

Israel ramps up provocations against Palestinians and neighbouring states

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There is no let-up in the incendiary provocations by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's far-right government against the Palestinians in East Jerusalem and the West Bank and Israel's neighbours in the region.

On Sunday and Monday, police in East Jerusalem allowed thousands of Jewish visitors to the al-Aqsa Mosque compound, the third holiest site in Islam, far more than last year.

This deliberate provocation and breach of the international arrangements governing the Mosque, agreed with Jordan, followed the police storming of the compound on Tuesday and Wednesday last week when worshippers were beaten inside the Mosque. On Friday, police arrested 15 worshippers for waving Palestinian flags, which they described as "terrorist flags" and "incitement" amid the deployment of a massive 2,300 officers in and around Jerusalem's Old City ahead of early afternoon prayers.

With al-Aqsa at the heart of escalating tensions in the region, there are fears that allowing non-Muslims to enter the compound during the last 10 days of Ramadan will provoke further attacks on worshippers, prompting more rocket fire from Lebanon and Gaza and potentially triggering a wider conflagration within the West Bank and Israel itself.

On Monday, an Israeli army battalion of 1,000 troops escorted a mass march of several thousand far-right activists on the settlement outpost of Eviatar, near the West Bank town of Huwara near Nablus, recently subjected to a pogrom-like attack by settlers. Thirteen border police companies were deployed to assist the regional police forces, with another 14 companies on standby.

The march was led by seven government ministers, including Finance Minister and Religious Zionism party leader Bezalel Smotrich; National Security Minister and Jewish Power leader Itamar Ben Gvir and National Missions Minister and Religious Zionism member Orit Strock; along with around 20 legislators and religious and settlement leaders.

Israeli settlers were forced to evacuate the outpost—illegal even under Israeli law—in July 2021 under a rotten deal that allowed them to retain about 50 caravan houses pending the designation of the land as "state-owned", legalising the theft of Palestinian property. Netanyahu promised to legalise the outpost as part of his deal to secure a far-right coalition

government.

Ben Gvir said of the march, "This statement, that we are here, and we are marching toward the future—and that today, ministers in the Israeli government are saying this—is a clear statement." In February, Smotrich, who was given responsibility for Israel's civil administration in the West Bank—tantamount to annexation—announced his intention to declare the land as state-owned land and turn it into an official settlement.

The march to Eviatar took place amid increasing efforts by the Israeli authorities to tighten their hold on the West Bank, illegally occupied by Israel since the 1967 Arab Israeli war. Last month, the Knesset gave approval for settlers to return to four settlements in the West Bank by amending a 2005 law ordering their evacuation. In February, Israel granted retroactive recognition to eight illegal West Bank outposts, not including Eviatar.

While settlers can establish outposts on private Palestinian land, Palestinians in Area C of the West Bank, designated under the Oslo Accords as under Israeli military control, are unable to obtain Israeli army-issued building permits to build or extend their homes, even on their own land. Should they do so, they risk being forced from their homes and land and their property being demolished.

The new government has moved to implement the plans, already in hand under the previous government, for the forced removal of thousands of Palestinians around Masafer Yatta and Khan al-Ahmar in Area C, while speeding up the enforcement of demolition orders.

According to United Nations figures, 218 Palestinians in Area C have been forcibly displaced as a result of demolitions since the beginning of 2023, more than one third of the 594 Palestinians displaced there in 2022, while a further 200 have seen their homes demolished in East Jerusalem so far this year. *Al Jazeera* cited Palestinian authorities stating that at least 70 homes in Area C have stop-work or demolition orders issued against them, with Israeli settlers, granted a \$5.5 million a year budget from the government and set to double in next year's budget, to monitor, report and restrict Palestinian building.

On Monday, the army raided the Aqabat Jabr refugee camp near the West Bank city of Jericho, killing a 15-year-old boy in

a mass arrest operation. Israeli forces killed six Palestinians in an earlier raid on the town last month. On Tuesday, Israeli soldiers shot dead two Palestinian gunmen who opened fire at a military post near a settlement in the West Bank.

