

Israeli man immolates himself over social crisis

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Moshe Silman, 57, was near death Tuesday, comatose and with his organs failing, doctors reported, three days after he set himself on fire during a Tel Aviv protest demonstration over worsening social conditions in Israel.

Silman, who owned a successful truck delivery business until he was ruined by debts and ill health, had been a regular participant in the protest movement that began last year over the rising cost of living and cuts in social programs and benefits. He was part of a crowd of several thousand who turned out Saturday to mark the first anniversary of those protests.

As speakers addressed the group, Silman began to douse himself with gasoline, then set himself ablaze. Fellow protesters swarmed around him trying to extinguish the fire with their shirts and water bottles, but he was burned over 90 percent of his body.

Silman left a typewritten suicide note in which he blamed the state of Israel, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Finance Minister Yuval Steinitz for “the humiliation that the weakened citizens of Israel endure on a daily basis” and for “taking from the poor and giving to the rich.”

He accused the government of destroying his ability to make a living and driving him to the brink of homelessness. “The state of Israel stole from me and robbed me,” he wrote. “They left me with nothing.” He added, “And I will not be homeless and this is why I protest.”

According to accounts in the Israeli press, Silman’s truck transport firm went out of business after a dispute with the National Insurance Institute, an Israeli government agency, over tax issues. First his trucks were seized to pay off debts, then his bank accounts and finally the home his mother left him on her death.

After a stroke, he was forced to go on disability, with

a monthly payment of just 2,300 shekels (\$581 a month in a country with a cost of living comparable to the US). He was denied permission to drive a taxi part-time for health reasons, his disability payments were stopped altogether in December for six months and he was then declared ineligible for public housing. He faced eviction from his apartment in two weeks.

Silman’s brother-in-law Amram Elul, speaking to the media outside the hospital where Silman lay dying, said, “He was born in Israel, he served in the army for seven years and after that did many years of reserve duty. He never bothered anyone, yet the state took everything from him—his business, his home—and in the end, no one was willing to help him.”

The self-immolation protest has had a shock effect throughout Israeli society. On Sunday, several thousand people marched in Tel Aviv in a show of sympathy. At a rally in Haifa, where Silman lived, demonstrators carried signs declaring, “The entire nation is Moshe Silman.”

Others gathered outside Prime Minister Netanyahu’s residence in Jerusalem under a banner that read, “We’re all Moshe Silman: The blood is on the Government’s hands,” and carrying signs that read, “Bibi, you burned us, too.”

According to a commentary published on the Israeli news site Ynet, Silman’s descent into economic ruin and disability coincided with drastic cuts in disability allowances imposed by Netanyahu as finance minister in 2004-2005. The impact of budget cuts on health care was demonstrated by the fact that “When Silman was taken to the hospital’s burn ward there was no bed for him. The department was at full capacity, as is the case with many other Israeli hospital wards. Silman had to be hospitalized in another ward.”

Moreover, according to a study by Calcalist, issued

last month, 63 percent of “middle class” Israelis would not be able to withstand a one-time emergency expense of 8,000 shekels (\$2,000), making the majority of the population vulnerable to the type of crisis that destroyed Moshe Silman.

A second man attempted to copy Silman’s suicide attempt on Monday in the city of Be’er Sheva, in southern Israel. The 47-year-old doused himself with a flammable liquid, but a security guard alertly jumped on him and prevented another tragedy. The man had recently asked the public housing authority to provide him shelter, according to one report.

The Israeli political establishment has responded to Silman’s tragic protest with typical indifference and contempt. Prime Minister Netanyahu dismissed the action as “an individual tragedy”—i.e., one with no wider social meaning—and his official spokesman added that the attempted suicide was a “humanitarian situation and has nothing to do with politics.”

A spokesman for the mayor of Tel Aviv was at pains to point out that Silman was an “outsider” who was not from the city. He wrote: “While this tragic incident took place in Tel Aviv, it really has nothing to do with the city establishment. The person who lit himself came from outside of Tel Aviv to protest in a large manifestation which took place in the city.”

Opposition Labor Party leader Shelly Yachimovich said that Silman “definitely must not be seen as a symbol of the social justice protest.”

But according to one Tel Aviv official, 400 people a year commit suicide in Israel because of economic hardship: in effect, a Moshe Silman every day of the year.

The Israeli Ministry of Welfare and Social Services and the National Insurance Institute announced the establishment of a team “to resolve exceptional incidents that go beyond the tools we have at our disposal” as well as a hotline to “treat and assist complex cases.” The purpose of such cosmetic gestures is to minimize future embarrassment to the government over the devastating impact of the economic crisis and its own right-wing social policies.



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