



### Secretary of State Pompeo Controversially Visits Illegal Israeli Settlements and the Golan Heights

In an unprecedented and controversial move, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo became the first top American diplomat to visit illegal Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank as well as the disputed Golan Heights. The trip included a stop at the Psagot winery whose vineyards are located on privately-owned Palestinian land, and was followed by a tour of the Golan Heights – land that the international community, with the exception of the United States under Trump, views as Syrian territory held under Israeli occupation. During the course of the past four years, Trump officials have broken from global consensus and longstanding U.S. policy regarding the illegality of settlements and the status of the Golan Heights. Now, in the outgoing administration’s final weeks before President-elect Biden’s inauguration, Pompeo has announced the latest string of biased actions in favor of Israel by saying that the U.S. will provocatively allow goods imported from occupied territory in the West Bank to be labeled as “Made in Israel” and inaccurately branding the global Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement as anti-Semitic. Ultimately, unjust moves like these are harmful to the prospect of genuine progress regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but there is hope that the new Biden administration will provide a more equitable approach to the Middle East peace process.

Overall, more than 600,000 Israelis live in settlements in the occupied Palestinian territory of the West Bank, which the global community overwhelmingly views as illegal and a major hindrance to the peace process. Last year, the Trump administration drew condemnation for reversing decades-old U.S. policy concerning the status of these settlements as illegal under international law. The decision by Pompeo to visit and attempt to legitimize them is yet another example of how current White House officials have actively tried to cement Israeli sovereignty over illegally-occupied territory. The same can be said about the trip to the Golan Heights, where by doing so, U.S. officials under Trump are blatantly disregarding the widely agreed-upon position that Israel’s presence there is illegitimate. With his recent course of actions, Secretary of State Pompeo has controversially departed from the impartial behavior of his predecessors – ones who served under both Republican and Democratic administrations alike.

In conjunction with his trip, Pompeo drew the ire of worldwide social justice activists by saying that the United States will regard the BDS movement as “anti-Semitic” and by doing so cut off government support for any human rights groups or organizations that take part in it. Advocates of BDS rightly point out that its aim is to peacefully resist oppressive Israeli government policies, and that there is no correlation between criticism of Israel and anti-Semitism, as demonstrated by the fact that Jewish social activists are also involved in the movement. As such, any efforts to conflate BDS with anti-Semitism are unfair and misguided, and gloss over its simple intent to strive for equal rights for all citizens living in the state of Israel and the Palestinian territories. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) was among the groups to quickly denounce Pompeo’s actions, stating that “criticism of Israel, or any government, is fully protected by the First Amendment...(and thus) threatening to block government funds to groups (that do so) is blatantly unconstitutional.”

Additionally, Pompeo also announced that products from settlements in the West Bank could be sold in the United States with “Made in Israel” labels, despite their origin in Palestinian territory that is illegally occupied by the Israeli government. Most of the world requires imports from there to be marked as coming from the West Bank due to the absence of recognition for Israel’s proclaimed sovereignty in those areas. Pompeo’s visit to the Psagot winery was particularly offensive and hurtful to Palestinians, whose families used to farm the grapes that are now harvested and sold as wine by Israeli settlers. The hill where the winery is located is the site of dozens of acres of privately-owned Palestinian land, making the secretary of state’s trip there all the more insulting to global accords which deem the settlements to be a major violation of international law.

With all of these recent developments and the preceding years of longstanding policy reversals, the Trump administration is leaving behind a clear legacy of partiality regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and therefore in the end, Pompeo’s actions do not come as a surprise.