

Israel's far right uses Flag Day to push for expansion of war

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Tens of thousands of ultra-religious nationalists from religious Zionist youth groups, yeshivas and seminaries, marched through the Old City in occupied East Jerusalem Wednesday to mark Jerusalem Day. They wore white shirts emblazoned with the *Fist of Kahane* symbol, representing notorious fascist Meir Kahane, waved Israel's blue-and-white flags and chanted revenge songs.

The annual march to mark Israel's capture of East Jerusalem from Jordan in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war has long been a symbol of violence and occupation. In the context of Israel's genocidal war against the Palestinians, it was a deliberate provocation by Israel's fascistic Zionist groups aimed at inciting violent clashes as a pretext for a further escalation of the war against the Palestinians in the West Bank and East Jerusalem as well as against Israel's own Palestinian citizens.

The authorities refused to alter the route so as to avoid it passing through the Muslim Quarter and prevent the violent clashes with the Old City's Palestinian residents that have taken place in recent years, despite repeated calls to do so. In May 2021, the Flag March coinciding with Ramadan was one of the factors ratcheting up tensions prior to a murderous assault on Gaza, as well as violent clashes between Arab and Jewish Israelis within Israel. The following year, marchers attacked the Palestinians of the Old City, wounding at least 79 residents, 28 of whom required hospital treatment.

This year, with tensions running high and mindful of the widespread international support for the Palestinians among workers and young people, judges ordered the police to take action against those who ran riot, chanted racist, anti-Arab slogans and incited attacks on Arabs in the Old City. The authorities deployed more than 3,000 police, including border police, forces from other areas and volunteers to maintain order.

While the police stressed that the march would not be allowed to go to the Temple Mount/al-Aqsa Mosque compound, the religious ultra-nationalists said they would visit the compound before the march. As Islam's third-holiest site and the location of the Jewish Temple 2,000 years ago, the compound is a major flashpoint in Israeli-Palestinian relations.

The Arab states—particularly Jordan, which has custodianship of the al-Aqsa Mosque compound under an international

agreement—have repeatedly warned Israel against taking any steps that would undermine the arrangements whereby Jews are allowed to visit the site but not worship there. Far-right politicians and religious zealots have called for an end to such “discrimination” and Israeli security forces have turned a blind eye to settlers, nationalist and religious activists praying at the site. Activists calling for the rebuilding of the Holy Temple have launched a campaign to increase the number of visitors during the day.

National Security Minister and Jewish Power leader Itamar Ben-Gvir is a convicted racist and supporter of the Kahanist organization, once designated a terrorist organization in Israel and the United States, who has threatened to expel Palestinians with Israeli citizenship. He declared in an interview on *Army Radio* Tuesday that his goal was to foment provocations as part of his broader plans to escalate the war on all fronts, assert Israel's right to the Temple Mount and annex the West Bank, driving out the Palestinians. He declared, “We'll march through Damascus Gate and we'll ascend the Temple Mount in spite of the Hamasniks. We have to hurt them in the place most important to them, and we have to come and say that the Temple Mount is ours and Jerusalem is ours. They must be beaten in their most important site.”

The march's organizers said the war in Gaza would realize the hopes of many on the religious right to reconquer the Gaza Strip. Meir Indor told the *Times of Israel*, “It [the march] isn't only about the liberation of the Western Wall and the Old City, it's also about the liberation of Judea and Samaria [the West Bank], and this year it's more timely, because it's also about the liberation of the Gaza Strip.”

It was Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook, one of the founding fathers of the settler movement, who initiated the annual Flag March in 1968, mobilising Indor and other religious Zionist students from his yeshiva (religious seminary), Mercaz HaRav. Kook, bitterly opposed to the Zionist establishment's acceptance of the UN Partition Plan of November 1947, was one of the first religious extremists demanding a “Greater Israel.” When Israel seized the West Bank in the 1967 War, Kook's followers attributed it to divine providence. Indor said, “Jerusalem is always in the centre of the battles of our enemies,” adding, “Jewish rule is a larger guarantee of security,” while

“Palestinian rule—that is where terror awakens.”

