

Scores of Palestinians injured in Jerusalem as Jewish supremacists march chanting “Death to Arabs”

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More than 100 Palestinians were wounded in violent clashes with the police that broke out in East Jerusalem after a march by hundreds of far-right Jewish supremacists chanting, “Death to Arabs! Death to Arabs! All the people want revenge!” on Thursday night. The clashes followed days of mounting tensions in the city.

The police used water cannon and stun grenades on the Palestinians, many of them in family groups with young children dressed in their holiday clothes. They had gathered outside the Damascus Gate at the end of the day’s fast during Ramadan, which started on April 12. At least 20 Palestinians, injured by the security forces’ sponge-tipped bullets and stun grenades, had to be taken to hospital. One Israeli driver, slightly wounded in an attack by young Palestinians, and a police officer were also hospitalised. Dozens of Jews and Palestinians were arrested.

The Damascus Gate, one of the entrances to the Old City, is the most important gathering place for East Jerusalem’s Palestinian community, with tens of thousands of people passing through or sitting there every evening. The plaza outside the Gate has witnessed multiple clashes between Palestinians and the police in the last days over barriers installed by the police to prevent people sitting there during the month of Ramadan.

The authorities gave no valid reason for the barricades, precipitating largely peaceful demonstrations at the Gate and calls to “Open the barriers” that were aggressively dispersed by mounted police and torrents of foul-smelling “skunk water,” turning the plaza into a battlefield. Further fuelling tensions, the authorities disconnected the Al-Aqsa mosque’s loudspeakers so that the call to prayer would not disrupt Israel’s Memorial Day ceremony for fallen soldiers at the Western Wall and restricted the number of West Bank Palestinians attending Ramadan services at the compound to just 10,000, subject to vaccination, far fewer than the numbers wanting to attend.

When young Palestinians posted videos of themselves

assaulting Jews on social media, amid flare-ups in Jaffa where Palestinian Israelis beat up the head of a yeshiva (a religious seminary) leading to violent clashes with the police, right-wing Jewish extremists seized the opportunity to fan the flames and demand vengeance.

On Sunday evening, legislators from the fascistic Religious Zionism party, accompanied by provocateurs singing songs of anti-Palestinian hatred and vengeance, demanded the police take tougher action to “protect Jewish dignity.”

Shortly after, Mohammed Abu Ziyadeh, 17, was attacked at the light rail station on Jaffa Street. Then on Monday, assaults on Palestinians escalated as dozens of young Jewish racists went on a rampage through the city chanting “Death to Arabs” and attacking passersby with stones and tear gas. The police made a show of arresting six suspects, later releasing all of them, and allowed similar provocations to continue in the days that followed.

Lehava (The Flame), the fascistic group that organised Thursday’s march, called on its supporters to gather near the Damascus Gate on Thursday to “protect Jewish honor” and said in its Whatsapp group, “We must break their faces, bury them alive.” *Ha’aretz* reported that far-right, anti-Palestinian organisations used WhatsApp groups to call on protesters to carry guns and to show people how to avoid arrest. It cited a group chat organised by the far-right group, La Familia, that posted, “Burning Arabs today, Molotov cocktails are already in the trunk … the way I see it, an Arab dies today.”

On Thursday night, these forces, made up of youth, the ultra-orthodox and settlers, ran amok, targeting Palestinians, leftists and journalists alike. They also vented their fury on the police, pelting them with rocks and bottles, cursing and swearing at them. Jerusalem’s mayor deployed hundreds of police to prevent them from reaching the Damascus Gate and fighting the Palestinians, but they used kid gloves in comparison with their treatment of the Palestinians, leading to few injuries.

This takes place amid Netanyahu's increasingly frantic efforts to cobble together a coalition government that would enable him to evade trial on charges of corruption. One of the two potential kingmakers is the United Arab List, one of the four parties that formerly made up the Arab Joint List, which Netanyahu made great efforts to divide. However, the fascistic Religious Zionism alliance, led by Bezalel Smotrich, which has six seats in the Knesset, has refused to join a coalition reliant on Arab legislators, even if they remain outside government.

Religious Zionism is part of Netanyahu's far-right bloc that also includes the openly racist Jewish Power—the political heir of Meir Kahane's Kach party that was banned as a terrorist organization—and the ultra-conservative religious and homophobic Noam. During the election campaign, Jewish Power leader Itamar Ben Gvir openly demanded the expulsion of Israel's Palestinian citizens, who comprise more than 20 percent of the country's population, deemed "disloyal." Religious Zionism advocates the expulsion of the Palestinian population, violence against Arabs and the eradication of secularism and intermarriage.

It was Netanyahu who brokered the merger of Smotrich's group with Jewish Power and Noam to form Religious Zionism to ensure they would pass the threshold for entry into the Knesset in last month's general election, in essence making himself a hostage to the far right that has increasingly determined his political agenda since becoming prime minister 12 years ago. These layers are determined to annex vast swaths of the West Bank, an electoral pledge Netanyahu reneged on in favour of the Abraham Accords with the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco and Sudan and the de facto backing of Saudi Arabia.

Should Netanyahu be able to form a government, Ben-Gvir, Religious Zionism's number three, may be given a ministerial position, alongside the alliance's leader, Bezalel Smotrich, or a seat on the Judicial Appointments Committee, either of which would enable him to keep his fellow fascists out of jail. A lawyer, Ben Gvir is best known for defending Zionist settlers accused of terror attacks and hate crimes against Palestinians and for representing Lehava, an organization that fights Jewish intermarriage with non-Jews. Lehava's leader Bentzi Gopstein, another former Kach activist, is one of Ben Gvir's closest allies.

The growth of the far-right movement is bound up with Israel's expansionist policy following its seizure of the West Bank, East Jerusalem (which it annexed), Gaza and Syria's Golan Heights during the 1967 Arab-Israeli War. The cost of this policy continues to be borne directly by the Palestinian masses and indirectly by the Israeli working class, in the form of social cuts and tax hikes carried out to fund a militarised and increasingly antidemocratic state.

A necessary concomitant of the Greater Israel policy, which established settlements in its newly conquered territories in defiance of international law, was the advocacy of communalist and ethno-religious politics, including ethnic cleansing that has involved countless attacks on Palestinians, Israel's own Arab citizens and migrant workers.

As the gap between rich and poor has grown, due in large part to the economic policies pursued by successive Israeli governments of all political hues, the state has increasingly relied on right-wing settlers and extreme nationalist zealots, who provide the basis for the emergence of fascistic tendencies within Israel. Netanyahu for his part has encouraged extreme nationalism as a mechanism to divert growing anger over declining living standards and social inequality along reactionary lines.

Despite the problems in the political development of the Israeli working class, there remains widespread opposition to the ruling elite's agenda. There is, however, no political vehicle and programme to give expression to this opposition. It is impossible to find a way out of this impasse without a break from the nationalist and communalist agenda of Zionism. The only progressive way forward lies in the independent mobilization and unification of Arab, Jewish and Iranian workers in a common struggle for a Socialist Federation of the Middle East as part of the fight to put an end to capitalism all over the world.

It is to develop such a unified movement that the *World Socialist Web Site* and International Committee of the Fourth International are holding an online May Day rally on Saturday, May 1—"One year of the coronavirus: From global pandemic to global class struggle." We urge workers and youth in Israel, Palestine and throughout the Middle East to attend the rally.



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