

Netanyahu's provocations in East Jerusalem threaten war with Palestinians

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Palestinian demonstrators were met once again on Sunday night by Israeli police clad in riot gear and on horseback in a neighbourhood in occupied East Jerusalem where Zionist settlers are seeking to evict Palestinian families from their homes.

Sunday's protests follow days of clashes incited by heavy-handed Israeli repression. Demonstrators also took to the streets of the northern port city of Haifa, where 18 were arrested, as well as Nazareth and Ramallah. There were also clashes with riot police outside the gates of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, where an attack on a Palestinian by Israeli civilians sparked a protest.

The Palestinian Red Crescent reported that 14 people had been treated for injuries suffered at the hands of the Israeli security forces, bringing the total number treated for injuries over the past three days to 560.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government have readied the police and Israel Defence Forces (IDF) in preparation for further clashes with the Palestinians on Monday, when a provocative march by far-right Israeli nationalists is to take place in Jerusalem.

Tensions have been mounting in Jerusalem and the occupied West Bank since the start of the month-long Ramadan fast on April 12. The authorities installed barricades around the plaza outside the Damascus Gate, a traditional gathering place during Ramadan for worshippers after prayers in the al-Aqsa mosque, leading to multiple clashes with police and hundreds of injured Palestinians.

In addition, the authorities had disconnected the 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.

There have been nightly confrontations with the police in Sheikh Jarrah, a Palestinian neighbourhood north of the

Old City. Palestinian Israelis have been gathering to protest the likely eviction of Palestinian families, in a long-running legal case, to make way for settler homes and the increasing encirclement of the Old City by Jews. The fascistic and racist legislator Itamar Ben-Gvir, cultivated by Netanyahu in a bid to bolster his support base, sought to fan the flames by setting up his own "office" in the neighbourhood. The Supreme Court hearing on the case, set for today, has been postponed for 30 days at the Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit's request.

The planned eviction is part of the government's broader process of judaicising the city, making it impossible for the Palestinians to ever set up their own mini-state with some part of East Jerusalem as its capital.

Israel's actions in Jerusalem and the occupied West Bank include home demolitions, settlement expansion and displacement of Palestinians, in flagrant violation of the Geneva Convention and international laws prohibiting an occupying power from destroying property or transferring its own civilians to occupied territories. It is de facto ethnic cleansing.

Last Thursday night, hundreds of far-right Jewish Israelis marched through Jerusalem's streets chanting "death to Arabs" and confronted Palestinians, leading to the wounding of more than 100 Palestinians, with 21 needing hospitalisation, and around 50 arrests.

On Friday night, riot police stormed Jerusalem's al-Aqsa compound, known as al-Haram al-Sharif to Muslims and Temple Mount to Jews, entering the mosque and trampling on prayer rugs with their boots, after they claimed Palestinians threw rocks and fireworks at officers.

More than 200 Palestinians were injured, with 88 taken to hospital, as thousands of Palestinians faced off with several hundred Israeli police in full riot gear, using rubber bullets and stun grenades inside the mosque and in the plaza. According to the Palestine Red Crescent, one of

those injured lost an eye, two suffered serious head wounds and two had their jaws fractured.

Hundreds of worshippers went on to Sheikh Jarrah to show their solidarity, where they were met by police using water cannon mounted on armoured vehicles.

Israel's public security minister, Amir Ohana, said the police had his "complete backing to use all means, force and the necessary power to restore law and order." Netanyahu said in a meeting with security officials, "Israel is acting responsibly to ensure respect for law and order in Jerusalem while allowing freedom of worship."

On Saturday night, as an estimated 90,000 worshippers gathered to mark Laylat al-Qadr, or Night of Power, the holiest night of Ramadan, clashes erupted with Israeli police outside the Old City. According to the Palestine Red Crescent, at least 120 people were injured, including a one-year-old child, with 14 taken to hospital. Police again sought to limit the numbers coming to worship at al-Aqsa by setting up roadblocks and halting public transport from other parts of the country, forcing Palestinians to walk along highways. Others ferried stranded worshippers into the city.

There were angry protests by Palestinian Israelis in towns throughout the country, including Jaffa and Nazareth, against the threatened Sheikh Jarrah evictions and Friday night's raids on al-Aqsa, marking an unprecedented involvement of Israel's Palestinian citizens in anti-government protests from which they have traditionally stood apart.

Tensions are also mounting in the occupied West Bank, where there are almost daily reports of the killing and wounding of Palestinians by Israeli soldiers, as well as unprecedented levels of settler violence against Palestinians and their property. Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas recently postponed Palestinian elections—the first since 2006—amid plummeting support for his Fatah faction, once the leading faction in the Palestinian Liberation Organisation, citing Israel's (longstanding) refusal to guarantee it would allow Palestinians in East Jerusalem to vote.

The al-Aqsa clashes have brought condemnation from Egypt and Jordan, whose population is largely of Palestinian descent, fearing that any instability in the Palestinian territories could spill over into their own unstable countries.

Turkey, as well as Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates, two of the countries that signed normalisation accords with Israel last year, issued statements criticising Israel.

The US State Department responded by urging "both sides to exercise decisive leadership" to quell the violence, in effect gave its backing to Israel. Secretary of State spokesperson Ned Price said, "We call on Israeli and Palestinian officials to act decisively to deescalate tensions and bring a halt to the violence."

Netanyahu's order to the IDF to expand its forces in the West Bank by four battalions, assist the police in security and deploy Iron Dome batteries in the south, takes place as Israel's settler groups and far-right forces began marking Jerusalem Day, starting last night and ending today. The day marks the anniversary of East Jerusalem's capture from Jordan in the 1967 Arab Israeli war and its illegal annexation to Israel. The main event is today's planned march through Arab neighbourhoods in the city, taunting the Palestinians.

Netanyahu's provocations are tantamount to a declaration of war against the Palestinians and could spark a broader war in the Middle East, where Israel—the strongest military power in the region—acts as Washington's proxy force. It has stoked dissent within Israel as senior security officials warned that the flag march on Jerusalem Day could fan the flames in East Jerusalem and cause the violence to spread to Gaza and the West Bank. They have urged politicians to postpone the march, limit the number of participants and change the route, so as not to enter the al-Aqsa compound. A police spokesman told Israel's Army Radio Sunday night that the provocative march would take place.

These moves come as President Reuven Rivlin has called on opposition leader Yair Lapid to form a government after Netanyahu proved incapable of cobbling together a coalition that would ensure his ability to evade his corruption trial, now entering its evidence sessions. The eruption of a new Palestinian uprising would preempt any possibility of Lapid's potential right-wing partners such as Naphtali Bennett of Yamina or Mansour Abbas' United Arab List joining his coalition, thereby precipitating a fifth election and/or a state of emergency that would ensure Netanyahu's continued premiership.



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