

Arab states condemn Israeli minister's anti-Palestinians remark

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Israel's far-right National Security Minister Bezalel Smotrich says there 'isn't a Palestinian people'.

Ramallah, March 22 (RHC)-- The Palestinian Authority, Egypt and Jordan have condemned as “racist” a firebrand Israeli minister’s remarks denying the existence of the Palestinian people, with Amman summoning Israel’s ambassador for a rebuke.

Israel’s far-right Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich is part of veteran leader Benjamin Netanyahu’s hard-right government that took office in December. Smotrich had already faced international rebuke in early March after calling for a Palestinian town in the occupied West Bank to be “wiped out” after its settlers rampaged through it, killing one Palestinian and setting fire to cars and homes.

“There are no Palestinians, because there isn’t a Palestinian people,” he said on Sunday in Paris, quoting French-Israeli Zionist activist Jacques Kupfer at an event in his memory, according to a video circulating on social media.

A Jordanian official told Reuters news agency on Tuesday that Israel had reassured the kingdom that Smotrich’s behaviour, which included standing at a podium adorned with a map of an Israeli flag that included Jordan and the Palestinian territories, did not represent its position.

On Monday, Jordan’s Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi said he had been told by Israel’s national security adviser that Israel respected the sovereignty and territorial integrity of its neighbour.

Meanwhile, Palestinian Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh said before a cabinet meeting on Monday the “inflammatory statements” made by Smotrich provided “conclusive evidence of the extremist, racist Zionist ideology ... of the current Israeli government”.

Evoking biblical “prophecies” that are “beginning to come true,” Smotrich said: “After 2,000 years ... God is gathering his people. The people of Israel are returning home.”

“There are Arabs around who don’t like it, so what do they do? They invent a fictitious people and claim fictitious rights to the Land of Israel, only to fight the Zionist movement,” he said. “It is the historical truth, it is the biblical truth.”

Farhan Haq, deputy spokesman for United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, dubbed the minister’s remarks “completely unhelpful”, stressing the Palestinian people “obviously” exists. “We continue to support their rights and to push for a two-state solution,” Haq said.

The European Union’s foreign policy chief also criticised Smotrich’s statement. “I have to deplore these unacceptable comments by minister Smotrich,” said Joseph Borrell. “It is wrong, it is disrespectful, it is dangerous, it is counterproductive to say these kinds of things in a situation which is already tense.”

Smotrich, who met no French government officials during his trip, was speaking from a lectern which featured a map of so-called Greater Israel, including the occupied West Bank, Golan Heights, blockaded Gaza Strip and Jordan – the neighbouring Arab country that signed a peace treaty with Israel in 1994.

Israel has occupied the West Bank since the Six-Day War of 1967, when it also seized East Jerusalem, the Gaza Strip and the Golan Heights.

Smotrich’s comments came as Israeli and Palestinian representatives met in the Red Sea resort of Sharm el-Sheikh along with Egyptian, Jordanian and United States officials for “extensive discussions on ways to de-escalate tensions”, according to a joint statement.

Smotrich, who lives in an illegal West Bank settlement, had called in early March for the Palestinian town of Huwara to be “wiped out” after two Israelis were shot dead there by an alleged Hamas fighter.

Hundreds of rampaging Israeli settlers torched Palestinian homes and cars in Huwara after the shooting, and a Palestinian man was killed in a nearby village. Violence has intensified in the West Bank in recent

months, with fears of further escalation during the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan, due to begin this week.

The Israeli defense ministry body responsible for civil affairs in the Palestinian territories on Monday relaxed a series of tight restrictions with the aim of allowing more Palestinians to worship at Al-Aqsa mosque compound, Islam's third holiest site, during Ramadan. It said women of all ages and men 55 and older from the West Bank will be allowed free access to Jerusalem for Friday prayers at the compound.

Earlier, Israel's National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir, another extreme right figure in the cabinet, ordered the closure of an East Jerusalem office of West Bank-based public broadcaster Palestine. He accused it of "incitement and supporting terror" and said it was not licensed to operate from the annexed territory.

Ahmad Assaf, head of the Palestinian broadcaster, condemned the move and said it was a "crime against journalism." Since the start of the year, Israelis have killed 86 Palestinian adults and children, including fighters and civilians.

Fourteen Israeli adults and children, including members of the security forces and civilians, and one Ukrainian civilian have been killed in Palestinian attacks over the same period.

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