

Israel escalates war on all fronts against Palestinians

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Human rights organisation B'Tselem has highlighted the massive increase in Israel's attacks against the Palestinians in 2021, the deadliest year since Israel's criminal assault on Gaza in 2014.

According to B'Tselem, Israel's security forces killed 313 Palestinians in the Palestinian territories it has illegally occupied since the 1967 Arab Israeli war: 236 in the Gaza Strip, almost all during the 11-day assault in May, and 77 in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. Another six were killed either at the hands of soldiers or armed settlers. A further 25 Palestinians in Gaza were killed by rockets fired at Israel that landed within Gaza, while it was unclear whether another eight were killed by Israeli forces or Palestinian rocket fire. In the West Bank, Israel's de facto subcontractors, the Palestinian Authority (PA) security forces, killed two Palestinians during their arrest.

Of the 232 Palestinians killed by the military during the May assault on Gaza, at least 137 were non-combatants, including 53 minors and 38 women, many of whom were killed during the criminal bombardment of densely populated areas, a consistent feature of Israel's operations. While senior Israeli officials claim that lethal fire is used as a "last resort" in accordance with Israeli and international law, this is clearly routine with no one held accountable.

B'Tselem investigated 336 incidents of settler violence, up from 251 in 2020, that resulted in at least eight Palestinian civilian deaths, including two minors, at the hands of security forces or settlers that occurred during the weeks of protests against the establishment of the illegal Eviatar outpost on Palestinian land. Violence was not simply a case of a few unruly settlers out of control, but a strategy aimed at taking over more and more Palestinian land with the full support of the military and the government.

Following an agreement with the government in June, the 50 settlers at Eviatar agreed to leave and allow Israeli troops to establish a base in the area, while the defence ministry studied land claims to assess whether to recognise a future settlement.

Since then, Israeli soldiers have prevented Palestinian

farmers from accessing hundreds of dunams (one dunam is equal to one quarter of an acre) of their own land, blocked agricultural roads and repeatedly damaged them. On July 9, soldiers fired on Palestinian protesters, injuring nearly 400 people, making it clear that that the settlement will get government approval.

Civilian deaths and Israel's rules of engagement

As well as killing and wounding Palestinian protesters, soldiers killed at least 36 Palestinians, including four minors and five women, accused of attacking or attempting to attack Israeli security forces or civilians with a car, knife, firearm or even stones. B'Tselem cited two of the most egregious examples of such unlawful shootings: the killing of Osama Mansur, who was not endangering the soldiers' lives and was mistakenly suspected of trying to run them over; and of Fahmeyeh al-Hrub, 60, who was moving slowly towards the soldiers who killed her.

Together with right-wing settler groups' demands that the military stop "tying the hands" of Israeli soldiers in the West Ban, citing such attacks provides the context for last month's decision of the military, which has for years granted its soldiers near-total immunity and little legal accountability, to revise its Rules of Engagement (RoE) in relation to its open-fire policies in the occupied West Bank. Under the new rules, Israeli soldiers may shoot, even kill, fleeing Palestinians, including children, for allegedly throwing rocks at Israeli "civilian" cars, even when they no longer pose any danger. By "civilians," the new army manual means the armed settlers who have taken over land in the occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem and killed and wounded numerous Palestinians over the decades. The new RoE do not apply to armed settlers that assault or attempt to assault soldiers.

The security forces now have carte blanche to shoot-to-

kill, without any fear of retribution in the courts since they are acting in accordance with the army's manual of operations. This enables Israel to plead in any investigation into human rights violations and war crimes in the occupied territories by the International Criminal Court that no war crimes have taken place, since the killing of Palestinians have been carried out in accordance with Israel's military code and judicial system.

Israel's soldiers and police have become judge, jury and executioner, free of all restraint.

Demolitions

Israeli authorities demolished 295 residential buildings in the West Bank and in East Jerusalem, the highest number since 2016, making 895 Palestinians, 463 of them children, homeless; in addition to 548 non-residential buildings, including warehouses, agricultural structures, cisterns, businesses and public structures, the highest number since 2012.

Israel uses the Emergency Statutes of 1945, left over from the British Mandate, in the occupied territories to claim these demolitions were a matter of "law enforcement" as the homes and structures were built without permits. In the 1950s Menachem Begin, leader of the Irgun terrorist gang and future Likud prime minister, deemed this legislation when used against Jews as "worse than the Nazi legislation."

The use of these laws serves to block almost all Palestinian development in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, while greenlighting settlement expansion. The Palestinians have no option but to build without a licence, providing the pretext for the Israeli authorities to issue demolition orders.

Last month, Menachem Mazuz, a former attorney general and judge in Israel's highest court, told *Ha'aretz* that he considers house demolitions as collective punishment, illegal and immoral, as well as ineffective. His frustration over the issue was a major reason for his leaving the court in 2020, some five years before his tenure expired.

Arrests, imprisonment and administrative detention

A report by several Palestinian organisations, including the Commission of Detainees Affairs, the Palestinian Prisoner Society (PPS), Addameer Prisoner Support and Human

Rights Association, and Wadi Hilweh Information Center, revealed that the Israeli army had arrested nearly 8,000 Palestinians in 2021, including more than 1,300 minors and 184 women.

There were around 4,600 prisoners and detainees, including 34 women and a girl and about 160 children and minors, in Israeli jails. Some 547 prisoners were serving life sentences. According to the Palestinian News and Information Agency (WAFA), Israel holds 10 journalists in its prisons, while 384 Israeli violations against journalists in the West Bank were registered in 2021.

Addameer said that there about 500, including nine members of the Palestinian Legislative Council and four minors, in administrative detention—open-ended detention by the military authorities based on secret evidence without charge or trial. This is a practice that Michael Lynk, the United Nations human rights expert monitoring the occupied territories, has called "an anathema in any democratic society that follows the rule of law."

Last month, Israeli military officials, concerned that the death of 40-year-old Hisham Abu Hawash—who had been on hunger strike for four months to protest his open-ended detention—would spark civil unrest in the West Bank and Gaza, suspended his detention saying his failing health meant he no longer posed a danger to the state.

Nearly 600 prisoners were sick, including several with cancer. On Tuesday, rallies took place in the West Bank in a show of solidarity with Palestinian prisoners in Israel, with calls to free Nasser Abu Hamid, battling cancer in detention. Qadura Fares, the head of the PPS, a prisoners' rights advocacy group, said that Israel "is practicing slow killing" of Palestinian prisoners through "medical negligence."



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