

# Israel's Palestinian citizens strike and protest against government-sanctioned crime epidemic

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Last Thursday, more than 100,000 of Israel's Palestinian citizens took to the streets of Sakhnin and Umm Al-Fahm, in the north of Israel, and other predominantly Arab towns and villages across the country, closing businesses and disrupting daily life. They protested the epidemic of organised crime, killings and violence in Palestinian communities in Israel that has gone unchecked by the Israeli authorities.

Demonstrators waved black flags and accused the openly racist National Security Minister Itamar Ben Gvir of treating Arab lives as expendable. Some chanted slogans that drew clear links between the blind eye turned—even support offered—to criminal organizations and the genocidal war in Gaza and ethnic cleansing and oppression in the West Bank.

The near daily homicides, rampant extortion, protection rackets and violence in Palestinian towns and cities inside Israel is de facto Israeli government policy. At times tacitly encouraged lawlessness is seen as a means of pushing Palestinians to leave.

The protests came in solidarity with a three-day strike in Sakhnin that began after several shop owners were targeted in a harrowing wave of extortion-related shootings. Videos were posted by the perpetrators to terrorise the town. Doctors, lawyers, teachers and other professionals joined in, as well as Israel's Bedouin citizens in the south of the country who also held a parallel demonstration in Rahat, Israel's largest Bedouin city.

Such was the strength of feeling that the High Follow-Up Committee for Arab Citizens—made up of Arab mayors, Knesset members and other community representatives, felt compelled to call a one-day general strike, observed in almost all the Arab towns and cities. It also called a mass demonstration in Sakhnin, where more

than 50,000 people gathered.

The strikes and protests highlighted the widespread distress felt throughout the Arab community not just over the violence of criminal gangs—involved in protection, loan-sharking, drug trafficking and money laundering—but also deteriorating social and economic conditions. No one goes out on the streets after dark. Businesses are closing out of fear. Young people are leaving the towns.

In 2025, by far the deadliest year, 255 Palestinians were killed by gangs. Already this year, not yet a month old, 19 people have been killed in incidents linked to criminal networks. Just 10-15 percent of the murder cases are solved by the police, widely seen as reflective of deliberate state policy.

Israel's Palestinian communities, which constitute 21 percent of Israel's 10.2 million population, have long suffered neglect at the hands of the Israeli authorities. This includes planning restrictions, land expropriations and far lower funding of public housing and services than Jewish communities.

Israel has enacted more than 60 laws entrenching the second-class status of its Palestinian citizens—those and their descendants who survived the ethnic cleansing of the Nakba in 1948, when more than 75 percent of the Palestinian population was expelled from their homes to make way for the Zionist state. In 2018, this second-class status was written into Israel's Basic Law in its infamous Jewish Nationality Act.

Discrimination against Palestinian citizens has starved the municipal budgets of funds and pushed almost half of all families into poverty, while the unemployment rate has risen to 25 percent. These are the material causes driving young people into informal protection and extortion rackets, whose violence has been fuelled by the 240,000 rifles that Ben-Gvir has made available to Israelis since

the start of the October 7 genocide—many of which have almost certainly ended up in the hands of criminal gangs.

Last month, the government cut \$68 million that had been allocated to social and educational programmes for Palestinian citizens of Israel under its Five-Year Plan and transferred the funds to the Shin Bet, Israel's internal security agency, and the police “for the purpose of combating crime in Arab society.”

In reality, these cuts will further exacerbate the inequality and economic conditions that fuel crime. As the Adalah Legal Center for Arab Minority Rights in Israel said, “Diverting these funds to the Shin Bet and the police is part of a broader policy of militarizing and over-policing Palestinian communities, using high crime rates as a pretext rather than addressing the root causes of structural inequality.”

The authors of this move are the far-right National Security Minister Ben-Gvir and Social Equality Minister May Golan. Ben-Gvir, who has presided over the doubling of the homicide rate, has blamed “Arab culture” for the violence and accused local politicians of “turning a blind eye to criminal activity”.

The secular Arab coalition party Hadash-Ta'al—the former including the Stalinist Communist Party and other left groups—joined the protest but directed the movement to appeal to the government. Lawmaker Ahmad Tibi, the co-leader of Hadash-Ta'al said that the strike was “a civil cry for help.” He added that it “was not a demand for preferential treatment but something much more basic: that the state fulfil its duty toward its citizens”.

While the strike drew support from the Jewish-Arab NGO Standing Together, as well as the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, the participants in the strike and the mass rallies were overwhelmingly Palestinian.

Israel's opposition party leaders—opposed to Netanyahu as an individual, and on a pro-Zionist basis—expressed sympathy for the demonstration. They criticised the government for failing to protect Israel's Arab citizens from the protection racketeers. But they did nothing to rally their support base behind the protests.

It must be stated plainly: appeals to Netanyahu and the Zionist state for “increased public security” would, if heeded, result in the exact opposite of security and justice. What would follow is the expansion of police powers and the suppression of dissent, with the underlying social causes of gang violence left unaddressed.

Palestinian workers can only resolve the social, economic and political issues they confront by asserting their political independence from all the national

bourgeois parties, whether Arab or Zionist, including those who promise “tougher public security”.

They must demand social, not merely punitive, solutions: mass jobs programmes; housing; education, health and youth services; community policing democratically controlled by neighbourhood committees; and the redirection of Israel's military budget—a massive 17 percent of the 2026 budget, one of the highest percentages in the world—to social needs.

They must turn to Jewish Israelis whose social position is fast deteriorating—21 percent now live in poverty—amid Netanyahu's genocidal war against in Palestinians in Gaza, the push to drive the Palestinians out of the West Bank, almost daily strikes on Lebanon and Syria, and threats of a renewed offensive against Iran.

What is needed is the construction of democratic, rank-and-file committees in workplaces and working-class neighbourhoods that cut across religious and ethnic divisions. These can organise to defend community safety, provide aid, conduct inquiries into murders and rackets, and prosecute corrupt individuals who profit from gang activity. They can organise coordinated strikes to combat the arms industry and secure resources for public services.

As well as raising concrete demands for jobs, housing and services, this struggle must be linked to the broader international issues: militarism, war and the interventions and malign influence of imperialist and regional powers.

Jewish and Arab workers must forge their unity in a struggle to overthrow and replace the Zionist state and the various Arab bourgeois regimes and forge the United Socialist States of the Middle East. The decisive political task is to build sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International in Israel/Palestine and across the region to lead the working class in this struggle.



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