

# Israel farmers fear for future as Jordan claims back lands

**TSOFAR:** Every morning with the first rays of sunlight, Eitan Guedj leaves his house in Israel, passes through two checkpoints and heads for his pepper plantation in Ghumar, a leased Jordanian territory the neighboring kingdom now wants back. He is joined by around 30 fellow Israeli farmers and some 150 Thai workers who make a living from the 1,500 dunum desert enclave just beyond a hill dominating the skyline of Tsoufar village in southern Israel. Each worker has a permit to pass through the Israeli and Jordanian checkpoints, the 36-year-old said. "The crossings are open 365 days a year, from sunrise to sunset."

For the quarter of a century since a historic peace deal, Israel has leased from Jordan the border territories of Ghumar, in its southern province of Aqaba, and Baqura in the northern province of Irbid. But last Sunday, Jordan's King Abdullah II said his country had notified Israel that it wants to take back the two areas. Israel seized Baqura when its forces infiltrated the kingdom in 1950. It occupied Jordanian territories including Ghumar in the Six-Day War of 1967. Under their 1994 peace treaty, Jordan retained sovereignty over the areas but agreed to lease them to Israel for a renewable 25 years, with a one-year notice period for either party.

King Abdullah's announcement on Sunday came days before the end of that notice period. The move risks sparking a crisis between the Israel and Jordan, the only Arab country apart from Egypt to have a peace deal with the Jewish state. Relations with the Jordanians have hitherto been "excellent", according to Eitan Lipszyc, 60, the village's leader for the past

13 years. "We felt at home and we were surprised to be no longer welcome at the house," he sighs. He said around a third of the village's fewer than 100 residents make a living from farming. Without access to Ghumar, Tsoufar's very survival is in doubt.

If Jordan takes back the territories, "all the facilities will be lost", said Guedj, who earns 80 percent of his income from selling peppers grown on the Jordanian land - most of them for export. Planted in greenhouses tinted yellow by ochre dust from the surrounding desert, peppers grow better in Ghumar than elsewhere in the area, he said, as the soil there is rich in minerals. He estimated it would take him five to six years to relaunch his business inside Israel, and said he would probably never achieve such good returns.

King Abdullah's decision was seen as a response to growing public anger over high unemployment, inflation and poverty, exacerbated by the presence of hundreds of thousands of refugees fleeing the war in neighboring Syria. The announcement came after a series of demonstrations calling for the return of Baqura and Ghumar organized by lawmakers, political parties, trade unions and activists. Jordan's peace treaty with Israel is overwhelmingly opposed by Jordanians, more than half of whom are of Palestinian origin.

Following the king's announcement, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu sought to calm the crisis, proposing negotiations with Jordan to keep the current arrangement in place. Possibly in an attempt to show goodwill, Israel sent helicopters and search and rescue teams to its neighbor this week after a flash flood in the Dead Sea region that killed 21 people, most of them



Israeli farmer Eitan Guedj and a Thai worker check pepper crops near the Moshav Tsoufar Israeli-Jordanian border crossing point (Ghumar on the Jordanian side) on Oct 23, 2018. — AFP

schoolchildren. The Hashemite kingdom has said it is willing to engage in talks but insists on its right to reclaim the land.

Under the treaty, the two sides have a year to agree on the future of the enclaves. Oded Eran, Israeli ambassador to Jordan from 1997 to 2002 and a researcher at Tel Aviv's Institute for National Security Studies, said Israel must "offer something

attractive to the Jordanians" or compensate the farmers for their losses. In Tsoufar, residents are hoping for a negotiated solution. "For the time being, we're looking at our options," Lipszyc said, adding that he does not want to organize protests but rather to support the government in its efforts. Israeli farmers tilling Jordanian soil is "good for peace," he said.

