

Israel's settlers, army and far-right government attack the Palestinians on all fronts

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On Wednesday, hundreds of Israeli settlers, many armed and emboldened by the far-right government now in power, ran amok in the occupied West Bank, in a repeat of last February's pogrom-like rampage in Huwara.

They did so with the full support of the Israel Defence Forces (IDF), which instead of protecting civilians, as required under international law, turned their guns on the Palestinians.

Settlers entered the town of Turmus Ayya, near Ramallah, torching scores of cars, houses and fields, firing live bullets as they went. They were followed by the IDF which shot and killed Omar Abu Katan, 27. A further 10 were wounded, some by live shots fired by settlers and others by soldiers.

It brings to more than 126 the number of Palestinians killed by Israeli police, soldiers and settlers in the West Bank so far this year or who have died as a result of injuries sustained previously, while about 25 Israelis have been killed in Israel and the West Bank as a result of Palestinian attacks. The former figure is more than double the number in the same period the previous year, which was the deadliest year for Palestinians in the West Bank since 2005.

Wednesday's rampage was one of a series of vigilante attacks by settlers that have come in the wake of mounting violence by the IDF over the last 18 months.

With the fascistic forces in Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's coalition government stepping up their demands for the IDF to suppress the Palestinians, it presages the launching of a large-scale military operation—similar to its murderous assaults on the besieged Gaza Strip—in the West Bank, which Israel has occupied illegally since the 1967 Arab Israeli war. It would lead to mass killings and devastation. Israel's siege of the Jenin refugee camp in April 2002 killed at least 52 Palestinians and left many homeless. Twenty-three Israeli soldiers lost their lives in the battle.

These far-right forces have repeatedly demanded the annexation of the West Bank—as has Netanyahu himself—in defiance of international law, in pursuit of their aim of establishing a Jewish Supremacist state in both Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories.

This latest cycle of violence began early on Monday when the

IDF mounted yet another of its near-nightly raids on the northern West Bank cities of Jenin and Nablus to arrest two Hamas militants. Far from crushing Palestinian resistance, the raids have only intensified the conflict. Support for Hamas, the militant clerical group affiliated to the Muslim Brotherhood, has grown in the West Bank as opposition to the corrupt, Fatah-led Palestinian Authority under the leadership of the aging President Mahmoud Abbas has soared.

So unexpectedly fierce was the resistance they encountered—gunfire and explosive devices—that the IDF deployed Apache helicopter gunships to fire on the Palestinians, help extract soldiers whose armoured vehicle had been hit by explosives and seize the wanted militants. Seven Palestinians were killed and more than 90 injured in the 12-hour-long battle. Three IDF soldiers and five Israel Border Police officers were injured in the fighting.

The Palestinians killed included Qasam Faisal Abu Seriya, 29, and Qais Majdi Adel Jabareen, 21 (members of the Jenin Brigade, a Palestinian militant group linked to Palestinian Islamic Jihad), and Ahmad Khaled Faysal Draghma, 19 (a member of its Toubas Brigade), as well as Khalid Azam Asa'asa, 21, and a 15-year-old boy Ahmed Youssef Saqer, the Palestinian Health Ministry said. A 15-year-old Palestinian girl, Sadeel Naghniyeh, was critically wounded in the raid on Monday, reportedly from a bullet to her head by an Israeli sniper, while stood in the front yard of her home in the refugee camp. She died on Wednesday in a Jenin hospital from her injuries, bringing the total number of fatalities from Monday's assault to seven.

In another incident, two soldiers were injured and two Palestinians were shot after the Palestinians allegedly drove their vehicle towards troops at a checkpoint near Jenin.

The IDF raid on Jenin coincided with a visit by a high-ranking Hamas delegation to Iran on Monday morning. Their visit follows that of Islamic Jihad leaders who went to Tehran last week and met with Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

Also on Monday, Israeli troops shot and killed 20-year-old Zakarya al-Zaoul during clashes in the village of Husan, near

the West Bank city of Bethlehem.

These attacks led to a shootout on Tuesday when two Palestinian gunmen shot dead four Israelis and injured another four at a petrol station and restaurant near the central West Bank settlement of Eli. The IDF said a “civilian”—meaning a settler—had “neutralised” one of the gunmen while security forces had “neutralised” another that fled in a stolen car. It said both of them were “affiliated” with Hamas. Netanyahu has made it clear that Israeli policy is to execute “suspects” rather than arrest them.

