

Ex-CIA chief: US-Israel relationship seems to have gone 'overboard'

Leon Panetta tells Army Radio that by appearing to give up balanced approach, Washington now finds it difficult to be trusted to provide a fair peace plan

By STUART WINER
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Outgoing US Defense Secretary Leon Panetta testifies on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C., February 2013. (AP/J. Scott Applewhite)

Former CIA director Leon Panetta said Thursday that the relationship between the Trump administration and Israel has become so friendly the US appears to have abandoned taking a balanced approach toward the Israelis and Palestinians, impacting its credibility as a peace mediator.

Panetta, who served as CIA chief and US Secretary of Defense in the Obama administration, told Army Radio in an interview that Washington's attitude has created "serious problems" for its efforts to present a plan to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

"In some ways it seems to go overboard in the way they treat each other," Panetta told the station. "It cannot look like the United States is in the pocket of Israel, or Israel for that matter is in the pocket of the United States."

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"We've always tried to maintain a balanced relationship and because the United States appears to have given up that balanced approach it has created serious problems" in being trusted to provide a peace plan which is accepted on both sides, he said.

Since US President Donald Trump announced in 2017 that he would recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital and move the US embassy there from Tel Aviv, the Palestinians have refused to engage with the Trump administration or its diplomatic team, saying the US had forfeited its right to act as an honest broker in any negotiation.

The US president has subsequently cut aid from the Palestinian Authority, closed the Palestine Liberation Organization's DC office, and recognized Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights — all moves that Palestinians cite as showing preferential treatment toward Israel.

On Sunday, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his cabinet held a ceremony to mark the establishment of a new community on the Golan Heights, named "Ramat Trump" (Trump Heights) in honor of the US president.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu gives a speech before the newly-unveiled sign for the new settlement of "Ramat Trump", or "Trump Heights" in English, named after the incumbent US President during an official ceremony in the Golan Heights on June 16, 2019. (Jalaa MAREY / AFP)

Trump is posed to roll out his peace plan, but publication has been delayed by the political situation in Israel where April elections failed to produce a ruling coalition, leading to fresh elections in September.

Next week the Trump administration and Bahrain will hold an economic workshop in the Bahraini capital of Manama. The June 25-26 summit will aim to "facilitate discussions on an ambitious, achievable vision and framework for a prosperous future for the Palestinian people and the region."

American officials have said that the meeting will deal with the economic portion of Washington's plan to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The Palestinians have strongly opposed the conference and urged Arab states to stay away, arguing it will be placing economic issues ahead of reaching a political solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Panetta also commented on the current sky-rocketing tensions between the US and Iran which have been steadily rising since Trump last year pulled out of 2015 nuclear deal between the Islamic republic and world powers, while also reimposing crippling sanctions.

On Thursday Tehran said it had shot down a US drone in Iranian airspace, while the US has accused Iran of being behind recent attacks on oil tankers in the Gulf of Oman.

"There is always a danger that one side or the other miscalculates and it results in a military confrontation," Panetta said.

"No one wants another Middle East war," he added and recommended opening diplomatic channels.

Eric Cortellessa contributed to this report.