

Analysis

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This combination of file pictures shows (from left) US President Donald Trump speaking to reporters on March 22, 2019 in Washington; US Attorney General William Barr testifying on Jan 15, 2019 during a Senate Judiciary Committee confirmation hearing in Washington; and FBI Director Robert Mueller testifying on June 19, 2013 before the US Senate Judiciary Committee in Washington. — AFP

Trump Golan move boosts Netanyahu, but risks for Israel

US President Donald Trump's call for recognition of Israeli sovereignty over the occupied Golan Heights was manna from heaven for Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu two weeks before an election. For many Arabs, it crushed any hope that there will one day be a negotiated peace between Israel and the Palestinians and increased doubts that Washington is an impartial arbiter. But allies and enemies can agree on one thing: Trump's statement last Thursday was a turning point in US policy over territory Israel captured from Syria in a 1967 war and annexed in 1981, in a move the UN Security Council declared unlawful.

"I am confident that the Lord is at work here," US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, who was in Israel when Trump made his announcement on Twitter, told the Christian Broadcasting Network in an interview. Netanyahu, who has thanked Trump for the announcement, is seeking re-election on April 9 but faces a tough battle and possible indictment in three corruption cases in which he denies wrongdoing. He was due to meet Trump yesterday on a trip highlighting what Netanyahu calls the strongest ever bond between an Israeli leader and a US president, though Trump has said his decision on the Golan Heights was not connected with the election.

But Trump's decision, following US recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital in Dec 2017, could tempt other powers to annex land, undermine the roll-out of a US Middle East peace plan and tilt Israel back into conflict with its Arab neighbors. Middle East analysts say, "Donald Trump has made sure that Israel will be in a perpetual state of war with its Arab neighbors for many decades to come," said Fawaz Gerges, professor of international relations at the London School of Economics and author of the book Making the Arab World. "What Trump has done is to hammer a deadly nail in the coffin of the peace process and Arab-Israeli reconciliation. This is a fundamental turning point. There is nothing left to discuss anymore."

Reshaping the Middle East

Trump's move is, according to many analysts, partly intended to boost his own chances of re-election in 2020, by targeting the vast pool of US evangelical Christians. Many of them voted for his in 2016 and they are championed in his administration by Pompeo, Vice President Mike Pence and others. The announcement on the Golan Heights was the latest in a flurry of decisions that are widely seen as intended to redraw the contours of the Israeli-Arab conflict.

Most have ticked the wish-list of Israel's right-wing government and met longstanding demands of its US supporters, including US recognition of Jerusalem as the capital. The Arab east of the city was occupied by Israel and then annexed after 1967 in a move that is legally repudiated internationally. White House officials say the decisions on Jerusalem and the Golan Heights acknowledge the reality on the ground, which they say must be the basis for legitimate peace negotiations. Trump's Middle East envoy, Jason Greenblatt, said it was inconceivable Israel "would allow the Golan to be controlled by the state of Syria or by any of the rogue actors operating in the areas, including Iran". But with Sunni Arab leaders dealing with crises in Yemen, Syria, Libya, Algeria, Sudan and Qatar, and their standoff with non-Arab Shiite Iran, they are less focused on Israel.

Arabs in disarray

Trump's aides have indicated privately that they believe his moves on Jerusalem have provoked a less severe reaction in the Arab world than experts had predicted, a person familiar with the matter said on condition of anonymity. In particular, they did not appear to have blocked behind-the-scenes security contacts developed in recent years between Israel and the United States' Gulf allies over their common enemy Iran, the person said.

Aides' advice to Trump on recognition of Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights was that Washington could again weather the storm, the same person said. Support for the move in the Trump administration had gained momentum over the past year as Israel increasingly expressed concern about Iranian forces and their proxies taking up positions in southwestern Syria, the official said.

John Bolton, Trump's national security adviser and one of the administration's leading Iran hawks, was an important proponent of the policy shift, the official said. But sceptics say the move will also give Iran and its local ally Hezbollah what they would see as justification for new attacks on Israel and hamstringing anti-Iranian Arab leaders if they are seen to accept the US move. The Trump administration has identified Iran as its main target in the Middle East, and withdrew from the deal signed by Tehran, the United States and other world powers in 2015 on curbing Iran's nuclear program.

