

Pompeo, resuming travel, to visit Israel to meet coalition government

Fri, 2020-05-08 19:24

WASHINGTON: US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo will visit Israel in a show of support for the new coalition government, resuming travel after a coronavirus suspension, the State Department announced Friday.

The top US diplomat and staunch supporter of Israel will meet Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his centrist rival turned partner Benny Gantz in Jerusalem on May 13, the day the government is expected to be sworn in. The trip comes as President Donald Trump's administration gives its blessing to Netanyahu's plans to annex much of the occupied West Bank, despite warnings from the Palestinians that the move will kill the prospects of a long-term peace agreement.

Pompeo will "discuss US and Israeli efforts to fight the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as regional security issues related to Iran's malign influence," State Department spokeswoman Morgan Ortogus said in a statement.

"The US commitment to Israel has never been stronger than under President Trump's leadership," she said.

Pompeo becomes one of the first major officials around the world to resume travel amid a gradual reopening following the coronavirus lockdown.

He last traveled internationally on March 23 for a one-day trip to Afghanistan and Qatar in which he upbraided leaders in Kabul for their infighting and met Taliban leaders on a deal to withdraw US troops.

Pompeo, asked about his Jerusalem trip on Wednesday after it was reported by Israeli media, said he was "hoping to get back out and be on the ground" after the coronavirus restrictions.

"It'll start off smaller, but we're hoping to get back at it, just like we're hoping that we can get the economy back open not only here in the United States but all across the world as well," Pompeo told reporters.

Trump in January unveiled a long-awaited Middle East plan in which he gave the green light for Israel's annexation of areas around Jewish settlements on Palestinian land, which are considered illegal by the rest of the world.

In turn, the Palestinians will have the right to an independent but demilitarized state as well as promises of major investment.

Netanyahu hailed the plan as a historic opportunity. In a coalition agreement with Gantz, the new government can decide to go ahead with annexation starting in July but must consult with the United States – which has indicated it has no objections.

Gantz, who faced Israel's longest-serving prime minister in three inconclusive elections, will take over after 18 months as part of the deal.



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[Kuwait imposes 20-day 'total curfew' from May 10 to curb coronavirus](#)

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Reuters

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Fri, 2020-05-08 13:30

DUBAI: Kuwait will enact a "total curfew" from 4pm (1300 GMT) on Sunday through to May 30 to help to curb the spread of the new coronavirus, the

Information Ministry said on Twitter on Friday. Further details of the curfew will be announced soon, it said. Kuwait on April 20 expanded a nationwide curfew to 16 hours a day, from 4pm to 8am, and extended a suspension of work in the public sector, including government ministries, until May 31. On Friday the Gulf state announced 641 new coronavirus cases and three deaths, bringing its total number of confirmed cases to 7,208, with 47 deaths.



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Kuwait repatriates 29,168 nationals amid coronavirus crisis
Kuwaiti and GCC artists create online gallery to promote solidarity during COVID-19

[American University of Beirut faces](#)

fight of its life as crises hit

Author:

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Fri, 2020-05-08 13:01

BEIRUT: One of the Arab world's oldest universities faces its worst crisis since its foundation, with huge losses, staff cuts and an uphill battle to stay afloat as Lebanon's economic meltdown and the coronavirus pandemic hit revenues.

The American University of Beirut has graduated leading figures in medicine, law, science and art as well as political leaders and scholars over the decades including prime ministers.

It has weathered many crises, including Lebanon's 1975-1990 civil war, when a number of staff including two presidents were killed or abducted and a bomb destroyed one of its main halls.

But Lebanon's problems now may be the biggest threat yet to the institution founded in 1866 by Protestant missionaries. It ranks among the world's top 200 universities and its collapse would deprive future generations in Lebanon and the wider region of internationally recognized higher education.

"This is one of the biggest challenges in AUB's history. The country is crashing catastrophically," AUB President Fadlo Khuri told Reuters in an interview.

With inflation, unemployment and poverty high, many families have little means to cover food and rent, let alone tens of thousands of dollars in tuition fees.

The heavily indebted state, which defaulted on its foreign currency debt in March, owes AUB's medical center – which attracts patients from across the Middle East and Central Asia – more than \$150 million in arrears, Khuri said. Government officials have ruled out a haircut on the bank deposits of non-profit universities such as AUB, but Khuri still fears his institution may take a hit if a state rescue plan puts part of the burden on large depositors and includes colleges.

Along with other universities, his school has lobbied the state and, he said, received assurances from the president and finance minister that any such measures would not impact them.

But he remains worried, with government plans for plugging vast holes in the national finances not yet finalized.

Government officials could not be reached for comment.

"We have all this money they (the state) still owe us for the hospital so it's very hard to rely on well-intentioned people who may or may not have the ability (to deliver)," he said.

The university and hospital expect real losses of \$30 million this year after bleeding revenues. For 2020-2021 alone, it projects a 60% revenue reduction from this year, down to \$249 million.

The stark revenue forecasts rely on an "optimistic assumption" that the Lebanese pound will stabilize at 3,000 to the dollar, but Khuri has said they do not take into account a possible haircut imposed on AUB's bank deposits in

Lebanon.

Finance Minister Ghazi Wazni has said there will be a shift to a flexible exchange rate in the “coming period.”

Khuri said AUB will have to set its own rate in the meantime, taking into account people who have said they can pay in dollars to help cushion the impact of the pound’s collapse on poorer students.

AUB has already lost donations and scholarships it was expecting before the pandemic. On top of benefit and wage cuts, it is studying options such as closing whole departments and halting spending.

