

'New phase of relations' begins between Saudi Arabia and Iraq

Fri, 2019-04-05 00:09

BAGHDAD, Iraq: A "new phase of relations" has begun between the Kingdom and Iraq, a Saudi minister said Thursday, following the inauguration of a new consulate in Baghdad and the announcement of a \$1 billion development loan, the Saudi Press Agency reported.

"We have seen from the Iraqi side sincere feelings of brotherhood," said Saudi Minister of Commerce and Investment Majid bin Abdullah Al-Qassabi. Additional diplomatic missions would open in other Iraqi cities soon, he added.

Iraqi President Barham Salih met Al-Qassabi and his accompanying delegation on the sidelines of the second meeting of the Saudi-Iraqi Coordination Council, which wrapped up in the capital on Thursday.

Al-Qassabi conveyed a greeting from King Salman and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman to the Iraqi president, government and people.

The Saudi delegation also met Iraqi Prime Minister Adil Abdulmahdi. They reviewed ways of enhancing and supporting bilateral relations and discussed issues of mutual interest.

Parliament Speaker Mohamed Al-Halbousi also received the Saudi economic delegation.

Al-Halbousi confirmed Parliament's desire to provide all the necessary legislation to develop investment and commercial sectors to strengthen the relationship with Saudi Arabia.

Meanwhile, the Iraqi Foreign Ministry said the participation of Iraqi Foreign Minister Mohamed Ali Al-Hakim at the consulate's opening ceremony was a tangible sign of enhanced communication between the two nations.

The ministry said this participation also reflected the wish of both countries to facilitate consular services for Muslims wanting to visit Saudi Arabia's holy sites or perform Hajj and Umrah, as well as to facilitate labor movement procedures and trade exchange.

The opening of the new consulate came as senior ministers from the Kingdom visited Baghdad as part of a meeting of the Saudi-Iraqi Coordination Council. The meeting discussed ways to improve cooperation and bilateral relations, and to coordinate efforts to develop a strategic partnership and foster the exchange of professional and technical experience.

Saudi Arabia will provide Iraq with \$1 billion in loans for development projects, Al-Qassabi said, plus \$500 million to boost exports and a gift of a 100,000-seat sports stadium to be built on Baghdad's outskirts.

He made the announcement during a joint news conference with Iraq's Deputy Prime Minister for Energy Affairs and Oil Minister Thamir Ghadban.

Al-Qassabi added that there were 13 agreements and memorandums of understanding (MoUs) between Saudi Arabia and Iraq in all fields. These would have a "significant impact" on raising the level of cooperation between the two countries, he said.

He stressed Saudi Arabia's keenness to support development projects in Iraq, and said the Arar border crossing between the two countries would open in six months.

Around 80 Saudi and Iraqi businessmen and investors met to discuss prospects for cooperation and coordination in trade and investment.

The Riyadh Chamber of Commerce and Industry and its Iraqi counterpart signed a MoU on strengthening cooperation to serve common interests on the sidelines of the second session of the Saudi-Iraqi Coordination Council.

They agreed to coordinate visions and positions at regional and international economic forums, conferences and exhibitions, as well as conduct research and economic studies.

Separately, Prince Badr bin Abdullah bin Farhan, Saudi minister of culture, accompanied by Iraqi Minister of Culture and Tourism Dr. Abdul Amir Al-Hamdani visited landmarks in Baghdad. Prince Badr toured several areas including Mutanabbi Street, Qishla, Abbasid palace, and historical places.

"Baghdad is distinguished by many cultural and archaeological landmarks, which are immortalized by history as cultural symbols of great importance," Prince Badr said. "Baghdad is considered a beacon of cultural heritage in the Arab world."



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Thu, 2019-04-04 23:00

ALGIERS: A day after Algeria's Constitutional Council formalized Abdelaziz Bouteflika's departure Wednesday from the office he held for two decades, the ex-president himself asked the Algerians people for forgiveness. He urged citizens in a farewell letter "to stay united, and never divide yourselves."