More to come

But after the moves on Jerusalem and the Golan Heights, Iran and Hezbollah may feel better able to present themselves as the only steadfast allies of the Palestinian cause. They could also play into the hands of Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad by helping him in his portrayals of Israel and the United States as enemies. "This will give further power to the Iran axis of resistance between Iran-Hezbollah-Assad against Israel and the US," said Galip Dalay, visiting fellow at Oxford University and a fellow at Brookings Doha. "This axis has just been given a very strong symbolic victory and this will give them the high ground." — AFP

Findings offer re-election weapon for Trump

US Special Counsel Robert Mueller's conclusion that Donald Trump did not collude with Russia to win the presidency in 2016 gives the president a powerful weapon to use against his Democratic opponents and a potential boost to what is shaping up to be a tough bid for re-election in 2020. Mueller's conclusion that neither Trump nor his aides conspired with Russia in 2016 takes away a central charge that Democrats have flung at Trump for two years - that he did not win the presidency fairly or cleanly. The allegations have played out on an endless loop on cable TV news shows, overshadowing Trump's presidency from day one.

Democrats have vowed to continue congressional investigations into the 2016 election campaign and Trump's business practices. But without the solid foundation of a Mueller report that found evidence of any crimes by the president, they now risk seeming to overplay their hand. "This is a gold star day for Donald Trump," said presidential historian Douglas Brinkley. "Now the shackles are off. He's able to demonize the news media and Democrats as perpetuating what he calls a hoax. And he'll be able to use his innocence as fodder for the campaign trail."

The question for Trump now is whether he will be able to bring a minimum of discipline to his campaign messaging and to the presidency itself. History suggests he will have trouble with self-discipline. Just last week, he was immersed in a strange fight with a dead man, sharply criticizing the late Republican Senator John McCain and falsely accusing him of being at the root of some of the collusion allegations against him. He has also been prone to making baffling abrupt decisions, such as occurred last week when he called off a round of sanctions against North Korea before they had even been imposed.

Indebted hospital in Comoros faces collapse

The Bambao hospital, nestled in a tropical forest on Anjouan island in the Comoros, was meant to bring state-of-the-art medical care to the poor Indian Ocean nation. Just two years later, the hospital is deep in debt and shunned by potential patients who find it too costly. "A poisoned chalice", "a colossus with feet of clay", "a sinking ship" are among the clichés that chief pediatrician Ahmed Rakibou used to describe the facility funded and built under a Chinese aid scheme. "If they had consulted us while building it, this could have been a jewel," the doctor said, regretting that "today it's all going straight to hell".

The hospital is some 30 km east of Mutsamudu, the capital of Anjouan, the poorest of the three islands comprising the Union of the Comoros. The aim was to make the hospital a flagship of Comoran healthcare, with 120 beds in a brand-new building, a team of 167 staff, many recruited locally, and modern equipment including a digital radio scanner.

China's ambassador to the Comoros, Xiao Ming, hailed a "new page in the annals of cooperation" at the opening ceremony, saying "public health has always had a priority place in Sino-Comoran cooperation". But a project that cost four billion Comoran francs (\$9.2 billion) today looks more like a ghost ship, with a handful of patients wandering its corridors in stifling heat. For lack of funds, about 100 staff jobs have not been filled.

'Not many patients'

In the emergency ward, a doctor silently examines a child's injured arm. The lethargic mood is broken only by the arrival of an ambulance carrying the victim of a motorcycle accident. "Our activity is very varied," nurse Ali Mosthadi says cautiously before going further. "In fact, we don't have many patients." Deputy director Sidi Chaanbane was more forthcoming. Since the hospital was opened by President Azali Assoumani in 2017, it has faced mounting difficulties, he said. "At the start, the road from Mutsamudu was in a very bad state and patients had trou-

ble getting here," the administrator said. "It's been repaired since, but our real problem is that we sorely lack equipment and staff."

In addition to staff salaries, the Comoran state provides just five million francs (10,000 euros) a month, but the hospital needs three times as much to pay its bills. "We can't balance the budget," Chaanbane said. Day-to-day management is a nightmare. The scanner broke down soon after it was first used. Repairs were not covered by the Chinese cooperation agreement, so the hospital took out a loan to get the machine working again.

The main problem is the cost of treatment, which is not free in the former French colony, independent since 1975. Much of the funding comes from the French Development Agency (AFD) in its aid budget. France still rules over the fourth major island in the archipelago, Mayotte. The three islands forming Comoros lack the standard of living on Mayotte and are far from able to make up the remaining health budget.

'Expensive'

Rakibou said the hospital charges 125,000 Comoran francs for a Caesarian birth. "What Comoran can pay that?" he asks. "No - this hospital is not made for the population." Kanissa Adbou, 27, brought her eight-year-old daughter who trod on a nail to the hospital. "The treatment is expensive. If I could afford it, I would go to Mayotte because there, hospital is free." Those who believed that providing a modern hospital on Anjouan would dissuade Comorans from trying their luck on Mayotte have been disappointed, although the trip is illegal. "People here prefer to pay 1,000 euros to go to Mayotte by kwassa kwassa (human traffickers' dugouts) than to come to us," a nurse said. "They trust only white doctors."

