Prominent Abbas critic dies in PA custody after ‘vicious beating’ by officers

June 24, 2021

By Aaron Boxerman

The Times of Israel

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/prominent-abbas-critic-dies-after-allegedly-violent-arrest-by-pa-police/>

A prominent critic of the Palestinian Authority died early on Thursday morning after what his family charged was a violent arrest by PA security forces.

Nizar Banat, 44, a resident of Dura, near Hebron, was well-known for his caustically sarcastic videos tearing into the PA leadership, including PA President Mahmoud Abbas, for alleged corruption and fraud. His Facebook page had over 100,000 followers.

In a statement confirming Banat’s death, Hebron Governor Jibrin al-Bakri said that a unit of PA security forces had entered a house where Banat was hiding in the morning with a warrant for his arrest.

“During [his arrest], his medical condition deteriorated, and he was immediately referred to the Hebron public hospital for treatment. Doctors at the scene who examined him found he was dead,” al-Bakri said.

According to al-Bakri, the PA public prosecutor’s office had already opened an investigation into Banat’s death.

Banat’s family, who say they were with him during the arrest, accused over twenty PA officers of violently beating him.

According to his relatives, the arrest took place around 3:30 a.m. The officers first began hitting Nizar with iron bars when he was asleep before stripping him naked and continuing to beat him. They also used pepper spray to neutralize him.

“They beat him for about eight straight minutes. Are you coming to kill him or what?” his cousin Mohammad told Palestinian reporters outside the Banat home in Dura, deeming it a “vicious beating.”

“A large force entered and aggressively took off all of his clothes then beat him for eight minutes straight,” Banat’s cousin, Hussein Banat, told AFP.

He said the officers used pepper spray to subdue his cousin.

Speaking to the Al-Quds news website, other members of Banat’s family accused security forces of “hitting him on the head with wooden sticks and bits of iron” and “deliberately murdering” him.

PA security services spokesperson Talal Dweikat said that Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh had ordered the formation of a committee to investigate Banat’s death.

According to Dweikat, the committee will be composed of PA Justice Minister Mohammad Shalaldeh, a representative from a prominent Palestinian rights group, a doctor to be named by Banat’s family and a member of the PA military intelligence force.

Dr. Samir Abu Zaarour, a forensic pathologist for the Independent Commission for Human Rights who attended the autopsy, said the death was “unnatural” and ruled out a heart attack or stroke. He said final results will only be available after further testing. Pictures of the body released by the family appear to show bruising on his head and legs.

Thousands of Palestinians protested in downtown Ramallah following the announcement of Banat’s death. Palestinian Authority security forces reportedly sought to disperse the rallu with tear gas.

“Leave, leave, leave, leave,” demonstrators chanted on a main road in the city, just a few hundred meters away from Abbas’s office.

Security forces fired tear gas, and one protester was hit in the face with a canister and hospitalized.

“Enough is enough,” protester Sameh Abu Awwad said in Ramallah, describing Banat as a man who had “not hesitated to speak the truth whatever the cost.”

Protesters marching down another thoroughfare repeated one of the most famous chants of the 2011 Arab revolutions: “The people want the fall of the regime.”

The European Union, the Palestinian Authority’s largest financial backer, said it was “shocked and saddened” by Banat’s death. On Tuesday, the EU backed a $425 million aid package to the Palestinian private sector, at least $200 million of which would be channeled through PA institutions.

“Our thoughts go to his family and loved ones.[A] full, independent, and transparent investigation should be conducted immediately,” the EU said in a statement.

The social media activist had already been detained multiple times by Palestinian security forces under the PA’s controversial cybercrimes law, which allows individuals to be arrested for “slandering” government institutions online. Human rights groups allege that the PA has abused the practice to arbitrarily arrest opponents for political purposes.

In December, Banat was arrested by PA security forces, who held him [in defiance of a court order](https://www.timesofisrael.com/pa-security-services-refuse-to-release-palestinian-who-criticized-leadership/) for more than a day before releasing him without explanation.

Banat was also a member of an independent parliamentary slate in the recently canceled Palestinian elections. In January, Abbas announced the first Palestinian elections in 15 years, prompting a flurry of long-awaited political organizing among Palestinians.

But in late April, Abbas canceled the elections just a month before they were scheduled to be held, saying that Israel was refusing to allow the vote to take place in East Jerusalem. Critics, including Banat, accused Abbas of fearing a loss to his rivals both in Fatah and in the Hamas terror group.

After the cancellation, Banat called for the immediate cessation of aid by the European Union to Abbas, sparking condemnations from Fatah officials, who accused him of collaborating with Israel. A few days later, unidentified gunmen fired at his house.

In one of his last videos before his death, Banat had criticized a recent deal between the PA and Israel to transfer 1.4 million soon-to-expire Pfizer vaccines in Israeli hands to the PA. In exchange, Ramallah would send its later shipment of new vaccines to Israel.

But last Friday, the PA canceled the deal after backlash on social media, saying that the vaccines were set to expire by the end of June. Israel has said the vaccines were sound and that most had expiration dates well past the end of the month.

Banat’s death sparked widespread outrage on Palestinian social media.

“The Palestinian Authority kills Nizar Banat, a human rights activist, a critic of Mahmoud Abbas, and a parliament candidate in the recently canceled elections. The only reason they killed him is his outspoken criticism of the PA’s corruption,” tweeted anti-corruption activist and Abbas critic Fadi Elsalameen.

The West Bank has seen an uptick in the arrests of activists opposed to the Palestinian Authority since the recent 11-day battle between Israel and Hamas in Gaza. The fighting saw the widely disliked PA leadership in Ramallah lose still more support, as its Hamas rivals rose in popularity.

On Tuesday, PA security forces arrested Issa Amro, another prominent activist from Hebron, for statements accusing the West Bank leadership of corruption. Amro was released pending a hearing on his case with the PA public prosecutor.

According to the Palestinian legal advocacy group Lawyers for Justice, at least 23 West Bank Palestinians were arrested by the PA for “political reasons” between May 2020 and May 2021. Another 20 were arrested for “exercising their right to freedom of speech,” the rights group said.

The Hamas terror group, which rules the Gaza Strip, condemned Banat’s death as an “assassination.”

“This premeditated crime reflects the intentions and behavior of the Abbas Authority and his security services toward our people, opposition activists and his political opponents,” said Hamas, which has been at odds with Abbas’s Fatah movement since a 2007 civil war between the two sides for control of Gaza.

Exiled Abbas rival Mohammad Dahlan called for “a wide popular and legal response to hold the killers accountable.”

“There are no words to describe the killing of the prominent national activist, the martyr, Nizar Banat,” tweeted Dahlan, who leads a Fatah breakaway faction known as the Democratic Reform Current.