

U.S. claims Israeli settlements not illegal under international law



Washington, November 19 (RHC)-- The United States has abandoned its 40-year-long position announcing Israel's settlements in the occupied West Bank are not "inconsistent with international law." In doing so, Washington has effectively endorsed Israel's right to build settlements, further hindering an already difficult peace process.

"The establishment of Israeli civilian settlements is not, per se, inconsistent with international law," U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo told reporters at the State Department, adding "the hard truth is that there will never be a judicial resolution to the conflict, [...] and arguments about who is right and who is wrong as a matter of international law will not bring peace."

With these statements, Pompeo radically shifted from a formal legal opinion taken by his country under former President Jimmy Carter in 1978. "[...] the Israeli armed forces entered Gaza, the West Bank, Sinai, and the Golan Heights in June 1967, in the course of an armed conflict. Those areas had not previously been part of Israel's sovereign territory nor otherwise under its administration. By reason of such entry of its armed forces, Israel established control and began to exercise authority over these territories; and under international law, Israel became a belligerent occupant of these territories," the legal position which has since its redaction been the basis of U.S. policy towards the settlements stated.

Unsurprisingly, Monday's comments were immediately praised by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and condemned by Palestinian officials. Netanyahu's office said the U.S. move is "an important policy that rights a historical wrong" and called on other countries to follow the same stance.

Israeli Foreign Minister Israel Katz said the decision made it clear that "there is no dispute about the right of the Jewish people to the Land of Israel."

Palestinians, who hope the West Bank will become part of their future state, voiced outrage. "The United States is neither qualified nor is authorized to negate international legitimacy resolutions and it has no right to give any legitimacy to Israeli settlement," said Nabil Abu Rudeineh, a spokesman for Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas.

Saeb Erekat, the chief Palestinian negotiator said the Trump administration was threatening "to replace international law with the 'law of the jungle.'"

Jordan's foreign minister, Ayman Safadi, said the U.S. policy change would have "dangerous consequences" for the prospects of reviving peace talks and called settlements "a blatant violation of international law and United Nations Security Council resolutions."

The Jordanian official added in a tweet that settlements kill the prospects of a two-state solution, the only way-out the decades-old conflict, according to the majority of the Arab countries.

Analysts and right groups who also reacted to the move with disappointment, outlined its dangerousness and said it would make it even harder than it already is to find a resolution to the conflict.

Co-executive director of Jewish Voice for Peace Rabbi Alissa Wise said the announcement aims to prop up political support for both Netanyahu and Trump, who is seeking reelection in 2020. Like many of the latter's pro-Israeli announcements and decisions, Pompeo's comments are likely to appeal to evangelical Christians, an important part of Trump's political base.

"The Trump administration was never focused on promoting peace, but instead on propping up Netanyahu's and Trump's careers and perpetuating Israeli control and dominance over Palestinian land and lives at all costs," Wise said in a statement.

"He can declare that night is day, but it will not change the fact that Israeli settlements are not only illegal under international law, but are also a huge obstacle to peace and to the stability of our region," said Hagit Ofra of the Israeli anti-settlements group Peace Now.

For its part, the European Union (EU) said in a statement that its position on Israeli settlements "is clear and remains unchanged." "All settlement activity is illegal under international law and it erodes the viability of the two-state solution and the prospects for a lasting peace," it made clear.

Pompeo's controversial announcement comes a few days after the State Department attacked the EU's top court, for a decision it called an "anti-Israel bias," following the passing of a rule stating that Israeli settlement products must be clearly labeled as such.

After a series of strongly pro Israeli measures, this is the third major instance in which the U.S. clearly took the side of Israel under Trump's presidency; even before unveiling its long-delayed Israeli-Palestinian peace plan.

In 2017, Donald Trump recognized Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and, in 2018, he took the contentious decision to move the U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv to the highly disputed city. In March, he recognized Israel's 1981 annexation of the Golan Heights in a boost for Netanyahu as the Israeli prime minister is struggling to stay in power.

The Fourth Geneva Convention of which the United States is a signatory says an occupying power cannot move its civilian population into the territory it occupies. There are around 200 official Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, with about 620,000 residents, according to Israeli human rights group B'Tselem.

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