

# Trump: Mideast peace plan likely rolled out in days

Fri, 2020-01-24 02:04

JERUSALEM: President Donald Trump said Thursday that he'll likely release the long-awaited White House Mideast peace plan before his meeting early next week with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his main political rival Benny Gantz.

"It's a great plan. It's a plan that really would work," Trump told reporters on Air Force One en route to a Republican Party meeting in Florida.

He said he was surprised that both Netanyahu and Gantz were willing to take a break from campaigning for the March 2 elections to join him Tuesday in Washington.

"They both would like to do the deal. They want to see peace," Trump said.

"Look, Israel wants peace, Palestinians want peace. They all want peace. Not everyone wants to say it."

He said his administration has talked briefly to the Palestinians, who have rejected the administration's peace plan before it even comes out.

"We've spoken to them briefly. But we will speak to them in a period of time," Trump said. "And they have a lot of incentive to do it. I'm sure they maybe will react negatively at first, but it's actually very positive to them."

Vice President Mike Pence announced the invitation for Netanyahu and Gantz to visit during at a meeting with the prime minister in Jerusalem after addressing an international forum Thursday on the Holocaust. He said that at Netanyahu's request, the invitation was also issued to Gantz, a former army chief.

The plan is expected to strongly favor Israel, and is unlikely to garner any international support if it is seen as undermining the prospect of a two-state solution.

"We have had no better friend than President Trump," Netanyahu said. "With this invitation, I think that the president is seeking to give Israel the peace and security that it deserves."

The Palestinians rejected Trump's peace efforts after he recognized disputed Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and moved the US Embassy there in May 2018. The Palestinians want east Jerusalem, which Israel occupied in the 1967 war and annexed, to be their capital.

"If this deal is announced with these rejected formulas, the leadership will announce a series of measures in which we safeguard our legitimate rights, and we will demand Israel assume its full responsibilities as an occupying power," said Nabil Abu Rdeneh, a spokesman for Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas.

He appeared to be referring to oft-repeated threats to dissolve the Palestinian Authority, which has limited autonomy in parts of the Israeli-occupied West Bank. That would force Israel to resume responsibility for providing basic services to millions of Palestinians.

"We warn Israel and the US administration from crossing the red lines," Abu Rdeneh said.

Israel's Channel 12 TV, citing Israeli officials, said the plan is expected to be extremely favorable toward Israel and offer it control over large parts of the occupied West Bank. The Palestinians seek the entire territory, which was also captured by Israel in 1967, as the heartland of a future independent state. Most of the international community supports the Palestinian position. Netanyahu has said he plans to annex the Jordan Valley as well as Jewish settlements across the West Bank, which would all but extinguish any possibility of creating a viable Palestinian state.

Netanyahu has tried to make that the cornerstone of his campaign for reelection following unprecedented back-to-back elections last year that left him in a virtual tie with Gantz, with neither able to cobble together a ruling coalition.

The deadlock was deepened by Netanyahu's indictment last year on serious charges of bribery, fraud and breach of trust stemming from three long-running corruption investigations. Netanyahu has asked Israel's parliament to grant him immunity.

Next week's meeting could produce an awkward scene. Gantz has made Netanyahu's indictment the focus of his campaign to oust the prime minister. And his Blue and White party is leading an effort in parliament to block Netanyahu's immunity request before the election. At the same time, they will be joined by an impeached president who is being tried in the Senate.

The US was believed to be holding back on releasing the peace plan until Israel had a permanent government. Those calculations may have changed as the deadlock in Israeli politics looks to be further prolonged.

Trump may also be looking for a boost from evangelical and pro-Israel supporters as the Senate weighs whether to remove him from office after he was impeached last month, and as he gears up for a reelection battle this year.

Pence was among dozens of world leaders in Jerusalem on Thursday for the World Holocaust Forum. Many of the participants, including Russian President Vladimir Putin and French President Emmanuel Macron, also paid visits to the Palestinians in the West Bank.

A Palestinian official said Abbas asked the visiting French and Russian presidents to support the Palestinian position when the plan is published. "He asked them to refuse and act against any Israeli annexation of Palestinian lands," said the official, speaking on condition of anonymity because he was discussing closed meetings.

While the plan is expected to be friendly to Israel, it could still face opposition from Netanyahu's hard-line partners.

Defense Minister Naftali Bennett, leader of the ultranationalist Yamina party, called Trump a "true friend" of Israel and said the country likely stands before a "historic opportunity." But he said his party would not allow the transfer of any land to Palestinian control or for a Palestinian state to be established.



