

Israeli Forces Test Transfer Scenario

Secret drill simulates riots by Arab citizens

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Nazareth — Israel secretly staged a training exercise last week to test its ability to quell any civil unrest that might result from a peace deal with the Palestinian Authority requiring the forcible transfer of many Arab citizens, the Israeli media has reported.

The drill was intended to evaluate the readiness of the civil defence units, police, army and prison service to contain large-scale riots by Israel's Arab minority in response to such a deal.

The transfer scenario echoes a proposal by Avigdor Lieberman, Israel's far-right foreign minister, for what he has termed a "population exchange".

Lieberman proposes land swaps that would force many of Israel's 1.3 million Arab citizens into a future Palestinian state in return for annexation to Israel of most of the Jewish settlements in the West Bank. The scheme has been widely criticised as a violation of international law.

He outlined his proposal to the United Nations General Assembly last month. Although Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel's prime minister, said he was not consulted about the speech, he did not admonish Lieberman.

The training exercise has fuelled fears among Israel's Arab minority that the government might be hoping to pressure Mahmoud Abbas, the president of the Palestinian Authority, to agree to land and population swaps as part of US-sponsored peace negotiations, which have stalled.

Dov Chenin, a member of the Israeli parliament representing the joint Jewish-Arab Communist Party, called Tuesday for more details of the exercise from the government during a speech in the chamber, although officials offered no immediate response.

Chenin said the drill was a sign Israel was heading in an "extremely dangerous direction".

"A few years ago, only the extreme right-wing parties talked about transferring Arab citizens, but now we see that even the security forces are preparing concrete plans for carrying out such a scenario."

Netanyahu demanded this week that the Palestinians recognise Israel as a Jewish state before further progress was possible — a move seen by the Arab minority as a threat to its status inside Israel. A US State Department spokesman referred to recognition as "a core

demand” and said it had Washington’s support.

Haneen Zoubi, an Arab member of parliament, said the exercise was designed to send “very clear messages” to the Arab minority and Abbas’ negotiators.

“Netanyahu is letting us know that we are not part of his vision of Israel’s future as a Jewish state and that, if we try to resist his plans, our protests will be greeted with violent repression,” she said.

“He also wants the Palestinian negotiators to understand his minimum requirements for an agreement. He is not interested in justice for the Palestinians or in creating a viable state.”

Details of the five-day drill were reported last weekend on the Voice of Israel radio station by Carmela Menashe, one of Israel’s most respected military correspondents.

The exercise envisioned extensive disturbances by Israel’s Arab citizens, one-fifth of the population, as security forces prepared to enforce border changes that would forcibly relocate many to a new Palestinian state, according to her report.

In the operation, code-named Warp and Weft, the security services established a large detention centre in the Galilee region between Nazareth and Tiberias to cope with an “unprecedented” number of arrests of Arab citizens.

The drill anticipated a rapid takeover of the West Bank by Hamas following the signing of the peace agreement with the Palestinian Authority. In the exercise, the security forces had to handle the firing of hundreds of rockets into Israel, terrorist attacks, prison riots and breakouts.

As Chenin raised his concerns, Lieberman opened a new front in his attacks on Israel’s Arab citizens, following his repeated statements questioning their loyalty to the state. While hosting the Finnish foreign minister on Tuesday, he accused groups of Arab citizens of plotting to secede from the state under orders from the Palestinians in the occupied territories.

“The Palestinians will try, through various groups among Israeli Arabs, to overturn the legitimacy of Israel as a Jewish state and will work to create different autonomous areas within the state,” he said.

Aluf Benn, a senior columnist for the Haaretz newspaper, wrote yesterday that Netanyahu was “hiding behind” Lieberman and that the prime minister was the “true instigator” of the wave of anti-Arab policies and laws the government was promoting.

On Sunday the cabinet approved a bill that would demand a loyalty oath from non-Jews seeking citizenship.

In the Yedioth Ahronoth newspaper, Ahmed Tibi, an Arab MP, accused Netanyahu of being behind “a gradual ethnic-cleansing scheme — removing as many Arabs as possible while creating a Jewish, homogenous Israel”.

Opinion polls among Israel's Arab minority have repeatedly shown strong opposition to any plan to revoke their citizenship or force them into a Palestinian state.

The Association of Civil Rights in Israel, the country's largest human-rights group, wrote to Netanyahu this week calling the media reports "alarming" and demanding assurances that there were no plans for "population transfer".

It added that the impression was being created that "an issue which is completely illegitimate — the forced revocation of the citizenship of some of the country's Arab citizens — is perceived by the government as a reasonable and even likely possibility".

Some observers have speculated that the public security minister, Yitzhak Aharonovitch, who is a member of Lieberman's Yisraeli Beiteinu Party, may have been the driving force behind the exercise.

However, Chenin said such an extensive drill involving so many different branches of the security forces could not have been carried out without the involvement of other government ministers, including Ehud Barak, the defence minister.

Barak, leader of the Labor party, has presented himself in Washington as a moderating influence on Israel's right-wing government.

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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