

## International

# West Bank's settlers pressure Netanyahu ahead of March vote

## Election could hinge on a battle for right-wing votes

**GIVAT HAHISH, Palestinian Territories:** Jewish settlers in the Israeli-occupied West Bank are demanding concessions from Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu ahead of a March general election which could hinge on a battle for right-wing votes. While most countries consider all Israeli settlements in the West Bank illegal, Israel broadly divides them into two categories: government-recognized settlements and so-called wildcat outposts. In the former, Israel aims to provide similar services—water, electricity and the like—as it does to citizens within its internationally agreed borders.

Wildcat settlements, often ramshackle collections of portacabins set up by hardline religious nationalists deep inside the West Bank, generally have no connection to the Israeli grid.

Some outposts have been given retrospective authorization in the past, particularly by Netanyahu-led governments. As another Israeli election nears, pro-settler groups are using tactics including a hunger strike outside Netanyahu's Jerusalem office to demand recognition for another 70 wildcat outposts, home to some 25,000 of the 650,000 settlers in east Jerusalem and the West Bank.

Yossi Dagan, an influential settler leader who staged a week-long protest fast outside the premier's office this month, insisted that distinguishing between types of settlements was “absurd”. “There is no logical reason why 25,000 Israeli citizens do not have the same rights as others, it's not a political question, it's a question of social rights,” he said.

### Limited 'wobble room'

Dagan, head of a regional council for Israeli

settlements in the northern West Bank, fainted and was briefly hospitalized after speaking to AFP last week. He had launched his hunger strike as former US president Donald Trump was about to leave office—timing that experts suspect was far from coincidental.

Israel has occupied the West Bank since the Six-Day War of 1967.

Both Republican and Democratic US administrations have long opposed Israeli settlements on occupied Palestinian territory. But Trump's staunchly pro-Israel administration broke with this policy, announcing in 2019 that it did not regard such activity as illegal.

Trump's four-year term saw an unprecedented boom in settlement construction and spared Netanyahu from Washington's traditional criticism in response to new West Bank housing projects.

President Joe Biden is set to restore Washington's opposition to settlements, so right-wing settlers are trying to use the window before Israel's next election to secure firm commitments from Netanyahu—who is desperate for their votes. “The settlers know that (with Biden in office) the government's wiggle room will not be as great as it was during Trump's tenure, so they need promises, not just statements of support” from Israeli politicians, said Denis Charbit, a political scientist at the Open University of Israel.

Hagit Ofran, who monitors settlements for the Israeli anti-occupation group Peace Now, said Biden's presidency and Israel's election results could impact both wildcat settlement recognition and broader questions around the “appropriation of Palestinian land”.

of Action. Zarif said that as well as its unilateral withdrawal, the US had also imposed sanctions that “blocked food/medicine to Iranians” and “punished adherence” to a UN resolution. “Now, who should take 1st step? Never forget Trump's maximum failure,” the foreign minister added, stressing Iran had “abided by the JCPOA” and had only taken “foreseen remedial measures”.

Trump withdrew the US from JCPOA and imposed crippling sanctions on Iran in 2018, maintaining a policy of “maximum pressure” against the Islamic republic. Iran a year later responded by suspending its compliance with most key nuclear commitments in the deal, under which it was promised economic relief for limits on its nuclear program. On January 4, Iran announced it had stepped up its uranium enrichment process to 20 percent purity, far above the 3.67 percent level permitted by the deal, but far below the amount required for an atomic bomb.

Tehran has called on Washington to “unconditionally” lift sanctions imposed by Trump to salvage the nuclear deal. It has said it will return to full compliance once all parties to the accord fulfill their commitments to the agreement. — AFP



Matan Fingerhut, his wife Chagit, and their four children look on at their house in the wildcat outpost of Givat Hahish, near the Israeli settlement of Alon Shvut, south of the Palestinian city of Bethlehem in the occupied West Bank. —AFP

### Battle for the right

Netanyahu partly owes his record as Israel's longest-serving premier, in power since 2009, to his status as the unchallenged leader of the Israeli right. But polls suggest the March election, Israel's fourth in less than two years, could swing against him. Gideon Saar, a leading right-winger with pro-settler credentials, defected from Netanyahu's Likud party last year, and polls suggest his breakaway party could win a solid chunk of seats in the parliament.

Surveys also suggest that the staunchly pro-settler Yemina party of Naftali Bennett, a former defense and economy minister, is on the rise.

Both Saar and Bennett have ruled out joining a Netanyahu-led coalition, which could complicate the premier's bid to forge a 61-seat majority—something he already failed to do after three recent elections when the Likud was united behind him. In Givat Hahish, a wildcat outpost near Bethlehem where some 40 families live in a mixture of mobile homes and permanent dwellings, father of four Matan Fingerhut declined to state his political preferences. But he made clear that he wants political recognition of Givat Hahish. “I like this place and I want to live here legally,” said Fingerhut, who built his own house on a hill without Israeli government permission. — AFP

## Iran dismisses US call to return to nuclear deal first

**TEHRAN:** Iran dismissed yesterday a call by the US for it to return to full compliance of a nuclear deal first, insisting it had only taken “remedial measures” since America's withdrawal.

The administration of new US President Joe Biden on Wednesday confirmed its willingness to return to the deal, which has been hanging by a thread since his predecessor Donald Trump's decision to withdraw from it in 2018. But Secretary of State Antony Blinken, who made the announcement, said the US would only return to the deal agreed with major powers in 2015 once Iran resumes its commitments. Iran's top diplomat, Mohammad Javad Zarif, on Thursday dismissed the demand.

“Reality check for @SecBlinken: The US violated (the) JCPOA,” Zarif tweeted, referring to the accord by its formal name, the Joint Comprehensive Plan

## Canadian lawmakers vote to grant citizenship to Saudi blogger

**OTTAWA:** Members of Canada's House of Commons on Wednesday unanimously voted to grant citizenship to Saudi blogger Raif Badawi, who has been imprisoned in his home country since 2012 and whose wife and three children live in Canada. The motion asks Immigration Minister Marco Mendicino to use his “discretionary power” to grant Canadian citizenship to Badawi, “in order to remedy a particular situation and unusual distress.”

He was convicted in 2014 to 10 years in prison and 1,000 lashes for “insulting Islam.” He received 50 of those beatings in January 2015, but the rest of the sessions—which were to be carried out weekly—were suspended after a global outcry. Badawi, an outspoken defender of freedom of expression, had called for

the end of religious rule under Wahhabism—a rigid interpretation of Islam—in Saudi Arabia.

“Now that this is a formal request from the House, (Prime Minister) Justin Trudeau and Minister Marco Mendicino must act,” Yves-Francois Blanchet, head of the separatist Bloc Quebecois party and sponsor of the bill, said after the vote. “Every day counts” for Badawi, “as his health is constantly in danger in prison,” Blanchet said in a statement. Relations between Ottawa and Riyadh deteriorated in the summer of 2018 when the Canadian government called for the release of Saudi human rights activists, including Badawi's sister Samar Badawi. Badawi's wife and three children, who live in Quebec, have already received Canadian citizenship. —AFP