

# Prime Minister Naftali Bennett puts Israel on a war footing against the Palestinians

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Naftali Bennett, Israel's right-wing prime minister, has utilised a string of terror attacks that have killed 11 people over 10 days as a pretext to launch a vicious crackdown on the Palestinians. He has placed Israel's security forces on high alert in an operation named Break the Wave, which is tantamount to declaring war on the Palestinians.

Bennett's actions have sparked widespread anger among the Palestinians in Israel and in the Palestinian territories, including East Jerusalem, illegally occupied by Israel since the 1967 Arab-Israeli war.

On Wednesday evening, he issued a video statement saying, "Whoever has a gun licence, this is the time to carry it." He added, "Israel is facing a wave of murderous Arab terrorism," as he convened a special review of the security situation.

Defence Minister Benny Gantz announced he would send 1,000 soldiers to reinforce police and security forces within Israel and deploy 14 battalions to the West Bank and Israel's border with Gaza. Police have reportedly switched their attention to surveillance and counterterrorism in the expectation of further attacks. Gantz warned that "all means are legitimate to end this wave, and we will utilize any means that we think are proper to use," including calling up thousands of reservist soldiers.

Israel Defense Forces Chief of Staff Aviv Kohavi said the IDF must be prepared for "Guardian of the Walls 2," a reference to last May when Israel launched a murderous 11-day assault on Gaza. This was Israel's response to Palestinian protests in East Jerusalem over an expected decision of the Supreme Court, still to be announced, on the eviction of six Palestinian families in Sheikh Jarrah and the harassment of worshippers and storming of the al-Aqsa Mosque, the third holiest site in Islam, during Ramadan.

*Wall Street Journal* reported, "The Israeli Communications Minister Yoaz Hendel said Israel may soon need to launch a wide-scale military operation similar to Operation Defensive Shield of 20 years ago, in which Israeli soldiers entered Palestinian towns to arrest or kill militants and seize their weapons,"

This was a reference to the murderous assault on Jenin area in April 2002 that killed at least 52 Palestinians, including many civilians.

Earlier this year there were gunfights between Israeli forces and the Palestinians in the Jenin area and its refugee camp, with the Palestinian Authority's security units unwilling to enter the camp. The city has been a focus of mass opposition to President Mahmoud Abbas's corrupt Fatah-dominated PA for its role as Israel's subcontractor in its efforts to permanently subjugate the Palestinians in their own land.

In the last fortnight, there have been four attacks on Israeli Jews that have killed 11 people. Islamic State (IS), possibly linked to IS's affiliate in Egypt's Sinai Peninsula, which has for some years witnessed IS attacks on Egyptian security forces, claimed responsibility for two of them—in Hadera and Beersheba. The shooting of two policeman in Hadera took place as US Secretary of State Antony Blinken was holding talks with Bennett and leaders from Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Morocco—all signatories to the US-orchestrated Abraham Accords—and Egypt in the town of Sde Boker in the Negev desert. The talks centred on Washington's relations with Iran and its proposal to remove Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) from its list of terror organisations.

Israeli troops stormed and searched a house in the West Bank city of Jenin belonging to the family of the man they believed was responsible for a separate attack

in Bnei Brak, near Tel Aviv, that killed four Israelis. The soldiers vandalised the property and arrested some of his relatives and friends. When confronted with armed fighters and later civilians protesting the raid, the soldiers fired, killing two young Palestinians and injuring 15 who were throwing stones at the soldiers.

Israeli soldiers also killed three members of the military wing of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, which had claimed responsibility for one of the attacks in Israel, during an ambush at a checkpoint near Jenin city, bringing the total number of Palestinians killed to eight.

Within Israel, the security forces have arrested dozens of suspects in the predominantly Palestinian towns in the central regions of the country and the Negev, with the number expected to grow as they target people suspected of links to IS and other Jihadist groups. They are expected to initiate a crackdown on the Palestinians, in the name of combating crime and the high incidence of gang murders and armed robbery that have swept the poverty-stricken towns, with the government on Thursday announcing a \$60 million increase in the police budget.

The uptick in violence comes in the run-up to Ramadan, set to run between April 2 and May 1, and which this year coincides with Easter and the Jewish Passover. Israeli authorities have reportedly agreed to allow armed settlers, led by Knesset member Itamar Ben-Gvir, to enter the al-Aqsa Mosque compound en masse under police-protection during Passover.

There have been reports of dozens of incidents of damage to Palestinian property in Israel by right-wing extremists.

On Sunday, Israeli police used mounted forces, rubber-coated steel bullets, stun grenades and batons to disperse crowds that traditionally gather outside the Damascus Gate in East Jerusalem after Ramadan evening prayers, injuring at least 19 Palestinians, and arresting ten during a second night of clashes. It follows the arrest of four Palestinians in the Old City the previous night.

The police crackdown came shortly after Foreign Minister Yair Lapid made a provocative visit to the Damascus Gate and the Old City to show support for the police.

Israel's Palestinian political parties and groups, including the Ra'am party which is a member of

Bennett's fragile, eight-party coalition government, condemned the IS attacks of March 22 and 27. Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas also issued a condemnation of the Bnei Brak attack, presumably a nod towards his meeting with Blinken last week. On Wednesday, King Abdullah of Jordan also condemned "violence in all its forms" as he hosted Israel's President Isaac Herzog in Amman.

In Gaza, Hamas, the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated group that controls the besieged Palestinian enclave, held its traditional Land Day event, marking the loss of Palestinian lands, along the seafront, away from the Israeli border, in order to prevent any escalation in violence.

The UN humanitarian agency (OCHA) reported that in 2022 up to March 21, 18 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli forces and 222 Palestinians injured, in Gaza and the West Bank.

None of this will cut across Israel's plans for widespread repression.

No less a factor in Bennett's de facto declaration of war on the Palestinians is his determination to divert attention away from Israel's economic and social crisis, as the cost of living, already one of the highest in the advanced countries, makes it hard for Israelis and Palestinians alike to put food on the table.

Last month, the national tax revenue report revealed that people in the bottom decile pay 47 percent of their income in taxes, while those in the top decile pay at a lower rate, 40 percent. Half of Israeli workers do not earn enough to reach the minimum income tax threshold, leading workers to demand wage increases in strikes that the trade unions have done everything they can to sabotage.

This explosive situation is set to deteriorate further as sanctions imposed by the US and major European powers on Russia have hit Israel hard. Much of Israel's food and energy comes from Russia and Ukraine. With their own agricultural exports to Russia now unsold, Israeli farmers are preparing to destroy their produce.



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