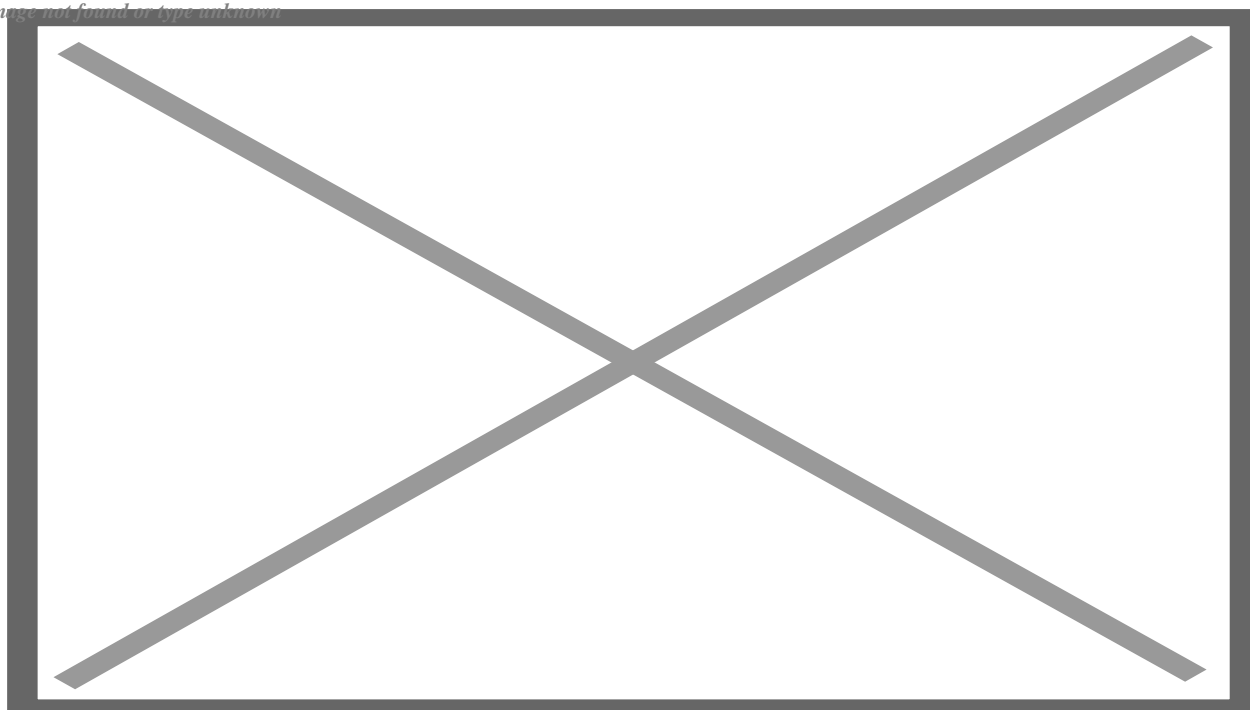


Mike Pompeo visits illegal Israeli settlement in occupied West Bank

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Mike Pompeo visits Israeli settlement in occupied West Bank

Jerusalem, November 19 (RHC)-- U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has visited the Israeli settlement of Psagot in the illegally occupied West Bank, becoming the first top diplomat from the United States to do so.

Pompeo arrived at the Psagot winery outside Jerusalem on Thursday. Earlier, he said he would also pay a visit to the Golan Heights, a territory Israel captured from Syria in the 1967 war.

Psagot is built on agricultural lands belonging to Ramallah's twin city of al-Bireh. "Many of the residents don't have access to their farmlands – some of which is being used for the winery that Pompeo [will] visit," Al Jazeera's Harry Fawcett earlier said, reporting from al-Bireh.

Dozens of Palestinians demonstrated outside the settlement and Israeli soldiers responded with tear gas.

The Psagot winery is part of a sprawling network of Israeli settlements in the West Bank that are considered illegal under international law and a major obstacle in peace negotiations. But the U.S. broke

from the international community consensus and announced that it no longer considers the settlements as unlawful.

“During a news conference earlier on Thursday with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu he again reiterated that, saying settlements could be done in a lawful, appropriate and proper way,” Fawcett said. “And so he is coming to the settlement to emphasise that.”

Pompeo had no scheduled meetings with Palestinian leaders, who have strongly rejected Trump’s stance on the decades-old conflict, including Washington’s recognition of Jerusalem as the Israeli capital.

Hanan Ashrawi, a member of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) Executive Committee, said Pompeo is “trespassing on Palestinian land stolen by Israel” and “has done enough damage.”

In the news conference with Netanyahu, Pompeo also announced the US will label the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) campaign, which seeks to isolate Israel over its treatment of the Palestinians, as “anti-Semitic.” He also said government support for any organisations taking part in BDS will be cut off – a step that could deny funding to Palestinian and international human rights groups.

Washington “will regard the global anti-Israel BDS campaign as anti-Semitic ... We want to stand with all other nations that recognise the BDS movement for the cancer that it is,” Pompeo said.

For his part, Netanyahu said the Israel-US alliance had reached “unprecedented heights” under the Trump administration, and thanked it for moving its embassy to Jerusalem, abandoning the U.S. position that Israeli settlements are contrary to international law, and taking a hard line against Iran.

Pompeo is also expected to visit the occupied Golan Heights, territory that Israel annexed from Syria in 1967 in a move that was not recognised by the international community. However, in March 2019, U.S. President Donald Trump recognised the Israeli occupation of the Golan Heights when he signed a decree alongside Netanyahu at the White House.

The move was condemned by the international community, while Syria called it a “blatant attack” on its sovereignty.

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