

Israel: Racist mob lynches migrant as violence intensifies

By Jean Shaoul
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An angry Jewish mob lynched an unarmed Eritrean migrant worker in the southern city of Beer Sheba after an Israeli security guard repeatedly shot him on Sunday. The crowd cursed and kicked him, chanting, “Death to Arabs!” “Arabs out!” and “Am Israel Hai!” (“The people of Israel still live”).

The murder underscores the noxious atmosphere of xenophobia, racism and fear that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has stoked up in a bid to deflect rising social discontent among Jewish Israelis, whose living conditions are in many cases only marginally better than those of the Palestinians. At the last elections, Netanyahu urged Jewish Israelis to vote, saying that “swarms of Arabs” were going to the polling stations.

Ultra-nationalist Jewish politicians have encouraged the mobilisation of vigilante groups and fascistic mobs that go on the rampage while the police stand and watch. Settler gangs that murder Palestinians and attack and destroy their property go unpunished. Now, Jerusalem Mayor Nir Barkat has openly encouraged Jewish Israelis to arm themselves and take vigilante action.

The Eritrean, 29-year-old Haptom Zerhom, had been working as a gardener in a plant nursery in a village near Beer Sheba for the last three years. He was on his way to collect his renewed work visa when 21-year-old Muhannad al-Okbi, a Bedouin Israeli, shot and killed an Israeli soldier and wounded 10 others, including four police officers, at Beer Sheba’s central bus station.

The police shot al-Okbi and then shot Zerhom, believing him to be al-Okbi’s accomplice. As *Yedioth Ahronoth*’s headline made clear, Zerhom was shot “Just because of his skin colour.”

As Zerhom came under attack from the mob, a bystander found his visa and held it up, shouting, “He’s Eritrean, he’s not a terrorist.”

No one heard him above the melee and Zerhom died of his injuries.

Israel’s Bedouin citizens have rarely been involved in attacks on Israelis. Some even serve in the Israeli army. But discontent has been growing since the government announced plans to evict nearly 40,000 Bedouins from their homes in the Negev desert. Without recourse to the courts to appeal their evictions, the Bedouin face the destruction of their pastoral way of life and a future of poverty and unemployment. As it is, they rank among the poorest people in Israel.

The displacement of the Bedouin is part of the broader process of dispossessing Palestinians within Israel and Palestine. The policy is to make way for Israeli settlements in the West Bank and reverse the demographics in East Jerusalem in favour of Jews. Some 195,000 Jewish Israelis, mainly orthodox Jews, now live in East Jerusalem, which has been at the centre of the current unrest.

Jerusalem’s 300,000 Palestinians have for decades suffered under a raft of discriminatory practices following Israel’s illegal annexation of East Jerusalem in the 1967 war.

Unlike the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, they have been technically under civilian, not military, law. But they are stateless, citizens of neither Israel nor Palestine, with no official passports and unable to travel freely. Denied citizenship as a right, they can apply for citizenship only if they swear allegiance to Israel and renounce all other citizenships, which most of them refuse to do. Even if they do agree, few are accepted.

Israel’s planning and building policy has limited their residency rights and their ability to build. They have been further isolated from their families and friends by the Security Wall, viewed under international law as illegal, separating Israel from the West Bank.

At least 10,000 new homes for Jewish Israelis have been built in the city since 2000 in ways that surround and isolate the Palestinian neighbourhoods, while at least

14,000 Palestinians from East Jerusalem have lost their city residency rights since 1967. Many more have lost their rights due to absence for more than five years to study or work abroad, or had their homes demolished due to Israel's discriminatory planning laws. Those that remain are restricted to ghetto-like neighbourhoods where unemployment and poverty are high.

According to the 2013 United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) report on East Jerusalem, the enclave's economy shrank by half in the last 20 years as a result of its isolation and the Israeli occupation. The report said that 77 percent of Jerusalem's Palestinian households lived below the poverty line, compared with 25 percent of Jewish families, with 84 percent of Palestinian children living in poverty against 45 percent of Jewish children.

To all intents and purposes, Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem suffer similar restrictions, oppression and poverty as those in the West Bank. These conditions provide the context for the current unrest among Israel's Palestinians, which was triggered by fears that Israel intends to change the status of the al-Aqsa mosque compound, the third holiest Muslim site.

While the protests and attacks started spontaneously in Jerusalem at the end of August, they have spread to encompass Palestinians in Israel and the occupied territories, the victims of both Israel's repression and a bankrupt political leadership.

The Palestinians have repeatedly been betrayed by the various Arab bourgeois governments, all of which are tied to imperialism, and by their own bourgeois leaders in the different factions of the Palestine Liberation Organisation and rival Islamist organizations.

Israel's Palestinian citizens, who make up 20 percent of the population, earn 30 percent less than even the poorest Israeli Jews (those from the Middle East and North Africa). Their towns and villages receive a much lower budget allocation than their Jewish counterparts, with the result that they are to be found at the bottom of every social indicator, including infant mortality, poverty, crime and imprisonment.

Far from seeking to ameliorate these conditions, the Netanyahu government has intensified the repression of Israel's Palestinian citizens and suspended their democratic rights, subjecting them to de facto military rule, as was the case from 1948 to 1966.

It has:

- * Put whole neighbourhoods of East Jerusalem on lockdown, making it impossible for thousands of

Palestinians to get to their workplaces in West Jerusalem and elsewhere, and forcing them to go through humiliating checkpoints.

- * Erected a wall between the East Jerusalem Palestinian neighbourhood of Jebel Mukaber and the Jewish neighbourhood of Armon Hanatziv.

- * Sent in thousands of extra police and widened their stop-and-frisk powers to allow them to search anyone on the street.

- * Authorised the use of live fire against Palestinians in Israel, including children who throw stones, leading to the killing of dozens of Palestinian youths and children.

- * Not opposed a ban on Palestinians working in schools imposed by at least four Israeli cities, including Tel Aviv.

- * Used Arabic-speaking members of the security forces, known as *mistaravim*, to infiltrate protests, act as agents provocateurs, encourage demonstrators to throw stones and attack soldiers, and then pull out their guns and fire at and arrest protesters.

- * Announced plans to revoke the citizenship of Palestinian citizens of Israel for allegedly attacking Israelis.

- * Carried out house demolitions against the families of alleged attackers, a form of collective punishment banned under international law.

- * Authorised unlawful "preventive arrests" of political activists and their families in advance of protests.

- * Banned or arrested Palestinian political and religious leaders, including Hassan Yusef, a West Bank leader and founder of Hamas, the group that controls Gaza.

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