

Israeli forces step up repression in Jerusalem, West Bank

By Jean Shaoul
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Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has responded to the escalating violence between right-wing Israeli Jews and Palestinians by blaming the crisis on “Islamic extremism” and putting Israel on a war footing.

Violence provoked by right-wing zealots, who want the government to take control of Jerusalem’s al-Aqsa Mosque compound and allow Jewish prayers on the entire site, has spilled over beyond the predominantly Palestinian areas of the West Bank and East Jerusalem into Israel itself. It has the potential to spark a third Palestinian *intifada* (uprising) or even a bitter religious civil war.

It could also ignite protests throughout the Arab world, disrupting Israel’s relations with Washington, and its Arab and Muslim neighbours that it has been covertly aiding in the US-backed war to topple the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

So tense is the situation that Netanyahu cancelled Thursday’s meeting with German Chancellor Angela Merkel in Berlin that was to mark 50 years of diplomatic ties between the two countries.

Instead, speaking alongside his military and security chiefs, at his first press conference since the violence erupted in September, Netanyahu said, “Hateful terrorists are trying to hurt our people.” He blamed Hamas, the Islamic Movement in Israel, the Palestinian Authority and countries in the region for fomenting unrest over “lies” that Israel was seeking to change the arrangements at the al-Aqsa Mosque compound known as the Noble Sanctuary to Muslims and as Temple Mount to Jews.

Netanyahu has ordered the police to stop government ministers and Jewish and Palestinian legislators from entering the al-Aqsa compound, saying, “We do not need more detonators to ignite the ground.” He did so while stressing that his primary obligation was the security of Israel and for this he needed international support for “anti-terror” measures.

After praising the security forces, which have killed two Palestinian children and injured more than 1,600 Palestinians since October 3, he said, “Israel has always known how to push back the terrorists and build the country.”

Israel had already taken measures to “root out the terror,” he said. These included the temporary closure of Jerusalem’s Old City to Palestinians without Jerusalem residency, the outlawing of the Muslim guardians of al-Aqsa, strict limitations on Palestinian worship at the compound, the authorisation of the use of live-fire against stone throwers, minimum jail sentences of four years for petrol bombers and stone throwers, and the fast-track demolition of the homes of relatives of Palestinians who carry out attacks.

These repressive measures follow the dispatch of four additional Israel Defence Forces battalions to the Nablus area in the northern part of the West Bank, which was put on lockdown, and the banning of Palestinians under 40 years of age from the al-Aqsa compound. Police reinforcements have been sent to the Old City and the surrounding area, and barricades have been erected all over East Jerusalem.

Netanyahu called on the opposition parties to form a National Unity Government, saying that there were no real differences between them. His right-wing coalition has a majority of just one in the Knesset.

The far-right settler movement has been cultivated by the ruling Likud and other ultra-nationalist and religious parties ever since the 1967 June War that brought the West Bank, East Jerusalem, Gaza and the Syrian Golan Heights under Israeli control. Their call to establish exclusive Jewish control of Jerusalem’s al-Aqsa Mosque is a flagrant breach of the 1994 peace treaty with Jordan, which supervises the Islamic Endowment that manages the Muslim holy sites in East Jerusalem and allows Muslims to pray there—with Jewish worship confined to

the Wailing or Western Wall.

The 35-acre al-Aqsa complex in the Old City, a UNESCO World Heritage site, is the third holiest site in Islam. The Temple Mount is the holiest site in Judaism. It was Ariel Sharon's provocative march into the al-Aqsa compound, escorted by a massive armed guard in September 2000, that sparked the second *intifada*.

Numerous attempts have been made to bring the compound under Israeli control as part of longstanding Zionist plans to Judaicize the city, remove most of its Palestinian inhabitants and surround it with Jewish settlements—thereby cutting East Jerusalem off from its Palestinian hinterland. The aim is to remove any possibility of the Palestinians claiming East Jerusalem as the capital of a future Palestinian state.

Netanyahu claims to be committed to the status quo. But he has repeatedly allowed provocations in the al-Aqsa compound, which has become the focal point of the right-wing settler project to take control of the entire West Bank.

Tensions have risen markedly since the end of August after police prevented Palestinians from entering the area between 7 a.m. and 11 a.m., while allowing right-wing Israeli groups under heavy guard to tour the compound, in defiance of objections raised by the Islamic Endowment.

Protests and demonstrations erupted all over the West Bank and East Jerusalem, resulting in frequent clashes with the security forces in which dozens of Palestinians and several soldiers were injured.

Since then, the violence has escalated. On Thursday, six Israelis were wounded and an assailant shot dead in separate stabbing attacks in Tel Aviv, East Jerusalem and the West Bank. These incidents follow the shooting or stabbing to death of four Israelis and three attackers in a series of attacks since last week.

There have been violent incidents outside the occupied territories, including the suburbs of Tel Aviv and towns in southern Israel. On Friday morning, an Israeli man went on a stabbing spree, wounding three Palestinians and an Arab Israeli citizen. Police arrested the man but did not identify him, although they said his motive for the attacks was "nationalistic."

An Israeli Arab woman tried to stab a security guard Thursday at the central bus station in Afula, an Israeli city near the West Bank, but was shot and taken to hospital.

In Bethlehem, Israeli security forces shot and killed a 13-year-old boy returning home from school during clashes with local youth. His death, the sixth Palestinian child killed by the military or settlers in the West Bank

this year, followed an announcement by Netanyahu that Israel was "at war" with stone throwers, and prompted further demonstrations and clashes.

Video footage of the clashes in the West Bank has emerged showing Israeli undercover soldiers dressed as Palestinians taking part in the stone throwing, before suddenly drawing their concealed weapons and turning on the Palestinians to carry out arrests. The Israeli army has not as yet commented on the footage, but the practice is reportedly widespread.

Settlers in the West Bank have carried out numerous attacks on Palestinians, their homes, cars, orchards and mosques that go unpunished. According to the Palestinian organisation Ahrar Centre for Detainees' Studies and Human Rights, there were at least 126 attacks or acts of vandalism against Palestinians during the first four days of October. In Jerusalem, Israeli mobs have gone on the rampage chanting, "Death to the Arabs" and assaulting bystanders.

For the past week, the settlers, whose leaders in the Yisrael Beiteinu, the Jewish Home party, Likud and various religious parties have criticised Netanyahu for his "soft" approach towards the Palestinians, have camped outside his official residence in Jerusalem. They are demanding further measures against the Palestinians and the building of a new settlement for every Palestinian attack.

A crucial weapon in Netanyahu's armoury is the Palestinian Authority headed by President Mahmoud Abbas. Abbas called on Palestinians to avoid an "escalation" with Israel, confirming his role as Israel's policeman. He told a meeting of the Palestine Liberation Organisation executive committee in Ramallah Tuesday, "We do not want a military or security escalation between us and them."

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