A discreet, 77-year-old Bouteflika ally – the president of the upper house of the Algerian Parliament, Abdelkader Bensalah – is expected to take over as interim leader while Algeria plans elections. But that might further anger the protesters who drove Bouteflika from power, and who want to overhaul a political system seen as secretive, elitist and corrupt.

“Our session today is related to establishing the vacancy of the post of president of the republic, following the resignation of Mr. Abdelaziz Bouteflika yesterday,” said Constitutional Council President Tayeb Belaiz at Wednesday’s meeting.

The 12-member body then formally notified Parliament that Algeria no longer has a president. Both chambers of the national legislature are expected to meet to name the president of the upper house as interim leader for 90 days while elections are organized.

In the public farewell letter released Wednesday by state news agency APS, Bouteflika acknowledged that some of his actions as president were less than successful, writing: “I ask your forgiveness for any failing toward you.”

But he also said, “I am leaving the political scene without sadness or fear, for the future of our country.” He said he hoped Algeria’s new leaders take the nation to “horizons of progress and prosperity.”

Women and young people, who led the protest movement that pressured him out of office, are “the beating heart of our nation” and deserve special attention, Bouteflika wrote.

He notably praised those who fought alongside him for Algeria’s independence from colonial France and urged Algerians to live up to their example and honor their sacrifices.

Bensalah, the man expected to serve as interim leader, has led the upper house for most of Bouteflika’s four terms. A one-time journalist and former ambassador, Bensalah has held senior political positions for the past 25 years but has kept a low profile, rarely giving interviews or appearing at public events.

BACKGROUND

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He’s known as a politician who works behind the scenes to strike compromises and solve problems, and who avoids controversial debates – and is very much part of the political elite.

Demonstrators worry that those who would play a role in the political transition are too close to the distrusted power structure, including Prime Minister Nouredine Bedoui, accused of contributing to fraud in the last presidential election in 2014 and cracking down on past protests.

However, the protest movement doesn't have a single, unifying alternative to the current political system. Another question is what the influential military and Bouteflika's entourage will do next. Military chief of staff Ahmed Gaid Salah appeared to trigger Bouteflika's departure by pushing to get him declared unfit for office.



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[With Netanyahu's help, 'racist' aide could become MP](#)

Thu, 2019-04-04 22:56

HEBRON: The bespectacled man was given a hero's welcome when he arrived for the party on the recent Jewish holiday of Purim, with teenagers singing and applauding around him.

Itamar Ben-Gvir was on the streets of Hebron, a flashpoint city in the occupied West Bank, among Israeli settlers reveling while disguised and

masked according to Jewish tradition.

The support for him there was a sign of why he may soon become a member of Israel's Parliament as part of an extreme-right party many view as racist – helped along by a deal brokered by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

"No way – there's no way that they're racist," said Yehudit Katz, a resident of another West Bank settlement who came to celebrate for Purim in Hebron.

Several hundred Israeli settlers live in Hebron under heavy military guard – including Ben-Gvir – amidst around 200,000 Palestinians.

"The solution that they have is to keep the people that are not Jewish – the Arabs, whoever – that are loyal to the state of Israel as a Jewish homeland, and there are many Arabs like that," said Katz.

FASTFACT

Opinion polls show the list that Jewish Power is part of winning between five and seven seats in the 120-seat Parliament.

"We don't want terrorists. Terrorists can go live somewhere else," he added.

Ben-Gvir, a 42-year-old lawyer, said "God willing" Jewish Power will make it into Parliament.

It is a prospect that has touched off one of the most intense debates in the campaign ahead of April 9 elections.

Jewish Power's leaders are followers of an assassinated racist rabbi whose group was labeled a terrorist organization by the US, the EU and Israel itself.

Netanyahu's deal that saw Jewish Power join two other far-right parties to run on the same electoral list drew disgust at home and among Jewish communities abroad, particularly in the US.

For Netanyahu, the deal ahead of what is expected to be a close election was pure politics.

