

Israel's New Police Chief Emerges from Shadowy World

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Palestinian minority in Israel worried by top cop's twin-track as interrogator for secret police and hardline settler

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu parachuted in a new police chief last week after the government's previous candidates were thwarted by controversy.

Roni Alsheikh has officially been brought in as a new broom to sweep away a culture of corruption and sex scandals that has plagued the Israeli police for years.

The first choice for police commander, Gal Hirsch, a former army general, had to be dropped last month after it emerged that the FBI had [passed on suspicions](#) about his arms-dealing company.

Another hopeful, Benzi Sau, who served as acting police commander over the summer, drew a [storm of protest](#) from Israel's large minority of 1.5 million Palestinian citizens.

He had been harshly criticised by a judicial-led inquiry for deploying snipers 15 years ago against protesters in solidarity with the Second Intifada. Thirteen unarmed demonstrators from Israel's Palestinian minority were killed in a few days of clashes.

But Alsheikh is already proving to be an even more troubling choice to oversee law enforcement in Israel than either Hirsch or Sau, especially for the fifth of the population who are Palestinian citizens.

Aida Touma-Suleiman, a Palestinian member of the Israeli Knesset for the Joint List party, said: "We were deeply opposed to Sau but at least his crimes were done in broad daylight.

Alsheikh's crimes against Palestinians are likely to be even graver than Sau's but they are so secret we cannot know what they are.

Known only as 'R'

Alsheikh, aged 52, comes to the police force after decades of living in two shadowy worlds: as a senior officer in Israel's secret police, known as the Shin Bet; and as an religious settler who has lived in some of the West Bank's most extreme and violent communities.

Indicating the Shin Bet's lack of transparency and accountability, the Israeli media had to refer to the new police chief by the initial "R" until a gag order was lifted on Wednesday.

Photos of Alsheikh were then published for the first time.

Freed to discuss the appointment, the Israeli media revealed several disturbing aspects to Alsheikh's professional and personal life – qualities, an Israeli commentator [observed](#), that should have disqualified him from serving in the police in “a law-abiding country”.

Alsheikh's expertise in the Shin Bet, where he reached the position of deputy director, was in interrogating Palestinian suspects.

As Israeli human rights groups have [documented](#), blackmail and torture are staples of the Shin Bet's interrogation rooms, despite a high court ruling in 1999 that banned physical abuse of detainees except in life-threatening circumstances.

Although the Shin Bet is often referred to as Israel's domestic intelligence service, much of its work is in fact carried out outside Israel's recognised borders, in the occupied Palestinian territories.

Its chief tasks are to spy on Palestinians, both in Israel and the territories, select people for arrest, interrogate detainees in proceedings that are [not recorded](#), and use the information it collects to pressure Palestinians to turn collaborator.

Alsheikh's talents in extracting information from unwilling suspects earned him the nickname “The Fox”.

Mohammed Zeidan, director of the Human Rights Association in Nazareth, called the appointment “dangerous”.

“The concern must be that Alsheikh imports the Shin Bet's operational methods into law enforcement in Israel,” Zeidan told Middle East Eye.

Record of police brutality

Israel's Palestinian citizens have long complained that they have borne the brunt of police brutality.

Paradoxically, Alsheikh's appointment was confirmed on the same day that the Palestinian minority [commemorated](#) the 15th anniversary of the 13 deaths at the hands of the police in October 2000.

The Or Commission, an inquiry into the killings, found the police guilty of treating the country's Palestinian citizens as “an enemy” and called for urgent institutional reforms. None were implemented.

The events of 2000, and the subsequent killing by police of dozens of Palestinian citizens in unexplained circumstances, have left the Palestinian minority deeply distrustful of the police.

But Alsheikh's appointment gives them grounds to be even more wary and fearful, warned Touma-Suleiman.

This is a declaration of intentions by the government. It plans to deepen the police's view of us as a security threat.

The new police chief belongs to an extremist ideological group known in Israel as the national-religious. In practice, this is the ideology of many Israeli settlers.

