

Israel's Netanyahu steps up settlement construction

Jean Shaoul**31 January 2017**

Prime Minister Benyamin Netanyahu has launched a series of provocative moves against the Palestinians in the West Bank, East Jerusalem and inside Israel itself.

His aim is to distract public attention from the corruption probe that could force his resignation and bring down his government. In doing so, he has been emboldened by strong support from the incoming Trump administration.

Netanyahu has given the go-ahead for building 2,500 new homes in settlements in the West Bank, the largest construction scheme of its kind since 2013-14, saying, "We are building, and will continue to build."

This follows the announcement that 566 new homes—previously on hold because of US opposition—are to be built in East Jerusalem. Jerusalem's deputy mayor, Meir Turjeman, who also heads the planning committee, said plans for 11,000 other homes in East Jerusalem were also under consideration, although he did not say when they would be approved.

These moves come just days after Donald Trump's inauguration as US president. Trump, who has vowed to be "the most pro-Israel president in history," has indicated his support for the Greater Israel project and backs moving the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. He has appointed David Friedman, his personal bankruptcy lawyer, who is pro-settler and a fervent opponent of the two-state solution, as his ambassador to Israel. Jared Kushner, his son-in-law, is charged with imposing a deal with the Palestinians on Israeli terms.

Netanyahu has welcomed this shift in US policy. He had clashed repeatedly with former US President Barack Obama and Secretary of State John Kerry over settlement expansion—among other issues—because it cut across the charade of the two-state solution, seen as

vital to suppressing social and political opposition to the imperialist powers' reactionary and authoritarian allies in the region.

His extreme right-wing coalition partners hope that Trump will allow them to move forward with their goal of annexing so-called Area C, the 60 percent of the West Bank under Israeli military control; passing the law to legalise illegal settler outposts, including Amona, retroactively; and approving the Jerusalem Law proposal which would apply sovereignty to "greater Jerusalem"—the Eztion Bloc, Ma'aleh Adumim, Betar Ilit and Givat Ze'ev, all of which are across the 1967 borders.

Netanyahu has cautioned against taking unilateral action before he has met the new administration. He is set to meet Trump in Washington in February.

Not only is construction on land seized during the June 1967 war illegal under international law, but the Palestinians view the settlements, now home to more than 600,000 Israelis, as a major obstacle to any peace deal and the creation of a future Palestinian mini-state.

In another inflammatory move, the authorities have demolished dozens of homes belonging to Israel's Palestinian citizens, in part to appease the right-wing settler movement, which opposes the evacuation of illegal outposts in the West Bank. The authorities claim the Palestinian homes are illegal as they were built without a warrant, which is in fact impossible to obtain. Last year, the government approved the demolition of tens of thousands of Palestinian homes on this basis.

A new law, now going through the Knesset, will establish a national enforcement unit to wage an offensive against unauthorised construction in Palestinian towns and villages in Israel, giving it the power to demand information from the local authorities and restricting the right of judicial appeal.

On January 10, 11 homes were demolished in the city of Qalansawe. A week later, a further 15 were demolished in Umm al-Hiran, in the Negev, whose Bedouin community, along with dozens of other Bedouin communities, face expulsion.

While many of Palestine's original inhabitants fled or were driven out by the Israeli army in 1948, one-quarter of those who remained were subsequently driven from their homes by the Israeli army, including the Bedouin families who relocated to Umm al-Hiran. Since then, the exclusion of the Palestinians from the national master plans has led to the Palestinian local authorities holding just 2.5 percent of the land and a severe housing shortage for Palestinians who constitute 20 percent of Israel's population.

Successive governments refused to recognise Umm al-Hiran and similar villages now been classified as illegal. Under government proposals, drawn up to replace the Prawer Plan that was abandoned in 2013 following mass demonstrations, the villagers are to be relocated to overcrowded slum "townships" that are the most deprived in Israel. Their land is slated for the development of a new Jewish town.

At a mass rally to prevent the demolition of Bedouin homes in Umm al-Hiran, violent clashes broke out, ending in the death of two people. One of them was a local teacher, Yacoub Abu al-Qian, who had been shot by the police. Ayman Oydeh, head of the Palestinian Joint List, the third largest party in the Knesset, suffered a head injury from a rubber bullet.

Numerous witnesses insisted that al-Qian posed no threat to anyone when the police opened fire on his vehicle, causing him to swerve out of control and drive into the police officers. The police claimed that they had shot him because he had deliberately rammed into the police in a terrorist attack. Afterwards, they sought to justify their actions alleging he was active in the Israeli Islamic Movement, which his family denied. Later still, the police said he was struck not by police fire but by demonstrators' rocks, which conflicted with the medical reports.

Since then, there have been protests all over Israel by Palestinian citizens, who fear that the demolitions and forced evacuations in Umm al-Hiran are a taste of what is to come as the government opens up a new front against its own citizens and brings the war against the Palestinians to Israel itself. The police used tear gas,

rubber bullets and water cannon to break up the demonstrations.

A mass rally from all over the country descended on the Knesset in Jerusalem, demanding that the police release al-Qian's body without preconditions on his funeral, which the Supreme Court has now supported, and an end to the house demolitions. His family are demanding an investigation into the circumstances of his death.

Netanyahu and his ministers have repeated the unsubstantiated claim that the killing of al-Qian was a justified response to a terrorist attack by an ISIS supporter. The lies and cover-up of his murder are of a piece with claims a few months ago of a vehicle-ramming terror attack in East Jerusalem, which turned out to be a misunderstanding in which the driver was shot and killed by police. Similarly, when a wave of fires broke out at the end of last year, Public Security Minister Gilad Erdan, senior police officers and fire fighters claimed that many of the blazes were deliberate arson attacks by Palestinians. Despite numerous arrests for arson, all of the supposed suspects have been released without charge.

These provocations against Israeli Palestinians follow a particularly deadly and violent period for Palestinians in the occupied West Bank and Gaza. Since the start of a wave of violence in October 2015, in the wake of increasing restrictions on the right of access to and prayer in the al-Aqsa compound in East Jerusalem over the preceding summer, 247 Palestinians have been killed by Israelis, with 135 Palestinians killed between the months of October and December 2015 alone. Of the 130 killed in 2016, 112 were Palestinians, 15 were Israelis, and three were foreign nationals.

Netanyahu has already ordered his security chiefs to prepare plans to counter mass opposition expected in the West Bank if Trump does move the US embassy to Jerusalem.



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