

Jerusalem row escalates, puts peace process in doubt

The Arab Weekly staff

London

The Middle East peace process appears unlikely to resume as a diplomatic row escalates between US, Israeli and Palestinian leaders over the Trump administration's announcement to recognise Jerusalem as Israel's capital.

Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas has repeatedly said US President Donald Trump is unfit to broker peace negotiations.

In a meeting of the West Bank-based Palestine Central Council, a high-ranking arm of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), Abbas said, "The deal of the century is the slap of the century and we will not accept it" in a reference to Trump's pledge to reach the "ultimate" peace deal between Israelis and Palestinians.

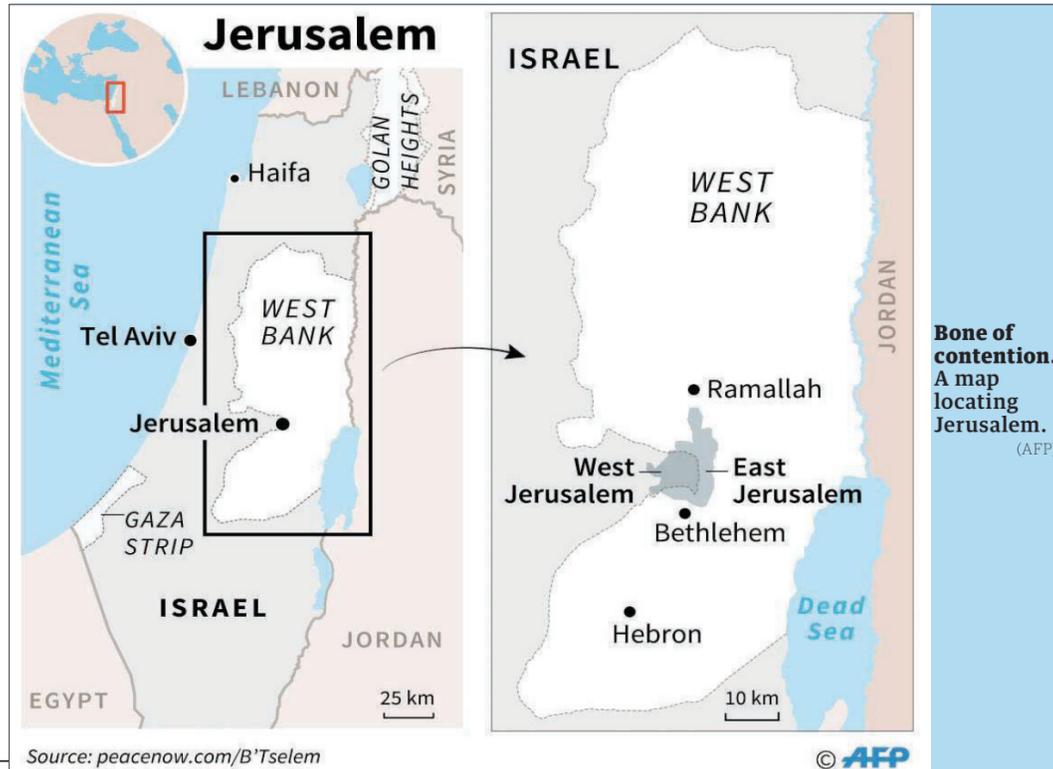
Abbas lashed out at Trump for accusing him of refusing to engage in peace negotiations. "Yekhreb beitak!" ("May your house be demolished!") Abbas exclaimed, using a colloquial Palestinian Arabic curse that drew laughter from PLO officials.

Abbas, who is expected to shun US Vice-President Mike Pence when he visits the region, called US Ambassador to Israel David Friedman and US Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley a "disgrace." Both are known to be firm supporters of Israel.

The Palestinian Central Council called to suspend the PLO's 1993 recognition of Israel but the final decision remains with Abbas, whom observers said is unlikely to implement it.

"If there is light in this darkness it is that Abbas also repeatedly stressed his continuing commitment to a two-state solution, based on international law and the 1967 borders," wrote Ian Black, the Guardian's former Middle East editor, in the British daily.