He defended it by saying he does not want any right-wing votes to go to waste as he eyes his next coalition.

Running alone, Jewish Power was unlikely to pass the 3.25 percent electoral threshold.

But all has not gone smoothly for Jewish Power, whose leader Michael Ben-Ari was also running but has been disqualified by the Supreme Court for statements it ruled were an incitement to racism.

Ben-Gvir's candidacy was also challenged at the court, but he was allowed to stand, making him the only Jewish Power representative with a chance to make

it into Parliament. Jewish Power are followers of late racist rabbi Meir Kahane, whose Kach movement wanted to chase Arabs from Israel.

The ideology of Kahane, assassinated in New York in 1990, also inspired Baruch Goldstein, who carried out a massacre of 29 Palestinian worshippers in Hebron in 1994.

Ben-Gvir acknowledges having a picture of Goldstein in his living room, but has reportedly said it is because he was a medical doctor who rescued Jews targeted in Palestinian attacks.

For Adalah, a rights group for Arab Israelis, Ben-Gvir belongs to a “racist movement recognized as a terrorist organization.”

Jewish Power strongly disputes the characterization, with Ben-Gvir telling the Supreme Court it is only against “enemies of Israel” and not Arabs in general.

Opinion polls show the list that Jewish Power is part of winning between five and seven seats in the 120-seat Parliament.

Ben-Gvir is seventh on the list.

Jewish Power advocates removing “Israel’s enemies from our land,” a reference to Palestinians and Arab Israelis who carry out attacks or who they see as not accepting the Jewish state they envision.

It also calls for Israel annexing the West Bank, where more than 2.5 million Palestinians live.

Ben-Ari was previously a member of Parliament as part of a different right-wing list between 2009 and 2013, but Jewish Power has never passed the electoral threshold.

Ben-Gvir has long been an outspoken member of the far-right.

Indicted 53 times since his youth, he boasts of having been cleared in 46 cases. He decided to study law on the recommendation of judges so he could defend himself.

He defends settlers accused of violence, including those allegedly responsible for an arson attack that killed an 18-month-old boy and his parents in 2015 in the West Bank, an incident that drew widespread revulsion.

In 1995, when only 19 and in a time of turmoil following the Oslo accords with the Palestinians, he appeared on television with what he said was the stolen emblem from then prime minister Yitzhak Rabin’s Cadillac.

Rabin was assassinated by an Israeli opposed to the Oslo accords later that year.

“We got to this symbol. We’ll get to him,” Ben-Gvir said at the time.



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Author:

Wed, 2019-04-03 21:52

JERUSALEM: In a charged election campaign that has been heavy on insults and short on substance, Israel's conflict with the Palestinians has been notably absent from the discourse.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's ruling Likud Party has offered no plan for what many believe is the country's most existential problem.

His main challenger speaks vaguely of "separation," while Netanyahu's hard-line partners speak openly of the once unthinkable idea of annexing all or parts of the West Bank. Talk of a Palestinian state, the international

community's preferred solution for the past two decades, is non-existent.

It is a far cry from past elections, when peace with the Palestinians was the central issue for voters. This apparent lack of interest reflects widespread disillusionment in Israel over years of failed peace efforts.

But it also is a testament to Netanyahu's success in sidelining the issue. Capitalizing on internal Palestinian divisions and promoting sometimes contradictory policies, Netanyahu has succeeded in managing the conflict without addressing the bigger issue of how two intertwined peoples will live together in the future. Strong backing from the Trump administration has given him an extra boost.

"The peace track is currently in a coma," said Shmuel Rosner, a senior fellow at the Jewish People Policy Institute. "There's not much hope for a viable solution to be revived in the near future, so people can just keep pushing it aside until someday it comes back to haunt them."

Netanyahu took office in early 2009 and under heavy pressure from then-President Barack Obama reluctantly stated his support for an independent Palestinian state, albeit with many conditions, which were rejected.

Things quickly went downhill, and serious peace talks never took place during Obama's time in office.

