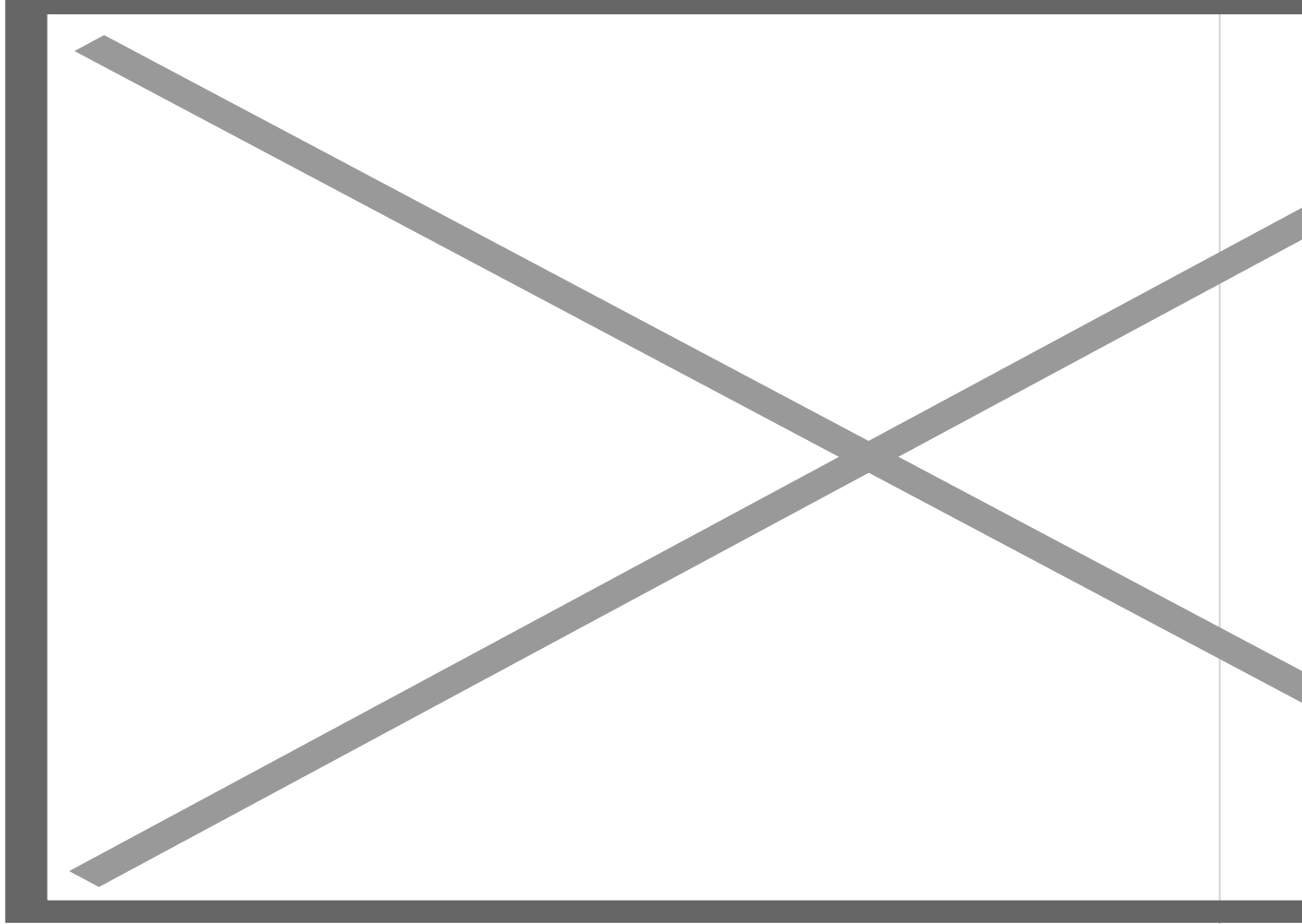


Hamas official warns that Israel's policies will set entire region on fire

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The Israeli settlement of Halamish is pictured behind a Palestinian flag raised in the village of Nabi Saleh, in the central part of the occupied West Bank. (Photo by AFP)

Gaza City, June 16 (RHC)-- A senior official with the Hamas resistance movement says the policies pursued by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's far-right cabinet in the occupied Palestinian territories will set the entire region ablaze.

Speaking to the Gaza-based Al-Aqsa TV, Saleh al-Arouri, the deputy head of Hamas' political bureau, warned of a regional conflagration as a result of Israel's illegal settlement construction activities and expulsion of Palestinians from the occupied West Bank.

"The fascist Zionist regime is trying to target al-Quds and the West Bank, and today we are witnessing the intensification of its settlement activities in these areas," he said. "The strategy of the current extremist regime will set the entire region on fire. The ruling Zionist regime has plans to evict Palestinians from the West Bank."

Earlier this week, the U.S.-based news website Axios reported that Tel Aviv had informed Washington it planned to build 4,000 new units in several existing West Bank settlements. The report came after Netanyahu's cabinet shelved plans to advance the highly controversial E1 settlement project under US pressure.

If constructed, the Israeli settlement would effectively divide the West Bank in two, isolating East al-Quds from Palestinian communities and forcing residents to make even lengthier detours to travel from one place to another while allowing for settlements to expand.

In recent days, the Arab League has warned of Israeli plans to build thousands more settler units in the occupied West Bank. Reports said the new construction plan appears to be an effort to mollify Netanyahu's hardline coalition partners after the shelving of the E1 settlement project.

Arouri said the Palestinian nation is paying the price for Netanyahu's extremist and radical efforts to maintain his ruling coalition. Referring to the Israeli onslaught on the Gaza Strip on May 9-13, the Hamas official said Netanyahu committed the crime against Gaza and assassinated resistance commanders along with their families in a bid to improve his image in the Zionist society.

"The existence of the Zionist regime poses a danger to the entire region," he noted, adding that Tel Aviv "seeks to explode the situation in the region through its criminal plans and policies."

Israel has stepped up its settlement expansion activities since last December, when Netanyahu returned to power as the prime minister of the regime's most far-right cabinet. In late March, a report by UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Turk said 700,000 Israelis are living in 279 settlements across the occupied West Bank, including 14 settlements in occupied East al-Quds.

The international community regards the settlements -- hundreds of which have been built across the West Bank since Tel Aviv's occupation of the territory in 1967 -- as illegal under international law and the Geneva Conventions given that they have been constructed on the occupied territories.

The UN Security Council and human rights groups around the world have condemned Israel's settlement activities in the occupied territories in several resolutions and statements.

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