Huwara offensive against Palestinians fuels anti-Netanyahu protests in Israel

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Ongoing attacks on Palestinians in the occupied West Bank make it clear that the pogrom-like rampage by hundreds of Israeli settlers on the town of Huwara on February 26, while Israeli troops stood by, is part of a broader campaign of ethnic cleansing.

Waged by Zionist settlers, it proceeds under the protection of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and is led politically by the newly installed government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, which includes fascistic, racist and ultra-religious parties. Their declared aim is to annex the Palestinian territories and implement apartheid rule, as embodied in the "Nation-State Law" enshrining Jewish supremacy as the legal foundation of the state.

Vigilante mobs attacked Huwara, beating residents with metal rods and rocks, killing one person and injuring 400 more, as well as setting fire to scores of homes and shops and hundreds of vehicles in a four-to-five-hour orgy of violence. They also attacked Burin and Einbus in the northern West Bank. All are in a part of the West Bank under Israeli security control and just minutes away from an army brigade headquarters. But Israeli soldiers stood by during the rampage. Not a single government minister condemned the atrocity. Just 10 people were arrested, of whom all but one were released.

Itamar Ben-Gvir, national security minister and fascistic leader of Jewish Power, declared, "The government of Israel, the state of Israel, the IDF, the security forces—they are the ones who have to crush our enemies," not the settlers. On Wednesday, Finance Minister and Religious Zionism leader Bezalel Smotrich, responsible for the settlements in the West Bank, said that Israel should "wipe out" Huwara, a demand tantamount to the horrors inflicted on the Palestinians when more than 700,000 were driven out in 1948-49 at the hands of Zionist militias.

The town's stores have only just reopened, following orders by the IDF to keep their doors shuttered that left storekeepers without an income. Settlers have issued threats on social media that they will return to the town in a repeat of their rampage. They plastered the area with posters demanding the army "crush" its enemies. One declared, "The intifada is here. We demand to crush! We demand to respond with war!"

Yesterday, Israeli forces stormed the Umm Said area, southeast of Beit Lahm, and demolished a Palestinian mosque, claiming it had been built without a building permit, which the Israeli authorities never grant. On January 23, soldiers stormed the Palestinian town of Isawiyyeh and the Khan Al-Ahmar community in East Jerusalem, where they demolished a greenhouse.

The United Nations' Office of the High Commission for Human Rights (OHCHR) recently called on the major powers to take action against Israel's systemic and arbitrary demolition of Palestinian buildings. Israel demolished 132 Palestinian structures, including 34 residential and 15 donor-funded structures, across 38 West Bank communities in January alone, a 135 percent increase on 2022.

On Monday, Ben-Gvir demanded that police continue demolishing Palestinian homes during Ramadan, set to begin on March 23, overturning the past practice that has seen Israel refrain from doing so to avoid inflaming tensions further. The attempted expulsion of families in the Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood of East Jerusalem during Ramadan in 2021 was one of the factors that precipitated the firing of rockets by Hamas, the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated group that controls Gaza, followed by Israel's bombardment of Gaza and riots in Israel's mixed Palestinian-Jewish cities in May of that year.

Israel's escalating violence and criminality has killed at least 67 Palestinians so far in 2023, more than one per day, a rate far higher than last year when at least 171 Palestinians were killed in the West Bank and East Jerusalem—the highest death toll since 2005. It is setting the stage in the run-up to Ramadan and Passover for a violent conflagration that threatens to engulf not just the occupied Palestinian territories, but Israel and its neighbours.

This growing threat has led increasing numbers of Israelis to take to the streets in protest. Last Saturday evening, around 160,000 rallied in Tel Aviv, Israel's commercial capital and largest city. An even greater number took part in pro-democracy demonstrations across Jerusalem, Herzliya, Netanya, Beersheba, Haifa, Ashdod and scores of other towns, with organisers claiming that there were some 400,000 protesters in all.

This is particularly significant given that the organisers have sought to restrict the demonstrations' focus to opposition to Netanyahu's plans to trim the powers of the judiciary. The main speakers at the rallies have been former generals, heads of the intelligence services and government ministers. Most of them were members of the misnamed "government of change" headed by Naftali Bennett, Yair Lapid and Benny Gantz, had served under Netanyahu in the past, and have few substantive political differences with him.

They have deliberately ignored or downplayed growing social inequality and poverty and the worsening suppression of the Palestinians, ensuring that very few of Israel's Palestinian citizens have participated in the rallies. Their sole concern is to protect the Israeli state in the interests of the plutocrats.

In marked contrast to the hands-off approach taken by the military and border police during the raid by Israeli settlers on Huwara, Police Commissioner Kobi Shabtai readied 1,000 police officers for the demonstrations, particularly in Tel Aviv. He was determined to stop them blocking the Ayalon Highway, the city's chief highway, which has become a symbol of resistance in demonstrations in recent years.

Until last Wednesday's "National Disruption Day," the police had largely refrained from interfering in the rallies. Their intervention followed Ben-Gvir's provocative demand that the police chief stop the protesters, whom he branded "anarchists," from "disturbing the order."

Saturday saw a second eruption of violence after the authorities in Tel Aviv deployed mounted police, special forces and water cannons against demonstrators who had broken through the barriers leading to the Ayalon Highway and halted traffic. They chanted "Shame!" and "Where were you in Hawara?" at police officers making arrests. Following the rallies, Ben-Gvir said that he had no intention of apologizing to anyone, "certainly not to the anarchists who seek to set the State of Tel Aviv on fire."

The protest organisers announced that they would hold another "day of disruption" around the country on Thursday, March 9.

But it is impossible for Israeli workers to halt the government's plans for dictatorship or prevent all-out war with the Palestinians without rejecting nationalism and allying themselves directly with the Palestinians. This means rejecting the Zionist project of a Jewish state based on the ethnic cleansing of the Palestinian population and unifying their struggles with those of their Arab class brothers and sisters for the overthrow of the capitalist profit system and the nation-state framework on which it is based—for the socialist reorganization of the economy of the entire Middle East region so that its vast resources can be utilised for the benefit of all its peoples.

Such a perspective must be fought for against all those parties and organisations that work to subordinate the working class to an alliance with one or another of the imperialist powers and the Arab regimes. It means building sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International in Israel/Palestine and throughout the Middle East to lead and organize this struggle.

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