dismissing it altogether.

In previous statements, Abbas said Trump's so-called "deal of the century" – which has yet to be introduced – was "doomed to fail."

With multiple Palestinian officials dismissing the plan as "dead on arrival," some have questioned whether it will ever see the light of day, but Kushner and Special Representative for International Negotiations Jason Greenblatt have rejected that premise, saying they are busy consulting with officials in the region.

Greenblatt noted Friday that the Trump administration is prepared for Israeli criticism of elements of its coming Middle East peace plan.

Both Kushner and Greenblatt have stated in the past that the proposed plan would require concessions on both sides and that neither would be "happy" with its final outline.

Greenblatt said work on the peace plan has entered the "pre-launch phase" despite a boycott by Palestinian leaders.

He declined to specify a time frame, except to say it would not be announced at the U.N. General Assembly gathering in New York later this month, or offer any details of a proposal that has drawn deep skepticism even before its unveiling.

Pushing back against widespread perceptions among Palestinians, Arab officials and independent analysts that the peace plan is likely to be decidedly pro-Israel, Greenblatt made clear that both sides can expect parts they will like and dislike.

"We're going to have to defend the plan to Israelis and Palestinians. We are ready for criticism from all sides, but we believe this is the best path forward for everyone," he said.

The United States will recommend compromises but will not seek to impose a deal, he stressed.

"The parties will need to decide if they think the plan works for them and will make their lives better. The parties are the only ones who can make these compromises, and there are no compromises on Israel's security needs."

Some U.S. officials have said they were counting on Arab states to use their influence with the Palestinians to convince them to return to the negotiating table.

With the "political component" of the plan at the point where it covers all core issues of the decades-old conflict, "We do have to get the economic portion of the plan finished," Greenblatt said. "A successful economy is critical for the Palestinians."

That is widely expected to include international funding proposals for the impoverished Gaza Strip.

U.S. officials have also been noncommittal about whether the plan would endorse the creation of a Palestinian state, as the Palestinians have long demanded.

Senior Palestinian official Saeb Erekat said earlier this week that "we will not succumb to U.S. threats and bullying."

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[Syria, Jordan begin talks on opening vital border crossing](#)

Syrian forces regained control of the Nassib border crossing last month • Damascus and Amman see crossing a crucial trade artery between the region and Europe and the Persian Gulf markets, but opening the border may not spell political rapprochement.

Reuters and Israel Hayom Staff

A Syrian soldier near the Nasib border crossing with Jordan | Photo: Reuters

Jordan and Syria held their first technical talks on opening a major border crossing in southern Syria that was recaptured from the opposition last July, a Jordanian official source said on Thursday.

Damascus, which took back the crossing from the opposition, hopes to reopen the Nassib route vital to its hopes of reviving Syria's shattered economy and rebuilding in territory under its control.

Amman also hopes the opening of the border crossing will reactivate billions of dollars of annual transit trade between Europe and Gulf markets across Syria.

The meeting that was requested by Syria was held on Wednesday at the Jaber crossing, on the Jordanian side of the border, where technical teams began talks on the practical arrangements from customs to security needed to reopen the crossing.

"The meetings will continue to put a complete view of all the arrangements linked to reopening the crossings in the coming period," a Jordanian source said.

The crossing's recapture by Syrian forces in July was one main goal of a Russian-backed military campaign launched last June to regain control of rebel-held parts of southwest Syria.

Western diplomatic sources said Russia had been pressing Jordan to open the crossing as part of a drive to show the war was drawing to a close and to help rehabilitate President Bashar Assad. Many Western and Arab countries have not restored ties with Assad and blame him for the civil war.

Jordan's Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi last month said the country wants to open its borders with Syria but was waiting for a formal Syrian request to begin discussions.

Another Jordanian official said the crossing could open by the end of this year.

Diplomatic sources say the opening would not signify a thaw in political ties, as the two countries' foreign policies diverge over the Middle East peace process and the role of Iran in the region.

Jordan is a staunch U.S. ally and supports Washington and its Persian Gulf allies in their tough stance towards Iran. The crossing's shuttering has also weighted on Lebanese exporters who used it to export hundreds of millions of dollars of produce and goods to lucrative Gulf markets.

