

Israel's new government plans war on Palestinians and working class

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The new National Emergency Government, headed by an indicted Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his deputy Benny Gantz, has taken office amid a political crisis unprecedented in the country's 72-year history.

The new government was formed after 18 months of political stalemate and three inconclusive elections. Following weeks of wrangling, Netanyahu reached a deal with his main rival, the former army chief Gantz, who as leader of the opposition Blue and White party had pledged never to serve under Netanyahu.

Netanyahu's trial for bribery, fraud, and breach of trust in three separate cases began on Sunday. He has accused police and prosecutors of inventing "baseless cases" against him, saying probes "were corrupted and fabricated from the start" and part of a left-wing plot to unseat him. The whipping up of his fascist supporters against the judiciary is reminiscent of incitement against the "treachery" of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin for signing and implementing the 1993 Oslo Accords with the Palestinians that led to his assassination in 1995.

Gantz's U-turn has shored up Netanyahu's position and led to the disintegration of his own party, leaving him with just 15 members, less than half the original list.

Netanyahu has pledged to "restore the economy"—by which he means shore up the position of Israel's financial and corporate oligarchy—and to annex Palestinian land in the occupied West Bank.

He said his priority was ending the economic crisis precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic. He had already eased lockdown restrictions, ordered businesses and schools to reopen and allowed houses of worship to reopen for prayers, even as new cases bring the total number in Israel to nearly 17,000 and deaths to 280. This week, restaurants, bars, clubs, swimming pools and hotels will open, which will lead to a resurgence of the virus.

In the Palestinian Territories, for which Israel is responsible under international law, the number of

confirmed cases has risen to 554 in the West Bank/East Jerusalem and 55 in Gaza, while there have been 55 deaths in the West Bank/East Jerusalem and one death in Gaza, a woman who had recently returned from Egypt where the disease is raging.

With totally inadequate healthcare facilities due to Israel's occupation, its punitive and repeated withholding of taxation and utility revenues to the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank and the 13-year long blockade of Gaza, the lockdown has taken a heavy toll on people's livelihoods and brought many families to the brink of starvation.

More than a million Israelis—26 percent of the workforce compared to just over 3 percent in February—have lost their jobs, thanks to Netanyahu's decision to protect employers by granting them low interest loans while allowing workers to be laid off with only unemployment benefits. This has discriminated against Israel's Arab citizens whose municipalities are less well funded than Jewish municipalities.

It is expected that at least 30 percent of those laid off will not be rehired even as the designated period—50 days—for unemployment benefits comes to an end. Many businesses are not expected to reopen. A further 500,000 self-employed and gig economy workers, who are not included in the unemployment statistics, are drowning in debt, while asylum seekers and foreign workers are ineligible for government support.

Even before the pandemic, one in three children were living in poverty, with workers foregoing buying medicine to pay their water and electricity bills, tens of thousands of families were facing food insecurity and thousands waiting for public housing. Now even that seems a distant dream as the ending of welfare benefits affects the most vulnerable, including people with disabilities who have seen their income vanish after the factories employing them shut down.

The new budget is expected to increase taxes and slash services in a bid to recoup the billions of dollars made available to the financial elite.

According to the coalition deal, Netanyahu will retain the premiership for 18 months as he seeks to stall the prosecution's case with endless legal challenges, before handing over to Gantz. The government cannot pass legislation on other major issues until after the end of the pandemic and these will be subject to Gantz's approval. The government includes a record number of ministers as a sop to Netanyahu's fascistic and ultra-orthodox support base.

Crucially, Gantz agreed—with no right of veto—to moves to annex parts of the West Bank in July, after the Trump administration gave Israel the green light under its “deal of the century.” While the exact scope of the annexation is unclear, it is expected to include the settlements blocs, all or part of Area C in the West Bank, which is under Israeli military control, and the Jordan valley.

The annexation, which has popular support within the Republican evangelical constituency, takes on a greater urgency in the light of the US presidential elections in November and Washington's belligerence against Iran as part of its broader campaign to reduce Chinese influence in the region. Israel, along with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf petro-monarchies, plays a key role as Washington's attack dog and local proxy.

Joe Biden, the Democratic Party's presumed presidential candidate, has nominally opposed Israel's annexation of Palestinian territories, saying it would “choke off any hope of peace,” but renewed his pledge to unconditionally continue US military aid to Israel if elected president.

Netanyahu emphasised the importance of achieving sovereignty for biblical sites such as “Shilo, Bethel, Hebron” and others, saying, “This is a historical mission which will be achieved together.”

It will lead to a tsunami of dispossessions and expulsions as Palestinian land is expropriated to make way for new or expanded settlements, with Palestinians transferred to the nearest big city, as happened with the Bedouins in the Negev and East Jerusalemites who found themselves in areas cut off from the rest of the city.

Leading the drive for annexation have been fascistic settlers who, notwithstanding Israel's social-distancing measures and lockdown, have ramped up their attacks on Palestinians in the West Bank to drive them off their land. They have used clubs, axes, electroshock weapons, stones, and assault dogs, in some cases causing severe

injury, as soldiers have looked on. They have attacked homes, torched cars, vandalized and uprooted olive trees and other crops, and stolen livestock.

According to the human rights group B'Tselem, Israeli security forces raided 100 homes in the West Bank and arrested 217 Palestinians, 16 of them minors, between March 1 and April 3. It documented night raids on 12 homes, of which 8 belonged to members of one extended family.

Tens of thousands of Palestinian laborers continued to work in Israel and the settlements. Some of the country's least protected workers, they were not allowed to commute across the border, but had to agree to remain in Israel so as not to spread the disease. At the mercy of their employers, some have had to sleep in construction sites in atrocious conditions. Those who returned home received no compensation and many lost their jobs.

In one of his last acts before quitting Netanyahu's coalition to sit with the Opposition, Defence Minister Naftali Bennett approved a settlement project in the southern West Bank city of Hebron, one of several around the Ibrahim Mosque, that will involve the seizure of Palestinian land.

Annexation will involve military force, under conditions where the Palestinians in the occupied territories and Israel now number approximately the same as Jewish Israelis.

An open-source document published by the Institute for Policy and Strategy (IPS) in Herzliya states that annexation would destabilise the eastern border of Israel, which is “characterised by great stability, a quiet and a very low level of terror,” cause a “deep jolt” to Israeli-Jordanian relations and lead to the “gradual disintegration” of the Palestinian Authority, which acts as Israel's local police force, and another Palestinian uprising.



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