

As Unrest Grows in Israel and Palestine, Netanyahu Seeks Scapegoats

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Israeli prime minister targets Palestinian leaders in Israel as his 'Mr Security' image takes a beating

Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu has announced a crackdown on Palestinian political leaders in Israel, blaming them for the current unrest, in what appeared to be an attempt to bolster his severely dented image as ['Mr Security'](#).

After a lengthy meeting of the security cabinet on Sunday, Netanyahu directed officials to assemble the evidence to make possible the outlawing of the northern wing of the Islamic movement.

Led by Sheikh Raed Salah, the organisation is generally regarded as the most popular Islamic party among Israel's 1.6 million Palestinian citizens, who comprise a fifth of the population.

Over the past two decades the movement's standing among Palestinians has risen as it has taken an increasingly central role at the al-Aqsa mosque compound in Jerusalem's Old City. Salah has accused Israel of trying to engineer a takeover of the site.

After Netanyahu's announcement, he [told reporters](#): "We are conducting exhaustive and meaningful discussions into the question of outlawing them. There is no question that we will take strong action."

Separately, Netanyahu [urged](#) Israel's attorney general to indict Haneen Zoabi, a member of the Israeli parliament, or Knesset. She faces an investigation for incitement over an interview in which she reportedly called for Palestinians to converge on al-Aqsa to launch a "popular intifada".

Ban on mosque visits

Last week the prime minister [barred](#) Palestinian Knesset members from accessing the al-Aqsa compound, after facing massive criticism from the right for his decision to ban Jewish MKs from visiting the site. He had said the measure would help "restore calm".

Palestinian MKs have argued that Netanyahu has no authority to ban them from al-Aqsa, which under a long-standing agreement is managed jointly by Islamic religious authorities and Jordan.

Ahmed Tibi said treating alike the Palestinian MKs and settler leaders in the Knesset was “like saying a homeowner and the burglar who stole from him are the same”.

The MKs have vowed to demand entry to al-Aqsa on Wednesday, in defiance of the ban.

The site is seen as holy by Palestinians and by Jews, who refer to it as Temple Mount. The ruins of two Jewish temples are believed to lie underneath the compound.

Tensions have been rising in recent years as increasing numbers of Jews have begun visiting the site, often at the expense of Muslim worshippers. Israel has imposed restrictions on prayer and access for Palestinians, with men under the age of 50 repeatedly denied access.

Restrictions at al-Aqsa and the scenes of mounting casualties in the occupied territories have triggered protests in all major Palestinian towns in Israel in recent days, often ending in clashes with the police. More than 100 demonstrators have been [arrested](#), including many minors.

At the weekend police chief Aharon Aksol [accused](#) the northern Islamic Movement of being the “guiding hand” behind the clashes and recent attacks on Israeli Jews.

Slump in poll ratings

Netanyahu’s hard line comes as his poll ratings have slumped following the upswing in violence, which has been accompanied by concerted attacks from rightwing rivals, including from within his own governing coalition. A survey of Israeli Jews at the weekend [found](#) 73 per cent were unhappy with his performance.

Both Avigdor Lieberman, of the far-right Yisrael Beiteinu party, and Naftali Bennett, of the settler party Jewish Home, were more trusted to deal with the current crisis, the poll found.

“Netanyahu has no solutions for ending the unrest so he needs to find someone to blame,” said Asad Ghanem, a political scientist at Haifa University. “The Arab leaders in Israel generally, and the Islamic Movement in particular, are convenient scapegoats.”

The Islamic Movement split into two regionally led branches in the late 1990s over ideological differences. Salah’s wing, unlike the southern movement, rejects participation in the Knesset and is seen by Israel as more extreme.

Zoabi belongs to a democratic nationalist party, Balad, whose MKs have repeatedly fallen foul of Netanyahu. A joint Jewish-Arab Communist party has also come under fire after its leader, Ayman Odeh, was appointed earlier this year to head the Joint List, a coalition of all the Arab parties in the Knesset.

Conflicting pressures

Netanyahu’s difficulties have been exacerbated by the conflicting pressures he faces domestically and internationally.

At the weekend John Kerry, the US secretary of state, phoned him and the Palestinian president, Mahmoud Abbas, [urging them](#) to reduce tensions.

But Netanyahu’s political rivals, from both the centre-left and right, have demanded tougher

measures against Palestinians in the occupied territories and Israel, leaving Netanyahu looking indecisive and weak.

Lieberman [called](#) on Monday for Abbas' Palestinian Authority in the West Bank to be overthrown, while Bennett has insisted on intensified settlement-building.

