

Netanyahu brands Israel's Palestinian citizens as criminals

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Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has unleashed a wave of venom against Israel's Palestinian citizens following a lone attack by a Palestinian Israeli on Jewish Israelis in Tel Aviv. In so doing, he is inciting his right-wing supporters to adopt vigilante tactics, exacerbating tensions and whipping up an atmosphere of fear and intimidation.

In early January, a Palestinian Israeli killed two young people and injured several others in a Tel Aviv bar. After fleeing the scene, the shooter killed a Palestinian Israeli cab driver. Speaking immediately after the attacks, Netanyahu branded the entire Palestinian community as criminals.

He accused Israel's 1.5 million-strong Palestinian community, who make up 20 percent of Israel's population, of maintaining a "lawless state within Israel." He added, "Whoever wants to be Israeli must be Israeli all the way. One cannot say, 'I am Israeli in my rights and Palestinian in my responsibilities.' I will not accept two states within Israel."

"There are enclaves without law enforcement, with Islamist propaganda, with plenty of weapons often fired during wedding celebrations, with constant crime," he said.

He demanded that Palestinian legislators condemn the attack "without hesitation or rhetorical phrasing."

Netanyahu promised to "beef up law enforcement in all parts of the state--the Galilee, the Negev, the Triangle and everywhere," referring to the predominantly Palestinian areas of the country. His message was very clear: "peace" with the Palestinians in Israel, as well as the West Bank and Gaza, is simply impossible.

The whipping up of anti-Arab sentiments by the Israeli bourgeoisie is part of a broader effort to deflect the growing social tensions over the lack of affordable

housing, declining public services, inequality and rampant corruption, and preventing any united opposition emerging to government policies.

These efforts come amid Israel's brutal crackdown on the unrest provoked last summer by right-wing elements with the support of the security forces. Right-wing groups provocatively demanded access to the Al-Aqsa mosque complex and clashed with Palestinians whose access to the mosque has been increasingly restricted.

In recent months, lone Palestinian youths from the West Bank with no organisational affiliation have killed 24 Israelis and an American, using stones, screwdrivers and knives, or their cars. The Israeli security forces have responded with methods of collective punishment. They have killed more than 140 Palestinians, injured thousands, arrested hundreds, demolished the family homes of alleged attackers of Jewish Israelis and expelled Palestinian residents from Jerusalem.

In this case, the alleged killer, Nashat Melhelm, was a 31-year-old from the northern Israeli village of Arara who worked at a greengrocer's in Tel Aviv. His father identified him from video footage and reported him to the police. A disturbed young man, Melhem had a record of violence against his own family and had served time in prison for trying to snatch a soldier's gun to avenge the death of his cousin who was killed by the police. Local people, especially Wadi Ara residents, condemned the attack.

Despite this, the media branded him a terrorist and the police arrested Juadat Melhem, the suspect's brother, and later his father, along with five other relatives and family friends. They treated the murder as a terrorist attack and conducted a week-long manhunt that caused widespread panic. Melhem's relatives told

the Associated Press that the police overturned their house, damaging a car and several home appliances.

Hundreds of police officers descended on Arara, a town of some 22,000 people, and sealed off part of it in an attempt to prevent anyone from entering. Police searched homes at random, leading human rights groups to say that the authorities were unfairly targeting Israel's Palestinian citizens. The police then descended on the building where Melhem was hiding and shot him, claiming that he had fired on them—an allegation that locals denied.

At the same time, the authorities raided Palestinian students' apartments in Tel Aviv, apparently without search warrants. There were reports of doors being broken down, officers entering with weapons drawn and rooms being ransacked. Many Palestinian citizens are now afraid to go out to public places in case they happen to be at the scene of an attack where they could be either a suspect or a target.

Such was the hysteria caused by the police mobilisation in search of a "terrorist" that 50 percent of students at the university stayed away from school.

The media glorified Melhem's murder by the police, impervious to the basic norms of the right to a trial before being found guilty and sentenced. Newspaper headlines screamed "Account Settled" and "The Assassination." Netanyahu praised the extra-judicial execution of Melhem and chillingly promised similar action against whoever tried to harm Israel, both at home and overseas.

Amid the frenzy, the political establishment seized on the incident to demand tighter security and deterrent measures. Likud legislator Amir Ohana called for the immediate loosening of gun control laws so that every army reservist without a criminal or medical record could carry a personal gun. Gun license applications have risen from 200 per day to 3,000 per day following the call from the mayor of Jerusalem for Jewish Israelis to arm themselves.

Israel's Palestinian citizens, while considerably better off than their counterparts in the occupied territories and refugee camps in neighbouring countries, have suffered decades of discrimination under Israeli rule. After the new Israeli government confiscated the land belonging to the Palestinians who were driven out or fled in 1948, the government nationalised 93 percent of Israeli territory, reserving most of it for the Jewish

population. As a result, only 3 percent remains in Palestinian ownership, and very little of that is authorised for development, leading to severe overcrowding and unlicensed building.

Poverty amongst both Palestinian Israelis and Jewish Israelis is on the rise, with over half of Palestinian Israelis and nearly one-quarter of Jewish Israelis classified as "poor." As capitalism fails to provide even the most basic needs for the populations of Israel and the rest of the Middle East, relentless attacks on the rights of Palestinians serve primarily to prohibit the development of a unified movement of workers of all national and religious backgrounds.



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