

Israel's war on protest

Army used to deport activists against the Wall

By [Jonathan Cook](#)

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The Israeli courts ordered the release this week of two foreign women arrested by the army in the West Bank in what human-rights lawyers warn has become a wide-ranging clampdown by Israel on non-violent protest from international, Israeli and Palestinian activists.

The arrest of the two women during a nighttime raid on the Palestinian city of Ramallah has highlighted a new tactic by Israeli officials: using immigration police to try to deport foreign supporters of the Palestinian cause.

A Czech woman was deported last month after she was seized from Ramallah by a special unit known as Oz, originally established to arrest migrant labourers working illegally inside Israel.

Human rights lawyers say Israel's new offensive is intended to undermine a joint non-violent struggle by international activists and Palestinian villagers challenging a land grab by Israel as it builds the separation wall on farmland in the West Bank.

In what Israel's daily Haaretz newspaper recently called a "war on protest", Israeli security forces have launched a series of raids in the West Bank over the past two months to detain Palestinian community leaders organising protests against the wall.

"Israel knows that the non-violence struggle is spreading and that it's a powerful weapon against the occupation," said Neta Golan, an Israeli activist based in Ramallah. "Israel has no answer to it, which is why the security forces are panicking and have started making lots of arrests."

The detention this week of Ariadna Marti, 25, of Spain, and Bridgette Chappell, 22, of Australia, suggests a revival of a long-running cat-and-mouse struggle between Israel and the International Solidarity Movement (ISM), a group of activists who have joined Palestinians in non-violently opposing the Israeli occupation.

The last major confrontation, a few years into the second intifada, resulted in a brief surge of deaths and injuries of international activists at the hands of the Israeli army. Most controversially, Rachel Corrie, from the US, was run down and killed by an army bulldozer in 2003 as she stood by a home in Gaza threatened with demolition.

Ms Golan, a co-founder of the ISM, said Israel had sought to demonise the group's activists in the Israeli and international media. "Instead of representing our struggle as one of non-violence, we are portrayed as 'accomplices to terror'."

The first entry of Israeli immigration police into a Palestinian-controlled area of the West Bank, the so-called "Area A", occurred last month when a Czech woman was arrested in Ramallah. Eva Novakova, 28, who had recently been appointed the ISM's media co-ordinator, was accused of overstaying her visa and was deported before she could appeal to the courts.

Human rights lawyers say such actions are illegal.

Omer Shatz, the lawyer representing Ms Marti and Ms Chappell, said a military operation into an area like Ramallah could not be justified to round up activists with expired visas. "The activists are not breaking any laws in Ramallah," he said. "The army and immigration police are effectively criminalising them by bringing them into Israel, where they need such a visa."

Officials in the Palestinian Authority (PA) have grown increasingly unhappy at Israeli abuses of security arrangements dating from the Oslo era. The PA's president, Mahmoud Abbas, recently described the Israeli operations into Area A as "incursions and provocations".

Although the supreme court released the two women on bail on Monday, while their deportation was considered, it banned them from entering the West Bank and ordered each pay a \$800 bond.

The judges questioned the right of the army to hand over the women to immigration police from a military prison in the West Bank, but left open the issue of whether the operation would have been legal had the transfer occurred in Israeli territory.

The Spanish government is reported to have asked the Israeli ambassador in Spain to promise that Ms Marti would not be deported.

Ms Marti said they had been woken at 3am on Sunday by "15 to 20 soldiers who aimed their guns at us". The pair were asked for their passports and then handcuffed. Later, she said, they had been offered the choice that "either we agree to immediate expulsion or that we will be jailed for six months".

On Wednesday, shortly after the court ruling, the army raided the ISM's office in Ramallah again, seizing computers, T-shirts and bracelets inscribed with "Palestine".

"Israel has managed to stop most international activists from getting here by denying them entry at the borders," said Ms Golan. "But those who do get in then face deportation if they are arrested or try to renew their visa."

The ISM has been working closely with a number of local Palestinian popular committees in organising weekly demonstrations against Israel's theft of Palestinian land under cover of the building of the wall.

The protests have made headlines only intermittently, usually when international or Israeli activists have been hurt or killed by Israeli soldiers. Palestinian injuries have mostly gone unnoticed.

In one incident that threatened to embarrass Israel, Tristan Anderson, 38, an American ISM member, was left brain-damaged last March after a soldier fired a tear-gas cannister at his

head during a demonstration against the wall in the Palestinian village of Nilin.

In addition to regular arrests of Palestinian protesters, Israel has recently adopted a new tactic of rounding up community leaders and holding them in long-term administrative detention. A Haaretz editorial has called these practices “familiar from the darkest regimes”.

Abdallah Abu Rahman, a schoolteacher and head of the popular committee in the village of Bilin, has been in jail since December for arms possession. The charge refers to a display he created at his home of used tear gas cannisters fired by the Israeli army at demonstrators.

On Monday, the offices of Stop the Wall, an umbrella organisation for the popular committees, was raided, and its computers and documents taken. Two co-ordinators of the group, Jamal Juma and Mohammed Othman, were released from jail last month after mounting international pressure.

The Israeli police also have been harshly criticised by the courts for beating and jailing dozens of Israeli and Palestinian activists protesting against the takeover of homes by settlers in the East Jerusalem neighbourhood of Sheikh Jarrah.

Last month, Hagai Elad, the head of Israel’s largest human rights law centre, the Association for Civil Rights in Israel, was among 17 freed by a judge after demonstrators were detained for two days by police, who accused them of being “dangerous”.

Jonathan Cook is a writer and journalist based in Nazareth, Israel. His latest books are “Israel and the Clash of Civilisations: Iraq, Iran and the Plan to Remake the Middle East” (Pluto Press) and “Disappearing Palestine: Israel’s Experiments in Human Despair” (Zed Books). His website is www.jkcook.net.

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