

Middle East

# Pompeo West Bank visit stirs diplomatic dispute

MEHUL SRIVASTAVA — TEL AVIV

Mike Pompeo visited a Jewish-owned vineyard in the Israeli-occupied West Bank yesterday, becoming the first US secretary of state to visit the sprawling settlements regarded as illegal by the international community.

The visit to the Psagot winery — which in February named a vintage after Mr Pompeo in recognition of his reversal of Washington's historical objection to Israeli settlements — was condemned by the Palestinians. Protesters gathered outside with balloons ahead of his visit.

Mr Pompeo's two-and-a-half-years at the helm of US diplomacy has seen a departure from decades of policy designed to discourage the expansion of Jewish settlement in land on which Palestinians hope to build a future state.

Donald Trump, the US president, and Mr Pompeo, who is thought to be considering a 2024 run for the presidency, have sought to bolster their Christian evangelical base by indulging rightwing Israeli positions.

Mr Trump's close relationship with Benjamin Netanyahu, Israeli prime minister, has underscored the most pro-Israeli US administration in decades. Christian Zionists who vote Republican subscribe to a prophecy that Jewish control of Judea and Samaria — the biblical names for the occupied West Bank — will hasten the Second Coming of Christ.

For Palestinians, yesterday's visit was a "final twist of Trump's knife", said a person close to Mohammad Shtayyeh, the prime minister, who has welcomed the election of Joe Biden as a return to the studied neutrality the US has hitherto sought to project in one of the most intractable conflicts.

"We had hoped that the foot was finally off our neck," the senior Palestinian official said. "Trump and his friends want to kick us a final time before they leave, maybe just for fun, maybe to get

more votes."

Mr Pompeo said yesterday that the US would designate as anti-Semitic a global boycott movement that seeks to stigmatise Israel for settlement building.

"It's just wonderful," said Mr Netanyahu. "The people of the book have never had a better friend."

Given that US courts have upheld boycotts as constitutional, the move is largely symbolic.

The choice of Psagot for Mr Pompeo's visit is strategic. Partially built on land expropriated from Palestinian landowners, Psagot lost a 2019 case at the European Court of Justice, which upheld an EU policy of labelling products from Israeli settlements differently from those made in Israel.

Four US senators, including Kelly Loeffler of Georgia, have appealed to Mr Trump to overturn a Clinton-era policy, currently not being enforced, that could allow settlement products sold in the US to be labelled as "Made in Israel".

White evangelicals make up a third of the electorate in Georgia, which is re-running a Senate race in January that will decide the balance of power in the US legislature.

Over the past four years, the Trump administration has pushed through a series of policies that have infuriated the Palestinians. Mr Trump moved the US embassy to Jerusalem, recognised Israel's annexation of the Syrian Golan Heights and cut all aid to Palestinian refugees. Israel normalised relations with the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain under a US-brokered deal that made no mention of Palestinian sovereignty.

In preparation for Mr Biden's presidency and desperate for a shift in US policy, Palestinians last week renewed a US-backed security agreement with Israel that was abandoned as relations

deteriorated.

"The Palestinians were trying to look for a ladder down from this very high tree that they climbed up to," said Neri Zilber, author of *State With No Army, Army With No State*, a book on the security agreement.

"What they were waiting for really, as were many people all over the world, was the US election and they were hoping beyond hope that Joe Biden would be elected."

The fate of the Palestinian project has often been prey to the vicissitudes of US domestic politics. Barack Obama, during a 2013 visit to the Holy Land, visited the other side of the fence from the Psagot winery, meeting Palestinian leaders at a youth centre in the Arab community of al-Bireh.

"We want to tell our fellow Americans, that when you drink [Psagot's] wine, you are drinking the blood of the Palestinian people," said Abdel Jawad Saleh, an American citizen who has served as mayor of al-Bireh.

On the day of the US elections, Israel destroyed an EU-supported Palestinian-Bedouin village in the West Bank. Last week, it announced published tenders to build a new neighbourhood east of the 1949 armistice line that ended the 1948 war. This would further separate East Jerusalem from other Arab neighbourhoods.

"Like many issues of building in the areas within Jerusalem but outside of the 1949 armistice line, there are a lot of sensitivities," said Lior Schillat, director-general of the Jerusalem Institute for Policy Research.

The deadline for the bids is two days before Mr Biden's inauguration as president in January.

La visita di Pompeo in Cisgiordania scatena una disputa diplomatica



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