Jordan's private sector is also hoping for a revival in bilateral trade with a major neighboring market where Jordanian business have long-standing ties.

Syria's army has regained control of most of the country, helped by Iranian-backed militias and Russian aerial bombs.

With Russian air power, government forces have this year defeated the armed opposition in the last remaining enclaves near the cities of Homs and Damascus, and swept through the rebel-held southwest.

Newsletter Thursday September 13, 2018

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US Congress votes \$38 billion defense aid to Israel into law

Bipartisan bill passes U.S. House on Wednesday, now heads to President Trump's desk for signature • Bill ensures 10-year memorandum of understanding with Israel would not be affected by budgetary wars, boosts U.S. war reserve stockpile in Israel.

Ariel Kahana, Erez Linn and Israel Hayom Staff

The U.S. Capitol | Photo: Getty Images

A bipartisan bill that would cement the U.S. military aid to Israel into law has passed a major hurdle on Wednesday night.

The U.S. House of Representative approved the measure, known as the Ileana Ros-Lehtinen U.S.-Israel Security Assistance Authorization Act of 2018, several weeks after it passed the Senate. It will now head toward the president's desk.

Under the proposed legislation, the **\$38 billion in military aid over 10 years** spelled out under the 2016 Memorandum of Understanding, would be funded through a special mechanism that would be separate from the annual budget.

The bill would also give Israel increased access to sophisticated U.S. technology to ensure it maintains its qualitative edge in the region through the U.S. war reserve stockpile in Israel, which Israeli forces can use under certain conditions.

It also authorizes the president to bolster the stockpile with \$1 billion worth of weaponry, as well as with precision-guided munitions to use against Hezbollah. The bill further allows the president to **establish a collaborative U.S.-Israel counterdrone program.**

The **law ensures that U.S. aid would not be cut** so long as the memorandum comes into effect starting in 2019, ensuring that the funds would not be influenced by the budget

wars Congress and the White House have. It also means that presidents would not be able to suspend U.S. aid as a means of pressuring Israel.

"With this measure, we are codifying the assistance levels in the latest 10-year U.S.-Israel memorandum of understanding, which aims to strengthen our already robust relationship, especially on defense matters," Chairman of the House's Foreign Affairs Committee Ed Royce (R-Calif.) said on Wednesday. "This bill also works to build on the United States' and Israel's successful history of cooperation on technology development."

The American-Israel Public Affairs Committee praised the House for following in the Senate's footsteps, saying it "applauds the U.S. House of Representatives for adopting the Ileana Ros-Lehtinen U.S.-Israel Security Assistance Authorization Act of 2018."

According to AIPAC, "This key legislation seeks to ensure that Israel has the means to defend itself, by itself, against growing threats – most significantly Iran's presence on its northern border. This bipartisan bill authorizes agreed-upon increases in Israel's security assistance. It encourages expanding U.S. weapons stockpiles in Israel and advancing U.S.-Israel cooperation in anti-drone technologies and space."

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| Israel lauds US decision to close PLO mission in Washington

"Israel supports this action, which is meant to make it clear to the Palestinians that refusing to negotiate and attacking Israel in international forums will not bring about peace," PM Netanyahu says • PA says move aims "to protect Israeli crimes."

Yoni Hersch, Ariel Kahana, Daniel Siryoti, Gideon Allon, News Agencies and Israel Hayom Staff

The PLO mission in Washington | Photo: AP

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Tuesday praised the Trump administration for its decision to close down the Palestine Liberation Organization's mission in Washington, saying it was "the correct decision."

President Donald Trump's move to close the PLO's embassy in Washington has been described as the latest U.S. blow against the Palestinians over their refusal to resume peace talks with Israel.

The Israeli-Palestinian peace process has been frozen since 2014.

Relations between Washington and Ramallah have been particularly strained since Trump announced last December that he was recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's capital and would move the U.S. Embassy there, which was done in May.

The moves infuriated the Palestinians, and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas has since refused to engage with any of Trump's Middle East envoys, saying the U.S. bias toward Israel proves it cannot act as an impartial mediator in regional peace talks.

The State Department confirmed the decision to shutter the PLO mission.

