

Israeli police look to settlers to fill ranks

First army, now police set for takeover

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As US-sponsored peace talks have stalled over the issue of settlements, Israel's national police force has revealed that it is turning to the very same illegal communities in its first-ever drive to recruit officers from among the settlers.

The special officer training course, which is chiefly aimed at discharged combat soldiers, includes seven months of religious studies in an extremist West Bank settlement.

The programme has provoked widespread concern among Israel's 1.3 million Palestinian citizens, a fifth of the population.

"The police have already repeatedly demonstrated their hostility to Palestinian citizens, but this move proves that the authorities want to extend and deepen our oppression," said Jafar Farah, the director of Mossawa, an advocacy centre for the Palestinian minority.

"Is it really credible that these religious extremists who have been educated to hate Palestinians in the West Bank are going to behave differently when they police our communities inside Israel?"

The first 35 cadets in the officer-training programme — known as "Believe in the police" — are to start their studies next month. More than 300 settlers are reported to have expressed an interest in the course so far.

The police command is said to have taken up the idea, originally proposed by right-wing groups, in the hope of reversing years of declining recruitment levels that have led to a national shortage of officers.

Cadets will study for three and a half years, mostly at Haifa University in Israel, at the end of which they will be awarded a degree and the rank of officer.

But their studies also include seven months in a religious seminary in a small extremist settlement, Elisha, deep in the West Bank. Although all the settlements are illegal under international law, Elisha is one of dozens of wildcat settlements also illegal under Israeli law.

Gershom Gorenberg, an expert on the religious settlers, said Israel's "future police commanders" would graduate from the course after an early lesson in law-breaking.

Yonatan Chetboun, the head of the Raananim movement, a right-wing group overseeing the programme, described to Olam Katan, a newspaper popular with the religious community, one way the organisers might win over settlers to a career in the police.

He said taking potential recruits on night-time patrols of Ramle and Lod — Israeli towns notorious for containing deprived, crime-ridden Palestinian neighbourhoods — would quickly open their eyes to one of “the most meaningful national issues”.

The police spokesman was not available for comment.

A team of rabbis has been appointed to resolve potential conflicts between the settlers’ religious principles and their police duties, which could involve desecrating the sabbath and dealing with “immodest” women.

A right-wing settler activist, Hor Nizri, who has clashed with the police in the past over the evacuation of settlements, has been put in charge of recruiting young settlers.

He told the Yedioth Aharonoth newspaper that the programme was “a historic reconciliation”, adding: “We want to fill the ranks of the police as we fill the ranks of the army.”

His comments have sparked concern among Palestinian groups inside Israel that the programme is the first phase of an attempted settler “takeover” of the police, replicating their growing dominance of sections of the army.

The first official figures on the number of settlers in the Israeli military, released last month, show their massive over-representation in combat units. About a third of all officers in such units were settlers, up from only 2.5 per cent in 1990.

The police hope that a career in the force will be attractive to many of the settlers after they are discharged.

However, Mr Farah said there was plenty of evidence that religious settlers were becoming ever more extreme in their hostility towards Palestinians. He pointed to the growing influence of extremist rabbis in promoting anti-Palestinian views.

Over the summer, two prominent rabbis from the settlement of Yitzhar, near Nablus, were questioned on suspicion of incitement after publishing a book, *The King’s Torah*, in which they sanctioned the killing of non-Jews, including children. In one passage, the authors write: “There is justification for killing babies if it is clear that they will grow up to harm us.”

The book has been endorsed by a number of senior rabbis in the settlements.

Similar sentiments have been gaining a foothold among army rabbis.

Early last year, in the immediate wake of Israel’s three-week operation in Gaza, it was revealed that the army rabbinate had handed out a booklet to combat soldiers about to enter Gaza calling their attack ‘a war on murderers’ and warning them against “surrendering a single millimetre” of territory.

Some 1,400 Palestinians were killed in the attack, including hundreds of women and children.

The Palestinian minority’s relations with the police are already marked by deep distrust, following the killing of 13 unarmed demonstrators and the wounding of hundreds more in 2000, at the start of the second intifada.

A subsequent state commission of inquiry accused the police command of viewing the minority as “an enemy”.

Mr Farah also pointed to the unexplained deaths of 36 Palestinian citizens by the police over the past decade. In only two cases have police officers been convicted.

Some Israeli observers have expressed concern that the settlers’ greater influence on the police could also make implementing the dismantlement of West Bank settlements much harder in any future peace deal.

Mr Gorenberg said previous evacuations, including the 2005 withdrawal from Gaza, had been handled chiefly by the police because so many army units were dominated by settlers. The police, he added, “could acquire the same weakness”.

Jonathan Cook is a writer and journalist based in Nazareth, Israel. His latest books are “Israel and the Clash of Civilisations: Iraq, Iran and the Plan to Remake the Middle East” (Pluto Press) and “Disappearing Palestine: Israel’s Experiments in Human Despair” (Zed Books). His website is www.jkcook.net.

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