Israel’s anti-Palestinian provocations threaten stability of Israel, Gaza, West Bank and Jordan

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Israeli security forces again attacked Palestinian worshippers as angry clashes broke out at the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound in East Jerusalem early Friday, at the end of the third week of Ramadan. Using drones they fired tear gas, stun grenades and rubber-coated bullets, injuring at least 57, of whom 14 were hospitalized.

The mosque compound, holy to Jews and Muslims, has been occupied illegally along with the West Bank, Gaza and Syria’s Golan Heights since the 1967 Arab Israeli war. It is under the custodianship of the Jordanian government. Israel has broken longstanding agreements that allow Jewish visits but bar Jewish worship at the site, as extremists groups demand access to pray there.

The police said they were responding to stone-throwing and fireworks set off by masked rioters. Israeli officials have blamed Hamas, the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated group that controls Gaza, saying it and other parties are “stoking tensions” by claiming that Israel aims to change the status quo at al-Aqsa.

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights called for an investigation of Israeli police actions, with spokesperson Ravina Shamdasani saying, “The use of force by Israeli police resulting in widespread injuries among worshippers and staff in and around the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound must be promptly, impartially, independently and transparently investigated.”

Friday’s attack follows weeks of rising violence that have led to the deaths of 14 Israelis since March 22, while raids by Israeli security forces have killed more than 18 Palestinians since the start of Ramadan on April 2 in the biggest wave of violence, outside of a full-scale war, in several years.

The previous Friday, Israel stormed the mosque compound, injuring more than 150 worshippers. Since then, there have been almost daily attacks amid a febrile atmosphere in Jerusalem and the West Bank that threatens political stability on both the domestic and international arenas.

On Sunday morning, Israeli police allowed hundreds of Jews to enter the compound while blocking Muslim access for several hours, leading to clashes, the arrest of at least 18 Palestinians and the wounding of at least 17, five by rubber-tipped bullets according to the Palestinian Red Crescent.

On Tuesday, thousands of far-right settlers marched to Homesh in the occupied West bank, under the protection of Israeli soldiers who blocked a Palestinian counterdemonstration after Defence Minister Benny Gantz reversed initial military warnings that soldiers would not protect the marchers. Homesh has since 2005 functioned as the site of a yeshiva, a religious seminary, becoming an unauthorized settler outpost. Last year an Israeli settler was killed by Palestinians, making Homesh a rallying point for hardline Zionists.

Among those attending the march were Idit Silman, a lawmaker from Prime Minister Naftali Bennett’s Yamina Party who recently resigned from his fragile coalition government, ending its majority, saying it did not adequately represent Zionist and Jewish values, and fascistic lawmaker Itamar Ben-Gvir. Security forces fired tear gas, rubber bullets and stun grenades to disperse angry crowds protesting the march, injuring 79 Palestinians.

On Wednesday, hundreds of Jewish nationalists marched through Jerusalem chanting anti-Palestinian slogans such as “death to the Arabs.” Among the marchers were Lehava, an extremist group that seeks to prevent any mixing of Jews and non-Jews, and Ben-Gvir, who was greeted by the mob as their “next prime minister.” The march went ahead despite a lack of approval from Israeli police and warnings by Shin Bet, Israel’s domestic spy agency, that allowing Ben-Gvir to participate could ignite massive unrest and another war with Gaza.

Early Thursday morning, Israel carried out air strikes on Gaza in response to a rocket fired from the besieged enclave that caused no injuries or even damage as it landed in an

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open area near Sderot in southern Israel. This in turn prompted further rocket and gunfire from Gaza. Israel called its attack on Gaza, supposedly aimed at a facility manufacturing rocket motors, “the most significant” since last May, when Israel launched a murderous assault on Gaza following its storming of the al-Aqsa Mosque during Ramadan and brutal suppression of protests in East Jerusalem over the threatened eviction of six Palestinian families in Sheikh Jarrah. Palestinian militants fired two more rockets from Gaza Friday night.

On Thursday morning, security forces again attacked worshippers and attempted to raid the al-Aqsa mosque’s main prayer hall before allowing Jewish settlers to enter the compound.

As well as attacks in East Jerusalem and Gaza, Israel’s security forces have also continued their raids on towns and cities across the West Bank, arresting and shooting Palestinians. They have largely focused on the northern town of Jenin, a centre of Palestinian opposition to the repressive regime of Mahmoud Abbas, president of the Palestinian Authority (PA), where Hamas’ influence has grown. This week, two young Palestinians died from wounds sustained earlier when Israel’s security forces invaded the Jenin area.

Security forces have twice attacked the Palestine Technical University’s Kadoorie campus in Tulkarem city in the northern West Bank—injuring four people in the first attack and two 21-year-old students and a security guard a day later.

The rise in tensions has exacerbated Israel’s political crisis as Mansour Abbas, the leader of the four-member United Arab List (the Ra’am), an Islamist party, announced the party was suspending its membership of Bennett’s coalition. With parliament in recess until May 8, the government is in no immediate danger. But should Ra’am fail to rejoin the coalition, opposition parties would have a 64-56 majority in the 120-seat parliament, enough to bring down the government and send Israel to its fifth election in three years.

Bennett’s coalition, brokered last year by the incoming Biden administration after the fourth elections, brings together parties from across Israel’s narrow political spectrum, including Ra’am. The parties have little in common beyond their opposition to former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and desire to avoid a fifth election.

Ra’am’s decision on whether to rejoin the government ultimately depends on whether Israel wages another war against Hamas, which has gained increasing support in the West Bank as opposition to the PA’s subservience to Israel and deteriorating social conditions grows. Under pressure from Egypt, Hamas has sought to prevent another all-out war. But as Bennett seeks to placate his religious and settler support base through provocations against the Palestinians, Hamas is stepping up its rhetoric, forcing Ra’am and Mansour Abbas to withdraw from the government.

The PA in the West Bank is being challenged by workers, with teachers carrying out a four-week partial strike and protests over the failure to pay an agreed cost of living and family allowance and late payments of their salaries. Teachers have rejected the agreement between the General Union of Palestinian Teachers (GUPT) and the Ministry of Education to end their action.

Israel’s provocations have infuriated its new Arab allies, the Gulf and Moroccan monarchies as well as Jordan.

Jordan, the custodian of the Al-Aqsa Mosque, has seen mounting opposition to the corrupt regime of King Abdullah and deepening poverty and social inequality, with weeks-long protests by the unemployed in front of the royal palace, as well as an attempted coup last year by the king’s half-brother. It has called on the Biden administration, the European Union and leaders of Egypt, Morocco and the United Arab Emirates, to put pressure on Israel to stop sending security forces onto the mosque compound. It has requested the UN Security Council debate events at the compound. Abdullah is anxious to prevent Israel providing Saudi Arabia with an excuse to assert its authority over the site, a demand Riyadh made of former US President Donald Trump in return for joining his “deal of the century” plan for the Middle East.

So precarious is Abdullah’s position that US Acting Assistant Secretary of State for Near East Affairs Yael Lempert and Deputy Assistant Secretary Hady Amr were sent to the Middle East last week in a bid to shore up the beleaguered regimes in Jordan and the West Bank. They went first to Amman to meet Jordan’s Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi, before going to see Israel’s Foreign Minister Yair Lapid, PA President Mahmoud Abbas and senior Palestinian officials in Ramallah, with a final stop in Egypt.

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