The failure to put the sophisticated equipment at Bambao to regular good use enrages Ahmed Abdallah, secretary general of the Hombu public hospital in Mutsamudu. "The money spent there would have been enough to repair our buildings, replace our equipment and build roads so that sick people could come from nearby villages," he said. "We don't have even a single ambulance, yet the government has I don't know how many four-wheel drives." Health Minister Fatma Mbaraka declined to respond to requests for comment from AFP. But Rakibou refuses to throw in the towel. He hopes that the winner of Sunday's presidential election and the international community will come up with increased funding. "It wouldn't take much to change our lives!" he said. — AFP



A lab technician checks a broken scanner at the Sino-Comoran friendship Hospital on March 21, 2019 in Bambao-Mtsanga. — AFP

for the past two years," said former Trump campaign aide David Bossie. "We must investigate the investigators." White House spokesman Hogan Gidley said Trump had no plans to request that his attorney general open an investigation into the president's political opponents.

Challenges for Democrats

Trump's path to re-election remains a perilous one. Analysts say he will probably need to win the Midwestern states of Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin, just as he did in his improbable 2016 victory, and Democrats are already pouring resources into those states. Trump will foreshadow his campaign message on Thursday night when he headlines a "Make America Great Again" rally in Michigan. Trump supporters viewed the Mueller report as a blow to the more than a dozen Democrats who are campaigning for their party's 2020 presidential nomination.

"This is very problematic for any Democrat who's running for president in 2020 that was hoping they would face a weakened or beaten-down President Trump," former Trump campaign adviser Jason Miller said. "In fact, President Trump will likely see a ratings boost coming out of this and a strong tailwind pushing him towards the upcoming election." Reuters/Ipsos polling has shown that Americans decided early on in Mueller's investigation whether they thought Trump was guilty of collusion or not. The polling found few undecided voters. Brinkley said Democrats will need to adjust their tactics and emphasize their differences with Trump's record on issues ranging from healthcare and climate change to immigration. "Some of those charges are going to have to rise to be the main charges against Trump," he said, noting there was fatigue with the Russia issue. — Reuters

Behind in polls, Gillibrand vows transparency

Branding US President Donald Trump "a coward" who is "tearing apart the moral fabric" of America, Senator Kirsten Gillibrand on Sunday held her first rally for the 2020 Democratic presidential nomination outside the Trump International Hotel in New York. Gillibrand emphasized transparency as she presented herself as a candidate defined by the courage and integrity she claims Trump lacks. "Look at this tower!" said Gillibrand, her hair blowing in the wind. "A shrine to greed, division and vanity... We are here to reject the politics of fear and hate."



Kristen Gillibrand

Speaking to a few hundred supporters and curious onlookers, the 52-year-old - who first revealed plans to run in January before launching her campaign last weekend - insisted she was ready to take on lobbyists whose "special interests... prevent us from seeing solutions." Like most of her 15 or so Democratic rivals Gillibrand favors universal health coverage, a \$15 an hour federal minimum wage and access to university for everyone. Also high on her list of priorities is climate change: an "existential threat."

But rhetoric aside, Gillibrand - who is married to a venture capitalist - is closer to the political center than her leftist competitors like Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren, who are running on ideas like free university tuition. So far, Gillibrand is trailing in the polls - and had the misfortune of holding her first rally on the same day the president's 2016 presidential campaign was cleared of colluding with Russia, according to a released summary of Robert Mueller's probe into Moscow's election meddling.

Can a woman win?

Gillibrand, a mother to two boys, is a champion of causes that matter to women and families, from sexual harassment to paid maternity leave. But polls show that the Democratic favorites at this stage are all men: Sanders, former vice president Joe Biden, and Texan Beto O'Rourke dominate the top tier. Gillibrand's supporters are confident that she can close the gap in the coming months. "It's so early in the primary process... she has so much time to build and grow her coalition," said Zahen Sarker, a 24-year-old finance worker.

Among possible obstacles: Gillibrand started her career aligned closely with conservatives on key hot-button issues, like opposing gun control and pushing for more deportations. She has since changed her positions - leading to charges of being a political contortionist. But for Sarker, Gillibrand's "evolution on these policies shows that she is able to learn and change, which is so important in politics." With only a few hundred people turning out Sunday on her home turf, it seems like she has a steep uphill battle ahead. For some, the fact that she is a woman alone presents problems. "I like Gillibrand, but I don't think she could defeat Trump," said Carol Mitchell, 75. But she suggested Gillibrand could make a good running mate for Joe Biden. "After the Hillary experience, I am really worried about having a woman at the top of the ticket," Mitchell said. — AFP