

# Israeli defense minister backs 7,000 new West Bank settlement units

Author:

AFP

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JERUSALEM: Israel's Defense Minister on Wednesday issued building permits for 7,000 new homes in a settlement near Bethlehem in the occupied West Bank, sparking Palestinian condemnation.

Naftali Bennett announced he had "approved the construction of thousands of new housing units" in the Efrat settlement near Bethlehem in the southern West Bank.

The ministry indicated the land would allow the creation of a new neighborhood called Givat Eitam.

"Construction momentum should not be stopped for a moment," he said.

The rightwing hard-liner is expected to leave his post in the coming days.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his former rival Benny Gantz have agreed to form a unity government which will see Netanyahu stay as premier for 18 months, after which Gantz is meant to take over for an equivalent period.

While Netanyahu is in power, centrist Gantz is expected to serve as defense minister, replacing Bennett.

Brian Reeves from the anti-settlement Israeli NGO Peace Now said Bennett's decision meant the building process was "in motion" even if Gantz, who is less supportive of settlement expansion, takes over.

The project, which would further squeeze the already restricted city of Bethlehem, still has to pass through the Israeli housing ministry and could also be challenged in the courts, Reeves added.

Since President Donald Trump came to power in 2017, the US government has ceased to criticize Israeli settlement expansion and has supported proposals to annex parts of the West Bank.

The Palestine Liberation Organization immediately denounced a new "violation of international law."

"This is an outrageous exploitation of the COVID-19 global pandemic to advance the illegal settler project," senior PLO official Hanan Ashrawi said in a statement.

Over the past decade, the population in Jewish settlements in the West Bank has increased 50 percent, according to official data from Israeli authorities.

More than 450,000 Israelis live in West Bank settlements, with around 200,000 in East Jerusalem.

Settlements in both areas are considered illegal under international law.



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US Democrats urged to oppose Israeli occupation

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## [US announces \\$225 million in emergency aid to Yemen](#)

Author:

Wed, 2020-05-06 20:14

WASHINGTON: The United States will provide \$225 million in emergency aid to Yemen to support food programs, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said on Wednesday, as aid groups there are forced to scale down operations due to Houthi interference and amid a spreading coronavirus outbreak.

“This assistance will provide the UN World Food Program’s emergency food operation in southern Yemen, as well as a reduced operation in northern Yemen, which the WFP was forced to scale down earlier this month because of the ongoing interference of (the) Iran-backed Houthis” Pompeo told a news

conference.

Yemen is already grappling with the world's biggest humanitarian crisis caused by a war between the Saudi-led coalition seeking to restore the internationally recognized government, and the Houthi movement that drove the government from power in Sanaa in late 2014.

Around 80 percent of Yemen's population, or 24 million people, rely on aid, and 10 million are facing famine. Yemen has the world's fourth highest internally displaced population and health care is scarce in rural areas. The country has reported a total of 26 coronavirus infections with 6 deaths but due to inadequate testing and a shattered health system aid groups fear a devastating outbreak. According to WHO only 200 tests with results have been delivered nationwide.

Under such circumstances, a gap in aid funding is a major risk. The United Nations last week warned that 31 of 41 major UN humanitarian assistance programs will scale down or stop in coming weeks without more money as donors and aid agencies have increasingly complained of interference and obstruction from Houthi authorities.

Reuters reported last month the United States was readying a "substantial contribution" to help Yemen but that it had to find alternatives to the WHO after President Donald Trump criticized the agency being "China-centric" over its handling of the coronavirus outbreak, and paused funding.



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Yemen records 10 new coronavirus cases as Houthis attacked for lack of transparency  
US threatens to suspend Yemen aid operations over Houthi interference

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## Morocco launches fleet of drones to tackle virus from the sky

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RABAT: Morocco has rapidly expanded its fleet of drones as it battles the coronavirus pandemic, deploying them for aerial surveillance, public service announcements and sanitization.

"This is a real craze. In just weeks, demand has tripled in Morocco and other countries in the region," said Yassine Qamous, chief of Droneway Maroc, African distributor for leading Chinese drone company DJI.

Moroccan firms have been using drones for years and Qamous says it "is among the most advanced countries in Africa" for unmanned flight, with a dedicated industrial base, researchers and qualified pilots.

But restrictive regulations have long limited civilian drones to specific applications such as filming, agriculture, monitoring solar panels and mapping.

That changed rapidly as the novel coronavirus swept across the world.

In recent weeks, authorities have employed drones to issue warnings, identify suspicious movement in the streets and disperse illegal rooftop and balcony gatherings.

A strict lockdown imposed in March has not been uniformly respected, with local media reporting on nighttime gatherings of neighbors and collective prayers on roofs, beyond the view of street patrols.

Last week local authorities in Temara, a town near the capital Rabat, launched a high-precision aerial surveillance system developed by local company Beti3D, which previously specialized in aerial mapping.

