

Israeli ultra-nationalists and settlers attack Palestinians in “Flag March” through Jerusalem

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Thousands of Israeli settlers and far right activists attacked Palestinians on Sunday as they marched through Jerusalem's Old City. The attacks took place as part of the now annual Flag March marking Israel's annexation of East Jerusalem after its capture during the 1967 Arab Israeli war.

Last week, the Jerusalem Magistrate's Court overturned a police order stopping far-right activists praying in the al-Aqsa Mosque compound, the third holiest site for Muslims, in breach of a longstanding agreement between Israel and Jordan, which administers the affairs of the mosque. Settlers, nationalist and religious activists regularly storm the compound and perform Jewish prayers at the site which is reserved for Muslim prayers.

Bentzi Gopstein, the founder and leader of the fascistic Lehava organisation, has even called for the destruction of the al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock to make way for a Third Jewish Temple. He called on settlers to break into the mosque on Jerusalem Day (May 29) and start dismantling it. While the authorities banned the Flag March from entering the compound, they approved a route through the Muslim Quarter of the Old City and the Damascus Gate, a popular meeting place for Palestinians, with a massive police escort, knowing this would provoke mass protests that could inflame the entire region.

Hassan Nasrallah, Hezbollah's secretary general, and Ismail Haniyeh of Hamas warned they would respond if the march approached the Al-Aqsa Mosque. Last year's Flag March that coincided with Ramadan was one of the factors that led to the ratcheting up of tensions and another of Israel's murderous assaults on Gaza, as well as violent clashes between Arab and Jewish Israelis within Israel.

Yesterday's march provoked angry clashes, with at least 40 Palestinians wounded in the Old City and the

surrounding area, of whom 15 were hospitalized. Their injuries include wounds from rubber-coated steel bullets, beatings and pepper spray. Video clips show settlers assaulting and pepper-spraying Palestinians.

Despite a massive police presence, nothing was done to stop the attacks. Officers instead protected the marchers, assaulting the Palestine Red Crescent Society's medical staff trying to reach the wounded near the Damascus Gate.

This followed the storming of the al-Aqsa Mosque compound earlier in the day by more than 2,600 ultra-nationalists and settlers who prayed at the site and raised the Israeli flag. They then marched through the Old City, before converging with the main march outside the Damascus Gate.

Sunday's provocations take place amid Israel's deliberate ratcheting up of tensions. Hardly a day goes by without the security forces carrying out a raid in the occupied West Bank, ostensibly in pursuit of “terror suspects.” They have killed dozens of Palestinians, injured hundreds and made mass arrests that have left detention centres full to overflowing.

The latest victim was a 15-year-old, Zaid Ghuneim, shot dead in cold blood on Friday evening in Al-Khader, a village near Bethlehem, while 85 Palestinians were wounded, as the Israeli military cracked down on protesters across the occupied West Bank. These raids come in the wake of a series of killings of 14 Israelis by desperate Palestinians with few known connections to each other or to armed groups.

It was during one such raid in Jenin, a centre of opposition to Israel, that the Israeli military deliberately shot and killed Shireen Abu Akleh, the veteran Al Jazeera Arabic reporter, who was clearly visible and wearing a press identifier. That and the police's attack on her

funeral procession sent a clear message that Israel will not tolerate the reporting of its brutal suppression of the Palestinians.

The Palestinians' fury over the killings—more than 60 Palestinians have been killed so far this year—settler violence against their farms, homes and property, evictions, house demolitions and settlement expansion has been worsened by the deteriorating economic and social conditions in the West Bank and Gaza, particularly in the aftermath of US sanctions on Russia that have pushed up the cost of fuel, fertilisers and food.

Israeli violence has escalated since Naftali Bennett, who heads the small ultra-nationalist Yamina (Right) Party, became prime minister on June 21, 2021. Bennett, a leader of the settlers, is a determined advocate of Israel's expansionist policy, advocating in 2012 the *de jure* annexation of Area C, the 60 percent of the occupied West Bank under Israeli military control and home to around 300,000 Palestinians, including it in his 2019 election manifesto.

Such a policy can only be carried out by direct military rule, at the expense of both the Palestinian masses and the Israeli working class via social cuts and tax hikes. It has been prepared through the advocacy of communalist and ethno-religious politics, including ethnic cleansing of Palestinians, Israel's Arab citizens and migrant workers.

As the gap between rich and poor has grown, the state has become increasingly reliant on right-wing settlers and extreme nationalist zealots. As Bennett's fractious coalition loses its majority in the 120-seat Knesset, he is increasingly playing to these fascistic forces. He has called for the formation of armed vigilante groups, based in part on civilian volunteers, including from the "New Hashomer" (the New Guardian), a militia funded by wealthy donors in the US, far-right groups in Israel and the government that carries out extensive indoctrination activities with high school students described as "social involvement."

Bennett instructed the National Security Council to present "an orderly and budgeted plan to establish a national civilian guard" by the end of May. This is aimed not just at fighting "terrorists" but also Palestinian uprisings in mixed cities that are home to both Arabs and Jews, as happened in Lod and other cities last year during Israel's 11-day assault on Gaza.

Tensions were further inflamed last week when Israeli forces began demolishing the homes of Palestinians living in the Masafer Yatta district in the West Bank, leaving villagers to sleep out in the open or in tents. It followed a

high court ruling this month sanctioning the expulsion of about 1,000 Palestinians from their homes in 12 villages in the area and the repurposing of the land for Israeli military use. Israel has announced plans to build 4,000 new settlement homes in the West Bank.

The demolitions are a flagrant breach of the Geneva conventions banning the expropriation of occupied land or the forcible transfer of the local population. They set a precedent for further expulsions of Palestinians in the West Bank.

In 1981, Israel designated the area as "firing zone 918" for the exclusive use of the military with the explicit intention of forcing the villagers from their homes, according to cabinet minutes. "Firing zones" now cover 18 percent of the West Bank. The Israeli authorities first sought to expel the residents of the Masafer Yatta area in 1999, but the Supreme Court allowed them to return to their homes, pending a ruling by the high court that took two decades to reach a decision.

Since then, the Palestinians have had to live with the threat of the demolition of their homes and the confiscation of their land because they do not have the necessary building license from the Israel's Ministry of Defence. Since 2006, the authorities have granted just 75 building permits to Palestinians in Area C, compared with the 20,500 for Israeli settlements. Only 0.5 percent of Area C is available for Palestinian development. With almost all construction deemed illegal, Palestinians cannot access electricity from the grid, infrastructure or water and are forced to pay for costly private water supplies or build solar-powered pumps to access water.



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