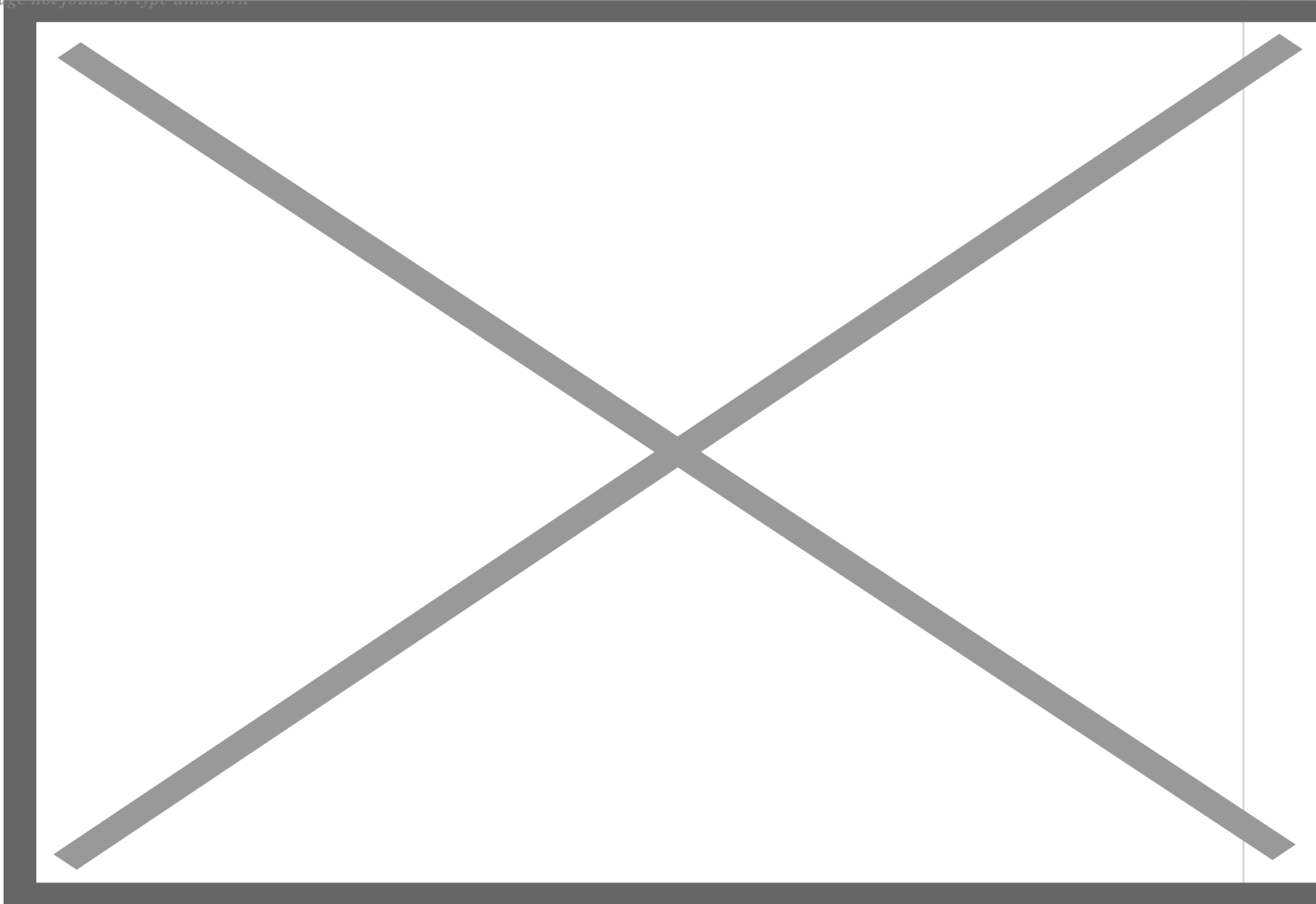


Netanyahu says Israel committed to Trump's Gaza plan

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U.S. President Donald Trump has called for Arab nations to take in Palestinians displaced from Gaza [File: Dawoud Abu Alkas/Reuters]

A drone view shows Palestinians walking past buildings damaged and destroyed during the Israeli offensive

Tel Aviv, February 18 (RHC)-- Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has said he is “committed” to a United States proposal to take over the Gaza Strip and displace its Palestinian residents, as Washington’s top diplomat was in Saudi Arabia to push the plan opposed by Arab states.

