

# Israel blocks funds of Palestinian Authority

Jean Shaoul  
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Israel has announced it will withhold \$127 million in monthly tax funds, about 70 percent of the Palestinian Authority's (PA) budget that it collects on the PA's behalf.

It is considering a raft of other measures against the Palestinians.

Israel's vindictive action came hours after Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas submitted an application to join the International Criminal Court, following the rejection by the United Nations Security Council of a resolution aimed at ending the decades-long Israeli occupation of Palestinian territory and the establishment of a Palestinian state by 2017.

Under the UN's Rome Statute, the ICC has the power to prosecute individuals accused of genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes committed since July 2002, when the statute came into force. Neither the US or Israel have signed up to the ICC, as their record of wars of aggression and criminal actions would open them up for prosecution.

If the PA's application is accepted, the Palestinians will be able, in three months' time, to pursue Israel through the ICC for war crimes against the Palestinians in Gaza in the wars of 2008-09, 2012 and 2014. Riyadh Mansour, the Palestinian ambassador to the UN, said it was a "very significant step," which was necessary to seek justice for crimes against the Palestinian people. Saeb Erekat, the Palestinian chief negotiator, confirmed Gaza would be one of the cases referred to the ICC and added that the Palestinians were putting together a file on Israeli settlement building in the West Bank that was seized during the 1967 war. Such activity also constitutes a war crime.

Shawan Jabarin, director of the Ramallah-based rights group Al-Haq, said the Palestinians had decided to file suit over Israel's actions in the West Bank and Gaza Strip starting from June 13, 2014, when Israel began a massive crackdown in the occupied territory. Israel used the kidnapping and murder of three Israeli teenagers to root out Hamas supporters, whom it claimed—without

evidence—were responsible. The deaths of the teenagers were later used as the pretext to launch a one-sided war on Hamas, which controls Gaza. More than 2,100 Palestinians, mostly civilians, were killed.

Washington and Tel Aviv have long opposed any move by the PA to take action in The Hague. Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu demanded that the ICC reject the Palestinian application out of hand, as the PA was not a state.

The Israeli moves are designed to bully into submission the cash-strapped PA, upon which many Palestinians depend for their livelihoods. On Sunday, Nissim Ben Sheetrit, director-general of Israel's Foreign Ministry, said that Israel's response to the Palestinian bid to join the ICC would be much harsher and more extensive than just freezing the PA's tax revenues. "Israel is about to switch from defence to attack mode," he said.

In a statement of breath-taking cynicism, Sheetrit said that Israel would not be launching a new wave of settlement construction and it had no interest in undermining security cooperation with the PA or causing its collapse. This was immediately contradicted by Strategic Affairs Minister Yuval Steinitz who said, "If the Palestinian Authority doesn't take a step back, I think we have to take much more severe steps," referring to a "gradual dissolution" of the PA. He added, "We should not aid the existence of this authority."

Speaking at a cabinet meeting on Sunday, Netanyahu said, "The Palestinian Authority has chosen to launch a confrontation with Israel." He added that Israel would not sit idly by but would respond. "We won't let them drag Israel Defence Force soldiers and officers to The Hague," he said, continuing, "The ones who must give an accounting are the heads of the Palestinian Authority, who formed an alliance with the Hamas war criminals."

The security cabinet will meet later this week to decide on the new measures.

Senior legal officials said that Israel was ready to counter the Palestinian move with its own lawsuits against Abbas and other Palestinian officials in the US and

elsewhere, either officially in the name of Israel or via pro-Israel organisations. They would argue that Abbas's partnership in a unity government with Hamas makes him complicit in their rocket attacks launched from Gaza on civilians in Israel.

They added that Jerusalem would be contacting Israel's friends in the US Congress to ensure enforcement of legislation requiring that the State Department stop US aid to the PA, some \$400 million a year, should the Palestinians take action against Israel at the ICC. The strongly worded law bans President Barack Obama from waiving any decision to halt aid to the PA. The incoming Congress will be controlled by the Republican Party.

Erekat condemned the Israeli measure, calling it a "new war crime" and said, "Israel is once again responding to our legal steps with further illegal collective punishments."

He added, "This is money that is Palestinian money, and therefore the decision of the Israeli government and Netanyahu to freeze it is against international law, and proves the justice of our request to the International Criminal Court."

It is not the first time Israel has frozen the monthly transfers. It imposed a similar sanction in April 2014, after Abbas applied to join a series of international treaties and conventions.

Abbas said he was discussing with Jordan, which holds a seat on the UN Security Council, plans to resubmit the resolution on Palestinian statehood when new members who are supportive of the Palestinians will take seats. Washington, however, is guaranteed to use its veto to kill any such resolution.

There is an element of electioneering in Tel Aviv's response, with Netanyahu competing fiercely with his right-wing coalition partners, particularly Economy Minister Naftali Bennett and his Jewish Home Party, over who has the harshest proposals for punishing the Palestinians. Nevertheless, these events and Tel Aviv's response are indicative of Israel's extreme nervousness and increasing diplomatic isolation. After all, the ICC has long been under US control, with the vast majority of cases referred to the ICC from sub-Saharan Africa and heard according to the degree to which they are flavour of the month with Washington.

The governments of Sweden and Belgium and the legislators of France, Britain, Portugal, Ireland, and the European Union itself have voted to recognise Palestine, a symbolic move that will not immediately affect their diplomatic status, but demonstrates the growing European

impatience with Israel for actions that cut across strategic interests and destabilise the oil-rich region.

Relations have deteriorated particularly with France, which voted in favour of the UN resolution on Palestinian statehood. Over the last few months, a number of meetings and events with French organisations have been cancelled at the last minute, including a conference of Israeli and French high-tech companies and a visit by French lawyers to Israel. Although different reasons were given for each, Israeli officials said there was a feeling that the French were trying to link its relations with Israel to progress in negotiations with the Palestinians.

Israel has taken action to exonerate itself and challenge any UN Human Rights Council commission of inquiry into possible war crimes, which will not investigate if Israel carries out its own criminal investigations. A total of 85 incidents arising from the 50-day long assault on Gaza last summer are under legal investigation.

The Israeli defence establishment is in an uproar over 13 investigations launched by the Military Police under instructions from the Military Advocate General's Office, in what they see as persecution by the IDF's legal authorities. This is despite the fact that few charges have ever been brought against officers for either criminal or disciplinary infractions in battle.

It is unlikely that any conclusions to these investigations or any of the parliamentary inquiries into the war will be published before the March 17 elections—if indeed they are ever published at all.



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