

Friday Times

# International

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 17, 2017

**Syrian regime, rebels attend Russian-backed talks; bombing kills 24**



**Sour mood as Kosovo turns nine**



**All eyes on Tillerson's debut at G20**



GAZA: Palestinian rescue members evacuate a man from a flooded home using a fishing boat during a heavy rain storm in Jabaliya refugee camp, northern Gaza Strip yesterday. —AP

## ISRAELI JOY, PALESTINIAN ALARM AT 2-STATE SHIFT

### TRUMP DROPS US COMMITMENT TO 'TWO-STATE' MIDEAST DEAL

**JERUSALEM:** US President Donald Trump's shelving of the decades-long goal of a two-state solution to the Middle East conflict has excited Israelis and alarmed Palestinians, though no one is quite sure what it means. The announcement was hailed by ministers in Israel's rightwing government, a number of whom have called for the annexation of Palestinian territory in the occupied West Bank. "The Palestinian flag has come down from the mast and the Israeli flag has taken its place," far-right Education Minister Naftali Bennett said.

Science Minister Ofir Akunis hailed "the end of a dangerous and erroneous idea: the creation of a Palestinian terrorist state in the heart of the land of Israel." Rightwing politicians consider the West Bank, occupied since 1967 in contravention of international law, to be part of historic Israel for religious reasons. In the first meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu since his inauguration, Trump on Wednesday broke with international consensus and decades of US policy insisting on a future that included an independent Palestinian state alongside Israel.

"I'm looking at two-state and one-state, and I like the one that both parties like. I'm very happy with the one that both parties like," he said. "I can live with either one." The two-state solution has been the cornerstone of US and international policy for decades, but Netanyahu has long wavered on his sup-

port for it. It is the first time Netanyahu's premiership has coincided with a Republican president and Israeli media hailed Trump's policy shift as a major success. Michael Oren, deputy minister in Netanyahu's office, said they could not have hoped for a better statement.

Palestinians, however, were less impressed. President Mahmud Abbas said his government was "ready to deal positively" with the White House, highlighting Trump's appeal to Netanyahu on Wednesday to "hold back" on settlements—seen as illegal by the international community—for a "little while." Hossam Zomlot, Abbas' special advisor, told AFP that while a two-state solution was still preferred, his administration was willing to discuss all options, providing Palestinian rights were protected. "What we retain is that Trump says he wants peace," Zomlot said, adding Israel sought an "apartheid state." Trump has yet to speak to Abbas and officials have quietly expressed alarm.

#### 'Weak' position

Jihad Harb, a Palestinian political scientist, said the leadership was being cautious due to its "weak position" and its past failure to follow through on threats. "The Palestinian leadership has failed to open a dialogue with the US administration. It is afraid that an escalation (in rhetoric) at this stage could

ruin any possibility of dialogue," he said. Ghassan Khatib, a professor and former Palestinian official, said Trump was "very bad for the Palestinians."

The leadership, Harb added, has limited options if Trump continues to freeze them out. It could return to the United Nations or International Criminal Court for another attempt to exert pressure, or instead push for "a movement of popular resistance against the occupation," according to Harb. What a one-state solution would look like in reality remains unclear. Oren implied there was support for what has been dubbed by Israeli media as the "state minus" approach, meaning levels of autonomy for Palestinian areas in the West Bank but never full independence. "(It) may not conform to what we know as a two-state solution but would enable the Palestinians to lead their lives in prosperity and security," Oren said.

Ofer Zalzburg of the International Crisis Group think tank said the Trump administration appeared to have "zero clarity" on the meaning of a one-state solution, leaving the Israelis in prime position to dictate terms. "Essentially Netanyahu was presented with the choice between one state and two," he said. "But he is in favor of one state and a half." Shmuel Rosner from the Jewish People Policy Institute agreed it was unclear what Trump meant. "I don't think what Trump presented yesterday was a realistic vision for Middle East peace," he said. —AFP