The Yesha Council, the official governing body for the West Bank settlements, was among those hurrying to welcome Alsheikh's appointment.

He has previously [lived in Kiryat Arba](#), one of the most notorious and violent settlements in the West Bank, located next to the large Palestinian city of Hebron.

He was also until recently a resident of another extreme settlement: Kokav Hashahar, a community of 350 families located north-east of Ramallah, on a ridge above the Jordan Valley.

'Partner to land theft'

Although all settlements are illegal in international law, Israeli columnist Gideon Levy pointed out that Kokav Hashahar's settlers have in addition broken Israel's own laws over the years by founding what are known as "outposts". These satellites of the original settlement are not officially authorised by the Israeli government.

Levy [wondered](#): "Can a partner to theft of such magnitude [of Palestinian land] be a policeman at all?"

Alsheikh moved out of the West Bank and into Israel three years ago, reportedly after concerns that it was too difficult for his bodyguards to ensure his safety in a remote settlement.

Touma-Suleiman noted that settlers and their ideological allies had been gradually taking over Israel's security services for the past two decades.

This has been particularly apparent in the Israeli military, where settlers are heavily over-represented among [officers](#) and in [combat units](#).

But members of the national-religious community have also come to dominate the top spots in the Shin Bet and the National Security Council, which is the prime minister's own advisory body on security matters.

Parallel developments have been discernible in the [diplomatic corps](#), the government, the courts and the universities. One Israeli analyst has [termed this](#) the "revolution of the crocheted kippot," in reference to the type of skullcaps worn by settlers and their allies.

Now Alsheikh will be in a position to steer the Israeli police force into the same ideological fold. That is likely to accelerate a process begun in 2010 when the police force [announced](#) that it was launching its first-ever drive to recruit officers from the settlements.

Majd Kayyal, a political analyst, observed: "In a normal country, it would be crazy to appoint a law-breaking settler like Alsheikh to be police chief. But we are not living in a normal environment."

Greater settler influence

Aside from Alsheikh's likely predilection for greater secrecy and readier resort to illegal

information-gathering techniques, there are several issues relating to settler activity in Israel and East Jerusalem where his new influence over policing is reason for especial concern.

The most immediate worry is that, as police chief, Alsheikh will now be dealing directly and daily with the already highly unstable situation at the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound in the Old City of Jerusalem.

Recent weeks have seen repeated clashes between Palestinians and the Israeli police as settlers have increased their [provocative visits](#) to the mosque area during the Jewish holiday season.

The settlers are reportedly putting pressure on Netanyahu's government to divide the al-Aqsa compound, in the hope of repeating their success two decades ago at the Ibrahimi mosque in Hebron. They would then claim rights to pray there, as several government ministers have [demanded](#).

Touma-Suleiman said Alsheikh's fingerprints were already visible in a police decision last week to set up roadblocks at entrances to Palestinian communities in Israel to check whether vehicles were heading to Jerusalem.

Another policing issue where Alsheikh may quickly leave his mark to the benefit of the national-religious is in the so-called "mixed cities," half a dozen communities in Israel where Jewish and Palestinian citizens live in relatively close proximity.

In recent years settler groups have been [moving back into Israel](#) in what appears to be a low-level war to force out Palestinian families and complete the mixed cities' "Judaisation".

And then there is the pressing matter of efforts in recent years by extremist settlers to target for attack Palestinian citizens and their Muslim and Christian holy sites inside Israel.

An arson attack in July [badly damaged](#) a famous church next to the Sea of Galilee, marking the spot where Christians believe Jesus performed a miracle by feeding his followers with a few loaves and fish.

The police and Shin Bet have been criticised for their dismal failure to identify those behind such hate crimes. A former Shin Bet head, Carmi Gillon, [argued](#) last year that there was a lack of determination in the agency to crack down on violent settlers: "There's no such thing as 'can't do' in the Shin Bet, just 'don't want'."

There is every reason to suspect that the same attitude will now deepen its roots in the Israeli police.

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