"That remains an enduring point of both principle and political real-



ism – even in the topsy-turvy days of the Trump era. Yet how it is to be achieved looks harder than ever before."

To many, Abbas seems to have run out of ideas on how to deal with Trump.

"Beyond the rhetoric, however, the truth is that the Palestinians still don't have a strategy for how to respond to the American president, particularly after his announcement that the United States considers Jerusalem the capital of Israel," wrote Grant Rumley, a research fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, in Foreign Policy magazine.

A total of 18 Palestinians and one Israeli have been killed since Trump's December 6 announcement on Jerusalem. Most of the Palestinians were killed during clashes with Israeli forces.

Diana Buttu, a former aide to Ab-

“
The Palestinians still don't have a strategy for how to respond to the American president.”



Grant Rumley, a research fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies

bas, was more vocal in her criticism of the Palestinian leader. "You can't lead a revolutionary movement with people at retirement age," she told Agence France-Presse.

Israeli Defence Minister Avigdor Lieberman said Abbas had "lost his senses" and Israeli Education Minister Naftali Bennett said the speech represented Abbas's swan song. In a Facebook post, Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu said Abbas "tore off the mask."

Netanyahu told Israeli reporters travelling with him in India that the US Embassy would be moved from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem "far faster than what we think ... in the course of the year." American officials previously estimated the embassy move would take place near the end of Trump's term in office but it appears that the United States will accelerate the move by modifying existing property

to accommodate the new mission, allowing it to open next year.

Days after his speech in the West Bank, Abbas again criticised Trump at a conference in Egypt, saying Jerusalem is "the gate for peace and war and President Trump must choose between the two."

"It is our eternal capital, to which we belong, just as it belongs to us," Abbas said.

The speech in Cairo came after Washington announced a freeze on crucial funding for UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA). The United States said it would withhold \$65 million while allowing \$60 million through to keep UNRWA running in the short term. The agency provides aid for about 5 million Palestinians across the Middle East.

PLO member Hanan Ashrawi said Washington was seeking to dismantle UNRWA at Israel's behest. The US move was "targeting the most vulnerable segment of the Palestinian people," she said in a statement.

Israeli politicians have previously called for Palestinian refugees in neighbouring countries to be incorporated into those societies.

US State Department officials insisted the decision was not made to pressure Palestinian leaders. "This is not aimed at punishing anyone," State Department spokeswoman Heather Nauert said. "The United States government and the Trump administration believe that there should be more so-called burden-sharing to go around."

UNRWA Commissioner-General Pierre Krahenbuhl said he would appeal to other donor countries for money.

"At stake is the dignity and human security of millions of Palestine refugees, in need of emergency food assistance and other support in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and the West Bank and Gaza Strip," he said in a statement.

"The reduced contribution also impacts regional security at a time when the Middle East faces multiple risks and threats, notably that of further radicalisation."

Viewpoint



Kamel Hawwash is a British-based Palestinian university professor and writer.

Israeli sovereignty doesn't extend to Palestinian territories

Fifty years after Israel took control of all of historic Palestine in the Six-Day War, it is taking a number of approaches to the status and laws that operate in what the rest of the world considers illegally occupied Palestinian territory. Israel regards the area as "disputed" territory that it might consider returning – or more likely return part of – to secure peace with its neighbours.

In reality, Israel behaves as if it is sovereign over the whole of historic Palestine. It is important to note that UN Security Council Resolution 2334 distinguished between Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories, thus rejecting Israeli sovereignty over them.

International law does not consider Israel as sovereign over the occupied territories, including East Jerusalem, which the Israelis in 1967 annexed in the Six-Day War. In recognising Jerusalem as Israel's capital, US President Donald Trump referred to Israel as a "sovereign nation" that can "determine its own capital." He is wrongly recognising Israel's sovereignty over the whole city.

There is no way to access the illegally occupied Syrian Golan Heights except through Israel. That border has been effectively shut since the 1967 war, with the exception of some movement facilitated by the UN peacekeeping force for humanitarian reasons. Even this movement came to a halt after violence erupted in Syria.

