

Political

update:– The Ahrar al-Jalil Palestinian militant group claims responsibility for third Jerusalem bulldozer attack – 12 March

Key points:

- Two policeman injured in Jerusalem bulldozer attack; bus of children narrowly escapes injury
- The Hezbollah-backed Ahrar al-Jalil Palestinian militant group claims responsibility for its sixth attack in Jerusalem since March '08
- Jerusalem Mayor calls for a tough response

Latest developments

- A construction worker in west Jerusalem was shot dead by police on 5 March after he rammed his bulldozer into a police car, flipping it over several times, pushing it into a bus and dragging it down Jerusalem's main Begin Highway for approximately 30 metres.
- Two police officers were wounded in the attack by Mari al-Rdaidah, a resident of the East Jerusalem suburb of Beit Hanina. A bus of children narrowly escaped injury as an electrical post came between them and the bulldozer.
- In response to the attack, Jerusalem Mayor Nir Barkat said that he would recommend the authorities take "the harshest measures we can take by law" against those involved in the attack and that:

"We need to quickly return to normalcy and send a clear signal that no one will be able to harm our lives." (05/03/09)

- The little known Ahrar al-Jalil (Galilee Freedom Battalion) militant group claimed responsibility for the attack, saying the bulldozer driver was one of its members.
- Police have since rejected claims by al-Rdaidah's family that the incident was an accident, saying that video footage clearly shows the attacker intentionally directing his vehicle towards the police car.
- In response to the attack and since the Jewish festival of Purim started on Monday (9 March), the police and military raised Israel's national alert level to 'high' as a precaution until today (12 March).

Background

- Ahrar al-Jalil has now claimed responsibility for six terror attacks in Jerusalem over the last year, including three bulldozer attacks, an attack involving a car, a shooting in a religious school and the murder of a police officer.
- The group was established by four Israeli-Arabs, led by Mohammed Anbatawi from the Israeli town of Kfar Kana, near Tiberius. It first claimed responsibility for an attack in 2003 when they killed an Israeli soldier and girl from Tiberius.

- Ahrar al-Jalil is also known as the “Imad Mughnieh Group,” named after the Hezbollah military leader assassinated in Syria in February 2008. Salem Thabet, a senior member of the al-Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigades, claimed in an interview with the London based al-Sharq al-Awsat newspaper on 9 October 2008 to be Ahrar al-Jalil’s commander. In an interview with the paper he said that Ahrar al-Jalil received “logistic and material aid” from Hezbollah.
- In addition to the attack on 5 March, the group has carried out the following attacks in the last year:
 - Seventeen people, including one civilian, were wounded on 22 September 2008 when a resident of East Jerusalem ploughed his car into a crowd of Israeli soldiers on their way to the Western Wall to mark the upcoming Jewish New Year. The attacker, a resident of the al-Farouk area of East Jerusalem, was shot dead by one of the soldiers involved.
 - Approximately 24 people were wounded on 22 July 2008 when a construction worker from East Jerusalem drove a bulldozer down Jerusalem’s King David street, hitting a bus and five cars. The driver was shot and killed by a civilian and a police officer.
 - Ahrar al-Jalil took responsibility for a shooting on a police patrol in Jerusalem on 12 July 2008, which claimed the life of border patrolman Lance Corporal David Chriqui.
 - Three people were killed and approximately 45 others wounded on 2 July 2008, when a Palestinian resident of East Jerusalem drove a bulldozer against the traffic on Jerusalem’s Jaffa Street, hitting and flipping over a bus and several cars. Police shot and killed the driver.
 - A Palestinian resident of East Jerusalem killed eight students and injured many more in Jerusalem’s Mercaz Harav religious school on 6 March. In addition, some students suffered fractures when they jumped from the second floor of the building. The gunman was shot and killed by Israeli security officers while fleeing the scene.
- Shin Bet’s (Israel’s internal security service) annual summary for 2008 showed that 36 Israelis were killed by terrorist attacks in the year, including the firing of rockets into Israel from Gaza, compared to 13 in 2007. More than a third of the terrorist related casualties occurred in Jerusalem. In a number of cases in which Arabs from East Jerusalem committed acts of terror, Shin Bet found that the perpetrators had formed independent organisations, acting without outside guidance from larger groups. Shin Bet explained that East Jerusalem terrorists are exploiting their familiarity with the city, as well as their ability to travel freely across it.
- Until 2006, the Israeli Defense Force was authorised by the Government to demolish the homes of terrorists in East Jerusalem. In response to 2008’s attacks in Jerusalem, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Defense Minister Ehud Barak both called for this practice to resume. The IDF has since requested the permission of the Israeli Supreme Court to carry out the demolition of the home of the bulldozer attacker of 2 July and the Mercaz Harav attacker. Court proceedings over whether the demolitions can go ahead are on-going.
- There are approximately 253,000 Palestinians who hold Jerusalem ID cards which, unlike Palestinians in the West Bank, entitle them to full freedom to work and travel in Israel.