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## [Militant sentenced to 19 years for role in Benghazi attacks](#)

Author:

AP

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Thu, 2020-01-23 21:42

NEW YORK: A federal judge on Thursday sentenced a Libyan militant to more than 19 years in prison for his role in the 2012 Benghazi attacks that killed four Americans, including the US ambassador.

A jury convicted Mustafa Al-Imam last year of conspiring to support the extremist militia that launched the fiery assaults on the US compounds but deadlocked on 15 other counts.

The attacks, aimed at killing American personnel, prompted a political fracas in which Republicans accused the Obama administration of a bungled response. Al-Imam was sentenced to a total of 236 months behind bars. He is the second

militant convicted in the attacks that killed Ambassador Chris Stevens, communications specialist Sean Smith and security officers Tyrone Snowden Woods and Glen Anthony Doherty.

The head of the extremist militia who directed the siege, Ahmed Abu Khattala, was convicted in 2017 on terrorism-related charges and sentenced to 22 years in prison.

Khattala was accused of driving to the diplomatic mission on Sept. 11, 2012, and breaching the main gate with militants who attacked with assault rifles, grenades and other weapons.

The initial attack killed Stevens and Smith and set the mission ablaze. Woods and Doherty were later killed at a CIA annex.

On Thursday, federal prosecutors in Washington asked US District Judge Christopher Cooper to send a message to others contemplating attacks on Americans overseas, saying Al-Imam deserved the maximum 35-year sentence.

"In the current geopolitical environment, terrorists must understand that there are harsh consequences for attacking diplomatic posts and harming US personnel – particularly a US ambassador," Assistant US Attorney John Cummings wrote in a court filing.

Defense attorneys said Al-Imam made a "tremendous mistake" by damaging and looting US property after the attacks. But they insisted there was no evidence he intended to harm any Americans, noting jurors could not reach a verdict on the murder charges Al-Imam faced.

"Mustafa Al-Imam is a frail, uneducated and simple man," they wrote in a court filing. "He is not a fighter, an ideologue or a terrorist. He is a former convenience store clerk whose main loves in life are soccer and family."

Al-Imam was tried in a civilian court despite the Trump administration's earlier contention that such suspects are better sent to Guantanamo Bay. His arrest, five years after the attack, was the first publicly known operation since President Donald Trump took office targeting those accused of involvement in Benghazi.

Prosecutors acknowledged there was no evidence that Al-Imam "directly caused" the killings at the US compounds. But they said he aligned himself with Khattala and acted as his "eyes and ears" at the height of the attacks. During a four-week trial in Washington, prosecutors pointed to phone records that showed Al-Imam was in the vicinity of the mission and placed an 18-minute call to Khattala during a "pivotal moment" of the attacks.

Al-Imam also entered the US compound, prosecutors said, and took sensitive material that identified the location of the CIA annex about a mile away from the mission as the evacuation point for Department of State personnel.

In interviews with law enforcement following his 2017 capture in Misrata, Libya, he admitted stealing a phone and map from the US mission.



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## [Lebanon MPs call for extra security](#)

Fri, 2020-01-24 00:37

BEIRUT: As Lebanon's new government gets down to business, MPs' biggest concern seems to be their own security.

In the wake of violent protests in the past week, Parliamentary Speaker Nabih Berri on Thursday asked Lebanese army chief, Gen. Joseph Aoun, to take "exceptional measures" to protect the parliament's surroundings.

The plea to beef up security follows clashes outside the Lebanese parliament and the burning of a photograph of new Prime Minister Hassan Diab near the government's headquarters.

Almost 500 people were injured in Beirut at the weekend after security personnel fired tear gas, water cannons and rubber bullets at demonstrators who threw stones, attempted to invade the Parliament building, and attacked bank offices and shops.

The formation of a new government ends months of political deadlock and economic decline following Saad Hariri's resignation as prime minister in October in response to mass protests over corruption and mismanagement.

With the country facing growing unrest, the rising levels of violence represent a stern test for the new government as it completes a ministerial handover.

Parliamentary guards were busy this week erecting concrete walls on roads leading to the parliament.

One military official told Arab News that "safe passage" will be restricted to MPs to prevent a repetition of Nov. 19 clashes when protesters blocked access to the parliament.

Parliament is due to meet on Monday and Tuesday to approve a draft budget for 2020.

Shops and businesses facing the parliament's entrance and access points have borne the brunt of violent protests in recent days.

A manager at a Rolex outlet said: "We haven't decided to close the shop completely yet. We are living day by day. During the day, everything is normal, there's traffic and people, but in the afternoon, protesters take over. We hide the merchandise in a safe place, close the shop, and leave. Today, we decided to cover the glass fronts with steel plates so that they won't be destroyed by protesters."

Protesters used petrol bombs as well as firecrackers for the first time on Wednesday night, according to security personnel.

