

Brutal crackdown on West Bank as Netanyahu pledges stepped-up land grab

By Jean Shaoul
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Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu authorized a military crackdown on the Palestinian West Bank.

The assault was calculated to appeal to Israel's ultra-nationalist forces at the expense of his fascistic coalition partners, which are vying over who has a tougher policy against the Palestinians.

In the days that followed, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) carried out a series of military operations, killing six and arresting at least 100 more in protests that erupted over Israeli brutality in Nablus, Tulkarem, Ramallah, Hebron and al-Bireh. One of those arrested in the Hebron area was the Palestinian legislator Mohammed Ismail Al-Tal.

The assault started after a drive-by shooting on December 9 near the West Bank city of Ofra that injured seven Israelis, including a pregnant woman whose baby was subsequently delivered by Caesarian section but later died. Settler leaders demanded to "see the blood of the terrorists." Netanyahu's son Yair joined the calls for revenge, following a series of posts on social media calling for the expulsion of the Palestinians and writing that he would prefer all Muslims to leave Israel. Facebook's temporary ban on him for breaking its rule on hate speech only served to make him a martyr among Israel's fascists.

On Wednesday, Israeli security forces gave chase to 29-year-old Salah Barghouti, who lived near Ramallah, opening fire on his car before arresting and killing him. His family denied that he had any involvement in the shooting, pointing out that he had not gone into hiding. The next day, the conflict escalated after Palestinians shot and killed two Israeli soldiers and injured two others in a drive-by shooting at a bus stop near the illegal settlement of Ofra. Amid another media uproar, there were calls from several far-right figures for Israel to legalise the entire settlement in retaliation for the attack.

The IDF mounted a full-scale provocation, moving into

Area A, supposedly under the Palestinian Authority's full control. The IDF blockaded the city of Ramallah, the seat of the Palestinian Authority (PA), for two days, escalating tensions throughout the West Bank. They carried out a mass round-up, arresting 40 Palestinians, mostly members of Hamas, the bourgeois Islamist group that controls Gaza.

The PA's security forces reportedly went into hiding during the Israeli military presence on the streets. PA President Mahmoud Abbas condemned the Palestinian attacks, while pointing to Israel's raids as the cause of popular anger.

The same day, Israeli security forces killed 23-year-old Ashraf Naalwa, whom they suspected of shooting and two killing Israelis in the Barkan settlement industrial plant last October. They had forced their way into a home in Askar al-Jadid refugee camp, near the northern city of Nablus, sparking a lengthy gun battle. Troops used live rounds or rubber-coated steel bullets on crowds of angry Palestinians protesting Naalwa's murder, injuring at least 11.

Soldiers shot Hamdan al-Arda, a 58-year-old resident of the northern town of Arrabeh, near his aluminum plant in al-Bireh, claiming that he had tried to ram soldiers with his car. Al-Arda died after soldiers refused to allow Palestinian medics to attend to him. Eyewitnesses told the *Ma'an News Agency* "that the incident was merely a car accident," and that taken by surprise by the presence of the Israeli soldiers, the driver—who was hard of hearing—had tried to turn away from them before they opened fire on him, a claim that Israel's Channel 10 also supported. There were reports of Israeli forces using drones to tear gas protesters gathering in the aftermath of the killing.

On Friday, the IDF shot and killed 18-year-old Mahmoud Yousef Nakhla in the Jalazone refugee camp near Ramallah. Palestinians came out onto the streets in

protest. The IDF responded by firing stun grenades and rubber-coated steel bullets to disperse the crowds. At least six Palestinians were wounded by the bullets and dozens more suffered from gas inhalation, while 57 were arrested.

Meanwhile in Gaza, the IDF shot and wounded 75 Palestinians, including five paramedics and two photojournalists, during the weekly Friday protests—held last week under the banner of the “legitimate right of resistance”—ongoing since the end of March against the Israeli blockade. Since then, Israeli forces have killed 235 Palestinians and injured 7,000 more with live fire, at least 1,000 of whom face permanent disabilities.

Early Saturday morning, 700 IDF soldiers besieged al-Amari refugee camp and demolished a four-story building that was home to Umm Nasser Abu Hmeid, after throwing the residents out onto the streets without even giving them time to put on warm clothes or take their possessions, as punishment for the killing of an Israeli soldier in May, allegedly by Umm Nasser’s son, Islam. On at least three occasions they stopped Palestinian Red Crescent ambulances trying to evacuate a pregnant woman who had gone into labour.

An Israeli court gave the go-ahead for the demolition—a flagrant violation of international law that bans collective punishment—as a “deterrence” against future attacks. Umm Nasser has faced decades of Israeli oppression. Mother to 12 children, 10 boys and two girls, she has six sons, including Islam, in Israeli jails, four of them serving multiple life sentences. Israeli soldiers killed another of her sons in 1994. As she told the *Middle East Eye*, “There isn’t a home in Palestine that hasn’t been affected in some way by the occupation. My family has been through everything with the Israeli occupation, and we will get through this as well.”

The Palestinians have faced not just the IDF but also Israeli settlers who have been attacking cars and civilians in the West Bank since Thursday, shooting and injuring at least one. Settlers from Ofra went on the rampage through the village of Ein Yabroud, northeast of Ramallah, firing on Palestinians’ homes and provoking clashes. Many of the attacks took place in full view of Israeli soldiers who did nothing to stop them. One far-right group put up posters all over the West Bank calling for the assassination of PA President Mahmoud Abbas.

Palestinians protesting in the city of Hebron also came face to face with the violence of Abbas’ PA security forces who attacked them, detaining a number, and prevented journalists from filming.

Netanyahu followed up the brutal crackdown with a pledge to expand the settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem that Israel annexed illegally after seizing it during the 1967 June war. Last Thursday, he announced his intention to legalise thousands of Jewish homes built in settlement outposts in the West Bank, previously deemed illegal under Israeli law, while he is pursuing plans to redefine Jerusalem’s borders to exclude Palestinian residents. Netanyahu said he would fast-track the demolitions of the family homes of Palestinians suspected of carrying out attacks on Israelis.

Speaking during a tour of the West Bank, he said, “We will bolster the settlements even more, as we have now, and we will take all the necessary steps against terror.” He added, “We won’t tolerate terror—neither from Gaza nor from the West Bank. We will beat it with a strong fist.”

He made a point of extolling “the settlers, who are showing strength and perseverance in face of this murderous terror, and the commanders and soldiers of the IDF who safeguard all of the country’s civilians, around the clock, throughout the year.”

Netanyahu faces the prospect of being indicted for bribery and corruption on numerous charges. He heads a fractious far right coalition that has a majority of just one in the Knesset, following the resignation of Avigdor Lieberman, his former Minister of Defence and leader of Israel Beiteinu (Israel is Our Home). The religious Agudat Yisrael, part of the United Torah Judaism party, has threatened to quit the coalition if Netanyahu goes ahead with the bill enforcing the conscription of the ultra-Orthodox into the army, as required by a High Court ruling before January 16.

At the same time, Netanyahu faces rising social discontent within Israel itself, fueled by social inequality, rising prices and the “yellow vest” protests in France that led to several hundred to protest on the streets of Tel Aviv last weekend.

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