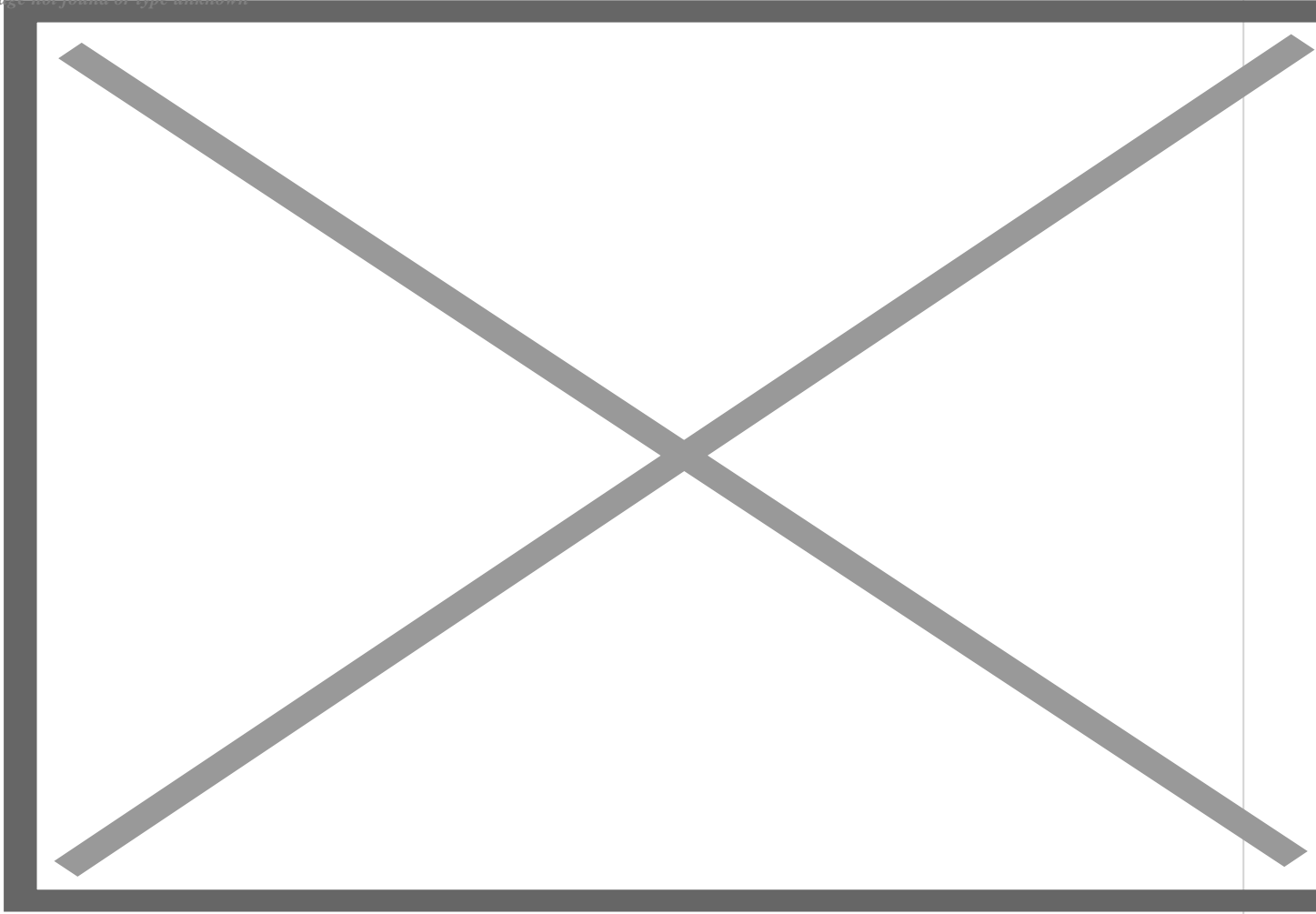


Palestinian lands seized in West Bank as Biden lands in Tel Aviv

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Joe Biden in Israel.

Tel Aviv, July 14 (RHC)-- The Israeli army began confiscating 1,480 dunams of lands belonging to Palestinians north of the occupied West Bank on Wednesday, just as U.S. President Joe Biden touched down in Israel to kick off his first trip to the Middle East since taking office.

Upon disembarking from U.S. Air Force One, which arrived at Ben Gurion Airport in Lydd (Lod) at around 12:30 GMT, Biden said that while he believed in the two-state solution between the Israeli and the

Palestinians, he did not think it was likely happen in the near future.

Biden, who was welcomed by Israel's caretaker Prime Minister Yair Lapid, former prime ministers Naftali Bennett and Benjamin Netanyahu, and Israeli President Isaac Herzog, will spend two days in Israel before briefly spending Friday morning in the occupied West Bank city of Bethlehem, where he will meet Palestinian leaders, including President Mahmoud Abbas. He will then fly to Saudi Arabia to meet Gulf officials, including Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman.

As Israeli and American media fixed their cameras on Biden's arrival, Israeli army bulldozers began plowing lands belonging to four Palestinian villages - Jaloud, Qaryut, Turmusaya and al-Mughayer - between Ramallah and Nablus.

The lands had been seized by the army after appeals from affected residents, who grew olives and almonds there, were rejected. The area was declared a security zone by the army to secure adjacent Israeli settlements and outposts, seen as illegal under international law, according to Palestinian activists documenting settlement expansion on the ground.

"They used Biden's visit where all eyes are directed at the moment to launch this settlement project, which is part of a larger plan to connect Israeli settlements and cut off the West Bank's north from its south," he added.

Israeli settlements in the West Bank, which house more than 600,000 settlers, are viewed by Palestinians as a major obstacle to the two-state solution and lasting peace between Israel and the Palestinians.

Both Herzog and Lapid also spoke briefly at the arrival ceremony. "As Joseph, son of Jacob, who sought out his brothers here, Mr President, you are truly amongst family... Like the biblical Joseph, you are both visionary and a leader," said Herzog at the welcoming ceremony.

Lapid hailed Biden as a "great Zionist" and one "of the best friends Israel has ever known". "You once defined yourself as a Zionist. You said that you don't have to be a Jew to be a Zionist, and you were right. And in your case, a great Zionist," Lapid said.

The 79-year-old president will then be briefed by Israel's military on the U.S.-backed Iron Dome anti-missile defence system and the new Iron Beam anti-drone laser system. Israel has said it will raise 1,000 flags to welcome Biden in Jerusalem, where he will pay respects at Yad Vashem, Israel's memorial to Holocaust victims during the Second World War.

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