Jan Kubis, the UN special coordinator in Lebanon, tweeted that some protesters were attempting to "provoke the security forces, undermine civil peace and fuel sectarian strife."

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said: "Lebanon will face a terrible financial crisis in the coming weeks. We are ready to intervene and provide support, but only to a government committed to reform."

"This is important to the US, but if you look at the protests taking place in Beirut and in cities outside Beirut, you can see, just like in Baghdad, they are not protesting against America, these are protests calling for sovereignty and freedom. The protests taking place in Lebanon today are to tell Hezbollah: Enough is enough."

The EU described the formation of the Lebanese government as a "fundamental step toward ensuring the country's ability to address the multiple crises affecting it." It also urged the government to implement "structural reforms

to answer the needs and the expectations of the Lebanese people. Adequate protection must be ensured for the most vulnerable groups in society.”

Ralph Tarraf, EU envoy to Lebanon, said: “We are ready to positively commit to assisting the government if it implements constructive reforms that can improve the government’s performance.”



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## [Tehran using violence and politics to push US out of Iraq, say experts](#)

Author:

Fri, 2020-01-24 00:28

BEIRUT: Iran has long sought the withdrawal of American forces from neighboring Iraq, but the US killing of an Iranian general and an Iraqi militia commander in Baghdad has added new impetus to the effort, stoking anti-American feelings that Tehran hopes to exploit to help realize the goal.

The Jan. 3 killing has led Iraq's parliament to call for the ouster of US troops, but there are many lingering questions over whether Iran will be able to capitalize on the sentiment.

An early test will be a "million-man" demonstration against the American presence, called for by influential Shiite cleric Moqtada Al-Sadr and scheduled for Friday.

It is not clear whether the protesters will try to recreate a New Year's Eve attack on the US Embassy compound in Baghdad by Iran-supported militias in the wake of US airstrikes that killed 25 militiamen along the border with Syria. Iran might simply try to use the march to telegraph its intention to keep up the pressure on US troops in Iraq.

But experts say Iran can be counted on to try to seize what it sees as an opportunity to push its agenda in Iraq, despite an ongoing mass uprising that is targeting government corruption as well as Iranian influence in the country.

"Iran is unconstrained by considerations of Iraqi sovereignty, domestic public opinion, or legality when compared to the Western democracies," said David Des Roches, an expert with The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington. "This is Iran's strategic advantage; they should be expected to press it."

A withdrawal of US troops from Iraq would be a victory for Iran, and Tehran

has long pursued a two-pronged strategy of supporting anti-US militias that carry out attacks, as well as exerting political pressure on Iraqi lawmakers sympathetic to its cause. Despite usually trying to keep attacks at a level below what might provoke an American response, Iran-backed Kataib Hezbollah fired a barrage of rockets at a military base in Kirkuk in December, killing a US contractor and wounding several US and Iraqi troops.

The US responded first with deadly airstrikes on Iran-affiliated militia bases in western Iraq and Syria, then followed with the Jan. 3 drone attack that killed Gen. Qassem Soleimani, Iran's most powerful military officer, along with Iraqi militia commander Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis as they left Baghdad's airport.

The severity of the US response surprised Iran and others, and it had the unanticipated result of bolstering Tehran's political approach by prompting the Iraqi parliament to pass the resolution calling for the expulsion of all foreign troops from the country.

In response, President Donald Trump has threatened sanctions on Iraq.

"What they want to do is get rid of US troops in what they see as a legitimate political manner," said Dina Esfandiary, a London-based expert with The Century Foundation think tank. "If Iraqis themselves are voting out US troops, it looks a lot better for Iran than if Iran is a puppet master in Iraq trying to get rid of them – and on top of that it would be a more lasting decision."

The legitimacy of the resolution is a matter of dispute. Not only was the session boycotted by Kurdish lawmakers and many Sunnis, but there also are questions of whether Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi has the ability to carry it out. Abdul Mahdi resigned in November amid mass anti-government protests but remains in a caretaker role.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo bluntly rejected the call for the troops' removal, instead saying Washington would "continue the conversation with the Iraqis about what the right structure is."

Abdul Mahdi strongly supported the resolution, but since then has said it will be up to the next government to deal with the issue, and there are indications he has been working behind the scenes to help keep foreign troops in the country.

After closed-door meetings with German diplomats last week, German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas said the prime minister had assured them that he had "great interest" in keeping the Bundeswehr military contingent and others part of the anti-Daesh coalition in Iraq.

The US, meantime, said it had resumed joint operations with Iraqi forces, albeit on a more limited basis than before.