This in turn sparked a series of assaults by settlers on nearby towns overnight and on Wednesday. Yesh Din, an Israeli human right organisation that monitors settler violence, said that eight Palestinians were wounded in settler attacks in Luban Sharqiya, Qablan, Huwara, Baytin, Zaatra Junction and Yizhar Junction

In a late-night attack on Wednesday, an Israeli drone targeted a car in the northern West Bank, killing three Palestinians. The army justified its summary executions with the claim it had “identified a terrorist cell inside a suspicious vehicle” responsible for several recent shooting attacks on Israeli settlements.

During Monday’s raid, Bezalel Smotrich, finance minister and leader of the fascistic Religious Zionist party that demands the annexation of the West Bank, called on the government to launch a “broad operation” in the territory. He said Israel should “replace tweezer activity with a broad operation” in the north of the West Bank “to restore deterrence.” He tweeted, “The time has come to use air forces and armoured forces. I will demand an urgent cabinet meeting on the matter.”

On Tuesday, his co-thinker, Itamar Ben-Gvir, national security minister and leader of Jewish Power, called for a “military campaign” in the West Bank, saying, “We need a return to targeted killings from the air, bringing down buildings, setting up roadblocks, expelling terrorists, and to finish passing the death penalty for terrorists legislation.”

Netanyahu has heeded their demands in the past, assassinating a number of senior Islamic Jihad figures in Gaza last month, leading to several days of intense cross-border fire and at least 33 Palestinian fatalities. He issued a statement saying that “all options are open,” adding, “We will continue to fight terrorism with full force and we will defeat it.” Such is the political crisis engulfing Israel, where protests against his judicial coup have continued, albeit somewhat smaller, that such a military operation in the West Bank would serve to divert attention from his deeply controversial judicial overhaul.

Since coming to power at the end of December, the Netanyahu government has approved the legalisation of nine settlement outposts previously deemed illegal under Israeli law. It has also announced plans for 7,000 new settlement housing units, 1,000 new homes in the Eli settlement “in response to Tuesday’s attack,” pledged billions of shekels for settlements and roads in the West Bank and transferred key powers over

civilian life in the territory to Smotrich. This is tantamount to annexation. It also granted Smotrich the power to approve plans for settlement construction. Next week, it is expected to announce more than 4,000 new settlement housing units.

The government has also allowed settlers to build a religious seminary at Homesh, an illegal outpost overlooking Barqa, where a settlement was dismantled in 2005 as part of an agreement with the US in 2004 to evacuate the settlement and three others, alongside Israel’s withdrawal from the Gaza Strip in 2005. Restrictions already put in place by the military around Homesh mean that Barqa’s residents have been unable to access much of their land, prompting fears of further restrictions on movement, even greater difficulties reaching their fields and the destruction of their livelihoods.

Yonatan Mizrahi, of the Israeli advocacy group Peace Now, said that Homesh “is a game-changer. Rather than just closing their eyes to illegal work, like in the past, this government is supporting it. It’s a statement.”

Smotrich recently told government ministries to prepare for an additional 500,000 settlers in the West Bank, with all the necessary additional infrastructure and services in settlements and outposts set to cost billions of shekels, which he labelled a “fundamental task” for the government. This can only come at the expense of health, education and social welfare upon which millions of Israelis depend.

At the same time, the government is now pressing ahead unilaterally with its judicial overhaul, aimed at giving itself dictatorial powers by curbing the power of the Supreme Court. These plans will politicise the judiciary, give the Knesset power to overrule the court’s decisions and help Netanyahu evade prosecution in his corruption trial. While Netanyahu had agreed to pause the legislation and negotiate some compromise agreement with the opposition following the massive protests that followed his dismissal, since rescinded, of Defence Minister Yoav Gallant, the talks mediated by the largely ceremonial President Isaac Herzog have now been called off.

The government’s first step is to advance a bill restricting the Supreme Court’s ability to use the “reasonableness” standard for vetting ministerial appointments. This would enable Netanyahu to reappoint Shas leader Arye Dery as a government minister, whose appointment was previously ruled invalid under the “reasonableness” criterion due to his multiple convictions for fraud.



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