Israeli army-police crackdown seals off East Jerusalem

Jean Shaoul
15 October 2015

Israeli Prime Minister Benyamin Netanyahu has mobilised the military and police to impose measures that suspend the rule of law and basic democratic rights.

In the midst of mounting conflicts between ultra-nationalist Jews and Palestinians, Netanyahu declared that Palestinian groups were using the al-Aqsa mosque as a centre for inciting violence. He pledged a widespread security crackdown targeting Israel's Palestinian citizens and residents, saying that "all means" available would be used. "Not only will we take away rights, but they will pay the full price…whoever raises a hand to hurt us--his hand will be cut off," he declared.

The violence was triggered by Israeli efforts to restrict Palestinian access to the al-Aqsa Mosque compound in Jerusalem's Old City, known as the Noble Sanctuary to Muslims and Temple Mount to Jews.

Tensions have been rising for some time as a result of escalating attacks by settlers on Palestinians and their property, crimes that go unpunished by the Israeli authorities, and the mobilisation of right-wing mobs and vigilantes by the ultra-nationalist Jewish parties, behind the slogan "Death to the Arabs." Such gangs are allowed to go on the rampage, unmolested by the police.

The mayor of Jerusalem, Nir Barkat, is openly encouraging Jewish Israelis to arm themselves. In 2013, the authorities issued some 160,000 permits for private citizens to carry firearms and another 130,000 for organisations. A 2008 law allows citizens to use deadly force in the defence of property.

In response, young Palestinians, armed only with stones, knives, screwdrivers or their cars, have stabbed, shot or driven into eight Israeli Jews.

Palestinian Israelis declared a two-day general strike on Monday and Tuesday, closing shops and offices. Up to 50,000 took to the streets of Sakhnin in northern Israel on Tuesday, in one of the largest demonstrations ever held by Palestinians in Israel itself.

There have been mass protests in Jerusalem and all the major Palestinian towns in the West Bank, leading to clashes with security forces. In Gaza, after tens of thousands of unarmed Palestinians approached the border with Israel, the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) opened fire, killing at least nine protestors last Friday and Saturday.

According to the Palestinian Health Ministry, the security forces have killed 29 Palestinians since the beginning of October--15 in the West Bank and 11 in the Gaza Strip. Most of the dead posed no threat or were already restrained prior to their killing. At least 1,300 Palestinians have been injured by live ammunition, rubber bullets or tear gas.

In neighbouring Jordan, students at several universities went on strike in solidarity with the Palestinians.

The Israeli cabinet agreed the deployment of six companies of the IDF in major cities and along highways throughout the country to assist the police in suppressing Israel's Palestinians, who make up 20 percent of the population. It sanctioned police checkpoints to control the movement of people and vehicles in the villages surrounding East Jerusalem, illegally annexed by Israel after the 1967 war with its Arab neighbours.

The police have effectively sealed off largely Palestinian East Jerusalem.

Netanyahu also ordered the closure of "centres of friction and incitement" in Jerusalem. He placed a ban on the rebuilding of homes demolished by the Israeli

government and ordered the permanent revocation of residency rights of those accused of attacks. Other measures include the deployment of 300 security guards to protect public transportation in Jerusalem and 16 battalions of the paramilitary Border Police, including 1,400 Border Police reservists, in addition to the 850 reservists already called up.

Two additional battalions were sent to the West Bank, three companies were dispatched to the Green Line that separates Israel and the West Bank, and two battalions were deployed to the Gaza Strip border, increasing the number of troops by 50 percent.

Ahead of Netanyahu's announcements, soldiers and police were already a major presence on the streets of East Jerusalem, although much of the city was deserted, with many shops closed and people reluctant to leave their homes.

Netanyahu also announced a crackdown on Palestinian political leaders, blaming them for the unrest. He is examining the possibility of banning the northern wing of the Islamic Movement, led by Sheikh Raed Salah, which has been the main presence at the al-Aqsa mosque since 2001.

Aharon Aksol, Israel's police chief, accused the northern Islamic Movement of fomenting the clashes and recent attacks on Jews. On Monday, the police arrested northern Islamic Movement leader Sheikh Yusef Abu Gammah, accusing him of inciting violence and organising an illegal gathering in the Bedouin town of Rahat in southern Israel. Last month, Israel banned the Mourabitoun, a cadre of Islamic students based at the mosque.

The prime minister is also seeking the indictment of Israeli legislator Haneen Zoabi for incitement, claiming that in an interview she called for Palestinians to converge on al-Aqsa to launch a "popular intifada." He accused her of calling for "wholesale terror against Israeli citizens."

Netanyahu has even accused the Palestinian Authority (PA) in the West Bank of incitement, despite the fact that the Palestinian police attacked demonstrators in order to help Israel crush dissent. He threatened to hold PA President Mahmud Abbas responsible for any further unrest.

Culture and Sports Minister Miri Regev demanded that the Justice Ministry end the legal defence of those accused of terrorism, calling for a halt to "the delusional policy in which terrorists are getting legal counsel and representation using the victims' tax money."

Netanyahu is under enormous pressure from his right-wing rivals in Yisrael Beiteinu, the Jewish Home party, his own Likud party, and various religious parties, all of which have criticised him for being "soft" on the Palestinians.

He also faces criticism from the so-called "centre-left." Isaac Herzog, leader of the Zionist Union, formerly the Labour Party, demanded that the West Bank be sealed off. Netanyahu rejected this following a warning by army commanders that it would not reduce attacks and would open Israel to criticism that it was collectively punishing Palestinians.

US Secretary of State John Kerry said he does not intend to blame Israel or the Palestinians for the recent wave of violence. "I am not going to point fingers from afar," he said at a press conference in Washington. "This is a revolving cycle that damages the future for everybody… But when I see violence like the killing of three innocent Israelis I am going to condemn it-- like we condemned the settler violence against a Palestinian family."

Kerry stressed President Barack Obama's "deep concern… about the escalating tensions," adding that, "All sides should take steps to restore calm."

Washington fears that the growing violence could ignite popular opposition throughout the Arab world. Kerry said he would visit the Middle East and seek to move the situation "away from this precipice."