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WORLD MIDDLE EAST

Israel Moves Troubled Military Unit Out of West Bank

Decision comes amid a series of alleged abuses by Israeli soldiers against Palestinians



Israeli soldiers from the Netzah Yehuda unit taking part in training in the Golan Heights in 2014.

PHOTO: AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

By [Dion Nissenbaum](#) [Follow](#) , [Aaron Boxerman](#) and [Fatima AbdulKarim](#)

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The Israeli military said Tuesday that it is moving one of its most troubled units out of the West Bank amid recent allegations of abuse and disciplinary action against soldiers accused of mistreating Palestinians.

The Israel Defense Forces is removing the Netzah Yehuda—a unique, ultraorthodox military unit—from the West Bank after soldiers in the battalion were suspended or demoted for allowing an elderly Palestinian-American to die in their custody earlier this year and beating Palestinian men with no justification, according to Israeli military investigations.

The Israeli military in recent months has moved to discipline soldiers accused of recent abuses and send out a public message that allegations of abuse undermine the nation's moral standing in the world.

On Tuesday, the Israeli military said that it had sentenced one Israeli soldier

from another unit to 10 days in military prison after he was filmed last week taunting an Israeli activist in the West Bank city of Hebron.

The soldier was one of five suspended after a confrontation with Israeli activists opposed to the military occupation in the West Bank. In the video, the soldier warned the Israeli that the incoming Israeli government, including far-right lawmaker Itamar Ben-Gvir, would crack down on activists in the West Bank.

“Ben-Gvir will make order here,” the soldier said in the video. “You’ve lost.”

Aviv Kochavi, the Israeli army’s chief of staff, released a public letter over the weekend to soldiers to condemn what he deemed “a few cases of the unjustified use of violent force, both against Israelis and Palestinians.”

“Such events tarnish the name of the unit in which the soldier serves, the Israel Defense Forces and the State of Israel,” he wrote.

In response to the disciplinary action, Mr. Ben-Gvir, who is expected to become Israel’s national-security minister in the new government being formed by former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, released a video with the father of the soldier in which he denounced the punishment as unjustified.



Palestinian protesters clashed with Israeli forces in the West Bank Tuesday.

PHOTO: MAMOUN WAZWAZ/ZUMA PRESS

“We cannot have anarchists coming to curse, spit and attack our heroic soldiers,” said Mr. Ben-Gvir. “Ten days in prison? It’s not reasonable, proportionate or appropriate. Our job is to back up our soldiers.”

The abuses are part of a series of problems that have inflamed tensions in the West Bank, where deadly confrontations between Israeli soldiers and Palestinians have reached highs not seen in years.

On Tuesday, five Palestinians were killed by Israeli forces, including two brothers who were shot dead near the West Bank city of Ramallah during an Israeli military operation that was denounced by Palestinian leaders as an “execution.” The Israeli military said the soldiers opened fire on Palestinians throwing Molotov cocktails and rocks at their patrol. Israeli officials said they were investigating.

In another incident on Tuesday, the Israeli military said Israeli police killed a Palestinian driver after he drove up onto a sidewalk and ran over an Israeli soldier walking near a West Bank gas station, according to security video posted on social media. The soldier was moderately injured and rushed to a nearby hospital.

The United Nations says that 2022 has been the deadliest year for Palestinians in the West Bank since 2005. More than 205 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli forces in the West Bank, Gaza Strip and Jerusalem, according to the Palestinian Authority Health Ministry. Thirty-one Israelis have been killed by Palestinians in Israel and the West Bank this year, according to the Israeli prime minister’s office, including one Israeli-Canadian teenage boy killed last week by a bus stop bombing in Jerusalem. That is the highest since 2014.

Netzah Yehuda, with just 500 soldiers in the battalion, has the highest conviction rate of any unit in the Israeli military for offenses against Palestinians since 2010, according to Israeli human-rights group Yesh Din.

The Israeli military has defended the male-only battalion, created in 1999 to try to integrate ultraorthodox Israelis into the army, as a valuable unit charged with the difficult challenge of confronting Palestinian militants in the West Bank.

The Israeli military said Netzah Yehuda would spend most of the next year in the Golan Heights, where they are far less likely to face combat or confrontation. The move, the military said, was designed to “diversify their operational deployment in multiple areas” before returning to the West Bank. Netzah Yehuda “will

continue to protect the citizens and the State of Israel,” the military said.

The soldiers came under their most intense scrutiny in January, when 78-year-old Palestinian-American Omar Assad died in their custody after being detained at an impromptu check point while heading home from visiting friends.

The series of problems led to calls from prominent Israeli lawmakers and ministers for the unique ultraorthodox unit to be disbanded.

Yesh Din said the unit was “merely a symptom” of the problems in the West Bank and warned that “the ongoing oppression, dispossession and apartheid will only result in more and more such incidents on the ground.”

On Monday, the Israeli military suspended three Druze soldiers suspected of throwing an explosive device at a Palestinian home near Bethlehem.

The Israeli military also ordered another soldier to spend 28 days on base after he was videotaped in Hebron earlier this month calling another Israeli activist a traitor for supporting Palestinians in the city.

Write to Dion Nissenbaum at Dion.Nissenbaum@wsj.com

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