Israel has renewed at least 800 administrative detention orders in the first three months of this year, the highest number since 2003. Israeli forces and settlers have killed more than 98 Palestinians in the same period.

Netanyahu has agreed to the establishment of a national guard that while aimed in the first instance against Israel's own Palestinian citizens, will also be used against all those who oppose the government.

This deliberate campaign of terror and incitement has led to the deaths of 14 Israelis in Palestinian attacks between January and the end of this March. Last Friday, two young Israeli sisters and their mother were killed in a shooting attack near a settlement in the Jordan Valley. An Italian tourist was rammed to death and another six injured in a car accident in Tel Aviv that the police claimed, contrary to the evidence, was a "terror" attack.

Netanyahu has given the green light to the fascists, racists and religious zealots that make up his government to incite the Palestinians in the run up to the end of Ramadan and provoke an uprising to be used as the excuse for a military onslaught. His aim is to quell the mass opposition, ongoing since the beginning of the year and the largest and most significant in Israel's 75-year history, to his government's plans to assume dictatorial powers, paused till May at the behest of the Biden administration. By manufacturing some kind of "national unity" based on militarism, he hopes to deflect the country's profound social and political tensions outwards and end the protests.

It comes as his ratings in the polls have plummeted, with surveys indicating that his Likud party would win just 20 seats, down from 32 in the last November's election, to finish in third place should an election be held now. A poll taken on Sunday showed that only 27 percent of respondents "rely on the government to handle the wave of terror".

Netanyahu has come under pressure from the Biden administration to try and curb some of the most provocative statements of his far-right, fascistic colleagues, with a leaked Pentagon memo indicating it spied on Israel and claiming that the Mossad, Israel's domestic spy agency, had encouraged protests against the Netanyahu government's judicial overhaul. Washington fears the far-right's inflammatory actions are harming US imperialism's broader machinations in the Middle East where Tel Aviv acts as its attack dog.

Netanyahu has retracted his decision to sack his defence minister, Yoav Gallant. He had fired Gallant, a former military commander who plays a key role in coordinating the US and Israel's covert war with Iran, for warning that Netanyahu's judicial overhaul was harming the military. Saying "I decided to put the differences we had behind us," he added, "Gallant

remains in his position and we will continue to work together for the security of the citizens of Israel."

While he blamed the previous government of Naftali Bennett, Benny Gantz and Yair Lapid and opposition protests for exacerbating the country's instability, he appealed to the opposition "to stop doing small politics and support the State of Israel in this time of trial."

This was hardly necessary. This thoroughly cynical and scandal-ridden politician knows only too well he has the support of the self-proclaimed leaders of the opposition movement, National Unity chairman and former defence minister Gantz and Yesh Atid leader and former prime minister Lapid. Both leaders supported the armed forces' attacks on Syria, Lebanon and Gaza last week, declaring they stood four-square with Netanyahu in defence of Israel's security against its enemies and absenting themselves from last Saturday evening's mass rallies that attracted 250,000 people.

The Israeli air force launched airstrikes on Syria, a key Iranian ally, over the weekend, targeting Iranian military operatives and a pro-Syrian regime Palestinian armed group in Syria, in response to tit for tat rockets fired from Syria. It comes two days after 34 rockets were launched into Israel from southern Lebanon, which despite causing little damage prompted Israel to attack infrastructure and targets linked to Hamas, the militant clerical group that controls Gaza, in southern Lebanon.

On Saturday, the US Navy said it had deployed the USS Florida, a guided missile submarine, to the Middle East, a day after the US 5th Fleet warned all ships to proceed with caution following escalating tensions between Iran and Israel.

These developments point to the growing danger that the US and NATO's war on Russia in Ukraine could spread into a broader war across the Middle East. They must be taken as a warning by workers not only in the Middle East but around the world. The only way forward to prevent such an escalation is the revolutionary mobilization of the working class internationally against capitalism's drive to war.



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