In an email to students and families, Khuri promised to work to protect their livelihoods and to raise money via an emergency fund.

“But there is no question that sacrifices must and will take place at every level,” Khuri wrote. “We must fundamentally change in order to survive ... Saving AUB must be our only priority. And save it we will.”



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Lebanon’s PM Diab says price increases ‘unreasonable’

Palestinians say Israel targeting prisoners' bank accounts

Author:

By MOHAMMED DARAGHMEH | AP

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Fri, 2020-05-08 12:26

RAMALLAH, West Bank: Palestinian officials said Friday that Israel is forcing banks in the occupied West Bank to close accounts held by the families of prisoners in Israeli jails to prevent the Palestinian Authority from providing stipends to them.

Israel has long objected to the Palestinian Authority's payments to the families of prisoners and those killed in the conflict, including militants, saying it rewards terrorism. The Palestinians view the payments as a social safety net for those living under decades of military occupation.

The apparent move to target banks comes as the Palestinians face a potentially severe economic crisis after weeks of lockdown to combat the coronavirus pandemic. It also comes as Israel vows to annex large parts of the West Bank in line with President Donald Trump's Middle East plan. Protesters shattered the windows of several bank branches and set fires outside some of them late Thursday and early Friday as word of the new regulations spread.

Qadora Fares, head of the Palestinian prisoners' association, said relatives of current and former prisoners have told him they were forced to close their accounts because of a new Israeli law penalizing banks for facilitating the payments.

The father of one prisoner told The Associated Press he tried to use an ATM on Thursday but the request was declined. He says the bank told him to withdraw his funds and close the account because of the new Israeli regulations. He spoke on condition of anonymity out of fear Israel would target his assets.

A bank manager said COGAT, the Israeli military body that oversees civilian affairs in the Palestinian territories, warned banks of the move months ago, saying it would go into effect Sunday. He said the banks are complying because they fear legal action or Israeli raids. He spoke on condition of anonymity, fearing retaliation from angry clients. Other bank managers declined to comment, citing similar concerns.

The Israeli Defense Ministry and COGAT did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

Fares said the families of around 12,000 current and former prisoners receive monthly allowances from the Palestinian Authority. Prisoners who have served more than five years get around \$700 a month until they find employment, and families receive aid according to how many children they have, he said.

He said the new regulation was a "blatant violation" of Palestinian sovereignty, since the banks are located in areas governed by the Palestinian

Authority. The Israeli military regularly carries out arrest raids and other operations in those areas.

Palestinian Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh issued a statement saying he has formed a committee to “to study the Israeli threats against banks that provide services to families of prisoners and martyrs.”

Hussein Al-Sheikh, an aide to Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, rejected the closing of the accounts, calling it an affront to the “dignity of every Palestinian” and a “submission to the will of the occupation.”

“We hope to create a Palestinian national consensus in protecting our families & their rights & preserving their dignity,” he tweeted.

The payments are dispensed by the so-called Martyrs’ Fund, which also provides aid to the families of suicide bombers and other militants. Abbas has consistently rejected violence in favor of peace talks with Israel, but the negotiations stalled out more than a decade ago. He has repeatedly vowed to continue the payments despite Israeli pressure.

Over the last two years, Israel has deducted the amount of the payments from tax revenues it collects on behalf of the Palestinian Authority. Last year, the Palestinian Authority rejected all the tax transfers in protest, but it relented months later.

The Palestinian Authority imposed heavy coronavirus restrictions in mid-March, closing nonessential businesses in the parts of the West Bank where it enjoys limited autonomy and banning most travel between towns and villages. Those measures appear to have succeeded in containing the outbreak, with Palestinian authorities reporting around 540 cases and only two fatalities. But the lockdown is expected to impose heavy economic costs on the territory and the cash-strapped Palestinian Authority.



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Israel top court approves coalition deal, new government to be sworn in May 13
Palestinians reject Israeli attempts to control Hebron mosque

[Amid ruins of a Syrian town, Ramadan meal reunites a community](#)

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Fri, 2020-05-08 11:51

ATAREB, Syria: Amid mounds of rubble and the ruins of buildings destroyed during nearly a decade of war, a Ramadan iftar meal has reunited a community in northwestern Syria.

Dozens of men and children sat out on a long line of blankets on the ground in the town of Atareb for the iftar, when Muslims break their daily fast at sundown during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan.

Many have returned to the town from camps for the displaced since a March cease-fire halted the most recent government offensive against the rebel-held territory.

"This is the first time that we've got together since the enormous destruction that happened in the district," said Mohamad Jabar, 30, who attended the iftar on Thursday with his children.

"We returned recently to our homes. Even if they are destroyed or half destroyed, they are better than the camps and the crowding."

Fears that the new coronavirus would spread quickly through camps for the displaced at the Turkish border have encouraged some to return to their homes near the frontline.

So far, no cases of the virus have been confirmed in the rebel-held northwest, where just a few hundred tests have been carried out on a population of some 4 million people.

The site of the iftar was cleaned and sanitised by Civil Defense workers beforehand, said Abdel Malak Al-Sheikh, 37, a member of the charity that organized the meal.

Organizers encouraged the attendees to stay apart to respect social distancing rules. But most ended up sitting close together as they ate.

"From amid the destruction, we are trying to deliver a message to the whole world that we are steadfast. From the destruction that Bashar Assad caused, life and hope will spring," Sheikh said.

Northwestern Syria is the last major piece of territory held by rebels

fighting President Assad. Backed by his allies Russia and Iran, Assad waged his latest offensive to recover the area earlier this year.





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Coronavirus measures in Egypt to continue during Ramadan