

Massive campaign to defend Israeli religious students accused of killing Palestinian mother of nine

Jean Shaoul
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Far-right and ultra-Orthodox groups have created a media storm over the arrest of five Jewish youths on suspicion of carrying out “serious terror offenses,” including the killing of a Palestinian woman last October.

The defence of the accused is being used to stoke nationalist tensions in the run-up to the general election on April 9, and to shift Israeli politics further to the right. All the mainstream parties are complicit.

The five boys, students at the Pri Ha’aretz yeshiva (religious seminary) in the Rehelim settlement in the occupied West Bank, are accused of the stone-throwing attack on a Palestinian car October 12 that killed Aisha Mohammed Rabi, 47, a mother of nine, and injured her husband, Yacoub.

The past year saw a threefold increase in racist attacks on Palestinians over 2017, with 482 politically motivated crimes by Jews reported in the West Bank. These included beating and throwing stones at Palestinians, painting nationalist, anti-Arab or anti-Muslim slogans, damaging homes and cars, and cutting down trees belonging to Palestinian farmers.

The murder and its aftermath highlight the utter lawlessness and racism inherent in the Greater Israel project from which the settler movement stems. Speaking to *Ha’aretz* after the attack, Yacoub Rabi said, “I don’t have any doubt it was the settlers. There were six or seven of them, and it was clear that they were young.”

As is common in such stoning attacks, the police dragged their feet over their investigation, to the extent that few believed any action would be taken.

According to the public broadcaster Kan, the day after the stoning attack, settlers from Yitzhar broke

with the strict religious rule of not driving on the Sabbath and traveled to the Rehelim yeshiva. One of those in the car was reportedly Meir Ettinger, a grandson of the extremist Rabbi Meir Kahane, whom the Shin Bet, Israel’s domestic intelligence agency, has accused of being a ringleader of an underground group that spawned the racist filth legitimising attacks on Palestinians.

In 2015, Ettinger spent time in administrative detention, which enables the state to order someone’s arrest without informing the detainee of the reason or providing any evidence of wrongdoing, and to detain him for unspecified periods and interrogate him without lawyers in attendance. Administrative detention orders are routinely used against Palestinians, but rarely against Jewish Israelis.

Ettinger’s arrest followed attacks on Palestinians in the West Bank and churches and mosques in Israel by right-wing Jewish extremists, including the torching of a Palestinian family in the West Bank village of Duma, which killed an 18-month-old baby.

The use of administrative detention orders under the pretext of combating militant Jewish nationalists facilitated the introduction of such methods as part of the build-up of repressive measures to be used against the working class.

On October 13, Ettinger and his companions went to the Rehelim yeshiva to brief the assailants before any investigation, arrest or interrogation, and thereby prevent them revealing the details of the stoning attack.

Two weeks ago, Shin Bet, not the police, arrested three of the suspects on suspicion of murder. They also arrested two others who were taking part in a protest in support of the alleged assailants. A gag order was

imposed on the media to prevent any reporting on the details of the investigation, and the youths were banned from seeing their lawyers, the far right activist Itamar Ben Gvir and Nati Rom and Adi Kedar of the Honenu NGO, which provides legal aid to Jewish activists suspected of terrorist attacks.

The police also called all the yeshiva students in for questioning after entering the seminary amid claims from the staff that they did not have a search warrant. By last Thursday, 30 students had been questioned.

The settlers and their supporters, including religious leaders and the suspects' lawyers, issued statements condemning the arrests and organizing protests outside the homes of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and other cabinet members, and later demonstrations outside the court proceedings. Neither Netanyahu nor any member of his cabinet had condemned the attack or demanded that those responsible be brought to justice. Rather, they actively encouraged the protests over the arrests and the investigation.

Following an appeal by one of the families over lack of access to lawyers, Ayelet Shaked, justice minister and leader, along with Naftali Bennett, of the newly formed New Right Party, called the mother of one of boys to say that she had discussed his case with State Prosecutor Shai Nitzan and urged the mother to "stay strong."

A week after the youths were taken into custody, they were permitted to meet with their lawyers, who claimed the boys were innocent and accused Shin Bet interrogators of "severe manipulation" and causing "serious trauma."

The Shin Bet was also forced to lift the gag order on part of the case. In response, it issued statements that it had discovered an Israeli flag with a swastika and "Death to Zionists" scrawled on it in the room of one of the suspects, who were now described as radical anti-Zionists. The lawyer for the five youths, Itamar Ben-Gvir, described this as "a spin" by Shin Bet, stating that there was "no real evidence" against his clients who "are good kids that love the State of Israel."

On Thursday, a judge ruled that four of the suspects should be released and subject to house arrest, while the fifth should be kept in detention because of the nature of the allegations, the evidence against him and concerns over obstruction of justice.

The Shin Bet claimed that it had respected all the

suspects' rights under law, saying, "Claims of their denial are baseless and aim at diverting the discourse from the serious suspicions for which they were detained and at bringing the service in disrepute."

The increase in violence and murderous attacks on Palestinians are bound up with the encouragement of all forms of extreme nationalism by Israel's fascistic settler parties, which sit in Netanyahu's government, as well as from recently elected municipal leaders. As the *World Socialist Web Site* explained in its statement on January 3: "The ultra-rightwing government of Benjamin Netanyahu in Israel is establishing the closest relations with extreme rightwing regimes and parties throughout the world. These alliances reflect the growing strength of fascist forces within Israel itself."

The WSWS drew attention to a column in the Israeli newspaper *Ha'aretz* on December 31, by the Israeli human rights lawyer Michael Sfard, who warned:

"We have to face reality. We are witnessing the flourishing of a Jewish Ku Klux Klan movement. Like its American counterpart, the Jewish version also drinks from the polluted springs of religious fanaticism and separatism, only replacing the Christian iconography with its Jewish equivalent. Like white racism's modus operandi, this Jewish racism is also based on fear mongering and violence against its equivalent of Blacks—the Palestinians."

Such obnoxious and abhorrent phenomena mirror similar trends internationally and demonstrate the bankruptcy and reactionary dead-end of the entire Zionist project.



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