

Sde Teiman riots reveal the ‘disintegration of Israeli state’

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Israel’s right wing have no intention of giving up the impunity it’s enjoyed for years, pitting elements of the state against each other

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Right-wing Israelis demonstrate next to the Sde Teman military base on 29 July 2024 (AFP/Menahem Kahana)

The scenes of far-right [Israelis](#) breaking into a detention facility to protest the arrest of soldiers accused of raping a [Palestinian](#) reveal a society heading towards a breakdown of state institutions, analysts have told Middle East Eye.

On Monday, nine soldiers in the notorious Sde Teiman facility were [detained](#) in southern Israel’s Negev desert for questioning.

They were accused of sexual abuse against a Palestinian detainee, which led to him being hospitalised with serious injuries to his rectum area. The soldiers deny the charges.

The arrests were met by angry demonstrations at the gates of Sde Teiman, with several protesters temporarily breaching the gates before being dispersed by police.

Among the protesters were reservist soldiers, as well as two far-right parliamentarians: Zvi Sukkot, a member of the Religious Zionist movement, and Heritage Minister Amichai Eliyahu, of the Jewish Power party.

“This is a very significant event,” Israeli journalist and analyst Meron Rapoport told MEE. “An event that has the character of a rebellion... to completely dismantle what is left of the rules that are supposed to govern society.”

Israeli soldiers reportedly barricaded themselves into Sde Teiman and used pepper spray to defend themselves against arrest by the military police, before eventually being taken into custody.

May Pundak, a lawyer, activist and chair of Israeli-Palestinian peace organisation A Land for All, told MEE that the scenes following the arrests were evidence that forces within Israel were attempting to “dismantle democracy”.

She noted that members of the Israeli government - which sought the arrests in the first place - joined the protests in an attempt to make “the government and the leaders of the army an enemy of the state”.

Effectively, that made these far-right leaders a threat to the government “from within”, she noted.

“There is no law and order, no enforcement,” she said. “This is the disintegration of the state.”

Widespread abuse

The alleged rape in Sde Teiman is the latest such allegation of abuse from the notorious facility.

Established after the 7 October Hamas-led attack on Israel and subsequent war on Gaza, Sde Teiman is an ostensibly temporary centre to hold Palestinian detainees. More than 4,000 Palestinians from Gaza have been detained by the Israeli military, often held with no charge or evidence of wrongdoing.

In April, an unnamed doctor [described in harrowing detail](#) the conditions at the facility, including limb amputation due to handcuff injuries and prisoners forced to defecate in nappies.

Further investigations by [Middle East Eye](#), [CNN](#) and the [New York Times](#) found [widespread examples](#) of abuse at the centre.

According to the UN, at least 27 Palestinian detainees have died in Israeli custody since the war, including at Sde Teiman. Officers at the facility told the New York Times that 35 Palestinians detained there since October had died either at the facility or after being brought to nearby hospitals.

Tal Steiner, executive director of the Public Committee Against Torture in Israel, told MEE that an “unprecedented increase in torture” has been used by Israel against Palestinians since 7 October.

“We have documented multiple instances of abuse, of physical torture, of humiliation,” she said.

Steiner added she was hopeful that a “silver lining” from Monday’s events could be that allegations of abuse that had been reported for months may finally receive public attention and “some accountability”.

Throughout the war, Israeli soldiers have brazenly published images of themselves abusing and humiliating Palestinian detainees, without any consequences or retributions from the authorities.

Indeed, such actions appear encouraged by government officials. On Sunday, National Security Minister Itamar Ben Gvir, who leads the party that Eliyahu belongs to, boasted that conditions inside Israeli prisons “have indeed worsened” since the war on Gaza began. “I am proud of that,” he said.

The latest abuse allegations from Sde Teiman are part of a well-worn pattern, Pundak noted, saying they were the latest example of Israeli authorities “breaking every red line from a moral point of view, from an international law point of view and from an inhumane point of view”.

Indeed, such abuses and impunity are not new, as can be seen with the case of Elor Azaria. In 2016, the Israeli soldier shot and killed a pacified Palestinian suspect, only to be lionised by the Israeli right wing. He served just nine months of an 18-month sentence and became a poster boy for rightwingers.

‘The army itself became the enemy’

The Israeli military has operated with impunity since the war broke out, yet its conduct has nonetheless drawn international pressure.

Israel is subject to cases at the two major Hague-based courts: the International Criminal Court (ICC) and the International Court of Justice (ICJ).

At the ICC, the chief prosecutor is applying for arrest warrants for Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his defence minister, Yoav Gallant, over crimes committed in Gaza. The ICJ, meanwhile, is trying Israel over accusations of genocide in the Palestinian enclave.

Rapoport sees the arrests at Sde Teiman as an attempt by Israel to show the international courts that it was acting domestically to deal with instances of abuse against Palestinians.

Under the principle of complementarity, the ICC acts as a court of last resort when member states are unwilling or unable to try heinous crimes themselves.

“This whole investigation... is because of the international pressure and the Hague, otherwise it would not have been opened,” he said.

Netanyahu “strongly condemned” the attempted break-in at the facility, though he did not comment on the allegations themselves, unlike other members of his Likud party and government coalition, many of whom defended the soldiers.

‘This is a country that fails to maintain law and order, it is a country that is close to being a failed state’

- Meron Rapoport, Israeli analyst

Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich, for instance, posted a video in which he said the arrested soldiers should be treated like heroes, not criminals.

Rapoport said that for many on the Israeli right wing, “the army itself became the enemy” as soon as it began investigating harm against Palestinians.

He compared the sentiments to those shared by rightwing Israelis in the lead-up to the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin, the Israeli prime minister who was killed in 1995 by an ultranationalist for engaging in peace talks with Palestinians.

This time, he warned, “it seems to be deeper and more dangerous”.

“Rabin was one person. Here they rebel against the authority of the army. As soon as it does not have the army, it is doubtful whether it will be possible to call the country a functioning country,” Rapoport said.

Notably, none of the protesters who forced their way into Sde Teiman were arrested. Another protest broke out at a military courthouse later that day in Beit Lid, where demonstrators again

were met with little resistance.

“This is a country that fails to maintain law and order, it is a country that is close to being a failed state,” said Rapoport.

He added that the scenes on Tuesday reveal a schism between military generals in Tel Aviv and soldiers on the ground in Gaza.

“Suppose there is a ceasefire tomorrow and the army orders the units to leave the Gaza Strip. Will these units listen to the army?” he asked. “A serious question arises here.”

Lubna Masarwa in Jerusalem and **Rayhan Uddin** in London

P.S.

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