

The US might finally unveil deal of the century, in the

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JONATHAN COOK

Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu needs all the help he can muster before voters head to the ballot box on March 2 – for the third time in a year. Once again, it seems as though US President Donald Trump intends to ride to his rescue.

Despite Mr Trump's best efforts, Israel's two elections last year ended in stalemate. Each time, Mr Netanyahu's Likud party and its religious, pro-settler coalition partners tied with the secular, yet hawkish right led by Blue and White leader Benny Gantz.

The pressure on Mr Netanyahu to win this time has intensified. His opponents in the Israeli parliament advanced plans last week to set up a committee to weigh whether or not he should be immune from prosecution in three corruption cases.

If he is denied immunity, as seems likely, the path will be clear for a trial that might make it impossible for him to head the next government whatever the outcome.

This was the background to intimations from the Trump administration last week that it may finally publish its long-anticipated peace plan.

The White House reportedly

delayed the plan's release over the course of last year as it waited for Mr Netanyahu to secure a majority government to put it into effect.

Leaks suggest the document will bolster Israel's maximalist demands, scuppering any hopes of establishing a viable Palestinian state. The Palestinian leadership severed ties with Washington a while back in protest.

More than any of his recent predecessors, Mr Trump has shown a repeated willingness to meddle in Israeli elections to the benefit of Mr Netanyahu.

Shortly before last April's vote, Mr Trump declared that the US would formally recognise Israel's annexation of the Golan Heights from Syria. The seizure of the 1,800-square-kilometre territory in 1967 remains illegal under international law. And days before the most recent ballot in September, Mr Trump publicly alluded to the possibility of a US-Israeli defence pact.

Now US officials, including Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, have hinted that the US peace plan could be published in the run-up to the March election.

Israeli officials have been saying much the same to local media since an unexpected visit this month by Avi Berkowitz, Mr Trump's new aide



Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu attends the weekly Cabinet meeting in Jerusalem.

overseeing the peace plan.

This prompted Mr Gantz, the prime minister's main challenger, to condemn any such move as "blatant interference" in the election.

In fact, until recently, Mr Netanyahu had been reluctant for the so-called "deal of the century" to be published because it would be

unlikely to satisfy the settlers' most extreme demands. He had feared that disappointment might drive some Likud voters further to the right, towards smaller, even more hardline parties.

But Mr Netanyahu is now in such precarious political and legal straits that he appears ready to gamble.

Publication of the peace plan could attract some more uncompromising Blue and White voters to his side. They may prefer a seasoned player like Mr Netanyahu to manage White House expectations, rather than a politically inexperienced former army general like Mr Gantz.

Furthermore, the settler parties

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Syria's invisible hand in Lebanon confront

Prime Minister designate Hassan Diab appears to be standing up to Hizb who nominated him, to the advantage of other pro-Syrian f

BASEM SHABB

Since October 17, a nationwide uprising took Lebanese by storm, forcing then prime minister Saad Hariri and his cabinet to step down. In December, Iran-backed Hezbollah and its ally, the Christian Free Patriotic Movement, or FPM, were duped into naming Dr Hassan Diab, a Sunni academic, as prime minister designate. It is the prime minister designate's duty by law to form the cabinet but acting foreign minister and head of the FPM, Gebran Bassil mistakenly thought he could impose his preferred nominees on a relatively unknown prime minister and divide the spoils with Hezbollah.

Much to the dismay of Mr Bassil, Mr Diab appears bent on forming a government of unaffiliated experts, in compliance with the demands of protesters. Mr Diab has challenged Mr Bassil as well as his father-in-law Lebanese President Michel Aoun, with active support from pro-Syrian politicians, most notably member of parliament Jamil Al Sayyed. Other pro-Syrian factions voiced their demands to be represented in the new government, effectively competing with the FPM for the next cabinet's 18 ministries.

It seems that Mr Diab, far from

being weak and isolated, has considerable support from Pro-Syrian factions opposed to the resigned prime minister Saad Hariri. Grand Mufti Abdul Latif Darian and other Sunni dignitaries have refrained from criticising Mr Diab, avoiding the thorny issue of his legitimacy within the community.

More importantly, the Saudi leadership has yet to take a position on Mr Diab, which may indicate that they are ready to give him a chance. Syrian President Bashar Al Assad has yet to comment on the situation but Druze politician Wiam Wahhab, one of Syria's closest allies in Lebanon, has indicated he was the one to suggest Mr Diab for the position of prime minister. The Russians first endorsed Mr Hariri but after Mr Diab was officially nominated, they have assumed a neutral stance. Western powers are closely watching as Lebanese politicians bicker while the economy is in free fall.

Ordinary Lebanese are struggling to cope with the deep recession yet Hezbollah is only concerned with consolidating its power in government while the FPM is preoccupied with the issue of presidential succession. Other players such as parliamentary speaker Nabih Berri, and Mr Jumblatt are worried about the return of Syrian influence in Leba-



Poster of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah and Syrian President Bashar Al Assad in South Lebanon.

non. Mr Diab's intransigence poses a threat to traditional politicians.

So much so that Mr Bassil now sees common cause with Mr Berri.

Since the end of the Syrian occupa- tion in 2005, Damascus' influence

in Lebanon ably. During