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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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18.04.2022

Israel attacks worshippers at Al-Aqsa Mosque to stoke war

In the opening salvo of a renewed war on the Palestinians, “Operation Break the Wave,” Israeli security forces stormed the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound in Jerusalem’s Old City early Friday.

They fired stun grenades, tear gas and live rounds at Palestinian worshippers marking the end of the second week of Ramadan. They beat and bound those captured, forcing them to lie face down in lines inside the mosque. Over a four-hour period, Israeli forces used baton rounds and tear gas to clear the compound, with police beating journalists and women.

According to the Palestinian Red Crescent, 153 Palestinians were hospitalised, while “dozens of other injuries” were treated at the scene. Nearly 400 people were arrested.



Israeli security forces take position during an attack on Palestinians demonstrators at the Al Aqsa Mosque compound in Jerusalem's Old City, Friday, April 15, 2022 (AP Photo/Mahmoud Illean)

The Israeli police claimed that “dozens of masked men” had set off fireworks in the compound before crowds hurled stones towards the Western Wall, injuring three soldiers. Omer Bar-Lev, Israeli public security minister, said the officers had acted 'bravely' in 'complex circumstances.'

Omar al-Kiswani, the director of the Al-Aqsa Mosque, flatly contradicted this lying narrative, telling AFP that an “assault was made inside the Al-Aqsa Mosque” and that “More than 80 young people inside the holy mosque were displaced.”

“Al-Aqsa Mosque is a red line,” he added.

The mosque is the third holiest site in Islam, while the Western Wall, on the edge of the mosque compound, is one of Judaism’s holiest sites.

Far-right religious zealots had threatened to sacrifice a goat and perform Passover prayers in al-Aqsa. With Jewish prayers in the mosque forbidden under an agreement with Jordan, which acts as the custodian of the mosque, Israeli authorities said they would stop any sacrifices being made. But since the security forces regularly turn a blind eye to Jews praying in the compound, the Palestinians stayed in the mosque over night to prevent any attempts.

Israel’s provocative attacks on worshippers and its storming of the al-Aqsa Mosque during Ramadan last year was one of the factors, along with brutal attacks on protests in East Jerusalem over the threatened eviction of six Palestinian families in Sheikh Jarrah, that were the precursor to an 11-day murderous assault on Gaza.

The latest violence at the mosque comes at the start of the Jewish Passover and follows three weeks of increasing tensions in Israel and the West Bank that have seen 14 Israelis and 25 Palestinians killed in reprisal raids, including those suspected of targeting the Israelis, an unarmed woman and a lawyer, since March 22.

The Israel Defence Forces (IDF) has increased its forces in the West Bank and on Israel's border with Gaza, while Prime Minister Naftali Bennett urged all Israelis licenced to do so to carry their weapons. Requests for arms purchases by Israeli citizens have risen by 350 percent since the same time last year, according to the *Walla* news website, with more than a thousand people submitting applications to purchase a gun in March.

Bennett announced he was considering “a larger framework to involve civilian volunteers who want to help and be of assistance.” This is little short of an open invitation to Israel's far right settler groups to form militias. Gangs of armed settlers have long acted as vigilantes, attacking Palestinian farms, their property and homes on the West bank and even threatening their lives with chants of “Death to the Arabs,” egged on by Israeli politicians and under the protection of the IDF. Having long called for ethnic cleansing under the guise of “population transfers,” last year they incited riots in Israel's mixed population towns to terrorise and drive out Palestinian citizens and “judaicise” the towns.

Bennett's call for civilian volunteers follows the formation of the Barel Rangers militia in the Negev, an armed Jewish vigilante group launched last month. Its founder is Almog Cohen, a former Israeli police officer and regional organiser of the far right Kahanist party, Otzma Yehudit.

The Negev is home to 90,000 of Israel's 300,000 Bedouin citizens who live in at least 35 “unrecognised” villages that lack basic infrastructure and services. Classified as trespassers, between 2013 and 2019 more than 10,000 Bedouin homes in the Negev were demolished. Earlier this year, the announcement of a forestation plan—a thinly disguised cover for a land grab near Beer Sheva—led to violent clashes with the security forces and a police crackdown, while vigilante attacks on the villagers have sown panic and fear.

According to the daily *Ha'aretz*, the militia's website says that the group, made up of volunteers, “will undergo training in fighting terror” and “show its presence and maintain security.” They would not join the regular civil guard, but instead would act as an “independent force” with each volunteer having “the authority, even when not accompanied by a policeman.” Cohen wrote in a Facebook post, “If there is a life-threatening situation it's simple. Kill the source of danger. It's simple and easy.”

While the police have supposedly withdrawn their support for the militia, they have declined to state whether they will prevent the group's operation.

Cohen's aim is nothing short of the completion of the Nakba, or catastrophe, that struck the Palestinians between 1947 and 1949 when 750,000 Palestinians—about half of mandate Palestine's Arab population—fled or were expelled from their homes, after the United Nations voted to partition Palestine and establish a Jewish State alongside a Palestine one. The Nakba saw entire Palestinian villages massacred, with Zionist gangs killing unarmed civilians.

Two weeks ago, Uzi Dayan, a former general and Knesset member, warned in a *Channel 14* TV interview, “The thing we need to tell the Arab community, even those who didn't participate in the attacks [on Israeli citizens], is to be careful.” Israel's 1.8 million Palestinian citizens make up 20 percent of the country's population. He added, “If we reach a civil war situation, things will end in one word and a situation you know, which is Nakba. This is what will happen in the end.”

In the past weeks, Israeli security forces have carried out repeated raids on the West Bank city of Jenin and the surrounding towns and villages. These areas have become the focal point of opposition to both the Israeli occupation and the corrupt government of Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas that serves as the enforcer of Israel's illegal occupation.

Israel's attacks on the Palestinians take place as Bennett's fragile coalition government suffered the defection of Idit Silman, who served as chairperson of Bennett's Yamina Party, to Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud Party. Her surprise move leaves Bennett with only 60 seats in the 120-seat Knesset. It came after Health Minister Nitzan Horowitz ordered hospitals to comply with a supreme court ruling overturning years of prohibition and allowing bread products into their facilities during the Passover holiday.

Mansour Abbas, leader of the Palestinian Ra'am party in the Knesset, also a member of Bennett's coalition, said the violent raid on the mosque could force his party to leave the coalition. He said, “The continued damage to al-Aqsa Mosque is a red line for us, also regarding the stability of the coalition,” adding, “There are no political considerations when it comes to al-Aqsa.”

Syria's state news agency *Sana* has reported that Israel had carried out air strikes on government positions near the Syrian capital of Damascus Thursday night. Syrian air defences had shot down "some" of the missiles fired and the strikes that hit the countryside caused only physical damage. Since the US-backed, proxy war for regime change in Syria began in 2011, Israel has carried out hundreds of air strikes against targets inside the country, including government positions, Iranian facilities and those of its allies, fighters from Lebanon's Hezbollah.

World Socialist 15.04.2022