Before the march itself took place, hundreds of Jewish worshippers, including Minister for the Periphery, the Galilee and Negev, Yitzhak Wasserlauf, and legislator Yitzhak Kreuzer, both of Jewish Power, entered the al-Aqsa Mosque compound.

Some attempted to pray, dance and wave flags, before being arrested by the police. Others went on the rampage through the Muslim Quarter chanting “Death to Arabs” and “May their villages burn” as they pushed, cursed and violently attacked Palestinians and activists belonging to the organization Standing Together who were acting as a “humanitarian guard” to prevent violence from marchers and protect the Palestinian shopkeepers. Instead of reining in the Jewish thugs, the police called on the Palestinians to close their shops. Several youths attacked *Haaretz* journalist Nir Hasson, knocking him to the ground and kicking him until the Border Police intervened. The police arrested 18 people.

On Monday evening, several hundred people had marched through Jerusalem in a display of cross-faith solidarity to voice their opposition to the Flag March and call for an end to the war. It followed the largest demonstrations in towns and cities in Israel on Saturday since the start of the war calling for a ceasefire, the return of the hostages and an end to the war.

The Flag March took place just days after Ben-Gvir and Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich threatened to quit Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s coalition government if he agreed to a Gaza ceasefire as part of a deal to release some of the hostages, before Hamas was destroyed, as suggested by US President Joe Biden Friday. They vowed to “dissolve the government” rather than agree to the proposal.

At the end of last month, a video appeared on Israeli social networks showing an armed and masked man in an Israeli army uniform—later identified as Ofir Luzon, a right-wing activist from Herzliya and supporter of Netanyahu’s Likud party—threatening mutiny. The soldier, in a message directed at Netanyahu, Defence Minister Yoav Gallant and Chief of Staff Herzi Halevi, said Gallant should resign. He warned that 100,000 reservists in Gaza were not willing to “hand over the keys of Gaza to any Palestinian Authority” or other “Arab entity” and said these soldiers would only take orders from Netanyahu. Netanyahu’s son Yair, currently in Florida avoiding reservist duty, was one of the many who shared the video until the furore forced him to delete it.

After the march, Smotrich called on Netanyahu to invade southern Lebanon to end Hezbollah attacks, declaring, “For victory we need to go into the north and fight Hezbollah and destroy them.” “We want victory!” he added. “Let our heroic warriors win, restore our national honour, national pride and security and allow the heroic residents to return home safely. The people of Israel are behind you!”

Ben-Gvir went to the northern city of Kiryat Shemona to demand stronger action against Hezbollah. He said it was

unacceptable that “our land is under fire and we are being hurt, that people here are evacuating,” while there is “quiet in Lebanon.” “They’re burning [us] here. All Hezbollah strongholds should be burned, they should be destroyed. War!”

Netanyahu’s fascist government is determined to use the war on Gaza to drive out the Palestinians in occupied East Jerusalem and the West Bank and seize their land. The army has carried out almost daily mass operations against towns and cities across the West Bank, shooting and killing Palestinians. This, combined with daily attacks by armed Zionist settlers, protected by the army, on Palestinian villagers, uprooting their olive groves and damaging their homes to drive them off their land, has resulted in the deaths of 505 Palestinians since October 7.

Finance Minister Smotrich is preparing to legalise 68 settler outposts on seized private Palestinian land in the West Bank, illegal under Israeli law, reportedly ordering several ministries to start preparing public services, including educational facilities, paved roads and medical services, in these outposts after they are “legalised.” The construction of outposts has increased significantly since the start of the war, with at least 15 built between October and January, compared to 23 over the whole of 2023, according to Peace Now, after settlers forcibly displaced 21 Palestinian communities.

The government has also accelerated the construction of settlements across East Jerusalem at an unprecedented rate, approving or advancing more than 20 projects totalling thousands of housing units since the start of the war. The homes will be offered to Israel’s Jewish population as part of its plans to prevent the establishment of a Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital and maintain a Jewish majority in the city whose population has now reached 1 million, of whom 40 percent are Palestinian.



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