The Gaza Strip is accessed through the Beit Hanoun crossing, which Israel controls, or the Rafah crossing, which Egypt controls.

Entry to the West Bank and East Jerusalem is under Israel's control, too. Palestinians with a Palestinian Authority (PA) passport enter and exit only via King Hussein Bridge, while Jordanian passport holders issued with Israeli visas by Israel's Embassy in Amman can enter via the Sheikh Hussein Bridge further north.

Those carrying foreign passports, including European and US citizens wishing to visit either Israel or the occupied Palestinian territories, can enter through one of the bridges or through Tel Aviv's Ben Gurion Airport.

The situation for human rights activists who wish to visit the occupied territories has changed considerably over the past few years. While some have been subjected to questioning about the purpose of their visit and who they were planning to meet, most were allowed to enter, especially those who managed to convince Israeli authorities they were tourists visiting holy sites.

Faced with increased scrutiny of its policies and an escalating Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement, however, Israel is using its control of entry points to the occupied Palestinian territories to punish human rights activists and organisations. It does this in addition to pushing allies to implement anti-BDS laws, particularly in the United States, where some 20 states have such laws.

While Israel has long denied entry at will to activists and EU and US citizens of Palestinian heritage, it is now routinely denying entry to those working in organisations supporting BDS or individuals who are vocal in criticising it and supporting

BDS. Israel has passed legislation amending its law of entry to specifically deny access to such individuals. This included Hugh Lanning, chairman of the UK-based Palestine Solidarity Campaign and myself. Shortly after this, it denied entry to Anwar Makhoul, the head of the Palestinian community in Chile and three Swedish citizens, members of the World Council of Churches, over alleged BDS affiliations.

Israel went further in implementing its ban in July, ordering Lufthansa airline to deny boarding to five members of an interfaith delegation at Washington Dulles International Airport, including Jewish Rabbi Alissa Wise. Jewish Voice for Peace, an activist organisation opposed to the occupation, said this was the first time Israel had barred Jews, including a rabbi, entry to Israel because of political positions. Israel's law of return stipulates that all Jews have the right to move to Israel and become a citizen. The airline claimed: "We don't know who these people are. We have no information as to why the Israeli government does not want them to enter. We simply have to abide by the rules and regulations of every country in which we operate."

Israel has gone even further, using intelligence about those planning to travel to one of its entry points to ban them before attempting to board flights. On November 13, it announced it was barring seven EU officials from travelling with a 20-member delegation of European Parliament members, national lawmakers and mayors over "support for Israel boycott" and for their aim to raise awareness on the plight of Palestinian prisoners, including

political figure Marwan Barghouti. Israel's Interior Ministry said the delegation had planned to visit Barghouti in Hadarim prison. It announced its decision a week before the delegation was to visit.

The European Union – France in particular – might have been expected to stand up for its citizens but instead used the sovereignty issue as a reason not to challenge Israel's decisions. A French Foreign Office minister said: "One can regret this Israeli decision but it remains nonetheless sovereign."

This is rather bizarre as the European Union does not recognise Israeli sovereignty over the occupied Palestinian territories. It was left to the Association for Civil Rights in Israel (ACRI) to challenge the decision. The group's executive director, Sharon Abraham-Weiss, said: "The interior minister is not authorised to serve as a commissioner standing at the gate and deciding for the country's citizens and for the residents of the occupied territories, who are dependent on Israeli border crossings, which positions are appropriate to be heard. Freedom of expression is not just the right to express oneself but also the right to be exposed to opinions, even opinions that outrage and infuriate the majority in Israel."

The European Union must take a stand on the issue of sovereignty, especially as it relates to the occupied Palestinian territories, to ensure non-Israelis can access them or consider taking their own measures, including denying entry to illegal Israeli settlers wishing to visit. Otherwise, the message to Israel is "Carry on; there are no red lines to cross."

Israel is using its control of entry points to the occupied Palestinian territories to punish human rights activists and organisations.