

Palestinians and Arab League condemn opening of Czech office in Jerusalem

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The Palestinian foreign ministry called Prague's move 'a blatant attack on the Palestinian people and their rights, a flagrant violation of international law' Photo: Showkat Shafi/Al Jazeera]

Ramallah, March 15 (RHC)-- The Palestinian Authority and the Arab League have condemned the Czech Republic's opening of a diplomatic office in Jerusalem as a violation of international law. Last week, Prague opened a Jerusalem branch of its Israel embassy, which is located in Tel Aviv.

The inauguration was attended by Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babis, two weeks after Israel sent 5,000 Moderna COVID-19 vaccine doses to the Czech Republic under a "vaccine diplomacy" programme that later came under legal scrutiny and was frozen.

The Palestinian foreign ministry over the weekend called Prague's move "a blatant attack on the Palestinian people and their rights, a flagrant violation of international law", and said it would harm peace prospects.

In Cairo, Arab League Secretary-General Ahmed Aboul Gheit said in a statement: "The legal status of Jerusalem will be affected by the decision of one country or another to open representative offices. East Jerusalem is an occupied land under the International law."

Stressing that the Jerusalem office was not an embassy, the Czech Foreign Ministry said it was meant to strengthen Prague's strategic partnership with Israel and improve services for Czech citizens there.

"The establishment of the office has no impact on the will of the Czech Republic to further develop political and economic relations with the Palestinian Authority," it said.

Jerusalem remains at the heart of the decades-long Middle East conflict, with the PA insisting East Jerusalem – illegally occupied by Israel since 1967 – should serve as the capital of a Palestinian state.

Speaking beside Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Thursday, Babis said Prague was a "strategic partner" of Israel, recalling how after 1948 Czechoslovakia helped it maintain its new-found independence by sending deliveries of fighter planes.

At the inauguration ceremony, Babis said it "represents another milestone in our cooperation, it gives evidence that we see the importance of this great city." Only two countries have full embassies in Jerusalem: The United States – after former US President Donald Trump broke with decades of US policy to recognise Jerusalem as the capital of Israel – and Guatemala.

The Czech Republic is one of Israel's strongest supporters in the European Union.

Although it formally supports a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it was named in an International Criminal Court pre-trial decision last month as one of the countries supporting Israel's argument that the court should not investigate war crimes in the occupied Palestinian territories.

Babis said last week that his country regarded the ICC's decision to proceed with an investigation as "unfortunate," adding: "Though we respect the independence of the court, the Czech Republic doesn't consider Palestine to be a state, therefore the court has no jurisdiction over it."

Last month, Israel and Kosovo established diplomatic ties, with the Muslim-majority country recognising Jerusalem as the capital of Israel.

At the time, Israel's foreign minister said he had approved Kosovo's "formal request to open an embassy in Jerusalem."

Kosovo also said it was ready to set up its Israel mission in Jerusalem, in exchange for Israel's recognition, as it seeks to further legitimise its 2008 declaration of independence from Serbia and statehood.

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