Meanwhile, Isaac Herzog, leader of the centre-left Zionist Union, demanded that the West Bank be sealed off. Netanyahu was forced to reject this measure after army commanders [warned](#) it would not reduce attacks and would open Israel to criticism that it was collectively punishing Palestinians.

"Netanyahu cannot admit the true causes of this kind of intifada are his occupation policies in East Jerusalem and the West Bank," said Amneh Badran, a Palestinian politics professor at al-Quds University in East Jerusalem.

Badran observed that Netanyahu had targeted the Islamic Movement because he was struggling to find a plausible group to blame in the occupied territories. Abbas' PA and Islamic rivals Hamas have been effectively barred from Jerusalem, where the worst violence has taken place.

"The northern Islamic Movement is very organised and active in Jerusalem, and has been at the forefront of clarifying what Israel is doing at al-Aqsa," said Badran. "Netanyahu sees the Islamic Movement as an obstacle that needs to be removed."

Banned from al-Aqsa

The Islamic Movement has provided the main presence at the compound since Israel formally ended the PA's links to Jerusalem in 2001 with the closure of Orient House. Fatah as an organised political movement in Jerusalem quickly faded afterwards.

Israel also cracked down harshly on Hamas representatives in Jerusalem following their success in the 2006 Palestinian Legislative Council elections.

Salah and many of the movement's leaders are already banned either from visiting al-Aqsa or from entering Jerusalem.

Badran said outlawing the Islamic Movement would be certain to escalate tensions and clashes in Jerusalem and elsewhere.

Israel's domestic security service, the Shin Bet, is [reported](#) to have made a similar assessment.

Last week, Salah [denounced](#) what he called "unbridled incitement" against his wing of the movement, adding: "We will not yield to threats intended to cow supporters of Jerusalem and al-Aqsa."

Zeki Aghbaria, a spokesman for the movement, told Middle East Eye: "Netanyahu has no authority to decide anything at al-Aqsa. We will continue the struggle to defend it whatever he decides."

Last month, Israel also [banned](#) the Mourabitoun, a cadre of Islamic students based at the mosque. Clashes in the Old City and neighbourhoods of East Jerusalem increased

dramatically in the days after the ban was imposed.

The group, which enjoys close ties to the northern Islamic Movement, has repeatedly confronted Jewish ultra-nationalists who also stake a claim to the site.

Salah and his followers believe Israel wishes to encroach on Islamic sovereignty at al-Aqsa so that the compound can be divided between Muslims and Jews, as occurred in the 1990s at the Ibrahimi mosque in Hebron.

‘Hysterical aggression’

In an apparent reference to the Islamic Movement during his speech at the Knesset’s opening on Monday, Netanyahu [said](#) Israel’s “enemies” were “using mendacious propaganda about Temple Mount to make trouble”.

Underscoring his demand that Zoabi be tried for incitement, he accused her of calling for “wholesale terror against Israeli citizens”.

Zoabi told MEE Netanyahu had twisted her comments to suggest she was calling for an armed struggle. “I was arguing the opposite: that Palestinians in the occupied territories need to concentrate on a popular, non-violent intifada as a way to raise their morale and liberate themselves.

The stabbings we see every day are an expression of individual Palestinians’ sense of frustration and hopelessness. The attacks will end when Palestinians collectively find a better way to resist.

Of the attacks on her and the Islamic Movement, she said: “Netanyahu is falling back on his favourite trick – creating an enemy to generate fear among his followers. He has lost the issue of Iran, so now he needs me and the Islamic Movement.”

His hysterical aggression really reflects the fact that he is growing ever more politically impotent.

Comparison with Islamic State

Ghanem said the Israeli prime minister had sought to blur the differences between Salah’s movement, which disavows violence, and militant groups in the region.

Netanyahu has compared the northern movement both to Hamas, which fights Israel through its military wing, and to Islamic State, which has been leading violent campaign through Iraq and Syria, and has been linked to two large-scale suicide attacks in Turkey.

Ghanem said the Islamic Movement’s policies had not changed in the past 20 years. “They do not call for violence. They live in Israel and accept they must work within the laws.”

Netanyahu has been actively [considering](#) the closure of the northern Islamic Movement since last summer. However, the Shin Bet has previously warned him off a ban, fearing it would drive the movement underground.

On Monday a northern Islamic Movement leader, Sheikh Yusef Abu Gammah, was [arrested](#), accused of inciting violence and organising an illegal gathering in the Bedouin town of Rahat in southern Israel.

Ghanem said he feared Netanyahu would not stop with Salah and his followers.

If Israel takes this major step against the northern Islamic Movement, there is a real danger that it will target next the Balad party [of Haneen Zoabi] and the southern Islamic Movement.

Netanyahu's approach only serves to expose to the Arab population in Israel their true situation. They will react to this and relations will deteriorate still further.

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