Other countries in Europe, Asia and the Middle East have also adopted technology deployed in China since the start of the pandemic, whether for tracking the movements of citizens, disinfecting public spaces or facilitating deliveries.

"Drones have quickly emerged as a vital technology for public safety agencies during this crisis as they can safely monitor public spaces," according to the website of DJI, by far the world's top drone maker.

Like most countries, Morocco primarily uses imported Chinese drones. But the emergence of new applications linked to the pandemic is also driving local production of specialized aerial vehicles.

"There is real demand," said Abderrahmane Krioual, the head of Farasha, a

startup that has raised funds to produce drones for thermal surveillance and aerial disinfectant spraying.

The aeronautics department of the International University of Rabat (UIR) offered its facilities, expertise and prototypes to authorities in March, deploying drones with loudspeakers or infrared cameras able to detect movement at night or spot individuals with high temperatures.

Several projects are underway across the country ahead of the widespread deployment of various models of drones, said Mohsine Bouya, the university's director of technology development and transfer.

Teams are also developing tracking applications, but "we'll have to wait for a change to the law" before launching them, he said.

Moroccan authorities declined to comment on the use of drones or the numbers deployed since the start of the public health emergency in mid-March.

Unlike in some countries, the use of surveillance drones has not sparked public debate in Morocco, where the kingdom's authoritarian response to the pandemic is widely supported.

Morocco closed its borders early and tasked law enforcement with imposing strict confinement measures on the population.

They include movement restrictions and the compulsory wearing of masks, with a nighttime curfew since the start of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan – enforced by a heavy police presence.

Those found guilty of violating lockdown measures face one to three months in prison, a fine equivalent to \$125, or both.

Officials say 59,000 people have been prosecuted for breaching lockdown measures.

Authorities say the measures have limited transmission of the virus, with 5,382 COVID-19 cases reported including 182 deaths since the state of emergency was announced.

But the kingdom's high number of arrests – some 85,000 people by April 30 – has drawn criticism from Georgette Gagnon, director of field operations at the United Nations' Human Rights Office.

Last week she listed Morocco among countries where repressive coronavirus measures have created a "toxic lockdown culture."

Morocco disputed this, saying its measures were "in line with legal frameworks respecting human rights."



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Ex-convict helps neighbors cope in Morocco virus lockdown

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## [A Ramadan TV show, hosted by a rabbi, is cementing Jewish-Muslim ties](#)

Wed, 2020-05-06 17:13

CHICAGO: For the past 20 years, Marc Schneier, an American rabbi, has been building “bridges of understanding” between Jews and Muslims, an activity that has recently become the latest focus in interfaith dialogue.

He has carried out this vital work through his organization, The Foundation for Ethnic Understanding.

Schneier, who has established strong ties with like-minded people in the Arab Gulf, is now trying to educate people about the meaning and importance of Ramadan.

He is doing this by hosting a special TV series, entitled "30 Faces for the 30 Days," on the Jewish Broadcasting Service (JBS) and the foundation's social media.



The new series highlights the positive impact of Muslims globally by featuring a Muslim luminary in politics, religion, arts and culture and sports.

The objective is to educate the Jewish community and the public about Islam and the significance of Ramadan.

"There is a lot of ignorance about Ramadan during this sacred and holy season for Muslims. There is little understanding on the different traditions, rituals and precepts of Ramadan," Schneier said in an interview with Arab News via video call.

"So, we decided to reach out to our global network.

"Muslim luminaries from politics, media, entertainment and culture teach and sensitize us to this important and sacred season for our Muslim brothers and sisters."

Schneier's message is reaching a large audience. A non-profit educational channel, JBS is America's largest Jewish TV network, broadcasting to more than 49 million cable subscribers.

He said the "30 Faces for the 30 Days" program is being produced with the goal of reaching not just the Jewish community but the foundation's diverse network.

## **FASTFACT**

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The Foundation for Ethnic Understanding was launched in 1989 originally to build bridges between Jewish and African Americans.

"Each episode begins with me introducing our special guests, each of whom has recorded a video for us," Schneier said.

"In the video they have been asked to share with us Ramadan and its traditions, particularly in addressing a non-Muslim community, and the interfaith message they can share during this holy season."

One of the participants, Sheikh Musa Drammeh, chairman of the Islamic Cultural Center of North America, praised Schneier's effort, saying it would promote understanding and resolve differences between the two communities.

"We are grateful because the unfortunate coronavirus situation has brought

Ramadan to its original concept, which is to focus on humanity, togetherness, neighborliness, injustice and oppressiveness,” Drammeh said in one of the “30 Faces for the 30 Days” video messages.

“It allows us to look from within and look inward, to correct our shortcomings, and advise our families to do the same.

