

Murder of Palestinian minister is latest Israeli provocation

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Ziad Abu Ein, Palestinian Authority minister of settlement affairs, was killed by Israeli security forces Wednesday, during a small, peaceful demonstration northeast of Ramallah.

Soldiers used tear gas and stun grenades to stop demonstrators reaching Adei Ad, an Israeli settlement outpost in the West Bank.

His death brings to 2,625 the number of Palestinians killed by Israeli forces since last June, at least 600 of whom were children.

Abu Ein was on his way with dozens of other Palestinians to plant olive trees to mark International Human Rights Day at the Israeli settlement outpost at Adei Ad. Close to the Israeli settlement of Shiloh, it is widely believed that the area will become a new settlement, especially as settlers had previously uprooted olive trees. Such outposts are considered illegal under Israeli law, but are defended by the security forces. Soldiers and border police stopped the demonstrators at a checkpoint and scuffles broke out.

According to eye witnesses and photos taken by news agencies, Abu Ein died after an Israeli border policeman hit him on the chest with a rifle butt and grabbed him by the throat, pushing him back before throwing tear gas and stun grenades. There were no indications that he responded violently towards the police. The Israeli forces clearly knew who he was, with one witness telling CNN, “The Israeli soldiers called Abu Ein by name and seemed to be focused on him.”

Within minutes, Abu Ein collapsed. He died on the way to hospital. Ramallah hospital director Dr Ahmed Bitawi said he died from asphyxiation after choking on vomit brought on by tear gas inhalation. Israeli authorities denied this, saying that Abu Ein had a history of heart disease and died as a result of a

blockage of the coronary artery due to haemorrhaging.

A joint Israeli, Jordanian and Palestinian team were present during the autopsy, which PA official Saeb Erekat said shows Abu Ein was “killed in cold blood”.

PA President Mahmoud Abbas denounced Abu Ein’s killing as “a barbaric act which we cannot be silent about or accept”. He called for three days of national mourning and said “necessary steps” would be taken after an investigation. There were calls for the PA to suspend all security collaboration with Israel.

Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman accused Abbas of inciting Palestinians against Israel by blaming the Israel Defence Force for Abu Ein’s death.

Thousands of Palestinians joined the procession from the PA’s headquarters in Ramallah to the cemetery, where Abu Ein was buried with full military honours. Acutely aware of the simmering tensions and the mounting anger at the PA’s collaboration with Israel in the West Bank, the Israeli Defence Minister Moshe Ya’alon took the unusual step of sending condolences, saying “We are sorry about his [Abu Ein’s] death” and said Israel was investigating the incident.

He accompanied these weasel words with the despatch of troop reinforcements to the West Bank and extra security forces to the al-Aqsa mosque compound in East Jerusalem ahead of Friday prayers.

US State Department spokeswoman Jen Psaki said the Obama administration was “deeply concerned” by the incident and called for a “swift, fair and transparent” investigation of the circumstances. United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon issued a statement along similar lines.

This latest criminal act on Israel’s part takes place just days after Prime Minister Benyamin Netanyahu called an early general election for next March. The move is a bid to seek support from Israel’s far right

amid a mounting political and social crisis within Israel and factional in-fighting within the coalition and his own Likud party.

Their tactical differences notwithstanding, the entire political establishment is determined to place the full cost of Israel's illegal occupation of Palestinian and Syrian territory and its repeated wars against the Palestinians and Israel's neighbours, including the war to topple the Syrian regime of President Bashar al-Assad, onto the Israeli working class.

Netanyahu is banging the nationalist drum over the supposed threats Israel faces from terrorism, Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran, to throw dust in people's eyes. Last week, Israeli fighter jets bombed targets near Damascus international airport, as well as the Dimas area near Syria's border with Lebanon, apparently targeting the delivery of Russian anti-air missile systems destined for Syria and Hezbollah, the Shia-based movement in Lebanon.

He is consciously inciting the Palestinians. This has included: the expansion of settlements in the occupied West Bank—20,000 Israelis have moved there in the last year—restricting access to the al-Aqsa mosque compound in East Jerusalem; the approval of a Jewish nation-state bill that lays the constitutional and legal framework for an apartheid state; and collective punishment in the form of the seven-year blockade on Gaza, and demolition of the homes of families of suspected "terrorists".

Netanyahu has also worked closely with the PA over the arrests of numerous Hamas members in the West Bank, and the closure of Islamic charities accused of links with Hamas and "terrorism". He has given the green light to fascistic Jewish gangs to attack the property and take the lives of Palestinians, including most recently setting fire to a bi-lingual school in Jerusalem serving both Jewish and Palestinian children.

This has led to Israel becoming increasingly isolated internationally. On December 17, the Swiss government is to convene a short, low key meeting of those states party to the Fourth Geneva Convention to discuss the situation on the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem. Following the collapse of the talks between Israel and the Palestinians last April, the PA signed up to the 15 Geneva Conventions on behalf of Palestine. The Fourth Convention deals with the protection of civilian populations in war zones or

occupied territories. It is expected that Israel, the US, Canada and Australia will boycott the conference.

This follows moves by the governments of Sweden and Belgium and the legislators of France, Britain, Ireland and Portugal to recognise Palestine, a symbolic move that will not immediately affect their diplomatic stance but demonstrates the growing European impatience with Israel.

Netanyahu's Likud party is now utterly beholden to the settler movement. These far-right elements, who refuse even the smallest tactical concessions to the Palestinians, forced long-standing members such as former ministers Dan Meridor and Benny Begin off the Likud election list and caused several splits, including Ariel Sharon's Kadima party and Tzipi Livni's Hatenua party.

Moshe Kahlon, a former Likud minister of communications, is set to lead the latest factional split. His main claim to fame was the reform of the mobile-phone market, which drove down prices. Polls predict that if he runs, his party could win 10 to 12 seats.

Labour Party leader Yitzhak Herzog and Livni's Hatenua party have announced an electoral pact whereby if they win, Herzog will become prime minister for the first two years and Livni the second two years. Polls are predicting, in what is expected to be a low turnout, 23 seats for Labour-Hatenua and 21 for Likud. Herzog and Livni appear to have some support in the Obama administration, which has tactical differences with Netanyahu—with invitations to attend photo-ops at the White House next month.



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