Some residents speculate that Jordanian farmers will struggle to grow anything on the land, surrounded by barren desert. The prospect of being cut off from the enclave places "enormous pressure" on the village, said Guedj, who has three children to feed. "If I lose this land, I'll probably leave," he said. "There's is nothing else in the area - neither tourism nor high-tech industry." — AFP

## Several dead as gunman attacks...

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people had died, while the local CBS affiliate reported that eight people were dead. A woman at the scene, in the historically Jewish Pittsburgh neighborhood of Squirrel Hill, told CNN her daughter was with others who ran down the stairs and barricaded themselves in the basement of the synagogue after hearing shots. "They're safe, but they kept hearing them firing and everything else," she told the television network. Police cordoned off the building, which was surrounded by police cars, ambulances and a police SWAT team.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu voiced his grief and solidarity with the United States, saying he was "heartbroken and appalled by the murderous attack". "The entire people of Israel grieve with the families of the dead" Netanyahu said in a video message. "We stand together with the Jewish community of Pittsburgh. We stand together with the American people in the face of this horrendous antisemitic brutality."

"We are devastated," tweeted Jonathan Greenblatt, the head of the Anti-Defamation League. "Jews targeted on Shabbat morning at synagogue, a holy place of worship, is unconscionable. Our hearts break for the victims, their families, and the entire Jewish community." Trump's daughter Ivanka, in a tweet, vowed that "America is stronger than the acts of a depraved bigot and anti-Semite". "All good Americans stand with the Jewish peo-

ple to oppose acts of terror & share the horror, disgust & outrage over the massacre in Pittsburgh. We must unite against hatred & evil. God bless those affected."

The New York Police Department said it was deploying heavy weapons teams to houses of worship across the city in response to the Pittsburgh attack. It is the latest shooting incident in the United States, where gunmen regularly cause mass casualties and firearms are linked to more than 30,000 deaths annually. The Tree of Life Synagogue is in a residential neighborhood about eight kilometers east of downtown Pittsburgh.

Michael Eisenberg, past president of the synagogue, told local television the door would typically have been open on Saturdays with religious services going on. He said police are normally deployed only on High Holy Days - the holiest annual Jewish religious holidays. He said security was a "major concern" during his stint as president, and active shooting situations and active shooter trainings were conducted, "if something horrific like this happened."

Anti-Semitism and hate crimes have been on a rise in the United States in recent years - with anti-Semitic incidents surging 57 percent from 2016 to 2017, to 1,986 from 1,267, according to the ADL. Squirrel Hill has historically been the center of Jewish life in the greater Pittsburgh and is home to 26 percent of all Pittsburgh-area Jewish households, according to a study from Brandeis University. More than 80 percent of the neighborhood's residents said they had some concern or were very concerned about rising anti-Semitism, found the 2017 study. The Tree of Life congregation was founded more than 150 years ago and in 2010 merged with the five-year-old Or L'Simcha congregation. — AFP

how it can get off the ground given a protracted dispute between Qatar and four Arab states led by Saudi Arabia who launched a boycott of Doha in 2017.

Saudi Arabia, the Emirates, Bahrain and Egypt cut off travel and trade ties with Qatar in June 2017, accusing it of backing their archrival, Iran, and supporting terrorism. Qatar denies the charges and says the boycott impinges on its sovereignty. Mattis said that it was important to end the 16-month-old Arab dispute with Qatar that analysts say has weakened regional coordination against Iran.

Jubeir said recent discussions in Saudi Arabia about a framework for MESA included Qatari officials and that the proposed alliance would not be affected by the diplomatic row. "It (MESA) is an alliance for security and prosperity for the region and will be open to those who accept its principles," Sheikh Khalid said, adding that the alliance would also cooperate on economic issues.

Mattis told the regional security conference that Russia is no replacement for the US in the Middle East following Moscow's military intervention in Syria. "Russia's presence in the region cannot replace the long-standing, enduring, and transparent US commitment to the Middle East," Mattis said. Russia supports the regime of Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad, while Turkey backs some rebel groups seeking to oust the Syrian leader.