In a statement on Monday, Netanyahu said he was “committed to US President Trump’s plan for the creation of a different Gaza. The Israeli leader also promised that “neither Hamas nor the Palestinian Authority” would rule the enclave at the end of the 15-month war, which has killed more than 48,000 Palestinians and led to a dire humanitarian crisis.

Netanyahu’s remarks come a day after he hailed “Trump’s bold vision for Gaza’s future” during a meeting with US Secretary of State Marco Rubio in Jerusalem.

Human rights groups have slammed the Trump administration’s push to take over Gaza and forcibly displace Palestinians as a violation of international law that would amount to ethnic cleansing.

The proposal also has been widely denounced by Arab countries, but it will be on the agenda during Rubio’s visits to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates this week.

Rubio was welcomed by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman on Monday in Riyadh, the latest stop on the top US diplomat’s first visit to the Middle East. “The Secretary and the Crown Prince reaffirmed their commitment to implementing the ceasefire in Gaza and ensuring that Hamas releases all hostages, including American citizens,” a State Department spokesperson said in a readout of the talks.

“The Secretary underscored the importance of an arrangement for Gaza that contributes to regional security.”

Saudi Arabia is spearheading Arab efforts to develop a counterproposal to Trump’s plan for Gaza, which could involve a Gulf-led reconstruction fund and a deal to sideline Hamas.

The Saudi Foreign Ministry has said it rejects any attempts to displace Palestinians from their land.

Rubio said in a recent interview that the U.S. remained open to alternative proposals from Arab governments, but for now “the only plan is the Trump plan.”

Meanwhile, Israel’s security cabinet was expected to discuss the second phase of the Gaza ceasefire on Monday.

The second phase – in which Hamas is to release dozens of remaining captives in exchange for more Palestinian prisoners, a lasting truce and the withdrawal of Israeli forces from Gaza – has yet to be agreed to.

Far-right members of the Israeli government, including Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich, have said they would quit Netanyahu’s coalition if the war does not resume.

So far, 19 Israeli captives have been freed as part of the first phase of the ceasefire deal that began on January 19. A total of 33 captives are expected to be released at staggered intervals during this stage

Netanyahu has said “the gates of hell will be opened” on Gaza if all the captives are not freed.

Reporting from the Jordanian capital Amman, Al Jazeera’s Nour Odeh noted that the Israeli premier has faced sustained protests by relatives and supporters of the captives held in Gaza.

“They have repeatedly accused the Israeli prime minister of trying to derail talks on the ceasefire in Gaza, of trying to not go onto phase two, partly because he is really trying to keep his coalition partners happy,” Odeh explained.

U.S. Mideast envoy Steve Witkoff said on Sunday that the second stage of the deal is “absolutely going to begin” and that Trump “wants to see” it happen. “We are not leaving anybody behind,” he said, referring to the remaining captives.

Meron Rapoport, an editor for Israeli news outlet Local Call, said that while Netanyahu’s government has little desire to move to the second stage of the ceasefire, it is being pressured on two fronts.

“Netanyahu is seeing in Trump’s plan the fulfilment of the dream of emptying Gaza of Palestinians,” Rapoport told Al Jazeera from Tel Aviv. “But at the same time, [he is] being pressured by the U.S. and by the families of the hostages who have not yet been released to go into the second stage.” He added that the second stage of the deal “would mean the end of the war” and the potential release of prominent Palestinian political prisoners, such as Marwan Barghouti.

“And this is very hard to swallow for Israel,” Rapoport said.

[SOURCE: PRESS TV and NEWS AGENCIES]

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