Throughout his tenure, Netanyahu has repeatedly cast blame on the Palestinians, accusing President Mahmoud Abbas, who seeks a negotiated settlement with Israel, of incitement and promoting "terror."

At the same time, he has maintained behind-the-scenes security cooperation with Abbas' forces in the West Bank in a joint struggle against the Hamas militant group.

In the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip, Netanyahu has engaged in frequent rounds of fighting, but is also conducting behind-the-scenes negotiations with his bitter enemy in hopes of maintaining calm.

The Trump administration has further sidelined the Palestinians by cutting hundreds of millions of dollars in aid and recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's capital, prompting the Palestinians to sever ties with the US. A long-promised peace plan, which the White House says will be released after the election, faces dim prospects, if it is even released.

With the peace process in a deep freeze, it is perhaps no surprise that none of the major Israeli parties are talking about the Palestinians.

"The Palestinian cause is totally absent in the Israeli elections, and when it comes, it comes only in a negative context," said Ahmed Majdalani, a senior Palestinian official. "This is worrisome, because it tells us that we are going from bad to worse."

The Palestinians seek the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza Strip – areas captured by Israel in the 1967 Mideast war – for an independent state. The

so-called two-state solution is widely backed internationally as the best way to end the conflict.

If Israel continues to rule over millions of Palestinians, the thinking goes, the Palestinians will eventually abandon their dream of statehood and instead demand Israeli citizenship and full equality. In such a scenario, Israel would no longer be able to be both Jewish and democratic.

Israelis accuse the Palestinians of rejecting generous peace offers, most recently in late 2008, a narrative the Palestinians reject. The Israelis also point to the 2005 withdrawal from Gaza, which cleared the way for Hamas to seize power from Abbas' forces two years later. Ahead of the election, several religious and nationalist parties, along with individual members of Netanyahu's Likud party, have openly called for annexing parts or all of the West Bank. These plans include a range of proposals for the Palestinians, including nonvoting residency rights, possible citizenship or financial incentives to emigrate.

It remains unclear how hard these parties, all potential coalition partners for Netanyahu, will push, though Trump's recent recognition of Israel's annexation of the occupied Golan Heights has led to stepped-up calls for annexing West Bank territory.

Likud spokesman Eli Hazan said he does not expect annexation to be on the agenda. He said the party "strongly believes" in the status quo. "We are against the one-state solution and two-state solution. Both ways may lead to the end of Israel as a Jewish and democratic country," he said.

Yohanan Plesner, president of the Israeli Democracy Institute and a former lawmaker, said he did not think Netanyahu would give in to the annexation calls. "At the end of the day, West Bank annexation is the prerogative of the prime minister," he said.

Netanyahu's main challenger, former military chief Benny Gantz, has given Israel's "peace camp" some dim hope.

His Blue and White party's platform devotes just a few sentences to the Palestinians, promising "an open horizon for political settlement" and pledging to work with Arab neighbors to find a way to "deepen the separation." It makes no mention of Palestinian statehood, and says Israel will continue to maintain control of parts of the West Bank and never divide Jerusalem.

Ghassan Khatib, a former Palestinian negotiator, said the lack of interest on the Israeli side is harmful to the Palestinians in the short term but much worse for Israel in the long term.

"It means the end of the two-state solution," he said. "The alternative will be an apartheid system, and this will cause huge damage to Israeli democracy and the image of Israel."



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Israeli kills suspected Palestinian attacker in West Bank
Palestinian killed in clash with Israeli forces

[INTERVIEW: Palestinian ambassador to UK braced for Trump's 'deal of the century'](#)

Wed, 2019-04-03 21:40

LONDON: Like many Palestinian officials, Husam Zomlot is deeply concerned.

The US is close to unveiling its new Middle East peace plan. But all the signs so far have deepened concerns that President Donald Trump's "deal of the century" will be heavily biased toward Israel and offer little to the Palestinians.