"We have permitted the PLO office to conduct operations that support the objective of achieving a lasting, comprehensive peace between Israelis and the Palestinians since the expiration of a previous waiver in November 2017," said State Department spokeswoman Heather Nauert.

"However, the PLO has not taken steps to advance the start of direct and meaningful negotiations with Israel. To the contrary: PLO leadership has condemned a U.S. peace plan they have not yet seen and refused to engage with the U.S. government with respect to peace efforts and otherwise.

"As such, and reflecting congressional concerns, the administration has decided that the PLO office in Washington will close at this point.

"The United States continues to believe that direct negotiations between the two parties are the only way forward. ... This action should not be exploited by those who seek to act as spoilers to distract from the imperative of reaching a peace agreement. We are not retreating from our efforts to achieve a lasting and comprehensive peace."

Nauert said the decision to close the PLO's mission was consistent with U.S. concerns about Palestinian attempts to prompt an investigation of Israel by the International Criminal Court.

U.S. National Security Adviser John Bolton also confirmed that the PLO office in Washington was being closed and that the move stemmed from concern about Palestinian attempts to prompt an ICC investigation against Israel.

Bolton said he did not believe the move would shut the door on the long-delayed Arab-Israeli peace plan, dubbed the "deal of the century," that Trump senior adviser and son-in-law Jared Kushner has been developing for months. Bolton stressed that the plan is still being refined.

The Trump administration has yet to say when it plans to roll out the proposed peace plan.

On Tuesday, PLO envoy to Washington Husam Zomlot confirmed that he and his staff have been given one month to pack up and leave Washington.

Zomlot said the mission's closure would not deter Palestinians from seeking a state with east Jerusalem as its capital.

"We lost the U.S. administration but we gained our national rights," he said.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu issued a statement welcoming the move.

"The U.S. made the correct decision. Israel supports this action, which is meant to make it clear to the Palestinians that refusing to negotiate and attacking Israel in international forums will not bring about peace," he said.

YouTube

PLO envoy to Washington Husam Zomlot

The Prime Minister's Office in Jerusalem issued a statement saying, "The Palestinians' appeal to the ICC and their rejection of negotiations with Israel and the U.S. are not the way to achieve peace, and it is good that the U.S. is taking a clear stance in the matter."

Deputy Minister for Public Diplomacy in the PM's Office Michael Oren praised the move.

"With the closing of the PLO office in Washington, the American administration is not changing the rules of the game, but simply restoring them after years of neglect," he said.

"It should be noted that, in contrast to previous administrations that would reward the Palestinians for abandoning the negotiations with Israel, President Trump is forcing the Palestinians to pay a price. As we have seen in the past, giving gifts to the Palestinians only keeps them away from the peace talks, and now the **Americans are punishing them in order to make them return to the negotiation table.**"

Jerusalem Affairs and Heritage Minister Zeev Elkin said, "The PLO under Abu Mazen [Abbas] is an organization that encourages terrorism through the paying of exorbitant stipends to murderers, it uses its educational system and Palestinian media to incite against Israel, and it spares no effort to undermine us in the international arena.

"The American decision proves once again that Abu Mazen is not a partner for peace, but rather an obstacle to it."

Knesset Speaker Yuli Edelstein also welcomed the move, saying, "The PLO's mission never focused on promoting peace, rather on promoting incitement and hate. This is good news for the new [Jewish] year."

Senior Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat issued a statement Tuesday saying that the closure of the mission will not deter the Palestinians from seeking ICC action against Israel.

He described the closure as a move designed "to protect Israeli crimes."

"We reiterate that the rights of the Palestinian people are not for sale, that we will not succumb to U.S. threats and bullying," Erekat said. "Accordingly, we continue to call upon the International Criminal Court to open its immediate investigation into Israeli crimes."

PLO Executive Committee Member Dr. Hanan Ashrawi called the U.S. policy "blackmail" that "once again seeks to punish the Palestinian people, who are already victims of the ruthless Israeli military occupation."

Turkey, one of the strongest critics of Washington's Middle East policy, said on Tuesday that the decision was a worrying step and "another sign that the USA has lost its impartial stance on the Middle East peace process."