

# Israel tightens grip on West Bank and Gaza

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Israel's latest military incursion into the West Bank, reoccupying Nablus and hunting down Palestinian activists, is once again justified as a response to the latest suicide bombing. But this stands reality on its head. For Israel has, to all intents and purposes, proclaimed military rule over the entire Palestinian Authority and merely has to decide where to next send in the tanks and helicopters—Jenin, Ramallah, Bethlehem, or the Gaza Strip. During such raids or preceding them, various Palestinian leaders or militants are assassinated, with the aim of provoking the next young man to strap explosives to his body and kill and maim Israeli civilians so that the Israeli Defence Forces may “retaliate”.

Israel's Deputy Defense Minister Dalia Rabin-Pelossof has denied that the IDF's increasingly frequent incursions into Palestinian territory are a precursor of a full-scale operation like that in Jenin. But in doing so she announced the Sharon government's next initiative, a plan to build a security fence between Israel and the West Bank “in a matter of weeks.”

The erection of a heavily-fortified razor-wire and concrete fence—the brainchild of Labour party Defence Minister, Binyamin Ben-Eliezer—is conceived of as the centre-piece of a plan to replace even the limited autonomy granted to the PA under the 1993 Oslo Accords with a form of Apartheid-style Bantustans, policed directly by the Israeli military, as a step towards Sharon's final goal of driving the Palestinians out and reincorporating the Occupied Territories into a Greater Israel.

Ben-Eliezer is proposing that the first stage of the fence will be between 70 and 80 kilometres long and subject to further expansion. Constructing the fence would itself involve annexing territory permanently to Israel. Military officials said the type of construction would be determined by the topography and it would not necessarily follow the so-called Green Line, delineating Israel from the West Bank. The Gaza Strip is already sealed off.

Whereas Palestinians would be fenced off from Israel,

the IDF would have the run of whatever was left of nominally Palestinian territory. Israeli defence analyst Ze'ev Schiff told Ha'aretz newspaper that in order to accommodate Jewish settlements inside the West Bank, “Israel will have to create corridors leading to and from such isolated settlements.” The fence would not provide total protection and IDF operations inside Palestinian areas would continue, he said.

Though the building of new Zionist settlements has supposed to have been banned, the settler population continues to expand. One group of settlers in the Binyamin area has launched a campaign to attract 1,000 families—about 4,500 people—to their 32 settlements by the end of the year. The head of the settlement project, Elazar Sela, said his aim was, “to bring some 1,000 families to the Binyamin area in order to... give new life and new impetus to all that is called settlements.”

Sharon has promised that not a single settlement will be dismantled. Instead they will continue to be guaranteed the best land, massive subsidies and the lion's share of the territories' water supplies while the Palestinians are herded into heavily fortified cantons and subject to daily repression.

The scale of Israel's military clampdown is evidenced by a report of Amnesty International (AI) noting that more than 8,500 Palestinians were arrested between February 27 and May 20. Many of those arrested were arbitrarily detained “for days without charge, access to a court, their lawyer or families” and subject to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment, and sometimes torture.

Palestinians rounded up during “Operation Defensive Shield” speak of being ordered to strip, blindfolded and bound with tight plastic handcuffs, often held squatting, sitting or kneeling, not allowed to go to the toilet, and deprived of food or blankets for up to 24 hours.

AI notes that a new military order issued on April 5 (Military Order 1500) allows for an initial period of 18 days detention without access to a lawyer, a judge or relatives. A military judge can extend the period of detention incommunicado up to 90 days.

The numbers held in administrative detention without charge or trial has skyrocketed. In May the IDF and the State Attorney gave figures ranging from 450 to 990 people in administrative detention, compared with the November 2001 figure of 32.

In a penetrating analysis of Israel's re-conquest of the occupied territories, Adam Keller of the Gush Shalom (Peace Block) movement noted, "since the beginning of April, all West Bank Palestinians have been living under an effectively restored direct military occupation, manifested in the Israeli Army and security services to sweep in, at any time and at any place, and arrest whoever they want. It doesn't make too much difference whether the military is actually present in a particular town or village or that it is spread just outside, imposing a tight closure and siege and subjecting passage to the next town to selectively granted permits.

"The Palestinian semi-sovereignty over several enclaves across the West Bank, which had been the heart of the Oslo process and which was supposed to widen and extend into complete statehood, has been effectively abolished with the tacit consent of the international community. In its place, a regime has been installed in many ways worse than the pre-1993 military government, which at least did not deny the Palestinians freedom of movement within the West Bank and which regarded itself as responsible for the maintenance of the Palestinian inhabitants' daily life. Its present-day successor shrugs off all such responsibility, throwing it upon a crippled Palestinian Authority which is systematically deprived of the ability to act—apart from being under a constant shrill demand to 'reform' itself."

Marwan Bishara, who teaches international relations at the American University of Paris and is the author of "Palestine/Israel: Peace or Apartheid," wrote an op-ed piece for the May 22 *International Herald Tribune* noting, "Israel is putting in place a de facto apartheid system in the occupied territories"

He explained, "According to the minutes of two recent meetings, Israeli army and government officials told representatives of donor countries that all major cities in the West Bank will be closed off and Palestinian travel between towns will no longer be possible without a permit issued through the Israeli military.

"Such permits will be valid for one month and allow for travel between 5 a.m. and 7 p.m. Movement of Palestinians to Israel and East Jerusalem will be prohibited. Similarly, the movement of Arab Israelis to the Palestinian territories will be prohibited."

Only goods deemed to be humanitarian are to be allowed into the Gaza Strip.

The economic and social impact of Israel's economic blockade of the PA and its military destruction of its infrastructure are devastating.

According to Bishara, the Palestinian economy shrunk by a third between September 2000 and December 2001, in addition to the 25 percent decrease during the seven-year Oslo peace process.

The Israeli invasion of the West Bank in March cost the Palestinians \$4 billion more, including \$360 million in damage and billions in lost earnings. The entire Palestinian gross national product in 1999 was \$3.5 billion.

Unemployment is above 50 percent in the towns and 70 percent in the refugee camps.

The United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) regional director, Khaled Adly, says that half a million Palestinians face severe food shortages and "hunger and malnutrition are rapidly increasing", especially amongst children. There has been "dramatically deteriorating" standards of living caused by restricted movement of goods across borders with Israel. The current shortfall of 740,000 metric tons of cereal in the PA would usually be met with commercial imports; so many Palestinians are finding it increasingly difficult to afford regular meals.

According to the World Bank, up to half of the PA population live on less than \$2 per day—the internationally recognised poverty line.

The WFP plans to provide 70,000 tons of food aid to those suffering most from a lack of food, particularly 360,000 "extremely poor," most of whom belong to families where the breadwinner is a single mother, elderly, disabled, or chronically ill.



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