Mattis told the Manama Dialogue that Moscow's "opportunism and willingness to overlook Assad's criminal activities against his own people evidences its lack of sincere commitment to essential moral principles". Iran's support for the Syrian regime "coupled with Russia's repeated vetoes of UN Security Council Resolutions, is the leading reason Assad remains in power," he said. "We are deeply aware of the sacrifices many of our partners have made, and continue to make, in dealing with the effects of Assad's violence against his own people," Mattis said. He vowed the US-led coalition in Syria would "continue to root out" militant groups "and expand space for our diplomats to negotiate for long-term peace in that war-torn country". "We stand with our partners who favour stability over chaos, and we support unity of effort among our nations' militaries in response to shared threats and challenges," Mattis added. — Agencies

## Riyadh rejects call to extradite Khashoggi killers, US 'concerned'

**MANAMA:** Riyadh yesterday dismissed Ankara's call to extradite 18 Saudis being held over the murder of critic Jamal Khashoggi, as Washington warned the crisis risked destabilizing the Middle East. "The individuals are Saudi nationals. They're detained in Saudi Arabia, and the investigation is in Saudi Arabia," Foreign Minister Adel Al-Jubeir told a regional defense forum in Bahrain. He was responding to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan who on Friday renewed his call for the 18 men to be extradited for trial in Turkey.

Saudi journalist Khashoggi, 59, who had lived in self-imposed exile in the United States since 2017, was murdered after entering his country's Istanbul consulate on Oct 2 to obtain paperwork to marry his Turkish fiancée. After weeks of denials, Riyadh has sought to draw a line under the crisis with an investigation. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, heir to the oil-rich nation's throne, publicly denounced the murder as "repulsive", while the Saudi prosecutor acknowledged for the first time last week that based on the evidence of a Turkish investigation the killing had been "premeditated".

But US Defense Secretary Jim Mattis, who was also addressing the Manama forum, warned that "the murder of Jamal Khashoggi in a diplomatic facility must concern us all greatly". "Failure of any nation to adhere to international norms and the rule of law undermines regional stability at a time when it is needed most," he stressed. The journalist's murder has generated international outrage and undermined Riyadh's relations with the United States and other Western governments.

France and Germany's leaders said yesterday they want a "coordinated" European position for sanctions on arms sales to Saudi Arabia. This came after French President Emmanuel Macron had on Friday implied German Chancellor Angela Merkel's government was engaging in "pure demagoguery" by halting arms sales to Riyadh. On the sidelines of a Syria summit in Istanbul, the two leaders had a "peaceful exchange", the Elysee palace said, and agreed not to announce their next positions on the issue without first coordinating "at the European level".

The Saudi foreign minister vowed yesterday that the kingdom would "overcome" the crisis over Khashoggi's killing. "The issue, as I said, is being investigated. We will know the truth. We will hold those responsible accountable. And we will put in place mechanisms to ensure it doesn't happen again," Jubeir told the defense forum. Beyond the detention of the 18 suspects, five Saudi intelligence chiefs have been sacked, including two who were part of the crown prince's inner circle.

On Thursday, CIA Director Gina Haspel briefed US President Donald Trump on the latest developments in the investigation after a fact-finding mission to Turkey. Pro-government Turkish media said intelligence officers showed Haspel video images and audio tapes of Khashoggi's killing gathered from the consulate. But the body of Khashoggi, who was once an insider in Saudi royal circles, remains missing.

"You need to show this body," Erdogan insisted on Friday, indicating that his country had more evidence about the killing to reveal. The Turkish president, who has stopped short of directly blaming the Saudi government, added the 18 suspects must know who killed Khashoggi and repeated his call for the men to be tried in Turkey. "The culprit is among them. If that is not the case, then who is the local conspirator? You have to tell," he said. "Unless you tell, Saudi Arabia will not be free from this suspicion."

Khashoggi's fiancée Hatice Cengiz said in a TV interview on Friday that she never would have let him enter the consulate if she had thought that "Saudi Arabia authorities would hatch a plot" to kill him. — AFP

## Muscat says time to accept Israel after...

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accompanied by his wife Sara and his delegation included Mossad intelligence chief Yossi Cohen and National Security Advisor Meir Ben-Shabbat. The visit came at the invitation of Sultan Qaboos and followed "lengthy contacts between the two countries", an Israeli statement said. Oman's state broadcaster showed Netanyahu and his delegation walking alongside Sultan Qaboos - who has rarely been seen in recent pictures - and other Omani officials in traditional garb.

Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia and key ally Bahrain said yesterday that Gulf states are playing a critical role in maintaining stability in the Middle East by combating Iran's "vision of darkness", as Riyadh faces its worst political crisis in decades. Saudi Arabia is the lynchpin of a US-backed regional bloc against growing Iranian influence in the Middle East but the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi at its consulate in Istanbul on Oct 2 has prompted a global outcry and strained Riyadh's ties with the West.

"We are now dealing with two visions in the Middle East. One is a (Saudi) vision of light ... One is a (Iranian) vision of darkness which seeks to spread sectarianism throughout the region," Jubeir told the security summit in Bahrain. "History tells us that light always wins out against the dark ... The question is how do we defeat them." Jubeir said ties between Saudi Arabia, the world's top oil exporter, and the United States are "ironclad" and praised what he described as the "rational, realistic" foreign policy of the current US administration.

Sheikh Khalid Al-Khalifa told the conference the Gulf bloc would remain a "pillar" of regional security and that a proposed security alliance grouping the United States, Gulf states, Jordan and Egypt would be activated next year. The Middle East Strategic Alliance (MESA) is meant to serve as a bulwark against Iran and extremism, Washington says. But there has been uncertainty about

## Turkey hosts Syria summit...

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conflict in efforts that have often been greeted with suspicion in the West, but Saturday's summit will be the first to include the European Union's two most significant national leaders. Erdogan met briefly with Merkel, Putin and Macron before the summit began, and the four leaders issued a joint statement ahead of individual press conferences.

After arriving in Istanbul, Macron tweeted that what was at stake was averting a "new humanitarian disaster". Turkish presidential spokesman Ibrahim Kalin said on Friday that the primary goal would be to "clarify the steps to be taken for a political solution and to determine a roadmap". Forming a commission to create Syria's post-war constitution, seen as a stepping stone to elections in the war-torn country, would be a particular point of emphasis, Kalin told the state-run news agency Anadolu.

A rival United Nations plan for a committee to draft a new constitution ran aground this week after Damascus blocked the proposal. UN special envoy Staffan de Mistura, who is also attending the Istanbul summit, said the Syrian government would not accept a role for the United Nations in selecting a list for the committee. The Istanbul talks also discussed extending the ceasefire around Idlib, where aid groups have warned that a military offensive could spark one of the

worst humanitarian disasters of the seven-year war.

With an assault by government troops seeming imminent, Moscow and Ankara agreed on Sept 17 to create a 15-20 kilometre-wide demilitarised zone ringing Idlib as Turkey sought to avoid an attack leading to a further influx of people across its border. However shelling in the area continued intermittently and has ramped up in recent days. On Friday, Syria's UN envoy Bashar Jaafari maintained that the buffer zone is temporary and that Idlib would eventually revert to government control.

However France hopes to extend the ceasefire to enable aid convoys to get through to Idlib, home to three million people. During a phone call with Putin before the summit yesterday, Macron reiterated his objectives to "extend the ceasefire in Idlib, prohibit chemical weapons, ensure access to humanitarian aid and find a timetable for the political process," the French presidency said. The participants talked down hopes of a long-term solution ahead of the summit, with the Elysee palace speaking of "modest expectations" and Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov urging all sides to be "realistic". Peskov said that while all sides want a political settlement, "certain disagreements may exist regarding the instruments and tactics", and the day was to "synchronize our watches" and "attempt to identify common topics".

Syria's opposition, which has previously described Russia's military intervention in 2015 as an occupation, on Friday said it welcomed dialogue with Moscow, signaling readiness for more concessions following the Assad regime's battlefield successes. Turkish media reported that Erdogan will discuss the crisis in one-on-one talks with leaders on the summit's sidelines. — AFP