Trump met Iraqi President Barham Saleh on Wednesday on the sidelines of the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, and said Washington and Baghdad have had "a very good relationship" and that the two countries had a "host of

very difficult things to discuss.” Saleh said they have shared common interests including the fight against extremism, regional stability and an independent Iraq.

Asked about the plan for US troops in Iraq, Trump said, “We’ll see what happens.”

In a sign that bodes well for NATO’s continuing mission in the country, Iraq’s deputy foreign minister went to Brussels last week for talks with Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg on the alliance’s presence in Iraq.

The mixed message of publicly calling for the troops to go but privately wanting them to stay is an indication of Iran’s strong influence, particularly among its fellow Shiite Muslims, Des Roches said.

“For any Iraqi politician in Baghdad – particularly a Shia politician – to defy Iran openly is to risk political as well as physical death,” he said. “So we shouldn’t be surprised if the public and the private lines espoused by Iraqi politicians differ.”

American forces withdrew from Iraq in 2011 but returned in 2014 at the invitation of the government to help battle Daesh after the extremist group seized vast areas in the north and west of the country. A US-led coalition provided crucial air support as Iraqi forces, including Iran-backed militias, regrouped and drove Daesh out in a costly three-year campaign. There are currently some 5,200 American troops in the country.

Even before the drone strike, there were growing calls in nationwide protests across sectarian lines, which started in October centered in Baghdad’s Tahrir Square, for the end of all foreign influence in the country. The demonstrations also targeted government corruption and poor public services.

The rejection of Iranian influence over Iraqi state affairs has been a core component of the movement, and pro-Iranian militias have targeted those demonstrations along with Iraqi security forces, killing hundreds and injuring thousands. Protesters fear that with the focus on the push for the US troop withdrawal in response to the attack that killed Soleimani, they may be even easier targets for those forces and that their message will be lost.

“I think Iraq has had enough of having to deal with the Americans and the Iranians alike,” Esfandiary said. “But the assassination of Al-Muhandis, almost more so than Solemani, was such a glaring oversight of sovereignty and of all agreements they had signed on to with the US in terms of the US presence in Iraq, that it has kind of taken some of the attention away from Iran, to Tehran’s delight.”

Friday’s march called for by Al-Sadr is expected to redirect the focus onto the US troops. The cleric, who also leads the Sairoon bloc in parliament, derives much of his political capital through grassroots mobilization.

The Tahrir Square protesters initially rejected that call, saying they want the escalating conflict between Iran and the US off of Iraqi soil.

Since then, Al-Sadr has reached out to them directly, saying the demonstrations against the government and against the American troops are “two lights from a single lamp,” and it is not yet clear whether that might convince them to participate in the march.



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## [The famous Egyptian city square that shaped a nation's history](#)

Author:

Fri, 2020-01-24 00:08

CAIRO: As famous city squares go, few can have played a more prominent role in shaping a country's history than Tahrir Square in Cairo.

Best known for providing the stage for nationwide protests, which led to the ouster of former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in 2011, the public

gathering place is one of the capital's most important sites.

For 18 consecutive days, hundreds of thousands of demonstrators – some reports put the number at millions – descended on the square before Mubarak finally resigned after 30 years in power.

And the anti-Mubarak protests were not the only political demonstrations Tahrir, also known as Martyr Square, has witnessed.

On June 30, 2013, a year after Mohamed Mursi became the Egyptian president, thousands of protesters gathered in the square demanding his resignation.

Following the two mass demonstrations, Tahrir (Liberation) Square, which lies at the midpoint of Cairo, has become not only a significant part of Egyptian history but also a popular tourist attraction.

Directly after the protests, Egyptians and foreigners feared venturing into Tahrir after it gained a reputation for being unsafe, despite a heavy police presence.

Nine years on from its most significant event, the square is now once again bustling with commuters being within walking distance of the Abdel-Moneim Riad bus station and a transport hub.

Tahrir is also home to the Egyptian Museum which houses more than 100,000 artifacts from the country.

The square is overlooked by the downtown branch of The American University in Cairo, one of the most famous international educational institutions in the country and the Arab world. In 2008, the university relocated to New Cairo, in the Fifth Settlement, taking with it a significant amount of traffic.

Renovation work resumed this month in the square, part of which will involve the addition of four rams restored from Karnak Temple's Hall of Celebration in Luxor. They will be placed around an obelisk being moved from Sun Al-Hajar in the east of Egypt.

With the Egyptian Museum due to relocate to Haram, near the Giza pyramids, the future of the square is not clear. But with its history, offices, schools, coffee shops, restaurants, hotels, and timeworn residential buildings, Tahrir Square is guaranteed never to be short of visitors.



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Egypt draws ire with artifacts' move to busy Tahrir Square  
Egyptians march on Tahrir Square to mark one year since clashes