

Israel's Cynical Approach Is Feeding Unrest. Netanyahu Wants to Censor Social Media

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[Jonathan Cook: The View from Nazareth](#) 6

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Once it fell to politicians and diplomats to solve international conflicts. Now, according to Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu, responsibility lies with social media.

Tzipi Hotovely, Israel's deputy foreign minister, headed off to Silicon Valley to meet senior executives at Google and its subsidiary YouTube late last month. Her task was to persuade them that, for the sake of peace, they must censor the growing number of Palestinian videos posted on YouTube.

Mr Netanyahu claims these videos spur other Palestinians to carry out attacks, exemplified by the weeks of stabbings and car rammings against Israeli soldiers and civilians.

After the meeting, the foreign ministry issued a press release claiming Google had joined Israel's "war against incitement", and would establish a "joint apparatus" to prevent the posting of "inflammatory" videos. Google denied last week that any agreement was reached.

On other fronts of this so-called war, the Israeli army has shut down three West Bank radio stations, accusing them of fomenting unrest. And inside Israel, officials have shut a newspaper and a separate website catering to Israel's large Palestinian minority.

Meanwhile, Palestinians, including children, are being arrested over their Facebook posts. Others accused by Mr Netanyahu of spreading terror-like incitement include Hamas, Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian education system, Palestinian parties in Israel's parliament and human rights organisations.

There is a deep cynicism at work here.

True, Palestinians are enraged by footage showing their compatriots shot or executed by Israelis, often after they have been disarmed or cornered, or – in the case of two teenage girls last month – badly injured.

But in many cases such videos are posted not by Palestinians but by ordinary Israelis or their government as proof of a supposed Palestinian "barbarism".

Most Palestinian videos are simply a record of their bitter experiences of occupation at the hands of soldiers and settlers. It is these experiences, not the videos, that drive Palestinians to breaking point.

A “war on incitement” waged through YouTube and Facebook won’t change Palestinian suffering. But it may, Mr Netanyahu presumably hopes, conceal Israel’s brutality from the eyes of the world.

Unrest has escalated of late not because of social media but because Palestinians, faced with an Israeli government implacably opposed to ending the occupation, are losing all hope.

Israel’s generals have warned Mr Netanyahu that without a diplomatic process there will be no end to the attacks. Desperate to obscure this obvious truth, the Israeli right needs to blame everything apart from its own uncompromising ideology.

Israel’s battle against “incitement” is not just meant to deflect attention from the right’s failing policies. It is also a form of incitement itself, and it is no surprise the campaign is led by two masters of provocation: Mr Netanyahu and Ms Hotovely.

Israel has accused Palestinians of incitement for suggesting that Al Aqsa, the much-revered mosque in Jerusalem, is under threat, yet Ms Hotovely recently said her “dream” was to see the Israeli flag flying at Al Aqsa.

There was a reminder, too, of Mr Netanyahu’s own dismal record. An investigation was dropped last month against the prime minister over his warnings, using Israeli terminology for a military emergency, that Palestinian citizens were coming out “in droves” to vote in March’s general election.

A consequence of government-inspired incitement is an ever uglier climate. In many towns, crowds calling “death to the Arabs” barely raise an eyebrow any more.

The justice minister, Ayelet Shaked, has backed a bill to stigmatise Israeli human-rights groups that receive foreign, mostly European, funding. And the culture minister, Miri Regev, demanded that films showing in an Israeli festival about the Nakba, the Palestinians’ mass dispossession in 1948, be vetted for “incitement”.

Public meetings with groups such as Breaking the Silence, Israeli army veterans who want to shed light on the occupation, are being cancelled under police pressure.

Mr Netanyahu, meanwhile, is giving a free hand to far right news sites as they make false and pernicious claims.

One, Newsdesk Israel, took a four-year-old video of Palestinians revelling at their acceptance into the United Nations and repackaged it as footage of Palestinians celebrating ISIL’s massacres in Paris. Another fabricated report suggested Palestinian citizens were proselytising for ISIL by blasting its songs on their car stereos.

In fact, no target seems too big to avoid the Israeli right’s defamation – not even Europe, Israel’s largest trading partner.

Israeli politicians have misrepresented as a full-blown boycott the EU’s recent tepid move to label products from illegal West Bank settlements and thereby deny them special customs exemptions reserved for Israeli products. The right argues Israel is being uniquely punished by Europe, when in truth the EU has enforced economic sanctions, not just labelling, against 36 countries.

Incitement does indeed pose a threat to the future of Israelis and Palestinians. But it is to be found in the falsehoods promoted by Mr Netanyahu and his ministers, not the bitter truths being posted on YouTube.

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