

# Israel ramps up provocations against the Palestinians in the occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem

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With attention focused on Israel's imperialist-backed genocide in Gaza, its fascist government, settlers and security forces have intensified attacks on the West Bank and East Jerusalem, illegally occupied by Israel since the 1967 Arab-Israeli war.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's objective is to drive out as many of the three million Palestinians as possible, mounting provocation after provocation to incite retaliation, as occurred on October 7, that can then be used to sanction a pre-planned campaign of mass murder and ethnic cleansing of the West Bank before moving on to Israel's two million Palestinian citizens. It is part of his broader plan to annex the territory and prevent the Palestinians becoming a majority in Israel/Palestine.

Netanyahu's annexation plans, along with measures aimed at altering the demographic composition, character and status of occupied East Jerusalem, are neither new nor secret, with numerous government ministers and officials calling for Israel's control over the entire area "from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea."

Netanyahu's Likud party charter from 1977 plainly states, "between the Sea and the Jordan there will only be Israeli sovereignty." He has emphasized that it is "his insistence that has prevented the establishment of a Palestinian state that would have constituted an existential danger to Israel."

"As long as I am prime minister," Netanyahu has said, "I will continue to strongly insist on this."

## The West Bank

Since taking office at the end of 2022, the most right-wing government in Israel's history has approved a raft of measures aimed at expanding the settlements in the West Bank, including: legalising nine illegal settler outposts and advancing a further six; establishing 26 new outposts including at least 10 since October 7; giving fascist finance minister Bezalel Smotrich charge of most of the Civil Administration in the West Bank; and shortening the procedure of approving settlement construction while giving Smotrich the authority to approve one of the stages. The first six months saw the construction of 13,000 housing units in settlements, nearly three times the total in 2022.

The government has amended the Disengagement Law, cancelling the ban on Israeli citizens from staying in areas from which Israel withdrew as part of the 2005 disengagement from Gaza, thereby allowing Israelis to enter evicted settlement areas like any other area in Area C that is under full Israeli military control. This changes the northern West Bank region from a contiguous Palestinian territory into an area for settlers, outposts,

and settlements, in effect legalizing the illegal outpost of Homesh.

The ethnic cleansing that started in 1947 has continued to the extent that there are now 517,000 settlers living in the West Bank, nearly double the total 20 years ago, and more than 200,000 in East Jerusalem.

The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) mount daily search and arrest operations on the West Bank, many lasting hours and even days, that have killed more than 400 Palestinians since October 7. Israeli soldiers are often stationed around hospitals, preventing ambulances from reaching the injured.

In a raid in Jenin Wednesday, Israeli forces killed three Palestinians in a massive arrest operation and destroyed infrastructure and buildings with bulldozers and armoured vehicles. The IDF said they had detained 14 "suspects". In a raid on the Jenin Refugee Camp last November, the IDF arrested at least 100 residents and fatally shot an eight and a 15-year-old, while demolishing infrastructure, including water, electricity and sewage networks, and homes.

*Al Jazeera* reported that, as of January 10, 2024, Israeli security forces had arrested nearly 6,000 Palestinians in the West Bank since October 7, with an estimated 3,000 being held under administrative detention. At least 7,000 Palestinian prisoners are currently being held in atrocious conditions in Israeli jails. Since October 7, conditions have deteriorated, on national security minister Itamar Ben-Gvir's explicit orders, with the incidence and severity of beatings and other forms of torture on the increase. At least nine Palestinians arrested in the current campaign have died in Israeli custody.

The IDF has raided Ramallah, the administrative centre of the Palestinian Authority (PA), on an almost daily basis, damaging homes and businesses.

Fascistic armed groups of settlers terrorise the Palestinians with impunity, protected by the military. The UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) has recorded 573 Israeli settler attacks against Palestinians resulting in 51 Palestinian casualties, damage to Palestinian-owned property (459 incidents), or both casualties and damage to property (63 incidents) since October 7.

With much of the IDF deployed to Gaza and Israel's northern border with Lebanon, the military has sent thousands of reservists as part of newly formed "regional defense" battalions to the West Bank. It has expanded its "emergency response units," composed of heavily armed civilians and largely far-right settlers, leading to a huge upsurge in violence and harassment.

Dror Sadot, spokesperson for the Israeli human rights group B'Tselem, said, "What we're seeing is something that looks like joint militias of settlers and soldiers," and that "No one knows who's who and who's giving the orders." Attacks typically peak during the months when the olive crop is harvested.

More than 1,000 Palestinians have been evicted from 16 villages that have been razed to the ground. On February 1, US President Joe Biden felt obliged to make a token gesture of protest, sanctioning four Israeli settlers who have been attacking Palestinians in the West Bank, with other countries following suit. Israeli officials have called on Israeli banks to ignore the sanctions.

Israel has imposed extreme restrictions making it impossible for about half of West Bank Palestinian farmers to harvest their olives. In a good year, the harvest brings \$200 million into the Palestinian economy. Claiming the restrictions are to enable the military to protect Palestinians from settler attacks, the IDF then cancelled “protected” days, leaving them unable to harvest their entire crop or prepare the land for winter crops.

The war has had a devastating impact on the Palestinian economy. Labourers in Israel’s construction industry and the settlements have had their entry permits withdrawn, leading to the loss of 276,000 jobs (32 percent of employment) by December.

The military has set up 400 checkpoints, affecting a further 67,000 workers who work in governorates other than their place of residence. It has pushed up costs and hindered production. Farmers unable to get their goods to market have suffered devastating losses.

The announcement that some of UNRWA’s biggest donors, such as Germany, the United States and the European Union, have halted funding for the UN agency, which provides vital humanitarian and social services for the Palestinian refugees of 1948 and 1967 and their descendants, will devastate living conditions in the West Bank where there are 871,000 people dependent on its support.

