

# Israel's fascist minister Smotrich calls for town of Huwara to be wiped out, anti-Netanyahu opposition grows

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Israel's fascist cabinet ministers have escalated their incendiary attacks on the Palestinians in the wake of the pogrom-style attack Sunday on Huwara and other Palestinian villages near the northern West Bank city of Nablus.

Hundreds of settlers, some masked and armed, went on a rampage, setting fire to the homes, shops, cars, property and agricultural land of the Palestinians, killing one person and injuring 120 more. At least 35 homes were destroyed, with another 40 damaged. More than 400 cars as well as agricultural property were set aflame, leaving the town smouldering for hours.

Israeli soldiers stood by and did nothing to protect the Palestinians, as required under international humanitarian law. The next day, the army ordered Palestinians to stay indoors and stores to close, leaving the settlers to roam the streets of what the *Jerusalem Post* described as a “ghost town.”

Neither Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu nor any of his cabinet ministers denounced the assault, simply saying that it was “not our way to take the law into our own hands.”

Following a public outcry, the Israeli authorities arrested a handful of people, all of whom were released. Just one was sentenced to four days of house arrest.

Far-right party leaders have called for the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) to drive out the Palestinians from their homes in an explicit call for the ethnic cleansing of the West Bank, or a second “Naqba,” as the Palestinians call the expulsion of at least 700,000 Palestinians before and during the 1948-49 war between Israel and its Arab neighbours.

Netanyahu's far-right and religious coalition parties absented themselves from a Knesset session called by the opposition bloc to discuss the rampage.

On Monday, Zvika Fogel of Jewish Power declared, “Yesterday, a terrorist came from Huwara—Huwara is closed and burned. That is what I want to see. Only thus can we obtain deterrence.” He was referring to the shooting earlier on Sunday of two brothers from a neighbouring settlement, killed as they drove through the town.

On Wednesday, Bezalel Smotrich, the Religious Zionist leader and Finance Minister who has been given responsibility for the civil administration of the West Bank illegally occupied by Israel since the 1967 Arab-Israeli war—said Israel should “wipe out” Huwara. Home to 7,000 Palestinians, Huwara is almost completely surrounded by Israeli settlements and bisected by a settler road.

“The Palestinian village of Huwara should be wiped out. The state needs to do it and not private citizens,” Smotrich said.

Before the assault, Smotrich had tweeted his support for a statement by David Ben-Zion, deputy leader of the Samaria Regional Council, calling for Huwara to be destroyed. He later complained that his remarks had been taken out of context and deleted his tweet, insisting that this was the government's responsibility.

This prompted a group of Israeli human rights lawyers to call for the attorney general to investigate Smotrich and two of his allies for “inducing war crimes”. There have been online collections for the Palestinians in Huwara, as well as demonstrations earlier in the week protesting the pogrom.

On Wednesday, there was a mass walkout by Israeli workers along with huge demonstrations in Tel-Aviv, Jerusalem and other towns and cities in a day of action—dubbed “National Disruption Day”—in protest at the government's plans to assume dictatorial powers by

neutering the judiciary. It follows eight weeks of Saturday-night mass rallies in towns and cities across the country that have been growing in strength.

The proposed legislation, set to become law before parliament goes into recess on April 2, would allow the government to appoint Supreme Court justices and grant the Knesset the power to override court rulings. This would smooth the path for the government to ride roughshod over democratic rights and for the ultraorthodox and religious Zionist groups to strengthen the role of religion within the country. It would remove all remaining restrictions on the ultra-nationalist settler movement in their bid to expand their presence across the West Bank.

If these measures become law, the Supreme Court is likely to rule them unconstitutional, precipitating a major political crisis ahead of the celebrations planned to mark the 75th anniversary of the founding of the Zionist State.

The government has also introduced legislation enabling thrice-convicted Shas party leader Aryeh Deri to serve as government minister, overruling a High Court decision, and is set to introduce a bill preventing the scandal-ridden Netanyahu, currently in court on corruption charges, from being removed from office. This is in anticipation of the auditor general declaring him “unfit for office” due to the “conflict of interest” between his corruption trial and his involvement in the plans to emasculate the judiciary. Such a ruling could precipitate a constitutional crisis, with the army and intelligence services unable to take orders from the prime minister.

Parliamentary committees have nodded through extra funds for Netanyahu’s homes and personal expenditure, while approving on an almost daily basis the far-right parties’ pet projects and allies, stoking public anger.

Tensions boiled over on Wednesday when hundreds of police sought to disperse the demonstration in Tel Aviv, using stun grenades and water cannon against protesters, dragging them off the road. *Arab News*, a Saudi publication, reported that the police were met with chants of “democracy,” “police state” and “Where were you?”, a reference to the refusal of either soldiers or border police to act against settlers in Huwara.

*Times of Israel* reported, “In the Jerusalem neighborhood of Rehavia, hundreds of protesters marching toward the Prime Minister’s Residence were blocked by police as they sought to block the road.... Dozens are heard shouting, ‘Where were you in Huwara,’ at officers...”

One policeman was seen kneeling on a protester’s neck. At least 71 demonstrators were arrested across the

country, including 42 in Tel Aviv, and 11 people needed emergency medical emergency treatment. It followed Jewish Power leader and minister of National Security Itamar Ben-Gvir’s order for the police to “use all available means” to disperse the protesters whom he accused of anarchy.

Ben-Gvir accused opposition leader Yair Lapid of encouraging anarchy and called on him and other leaders to stop inciting against the police.

For their part, Lapid and the Zionist leaders of the opposition advance themselves as a safer set of hands to protect the Israeli state, speaking for the most part in language identical to the far right. “Two months after the establishment of a full-on right-wing government,” Lapid said, “the scope of [Palestinian] attacks is increasing, terrorists are raising their heads, and the army is confused and does not understand its chain of command.”

Netanyahu has supported Ben-Gvir’s orders to the police and refused to disavow Smotrich’s comments. Speaking on Wednesday as protesters were rallying across the country, he also accused them of anarchy and claimed the demonstrations were being funded by “foreign elements.”

Netanyahu’s far-right government is beginning to fragment amid unprecedented uproar and opposition. This includes criticism from senior lawyers, legal experts, former generals, heads of Israel’s intelligence services and business leaders, and demonstrations from army reservists who have said they will refuse to serve if the legislation passes—as well as regular mass protests well in excess of 100,000 people in a country of just 9.3 million on successive Saturdays.

Noam party leader, Avi Moaz, part of the Religious Zionism electoral alliance, has resigned from the government, complaining that Netanyahu was not allowing him to carry out his mandate to strengthen religious education in public schools. Shortly after, a minister from one of the religious parties resigned from one of his posts after a fall-out with Netanyahu over the funding for ultraorthodox Jews.



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