

Israel makes military preparations for UN vote on Palestinian state

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On Tuesday evening, the Israel Defence Forces killed a commander of the Popular Resistance Committees' military wing in a fire exchange and air attack on an alleged mortar unit in the Gaza Strip. The attack by the IDF is only the latest development in a stepped-up offensive against Gaza and the Palestinians, as Israel prepares for a possible full-scale military intervention.

The IDF is training settler "security squads" in the West Bank and preparing to arm them with stun grenades and tear gas ahead of an expected yes vote for Palestinian statehood in the United Nations General Assembly later this month.

The IDF claims that it is training and arming the settlers in preparation for a potential eruption of Palestinian mass protest, as happened in May on the anniversary of the establishment of the state of Israel—called the "nakba," or catastrophe, by the Palestinians—and in June on the anniversary of the 1967 war. In truth, its actions suggest it is seeking to provoke a military confrontation.

Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmoud Abbas, whose Fatah movement controls the West Bank in collusion with Israel and the United States, announced last year that he would go to the UN to seek membership for a state of Palestine. But he has insisted that the move is not in place of negotiations, but rather in addition to them. Even should the UN vote to recognise a Palestinian state, he will continue to seek a negotiated settlement with Israel.

"Our first, second and third priority is negotiations," he said on Monday. "There is no other way to settle this. No matter what happens at the UN, we have to return to negotiations."

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu rejected these conciliatory statements, saying that a Palestinian bid for statehood would "set back peace, and might set it back years."

Netanyahu has no intention of negotiating a deal with

the PA. Israel has just approved plans to build some 300 new housing units in Ariel, one of the largest settlements in the West Bank, and 1,600 new housing units in East Jerusalem, which the Palestinians want as the capital of their future state. This provocative move comes despite the demands of Israel's massive social protests for affordable housing in Israel itself. The government has for years refused to construct low- and moderate-income housing within the 1967 borders in order to force people to live in the West Bank and East Jerusalem.

Abbas, who for decades has staked everything on reaching a negotiated settlement with Israel that would establish a truncated Palestinian entity in the West Bank and Gaza, has been thoroughly discredited by Netanyahu's refusal to engage in negotiations or comply with an insincere request from US President Barack Obama for a temporary freeze on settlement expansion.

The publication by *Al Jazeera* of the "Palestine Papers" in January exposed the Palestinian Authority and Abbas as utterly subservient to US and Israeli interests, ready to reach a deal that would jettison every historic aspiration of the Palestinian people, including the loss of East Jerusalem and the right of return for exiled Palestinians. Abbas was ready to agree to mass transfers of Palestinian Israelis to a future Palestinian statelet, a form of ethnic cleansing designed to meet Israel's goal of a demographically secure "Jewish state."

Abbas sought to secure a deal with the Islamist movement Hamas, which controls Gaza, to establish a national unity government—which months later has still not been formed—to provide some credibility to his bid for a Palestinian state.

Washington has vowed to use its veto power at the Security Council to stop the PA's bid for statehood going ahead, leaving Abbas no option but to go straight to the General Assembly, where there is no veto. With only observer status, the PA is reliant on other nations to push

through the statehood resolution, but is expected to win the required two-thirds majority, or 128 votes. The PA claims that more than 100 countries have endorsed the declaration of independent statehood. The US, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and the Czech Republic are the only Western countries so far committed to vote against it.

According to documents seen by *Ha'aretz*, the IDF claims that a yes vote will lead to a public uprising "which will mainly include mass disorder," including "marches toward main junctions, Israeli communities, and education centres; efforts at damaging symbols of [Israeli] government."

The Palestinian Authority has repudiated any suggestion that it is planning or supporting any mass demonstrations.

Ha'aretz states that the IDF has already held training exercises with the settlements' chief security officers at a military facility near Shiloh and trained "readiness squads" at a command centre at its Lachish base. The readiness squads are made up of settlers, mostly army reservists who already know how to use automatic weapons.

An IDF spokesman said, "The IDF is holding an ongoing professional dialogue with elements in the settlement leadership, with the routine security personnel, and is investing many resources in training forces from a defensive standpoint and in readiness for possible scenarios. Central Command has recently completed much training for the emergency response squads, and this training is ongoing."

The military preparations, known as "Operation Summer Seed," include the determination of "red lines" or boundaries for each settlement in the West Bank. Should Palestinian protesters cross the red line, troops will be authorised to open fire, just as they did during the years of confrontation with Syria before 1973.

Israeli troops shot and killed 23 unarmed protesters, including a woman and a 12-year-old boy, and wounded about 350 during the demonstrations last June, when protestors from refugee camps in Syria approached the border with the Israeli-controlled Golan Heights on the anniversary of the start of the 1967 war. They followed larger, coordinated protests three weeks earlier on four fronts—Syria, Gaza, Lebanon and the West Bank—and attempts on two others, in Egypt and Jordan, that were thwarted by those governments.

The US State Department came down firmly on the side of Israel, saying that the protests were provocative and Israel as a sovereign state had the right to defend its

borders.

Israel has long permitted settlers to carry weapons. Since the beginning of 2011, B'Tselem, the Israeli human rights organisation, has called for the police to investigate 42 cases of Jewish settler violence, including the murder of two Palestinian teenagers.

In a clear indication of Israel's preparations for warfare, the IDF has also drawn up contingency plans to call up reservists. It has also strengthened its border with Egypt, following the attacks near the southern Israeli town of Eilat last month that claimed the lives of eight people and injured dozens more. The IDF has deployed highly advanced technology in the area pending the completion of a border fence sometime in 2012. It has also closed Highways 10 and 12.

The Obama administration has threatened to halt its annual financial grant of \$470 million to the PA if it proceeds with its plans to ask the UN for recognition. Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad said that US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton made the threat in a phone conversation.

Republican Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, head of the House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee, is also seeking to block funds to any UN member who supports the vote for a Palestinian state. She is proposing as well to withhold a portion of Washington's UN dues and stop altogether its contributions to the UN Human Rights Council. Citing a similar threat to the UN member states that supported the PLO's push in 1989 for a Palestinian state, she boasted that "the PLO's unilateral campaign was stopped in its tracks.... The UN was forced to choose between isolating Israel or receiving US contributions. They chose the latter."



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