“So, I am sending this message of peace, this message of greetings, to all of you, especially to the family of the Foundation for Ethnic Understanding.”

✘ Schneier said that the Foundation for Ethnic Understanding, which he established 31 years ago, has become the platform of choice for people who are dedicated to strengthening Muslim-Jewish relations.

It has offices and contacts in 35 countries where Muslims and Jews share their lives.

He said his efforts are focused on building bridges between the Muslim and Jewish communities in the Arab countries in the Gulf, particularly in the UAE, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia.

“This is my passion to find the path to narrow the gap that divides the chasm between 1.6 billion Muslims and 16 million Jews,” Schneier said.

“We have become extraordinarily successful. Muslim-Jewish relations have become very chic. It is very much in vogue now.

“The number of organizations, particularly in the Jewish community, who have brought this field into their spectrum and are looking to us as a resource.”

The foundation was originally launched in 1989 to build bridges between the Jewish and African American communities, but it expanded to strengthen relations with Muslims in 2003.

Schneier said improving relations between Jews and Muslims was not an easy goal to pursue.



“I remember when I was practically lynched for even venturing into the Muslim world,” Schneier said, adding that such an idea was “impossible” to pursue decades ago in the Jewish community.

“Things were in such a bad state between Muslims and Jews,” he said.

Schneier said he was familiar with that struggle from his days of launching a drive in the 1980s to build bridges between Jewish Americans and the African American community.

Appointed a “special adviser” to the King of Bahrain Hamad bin Isa Al-Khalifa, he said he has forged good relations with leaders of many of the Islamic world’s major powers, including Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Oman, Morocco,

Palestine and Qatar.

Schneier was the first rabbi to lead a Jewish congregational mission to an Arab Gulf country when he brought members of the Hampton Synagogue to Bahrain in 2018.

“Muslims and Jews have a common faith and a common fate,” he told Arab News, “and our single destiny must strengthen our bonds of concern, compassion and caring for each other.”



To this end, he said, 20 of the “30 Faces for the 30 Days” video messages have been recorded and are being broadcast.

That said, based on his experience of the series, what do Jews and Muslims want to know about each other?

“I think Muslims want to know what we have in common,” Schneier said.

“Both Jews and Muslims recognize it is human nature to change human actions and how we need to go through a process of growth, spiritually, socially, culturally.

“We need to continue to expand our sympathies and our interests.

“And we Jews go through the same process during our High Holy Day season in terms of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, which are typically in the early fall.”

He added: “There is so much commonality but there is also so much ignorance on both sides without understanding each other.”



Schneier has been appointed to the steering committee of Saudi Arabia’s World Conference on Dialogue.

He also serves on the executive steering committee of the Multi-Religious Campaign Against Anti-Muslim Bigotry in the US.

Schneier founded The Hampton Synagogue in 1990, creating a Jewish presence in the affluent Long Island area.

Prior to starting the synagogue, the Hamptons was devoid of opportunities for Jewish life.

Today, however, it boasts one of the largest philanthropic memberships in the country, hosting international and national politicians and celebrities.

The synagogue is the only traditional Orthodox synagogue in the US which has its services televised nationally.

Schneier has pioneered programs and discussions among Jews and Muslims to remind them that they have more that unites them than what divides them.

He has achieved this through his work in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the UAE, Oman, Bahrain, Azerbaijan, Indonesia, Israel, Kazakhstan, Morocco, Palestine, Singapore, throughout Europe, South America and the southern hemisphere.

“I would like Muslims and Jews to recognize, coronavirus or no coronavirus, we are all in this together,” said Rabbi Schneier, adding: “Ramadan Mubarak.”



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Ramadan drama 'Um Haroun' conjures up a religiously harmonious Middle East Muslims, Jews make historic joint visit to Auschwitz

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## [Bahrain eases coronavirus restrictions, shops, industries to open](#)

Author:

Reuters

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DUBAI: Shops and industrial enterprises in Bahrain can open from Thursday while restaurants will stay closed to in-house diners, the Health Ministry said, as the Gulf state eases restrictions designed to stop the spread of the new coronavirus.

Bahrain shuttered non-essential shops and businesses in late March and barred entry of foreign visitors, but did not impose a curfew, unlike some other Gulf states.

Health Ministry officials told a news conference on Wednesday that employees and customers must wear face masks and practice physical distancing. Cinemas, sports facilities and salons remain closed.

Bahrain has reported 3,720 infections with eight deaths from the virus. The total count in the six Gulf Arab states exceeds 76,000 with 421 deaths.

Other Gulf countries eased curfews and other social and business restrictions with the start of the Muslim holy fasting month of Ramadan two weeks ago.

Bahrain this week opened a 152-bed COVID-19 field hospital intensive care unit on an empty piece of land in Sitra, as part of a plan to create 500 additional ICU beds for critical cases.



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Two Bahrainis bring fashion world to masks