In a deliberate attempt to engineer the Palestinian Authority’s collapse, Israel withheld \$164 million of its \$205 million monthly revenues, leaving the PA unable to pay salaries to its 144,000 staff on time or in full. Total deductions in 2023 amounted to \$1.5 billion or 25 percent of the PA’s revenues. The PA’s Finance Minister Shoukry Bishara has said it will run out of money by the end of February.

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) estimated that, taken together, this meant that the West Bank had suffered economic losses of \$500 million a month in October and November. According to the PA’s economic ministry, the West Bank’s economy contracted by more than 20 percent in the last quarter of 2023, with one third of businesses closed or on short time and daily losses of \$25 million.

Volker Türk, the UN human rights chief, described the situation in the occupied West Bank as “potentially explosive.”

## East Jerusalem

Violent clashes broke out between protesters and Israeli security forces after October 7, despite closures throughout East Jerusalem, leading to the killing of six Palestinians and dozens of detentions typically based on their social media activity. The military has led numerous incursions into Shuafat, the Palestinian refugee camp within city boundaries, leading to mass arrests and destruction of property. Palestinians, including children, are routinely harassed, stopped and searched.

The authorities limit access to the Old City and especially to the al-Aqsa Mosque compound, with restrictions on who can pray there. There is a heavy Israeli police presence, with 2,500 officers and volunteers patrolling. Jewish worshippers have continued to push their way into al-Aqsa under police protection to pray at the site in violation of the longstanding arrangements with Jordan governing the site.

Ben-Gvir used the shooting of an Israeli at a checkpoint near occupied East Jerusalem to call for even tighter restrictions on freedom of

movement and to promise more weapons for Israeli citizens. Smotrich used the shooting to demand the expansion of Maale Adumim and nearby settlements.

Ben-Gvir now plans to tighten restrictions on who can enter the al-Aqsa compound during Ramadan (March 10 to April 10), with a ban on Israel’s Palestinian citizens between the ages of 10 and 70 and a complete ban on Palestinians from the West Bank coming to worship at the mosque. This is also the date announced for a ground invasion of Rafah in Gaza to begin, which will collectively set the Occupied Territories and the entire Middle East alight.

## The Palestinian Authority’s role

The Palestinians facing escalating violence from the army and settlers also confront the treacherous political leadership of the Fatah-dominated Palestinian Authority, led by the 87-year-old ailing multimillionaire President Mahmoud Abbas.

Deepening Palestinian hostility towards the PA due to its corruption, cronyism and subservience to Israel has cut across the US Biden administration’s efforts to use it to front nominal efforts toward a “two-state solution” and establishing some form of Palestinian rule of Gaza after military operations end. This is a transparent mechanism for bringing US regional allies, including Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Qatar, Turkey and Jordan, on board his broader military aim of a war with Iran.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken has toured the Middle East capitals to convince them that the PA is a “good choice” for governing Gaza after the war. It is recommended to Blinken by its anti-Hamas stance and willingness to act as Israel’s security subcontractor.

The PA has for years sought to suppress any opposition to its administrative control of the West Bank and support for other factions, including Hamas, arresting its members and fighting a civil war against the group in Gaza in 2007 after Hamas won a surprise victory in the January 2006 elections. It cooperated with Israel’s blockade of Gaza and prevented any action in the West Bank during Israel’s wars on the besieged enclave in 2008–2009, 2012 and 2014. Fatah became so unpopular that Abbas refused to hold any elections after 2006.

The PA has given Israeli settlers a free hand to attack Palestinian farmers, towns and villages and done nothing to stop the IDF’s search and arrest raids in Area A, designated by the Oslo Accords as under the PA’s full control.

The PA’s support for Israel since October 7 has been even starker, with its security forces suppressing solidarity demonstrations and marches, firing live ammunition at attendees and detaining people who expressed support for the Palestinian resistance.

Having done everything in his power to demonstrate his Fatah-led administration’s subservience to Israel and its imperialist backers, Abbas has signaled his willingness to accept a role for the PA as a front for Israel’s military rule over Gaza after its destruction. Abbas has hosted Blinken and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan in their visits to Ramallah to demand the PA to “bring new blood” into the government.

Russia is no less willing than the US to use the PA in the service of Israel to police the Palestinians. Speaking at the Munich Security Conference on Sunday, PA Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh announced that Russia had invited Palestinian factions to meet in Moscow on February 26. He declared, “We are ready to engage. If Hamas is not, then that’s a different story. We need Palestinian unity.” Qatar has said that Hamas was willing to discuss the formation of a technocratic government for both the West Bank and Gaza under the authority of the PLO.

Abbas's abasement in front of US imperialism is the shared end point of all the bourgeois nationalist movements that sought "independence" from their colonial masters but ended up ever more dependent upon outside powers to impose their rule. The project of building an independent Palestinian state in the Occupied Territories became the means for the Palestinian bourgeoisie in a handful of families to enrich themselves, while oppressing the Palestinians and confining them in impoverished Bantustans in the West Bank and an open-air prison in Gaza.

The failure of the secular bourgeois nationalist PLO to secure a Palestinian state or even improve the Palestinians' living conditions was to give rise to Hamas, but the Islamist movement is no less of a dead end.

The liberation of the Palestinian people can never be achieved via the building of a caricature nation-state in a process brokered by imperialism. It is the task of the working class, in a common struggle across national and religious differences, against imperialism and its local agents, both Israeli and Arab, for a multinational state with equality for all its citizens and for the United Socialist States of the Middle East. Only this can put an end to oppression, poverty, ethnic cleansing and war.



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