

West Bank Attack Raises Tensions as Israeli Elections Approach



An Israeli security officer standing guard at the site of an attack in the West Bank city of Ariel on Sunday. Credit Credit Jack Guez/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

JERUSALEM — A Palestinian carried out a stabbing and shooting attack in the occupied West Bank on Sunday, killing an Israeli soldier and a civilian, and ratcheting up tensions ahead of Israeli elections.

The attack came amid a heated campaign for the April 9 ballot in which a former general leading a new, centrist party is challenging the longtime incumbent, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, over who can provide Israelis with better security.

The situation was already volatile.

On Friday, a fragile calm was restored after two rockets from Gaza were fired at Tel Aviv on the night before, without causing harm.

Israel retaliated swiftly, with strikes at what it said were military sites and compounds belonging to Hamas, the Islamic militant group that controls Gaza. The Israeli military said one of the sites it struck in Gaza was the headquarters for coordinating Hamas activities in the West Bank, where the group has been seeking to foment violence.

The soldier killed on Sunday was identified as Staff Sgt. Gal Keidan, 19. On Monday, a second victim, Rabbi Achiad Ettinger, 47, a father of 12 from the settlement of Eli and head of a seminary in Tel Aviv, died of his wounds. Another soldier was seriously wounded. As of Monday morning, the assailant was still at large.

Hamas praised the attack as a “courageous and daring operation,” without claiming responsibility for it. In a statement, it described the West Bank as a “strategic” place where it was possible to surprise Israel with violent attacks.

The assault began when a Palestinian man stabbed Sergeant Keidan near the settlement of Ariel in the central West Bank, then stole the soldier’s weapon and took off in a car, according to the Israeli military. He then fired at people at a bus stop before fleeing the scene.

In remarks at the weekly cabinet meeting in Jerusalem, Mr. Netanyahu said the security forces were pursuing those responsible for the attack at two points in the central West Bank. “I am certain that they will apprehend them,” he said, “and we will deal with them to the fullest extent of the law, as we have done in all of the recent incidents.”

In December, two Israeli soldiers were killed by a Palestinian gunman near Ramallah, days after another attacker wounded a pregnant woman; her baby died. Another Palestinian gunman killed two Israelis at a West Bank factory.



Israeli security forces surround a car near the spot in the West Bank where an assailant stabbed a soldier to death and wounded two other Israelis. Credit Jack Guez/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

Even before the victim of Sunday's attack had been named, the incident became grist for the increasingly rough election campaign. In search of support and facing corruption charges, a weakened Mr. Netanyahu is pulling out all the stops, including making a deal last month with a racist anti-Arab party.

On Sunday, Israel's High Court of Justice disqualified one of the candidates from that party, Michael Ben Ari, from running in the election. The judges acted after being presented with video evidence of Mr. Ben Ari's incitement against Palestinians, including those who are citizens of Israel.

Miri Regev, the minister of culture and sport from Mr. Netanyahu's Likud party, said the attack Sunday was the direct result of incitement by Palestinians; criticized an Arab lawmaker in Israel's Parliament for refusing to condemn terrorist attacks; and accused the new party, led by Benny Gantz, a former military chief, of wanting to form a parliamentary majority with the Arab lawmaker.

“This is the weak left, and this is the left that will bring us a continuation of terror attacks like these,” Ms. Regev said.

Mr. Gantz’s Blue and White Party dismissed the criticism. “Never in the history of the state has it happened that a minister in Israel has exploited the deaths of those killed in terror attacks for political propaganda even before the funerals of the dead,” it said on twitter. “For the honor of the victims we will not respond at this time.”

Hamas has found itself under increasing pressure because of a crippling economic crisis in Gaza. The group has harshly suppressed street demonstrations in recent days, beating and arresting civilians who have burned tires and blocked roads in protest against the daily hardships of life in the Palestinian coastal territory.

The United Nations special envoy for the Middle East peace process, Nickolay Mladenov, denounced Hamas’s actions in a statement on Sunday. He said he was “particularly alarmed by the brutal beating” of journalists and local human rights workers in Gaza as well as the raiding of homes.

“The long-suffering people of Gaza,” Mr. Mladenov said, have the right to protest “without fear of reprisal.”

There is more potential for violence.

Hamas is preparing for what it hopes will be a million-strong demonstration on March 30, the anniversary of the start of often-violent protests along the fence dividing Gaza from Israel, in which scores of Palestinians have been killed by Israeli fire. The domestic pressure might well make Hamas all the more eager to redirect the public’s anger toward Israel, analysts say.

In addition, an Israeli court on Sunday placed a temporary closure order on a disputed site known as Bab al-Rahma, which was being used by Muslims for prayer. It sits within the sacred compound revered by Muslims as Haram al-Sharif and by Jews as the Temple Mount in the Old City of Jerusalem, a frequent flash point for violence.

Iyad Abuheweila contributed reporting from Gaza.

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