

Protests in Israel against Gaza war

Jean Shaoul
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As Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced a “significant expansion” of the ground invasion of Gaza “for as long as necessary”, his security forces, police and extremist right-wing forces are also intervening to break up the as yet small anti-war protests, intimidate Israel’s Palestinian citizens and suppress the Palestinians in the West Bank.

On Friday, police arrested and handcuffed Hanin Zoabi, the Palestinian Israeli legislator, and 30 other demonstrators taking part in a rally in the northern port city of Haifa to denounce Israel’s murderous assault on Gaza’s defenceless population.

More than 1,000 Jewish and Israeli Palestinians attended the rally, organised by the Balad party, of which Zoabi is a member, and other groups through social media. Demonstrators shouted slogans opposing Netanyahu and the complicity of Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmoud Abbas in Israel’s murderous designs.

The arrests were made after scuffles broke out between demonstrators and the right-wing neo-fascist Kahane group, classified as a right-wing terrorist group in the US by the FBI in 2001. The right-wing extremists chanted “Death to Arabs”, “Muhammad is dead” and “We will burn down your villages”.

The police claimed that the rally was unauthorised as the organisers had failed to notify the authorities. A number of protesters, including legislator Jamal Zahalka, and some police were slightly injured. There were also protests in Acre, Tamra and the Arab Israeli communities in the Wadi Ara area.

A far larger rally, attended by mainly Jewish Israelis, was held in Tel Aviv on July 17 calling for an end to the bombardment and siege of Gaza. They were taunted by right-wing nationalists screaming, “Your mothers are whores”, “Death to Arabs” and “May a missile hit you now”. Clashes broke out, enabling police to evict the anti-war protesters from the square.

A week ago, a Saturday night anti-war protest had to be called off as the army has banned gatherings of more than

500 people when there are sirens warning of potential rocket attacks.

Last month, the Netanyahu government utilised the disappearance of three Israeli youths in the West Bank to gag the media. Aware within hours that the three boys were dead, the government used the time to whip up a frenzied campaign against Hamas, the militant Islamic group that rules Gaza. Without a shred of evidence, Hamas was accused of kidnapping and later killing the teenagers.

Hundreds of Hamas members and supporters were arrested, including prisoners released under the Gilad Shalit exchange in violation of the Egyptian-brokered deal. The homes of two families in Hebron whom it falsely accused of carrying out the killings were demolished.

The government-initiated campaign led to the foul murder of a young Palestinian, Mohammed Abu Khdeir, by Jewish settlers on July 2, setting in motion a wave of confrontations and clashes between Palestinian Israelis, Israeli settlers and other right-wing forces within the Green Line, the border between Israel and the West Bank established after the 1967 Six-Day War.

These terrible events follow a wave of violence by Zionist extremists, who have been egged on by Netanyahu’s constant sloganeering that Israel is a Jewish state. Even Amir Peretz, a minister in Netanyahu’s Likud coalition, warned that the violence has become “a dangerous epidemic”.

Last January a report by the United Nations Office for Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) documented 2,100 incidents of settler violence in the West Bank and East Jerusalem since 2006, with 93 attacks resulting in injuries in 2013. With the police doing nothing to curb the attacks, the settlers operate with impunity and the evident approval of the government. This serves to increase the violence, often described as “price tag” attacks, denoting that Palestinian resistance will incur a cost.

There have also been violent clashes in more than 30 towns and cities in the West Bank between Palestinians

and Israeli and Palestinian security forces, who have been fiercely denounced for imposing Tel Aviv's diktats. This has resulted in the wounding of dozens of Palestinians by live ammunition and rubber bullets.

The PA has erected security checkpoints and deployed its forces near the Israeli army checkpoints and camps to protect them against angry Palestinian youths. Abbas justified this by claiming that he would not allow Israel's attacks to provoke a third *intifada* or uprising. But following Israel's bombardment of Gaza, the confrontations have mounted in scale and intensity.

Various military and political leaders have referred the criminal ground, air and sea offensive on Gaza as "mowing the grass", testifying to the noxious state of Israeli political life. This scorched earth policy is aimed at destroying Gaza's already limited social, economic and political infrastructure.

More than 400 people have been killed, many of them children, another 3,000 injured, while thousands more have been forced to flee their homes. Hundreds of homes, hospitals, water pipelines and power installations have been destroyed in flagrant breach international law.

Netanyahu's claims that this is necessary to destroy tunnels used by Palestinian militants to smuggle weapons is risible. Hamas and Islamic Jihad's rockets are little more than amateurish and ineffective devices that are no match for Israel's defence shield, Iron Dome. Furthermore, most of the most sophisticated tunnels were built from Rafah, in the south of Gaza, to Egypt to circumvent Israel and Egypt's illegal blockade on Gaza and smuggle goods, fuel and construction supplies. Most of these have been destroyed by the Egyptian security forces since the military coup a year ago.

Netanyahu himself presides over a fractious right-wing coalition, beholden to even more extreme forces, that has been on the point of collapse for the last few months.

With right-wing figures in the cabinet calling for the annexation of the West Bank, Yesh Attid leader and Finance Minister Yair Lapid last month threatened to bring down the government and called for a freeze on settlement construction and the mapping of Israel's future borders.

Lapid said there was no reason to continue building settlements that would not remain within Israel in any future agreement and harmed Israel's relations with the rest of the world. It was a waste of money that could otherwise be spent on lower taxes, increased security and better social services.

This was an implicit nod at the Israeli National

Insurance report that revealed one in four Israelis—over 1.6 million people—live below the poverty line. Poverty now affects one in three children, an increase of 20 percent in the last five years.

According to a study commissioned by Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics, 14 percent of Israelis over the age of 20, about 550,000 people, have refrained from buying food in the past year due to financial difficulties. Nearly 19 percent of Jewish children in Israel go to bed with an empty stomach at least one night a week, while 13 percent suffer from malnutrition. The figures will be at least as bad if not worse among Israel's Palestinian citizens.

It is these figures that lie behind this year's unprecedented wave of formal notifications of industrial action by the Histadrut, the trade union federation, although it has done its best to defuse and isolate them. Israel's main public sector union postponed indefinitely a strike set for July 8 that would have closed all border control posts because of the war on Gaza.

Netanyahu has sought talks with the religious right-wing parties in an effort to shore up his shaky coalition and form a National Unity Government. His request was turned down as long as the government insisted on conscription for religious seminary students and refused to increase welfare for their social base.

Last week, in a situation unprecedented during a war and reservist call-up, Netanyahu fired his deputy defence minister and fellow Likud member Danny Danon. He is one of many who had been publicly lambasting the prime minister for approving the so-called ceasefire announced by Egypt without any consultation with Hamas in Gaza, a ploy Netanyahu concocted and used to justify his war on the enclave.

Danon's sacking followed the pull-out by Foreign Secretary Avigdor Lieberman's Yisrael Beiteinu party from the electoral alliance with Likud on July 9. He, like Danon, has gone on television excoriating Netanyahu as a weak and cowardly leader, and calling for the Israel Defence Forces to take full control of Gaza.



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