The plan is being constructed by Jared Kushner, senior adviser and son-in-law to the president, Jason Greenblatt, US special representative for international negotiations, and David Friedman, US ambassador to Israel. It is expected to be announced after the April 9 Israeli elections, and Kushner said last month it would address all core issues of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, including borders.

Speaking to Sky News Arabia, Kushner added that he wanted to see a unified Palestinian government in the West Bank and Gaza. For Zomlot though, the Fatah member and Palestinian ambassador to the UK, there are warning signs everywhere that the deal weakens the Palestinian position.

"The plan is illegitimate," he told Arab News, "because they did not consult the Palestinian people, the international community, or revert to international resolutions."

In September last year, Zomlot was expelled from the US. The Trump administration shut down the Palestinian diplomatic mission to Washington, and he relocated to the UK the following month to head the mission in London.

Trump piled more pressure on the Palestinians last year by moving the US Embassy in Israel to Jerusalem, and by cutting aid to the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA).

BIO BORN

Gaza Strip, 1973

EDUCATION

Doctorate in economics, University of London

CAREER

Ambassador, Head of Palestinian Mission to the UK

Former Head of PLO General Delegation to the US

Strategic Affairs Advisor to the Palestinian President

Economist at the UN and as an economic researcher with London School of Economics and the Palestine Policy Research Institute

On Monday, Trump recognized Israeli sovereignty over the occupied Golan Heights, seized from Syria in 1967, a move condemned by Arab countries and one that raised concerns in Ramallah over the future of its own territory.

That the deal is being put together solely by lawyers adds to its illegitimacy, Zomlot suggested, adding that the approach being taken was akin to real estate lawyers driving tenants from a building.

"You apply pressure on the tenants to evict them, like cutting water, electricity, heating, parking. This is what they have been doing with us for

the last two years, starting with the closing of our diplomatic mission to Washington.”

One of the biggest Palestinian complaints is that they have not been consulted during the process, yet at the same time, the US team have gone out of their way to accommodate Israel.

Saudi Arabia has always unconditionally supported the rights of the Palestinian people, both politically and financially

Husam Zomlot

“It’s only taking into consideration one side, not even that of Israel but of Netanyahu – a clear indication that the Trump administration is supporting him,” Zomlot said.

He added that the US was ignoring decades of “international resolutions, consensus and laws” in the face of growing domestic support for the Palestinian cause. “We see the growing solidarity and awareness in America, and the number of people that voice support from the youth, the Congress, the Jewish community, the media and the intelligence agencies.”

However, the 46-year-old diplomat, who was born in a Gaza refugee camp and later studied in London, appears to feel more at home in the UK, and wants it to spearhead the Middle East peace process, commending Whitehall’s recent decision to double its contribution to UNRWA. “The UK is way more equipped and familiar with the situation than the Trump administration,” he said.

In such uncertain times, though, Ramallah is looking more to its old regional allies, with Zomlot calling Saudi Arabia an “older brother” in his nation’s history.

“Saudi Arabia has always unconditionally supported the rights of the Palestinian people, both politically and financially,” he said, citing King Salman’s defiance of the US embassy move by renaming the Saudi-hosted Arab League Summit the “Jerusalem Summit” last year.

One issue most Palestinians agree on is the need for a unified position – something that came to an end when Hamas seized Gaza in 2007. The hard-line group remains in control while in the West Bank, the Palestinian Authority is viewed as increasingly ineffective under the leadership of the aging President Mahmoud Abbas.

Last month, Abbas named Mohammad Shtayyeh prime minister, and Zomlot claimed the veteran politician had the ability required “to form a national government backed by all parties.”

He said now, more than ever, the Palestinians required “a strong government capable of engaging with the international community and dealing with the reality of colonialism that is not interested in a two-state solution.”

In a matter of weeks, when the Trump administration reveals its “deal of the century,” Abbas, Shtayyeh, Zomlot and others will face one of their greatest tests yet.



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‘I wish that everybody could just tell the truth.’ – Palestine’s youngest journalist
Saudi Cabinet reaffirms support for Palestine