

Jewish Supremacist Ben-Gvir stages provocation at al-Aqsa mosque compound

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The fascistic and far right forces within Likud Party leader Benjamin Netanyahu's new coalition government have lost no time in demonstrating who now determines the trajectory of Israel's politics.

On Tuesday morning, National Security Minister and Jewish Power leader Itamar Ben-Gvir staged a provocation, visiting the al-Aqsa Mosque compound in Jerusalem's Old City under heavy security protection. Islam's third-holiest site and the location of the Jewish Temple 2,000 years ago, the compound has long been a major flashpoint in Israeli-Palestinian relations.

It was a move guaranteed to further inflame tensions, under conditions where 2022 saw more than 167 Palestinians, including 48 children, killed by Israeli security forces and settlers in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, illegally occupied by Israel since the 1967 Arab Israeli war, the highest number since 2005.

With the Palestinian Authority (PA), established under the Oslo Accords, widely despised amid bitter factional conflicts over who should succeed the ailing 87-year-old President Mahmoud Abbas, Israel is intent on provoking a military conflict with the Palestinians in the Occupied Territories and Gaza as well as with Palestinian citizens in Israel.

It was Ariel Sharon's visit to the al-Aqsa mosque compound under a massive military escort in September 2000 that precipitated the second intifada, the five-year-long Palestinian uprising. In May 2021, the fascists' Flag March coinciding with Ramadan was one of the factors ratcheting up tensions prior to another of Israel's murderous assaults on Gaza, as well as violent clashes between Arab and Jewish Israelis within Israel.

The Arab states, particularly Jordan, which has custodianship of the compound under an international agreement, have warned Israel against taking any steps that would undermine the arrangements whereby Jews are allowed to visit the site but not worship there. The last

years have seen far-right politicians and religious zealots calling for an end to such "discrimination" and Israeli security forces turning a blind eye to settlers, nationalist and religious activists praying at the site.

Ben-Gvir's incendiary stunt took place less than a week after Netanyahu's coalition government took office. His key partner is the Religious Zionist alliance, of which Ben-Gvir is a member, committed to Jewish supremacy and apartheid rule, the annexation of large swathes of the West Bank, the expansion of illegal settlements and Jewish prayer at al-Aqsa Mosque.

A convicted racist and supporter of the virulent anti-Arab Kahanist organization, once designated a terrorist organization in Israel and the US, who threatened to expel Palestinians with Israeli citizenship, Ben-Gvir heads the newly created Ministry of National Security. His brief includes the Border Police, the paramilitary force responsible for suppressing the Palestinians in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. Security forces that have long allowed the settlers to attack the property and lives of Palestinians with impunity, often under the protection of the military, will now actively encourage pogroms to drive them from their homes and land.

While he had early on declared his intention of visiting the al-Aqsa Mosque compound, after a meeting with Netanyahu on Monday he had apparently promised to delay his visit. Netanyahu refused to veto his visit, knowing it risked precipitating violent clashes with the Palestinians, rocket attacks from Hamas, the militant Islamist group that controls Gaza, and an angry response from the Arab states, claiming that "capitulating in the face of threats would be a reward for terror and legitimize actions against Israel."

In the event, Ben-Gvir went ahead with his visit, albeit a brief one early in the morning. It was not his first visit to the compound, but his first as security minister. In May last year, Ben-Gvir posted pictures of himself and his

family at the site and called for its destruction to “establish a synagogue on the mountain.”

After five elections in less than four years in which no government has had a convincing majority, Netanyahu’s majority of four in the 120-seat Knesset is entirely dependent on Religious Zionism’s 14 seats that make it the third-largest parliamentary party. He brokered the electoral alliance of its several factions to ensure they jointly met the threshold for parliamentary representation under Israel’s complex system of proportional representation, an alliance that immediately split after the election into its three constituent parts: Religious Zionism, Jewish Power and Noam.

Netanyahu, largely supportive of their policies, is currently in court on charges of bribery, fraud and breach of trust in three separate cases and particularly welcomed their offer to introduce legislation banning the indictment of a sitting prime minister. He is now utterly beholden to these forces.

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These fascists have promised to legalise scores of settler outposts and demolish Palestinian homes and buildings in Area C of the occupied West Bank that is under direct military control. The new government is set to carry out one of the largest expulsions of Palestinians since 1967 if the residents of 12 communities in the Masafer Yatta area refuse to leave their homes to make way for the repurposing of the land for Israeli military use. The demolitions of their homes would be a flagrant breach of the Geneva conventions banning the expropriation of occupied land or the forcible transfer of the local population. It would set a precedent for further expulsions in the West Bank.

Speaking during his Tuesday morning visit, Ben-Gvir said, “There won’t be racial discrimination in a government in which I am a member. Jews will ascend to the Temple Mount.” He threatened those opposing this with reprisals, saying they “must be dealt with an iron fist.”

The Palestinian Authority denounced Ben-Gvir’s action as a “blatant and shameless provocation.” While Hamas also condemned his visit, it refrained from threatening to respond with rocket fire on Israel. Zvika Fogel, a legislator from Jewish Power, hit out at Hamas, telling Channel 12 that Israel’s policy of going to war with Palestinians “every two or three years” was not enough and that it should “subdue them once and for all.”

Netanyahu, in a bid to forestall an international

backlash, declared that the government was adhering strictly to the “status quo” position in relation to the al-Aqsa Mosque. Nevertheless, he has been forced to postpone his visit to the United Arab Emirates (UAE), scheduled for next week, after Abu Dhabi, along with Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and other countries, condemned the visit. The UAE and China have called for a UN Security Council meeting to discuss it.

The White House, deeply concerned that this would cut across its efforts to forge an alliance between Israel and the Arab states against Iran, whom it accuses of arming Russia in the US/NATO led war in Ukraine, issued a statement declaring, “The United States stands firmly, and we have been very clear, for preservation of the status quo with respect to the holy sites in Jerusalem. Any unilateral action that jeopardises the status quo is unacceptable, and we will continue to be steadfast on it and be very clear on that.”

Israel’s new foreign minister Eli Cohen has further dismayed Washington with his call for Israel to speak out less in public about the war in Ukraine and to avoid denouncing Russia publicly over its invasion. His remarks drew criticism from Republican Senator Lindsey Graham, a keen supporter of the US war drive against Russia and one of Israel’s closest supporters in Congress, who called Cohen’s comments “unnerving.”

Israel has launched hundreds if not thousands of aerial strikes on facilities linked to Iran and its allies in Syria, with the evident agreement of President Vladimir Putin to stand down Russia aerial defence systems put in place to defend the regime of President Bashar al-Assad. Last weekend, Israel carried out yet another attack on Damascus’ international airport that briefly put it out of action.



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