

Conflict erupts on West Bank over death of Palestinian in detention

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Mass protests have been sparked by the death of a Palestinian prisoner in an Israeli detention centre, spurred on by evidence of torture and a hunger strike by other detainees.

Two Palestinian teenagers were shot and critically injured by Israeli soldiers this week, along with several others who were seriously wounded. On Tuesday, the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, Fatah's military wing, claimed responsibility for two M75 Grad rockets fired on Israel, the first such attack in more than three months.

Live ammunition had been used during clashes on Monday, with the two youth shot with 0.22 calibre bullets. Udi Sirkhan, 16, was shot in the head outside an Israeli military outpost near Bethlehem. The bullet lodged in his brain. Thirteen-year-old Mohammed Khaled Qurd was shot while standing more than 50 metres from an Israeli outpost, while throwing rocks. He was shot twice in the torso.

In total more than 150 people have been injured in clashes in East Jerusalem and the West Bank between the Israeli army and Palestinians protesting the continued detention of four Palestinian hunger strikers. Yasser Abed Rabbo, an aide to President Mahmoud Abbas, said Israel's treatment of prisoners and violence by Jewish settlers were to blame for the mass anger.

Meretz chairwoman Zahava Gal-On warned of a third Intifada, with the West Bank "on the brink, due to diplomatic and security failures of the government."

The latest clashes followed the burial of Arafat Jaradat—an alleged member of the al-Aqsa Brigade—who died under interrogation while in Israeli custody on Saturday. Jaradat, a father of two, was arrested last week for throwing a rock. He died at Megiddo prison. The official explanation was that he had suffered a heart attack, but an autopsy carried out by Israeli pathologists showed he had suffered two

broken ribs. Palestinian minister of prisoner affairs Issa Karake dismissed claims that this was the result of an attempt to resuscitate him, stating that Jaradat "faced harsh torture, leading to his immediate, direct death. Israel is fully responsible for his killing."

Sunday saw an escalation of the conflict across the West Bank, in Hebron, Ramallah, Nablus and Jenin, with thousands in attendance at Jaradat's funeral at his home village, Saeer.

Almost all 4,500 Palestinian prisoners held in Israeli jails refused food on Sunday to protest Jaradat's death. One hunger striker, Samer Issawi, was admitted to hospital yesterday as two of his compatriots ended their hunger strike. The two, Jaafar Izzedine and Tarek Qaadani, were among the four prisoners held without formal charge by Israel who have been on hunger strike for between three and six months.

Israel holds 178 Palestinians as "administrative" detainees, without trial, on renewable three- to six-month terms and based on classified evidence that supposedly proves only that they are active in militant groups.

Issawi was hospitalised at Assaf Harofeh Medical Centre after 200 days on hunger strike. Another, Ayman Sharawna, was hospitalised at Soroka University Medical Centre in Beersheba last week. Issawi, who had been sentenced to 26 years' imprisonment, had been released as a result of an agreement signed between Israel and Hamas to release Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit in exchange for 1,027 Palestinian prisoners. He was sentenced to eight months' imprisonment last week for violating the terms of his release by entering the West Bank and faces years in prison due to the military's procedures against him.

Sharawna, too, was also released as part of the Shalit

deal before being rearrested, accused of resuming activity in Hamas.

The ending of the hunger strike follows Israeli assurances that the two would be released within months, according to Palestinian sources. Qadura Fares, head of an advocacy group for Palestinian prisoners, said that Israel had agreed to release them on May 21, and an Israeli court was expected to ratify the deal. No deal has been announced relating to al-Issawi or Sharawneh.

Maximum pressure is being brought to bear on the Palestinian Authority (PA) and on Abbas to once again bring an end to the protests, particularly as President Barack Obama is due to visit the region in less than a month. The United States has called for “maximum restraint” on both sides, while United Nations secretary-general Ban Ki-moon said Israel should either put the Palestinians in its custody on trial or release them.

It is by no means clear how the PA can meet up to such demands. On Friday, a further protest takes place in the West Bank to mark the eighth anniversary of the struggle against Israel’s separation fence that will be in memory of Jaradat and dedicated to the four detainees.

Giving some insight into the terrible injustices fuelling the Palestinian protests, the Jerusalem Report 2012, issued by the European Union (EU), states that Israeli settlement construction in annexed East Jerusalem is part of a deliberate strategy aimed at preventing it becoming the capital of the proposed Palestinian state.

The report describes settlement construction, with plans to build 5,000 new homes in East Jerusalem, as “the biggest single threat to the two-state solution.” It is “systematic, deliberate and provocative.”

The report is authored by EU heads of mission in Jerusalem and Ramallah, who warn that construction in three southern areas—Har Homa, Gilo and Givat HaMatos—is “part of a political strategy aiming at making it impossible for Jerusalem to become the capital of two states.... If the current pace of settlement activity on Jerusalem’s southern flank persists, an effective buffer between east Jerusalem and Bethlehem may be in place by the end of 2013, thus making the realisation of a viable two-state solution inordinately more difficult, if not impossible.”

The report notes that last year, tenders were issued for 2,366 new housing units, “more than twice” the total

1,145 issued over the preceding three years. Settlement construction in Har Homa has significantly expanded the “existing footprint of the settlement’s built-up area” on land seized in the 1967 Six Day War.

“Israel is actively perpetuating its illegal annexation of East Jerusalem by systematically undermining the Palestinian presence through restrictive zoning and planning, demolitions and evictions, discriminatory access to religious sites, an inequitable education policy,” the report states.

The decision to build 3,426 units in the E1 area—in the West Bank, east of Jerusalem—will isolate Arab east Jerusalem and cut the West Bank in two, “threatening 2,300 Bedouin with forcible transfer”.

The report goes so far as to urge member states to impose sanctions by withholding funding helping settlement building directly or indirectly and ensuring that goods produced on settlements do not benefit from preferential trade agreements with Israel.

Israel dismissed the report out of hand. On Monday, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu sent a message through his envoy Isaac Molho, imperiously demanding that Abas “take the necessary measures to calm down the situation on the ground in the West Bank.”

After meeting with Middle East quartet envoy Tony Blair, Netanyahu threatened, “Israel’s hand is always extended in peace, but we are always prepared for other possibilities as well. In this context, I welcome the successful test of the Arrow-3 missile; it expresses the high technological and security abilities of the State of Israel, the defence industries, the Defence Ministry and our cooperation with the US. This enables us, in any scenario of peace or of those who want to oppose peace, to contribute to the security of Israel’s citizens.”



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