

Political

update: Hebron's 'House of Contention' is evacuated in major military operation – 4 December

Key points:

- **250 settlers evacuated in 600 strong military operation**
 - **Settlers retaliate by throwing stones at the Israeli Defense Force**
 - **50 ambulances and two helicopters take away the wounded**
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Latest developments

- Israeli security forces forcibly evicted some 250 settlers and their supporters from a disputed building, known as the 'House of Contention,' on Thursday 4 December. The Israeli Supreme Court had ordered the immediate evacuation of the house in the West Bank city of Hebron 18 days previously.
- Local media reported that it took approximately 600 security forces personnel, wearing riot gear and using stun grenades, less than 30 minutes to complete the operation. The settlers retaliated by throwing stones and eggs. Local emergency services reported that dozens of people were hurt during the evacuation, both police officers and settlers, with one person suffering serious head wounds. Fifty ambulances and two helicopters were dispatched to the site to evacuate the wounded.
- Defense Minister and Labor Chairman, Ehud Barak, said that he ordered the army to evict the settlers after all attempts to persuade them to leave peacefully had failed.
- Ehud Barak met with leaders of the Council of Jewish Communities of the West Bank (Yesha Council) earlier on Thursday over the crisis. The meeting ended with Barak vowing to clear the house, saying that the Israeli Defense Force would assume control of the building until its true ownership is determined by the district court. Before the meeting Barak said that Israel:

“cannot accept attempts by small groups of radicals to undermine the authority of the state over its citizens. Security forces will have to act so that the law is respected.” (3/12/08)

- Commenting on settler violence whilst at the official memorial ceremony for Israel's first Prime Minister, David Ben-Gurion, outgoing Prime Minister Ehud Olmert said that he will not allow anyone to “raise a hand against Israeli democracy.”
- Israel President Shimon Peres has commended the security forces for evacuation, saying:

“In order to safeguard its constitution and security, the state must sometimes take difficult measures... In this instance there was no escaping the difficult steps that were taken by Defense Forces. I commend the government and security forces for making a difficult decision and carrying it out with sense and responsibility.” (4/12/08)

- Settler youths vandalised Palestinian property in Hebron on Thursday in further retaliation to the evacuation of the house. The Haaretz newspaper reported that dozens of masked settlers surrounded the home of a Palestinian family in Hebron, throwing stones at it and setting their laundry alight. Police used stun grenades and tear gas in a bid to stop the settlers. Israeli television channels have also reported that Palestinians in Hebron were shooting at the settlers.
- In an effort to prevent the entry of more settlers into the area the IDF has now declared the whole of Hebron a closed military zone, Since Tuesday (2 December) IDF and police forces have blocked nearby road junctions and a special detachment of Border Patrol officers have been deployed in Hebron, following a particularly violent day in which 18 Israelis and seven Palestinians were hurt.

Background

- The Israeli Supreme Court ruled on 16 November that the settlers occupying the house must turn it over to the State until a district court decides who the legal owner of the building is. The deadline for the settlers' voluntary withdrawal passed on 19 November. The Israeli Army had originally planned to forcibly evacuate the settlers on 19 November, but due to increased violence at the site, postponed the operation.
- President Shimon Peres condemned settler violence whilst speaking at rally to commemorate the 13th anniversary of the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin on 9 November. Peres said "Extremists don't have a future, in the same way they don't possess justice... The democratic majority won't be intimidated by the violent few."
- During a Cabinet meeting on 2 November, the Israeli Government condemned illegal West Bank outposts and laid out plans to halt vigilante extremism and end "all direct or indirect financial support of illegal outposts and their infrastructure." Shin Bet security service chief Yuval Diskin warned of the rise of the 'Price Tag' policy amongst right-wing settlers, which involves violent attacks against the IDF and Palestinians in retaliation to the evacuation of even the smallest illegal outposts.
- Discussing the attacks before the Cabinet meeting, Defense Minister and Labor Chairman, Ehud Barak said:

"We need forceful, uncompromising action. We are going to increase the severity of punishments for extremists. We must convince our judges that this is not just bothering a civil servant at the National Insurance Institute, it's an attempt to undermine the state's sovereignty. Such people should be put behind bars. If there is no choice, we will also have to improve our use of the Emergency Regulations." (02/11/08)

- 2008 has seen an increase in the level and incidences of violence by settlers against Palestinians and the IDF. The Haaretz newspaper reported in August that Israeli security officials are concerned with the increase in violence by settlers in the West Bank (15 August). A recent UN OCHA (Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs) report documented 222 settler attacks in the first half of this year, compared to a total of 291 for the whole of 2007 (June 2008).
- A 2007 report on the increased violence for Major General Gadi Shamni of the Central Command, responsible for security in the West Bank, highlighted the weakening of formal settler leadership. The report said that past moderate settler leaders have been replaced by more right-wing activists who are willing to confront the security services. He also blamed the IDF for being too weak in its response to violent settlers. Shamni said in October that the rising level of violence from a

minority of settlers is impairing the ability of the IDF to carry out its missions (3 October).

- Research carried out by the Institute for National Security Studies of Tel Aviv University between 2001 and 2007 found that the number of Israelis willing to evacuate all but the major settlement blocs in the West Bank, in return for a permanent status accord with the Palestinians, increased significantly from 50 to 59 percent. The 2007 survey also found only 29 per cent of respondents in favour of the notion of a 'Greater Israel'.