Netanyahu given UK backing amid deepening Israeli crisis and repression of Palestinians

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The visit by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to meet with his UK counterpart Rishi Sunak saw protests by Palestinians and their supporters, and by British Jews and expat Israelis outside the British prime minister's official residence at 10 Downing Street.

Amid an escalating offensive by settlers and the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) on the West Bank, during the run-up to Ramadan, and protest by hundreds of thousands of Israelis against the country's far-right government, Sunak made reluctant and pro-forma noises of concern over Netanyahu's efforts to limit the powers of the Supreme Court to strike down laws, while saying nothing about stepped-up repression of the Palestinians.

Sunak's spokesman said, "The Prime Minister stressed the importance of upholding the democratic values that underpin our relationship, including in the proposed judicial reforms in Israel." But this was pro-forma posturing as the two focused on collaborating in a military escalation targeting Iran in less than an hour of talks.

On March 21, UK Foreign Secretary James Cleverly and Israeli Foreign Minister Eli Cohen signed the 2030 Roadmap for UK-Israeli Bilateral Relations, "boosting economic, security and technology ties," during discussions than covered NATO's war against Russia in Ukraine and "the threat posed by Iran."

The Conservative government's announcement boasted of a trade relationship "worth around £7 billion", "more than 400 Israeli tech firms operating in the UK" and Israeli investment "adding around £1 billion gross value to the UK economy and creating about 16,000 jobs in the last 8 years." Its most politically significant passage promises that "the UK and Israel will work together to tackle the singling out of Israel in the Human Rights Council as well as in other international bodies. In this context, the UK and Israel disagree with the use of the term 'apartheid' with regard to Israel."

The day before Netanyahu's leaving for London, at least 75 protesters were arrested during the latest anti-government "day of disruption" in Israel. That same day the Knesset passed by 64 votes to 47 the first part of legislation shielding him from prosecution for corruption. Attorney General Gali Baharav-Miara is now prevented from declaring Netanyahu unfit for office, even if he uses the judicial overhaul to overturn criminal charges. In a televised address that evening Netanyahu crowed, "Until now, my hands were bound. Now, I am getting involved" in the judicial overhaul.

With further protests to be held around the country, Israel's largely ceremonial president Isaac Herzog warned, "Israel is in the throes of a profound crisis. Anyone who thinks that a real civil war, of human life, is a line that we will not reach has no idea. The abyss is within touching distance."

Israeli special forces last week killed four Palestinians, including a child, during a daytime raid in downtown Jenin, a city in the northern West Bank. The NGO Defense for Children International-Palestine said that two civilian cars entered the area at around 3pm "and without warning, at least five undercover Israeli special forces dressed in plain clothes exited the cars and began firing live ammunition towards two young Palestinians on a motorcycle." A further 12 Palestinians were injured.

On Friday, Israeli forces shot and killed a 23-year-old Palestinian at a checkpoint near the West Bank city of Ramallah "after the occupation [Israel] opened fire on him," according to the Palestinian health ministry. The shooting brings to at least 86, including 16 children, the number of Palestinians killed by Israeli security forces

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and settlers so far this year, nearly half the 200 Palestinians killed in all of last year, while 14 Israelis, all but one of them settlers living in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, have been killed in Palestinian attacks.

In the last week, Netanyahu's government, incorporating far-right, racist and extremist forces, has carried out a series of provocations that pave the way for yet more savage repression of the Palestinians.

On Tuesday, the Knesset repealed legislation, dating back to the disengagement from Gaza in 2005, that had ordered the dismantling of four Jewish settlements (Homesh, Ganim, Kadim and Sa-Nur) in the occupied West Bank. The law was an anathema to the settlers, with extremists attempting to reclaim Homesh, which Israel's Supreme Court ruled was built on private Palestinian land, by building an illegal religious seminary on the site and repeatedly rebuilding it after the army demolished it.

Israeli citizens will no longer be barred from entering or staying in the evacuated areas—another step towards the establishment of more illegal settler outposts and the creeping annexation of the territory. The Knesset vote comes after the government's retroactive legalisation of nine settlement outposts deep in the West Bank, which Israel previously deemed illegal, and its approval of the construction of thousands of new settlement housing units.

Since Israel's seizure of the West Bank and East Jerusalem from Jordan in the 1967 Arab Israeli war, Israel has built 132 settlements in the West Bank and 12 in East Jerusalem that are home to more than 450,000 and 220,000 Israeli settlers respectively, in defiance of international law and countless United Nations resolutions.

Demolitions of Palestinian homes in East Jerusalem have risen sharply since Netanyahu returned to power at the end of last year. According to UN data, 77 buildings have been razed, nearly double the 40 destroyed during the same period last year, leaving some 145 people in East Jerusalem—half of them children—homeless this year. With permits "virtually impossible" to obtain, at least 20,000 Palestinian homes in East Jerusalem have been built without one. It means that more than 100,000 of the city's 361,700 Palestinians—who make up more than 60 percent of East Jerusalem's population—are at risk of being displaced.

Itamar Ben-Gvir, Israel's National Security Minister who heads the extremist Jewish Power party, has long advocated the demolition of homes built without permits to drive the Palestinians from the city. Such ethnic cleansing enables Israel to cement its control over East Jerusalem. Ben-Gvir has insisted that demolitions will continue during Ramadan.

On Sunday, Bezalel Smotrich, the leader of the far-right Religious Zionism and Israel's Finance Minister who was given special control over the settlements in the West Bank, claimed in an inflammatory speech in Paris that there was "no such thing" as a Palestinian people. His lectern was draped in a map of Israel that included Jordan as well as the West Bank and East Jerusalem. Smotrich said, "There is no such thing as a Palestinian nation. There is no Palestinian history. There is no Palestinian language." He added that the Palestinian people were "an invention" of the 20th century to fight Zionism and that it was people like him and his grandparents who were the "real Palestinians."

Jordan branded Smotrich's speech alongside the map "a reckless inflammatory act and a violation of international norms and the peace treaty," a reference to the 1994 peace treaty between Israel and Jordan.

Smotrich has called for the Palestinian town of Huwara in the occupied West Bank to be "wiped out" after hundreds of Israeli settlers went on a pogrom-like rampage following the shooting of two Israeli settlers as they drove through the town.

He gives the sharpest voice to the ideology embodied in Israel's Nation-State Law of 2018 that declared that "the right to exercise national self-determination in the State of Israel is unique to the Jewish people." Implicit in such a law is the denial of any national rights or existence for the Palestinians in a state whose borders are set to expand even further.

The UK's pledge rejecting comparisons with apartheid signals the agreement of British imperialism with this agenda.

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