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New challenges to Israel's strategies of control

Beyond Sheikh Jarrah



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Preventing a repeat of recent violence requires EU countries to put greater pressure on Israel – based on international law – to ensure equal rights for all its citizens and residents, as well as to accept Palestinian sovereignty.

From an outside viewpoint, Israel and Palestine bring to mind the tale of the frog being boiled alive. Israel is a securitised society whose democratic values and morality apply only to its in-group of Israeli Jews. Palestinians live in a second-class,

besieged or occupied society. Both risk 'boiling' in cycles of repression, violence and victimhood. But their own experiences differ starkly. While Palestinians have largely been forced into the hot water and know they are in a cul-de-sac of discrimination and repression, the water is only lukewarm for Israel due to its dominance of the conflict. The recent violence, however, points to several factors that risk raising the water temperature for Israel.

What happened?

On 20 May 2021, weeks of crisis and violence ended with a ceasefire between the Israeli government and Hamas in which the former invoked its 'right of self-defence' and the latter its 'right to resist the occupier'. But it all started in Jerusalem with the Israeli closure of the Damascus gate area to Palestinian gatherings, the threat of more evictions in Sheikh Jarrah, and Israeli police violence on the Al-Aqsa compound. The subsequent rocket attacks by Hamas and aerial bombardment by Israel took place alongside protests, riots and violence inside Israel between Israeli Arabs¹ (20% of the population) and Israeli Jews (80% of the population), with police often standing by. International condemnation of heavy-handed Israeli violence was as loud in its press releases as it was inaudible in its actions. The US backed Israel by blocking at least three UN Security Council initiatives before calling seriously for calm.

One might think that not much was different from the usual pattern of escalating violence, international rhetorical indignation, and a return to the status quo. The news cycle has indeed moved on, and Israel got off scot-free apart from more rockets than expected and a small number of regrettable casualties. As usual, Palestinian civilians living in Gaza paid the highest price of the conflict. Yet, there were also departures from the usual conflict pattern.

- To begin with, Israeli efforts to establish more control over the Al-Aqsa complex continue to turn a conflict over land that is limited to Palestine into a religious conflagration spanning the entire Middle East. As the region's authoritarian Arab governments do not seem to care much about Al-Aqsa beyond rhetorical indignation (not necessarily true for their citizens), the short-term cost to Israel are most likely limited to delaying the speed of its normalisation with the Arab world ('the Abraham Accords'). But Israeli

actions increasingly risk encouraging radical mobilisation and violent extremism at the social and transnational level across the region in the medium term. In the long term, transitions towards democracy in the region also pose a risk to Israel.

- Moreover, protests and violence inside Israel showed that Israeli society is fractured beyond its liberal, religious and nationalist-right Jewish populations. There is also a stark divide between Israeli Arab and Israeli Jewish citizens. Israeli Arabs used to focus more on their socioeconomic problems than on the conflict. But recent events made clear that they view these problems as having the same root as problems of discrimination plaguing Palestinians elsewhere: the policies of the Israeli state.
- Finally, Hamas fired an unparalleled volume of rockets into Israel and with much greater precision with help from, at a minimum, Iran. Rather than being contained by siege, it appears that Gaza's desperate humanitarian crisis offers Israel's regional rivals an entry point for bringing pressure to bear.

To appreciate the significance of these departures, we must look at the trends that enabled them. Even though the essence of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is straightforward – competing claims on land based on different historical-religious concepts and identities – the ways in which Israel has dominated the conflict for decades are both subtle and complex.²

Trends leading to crisis

By creating the state of Israel, the end of one tragedy – the Holocaust – proved to be the beginning of another. From 1948 onwards, Jewish leaders sought to drive as many Palestinians as possible from the lands

1 Also called Israeli Palestinians. We use the term applied by the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics.

2 Weizman, E., *Hollow land: Israel's architecture of occupation*, London: Verso, 2012; Human Rights Watch, *A Threshold Crossed: Israeli Authorities and the Crimes of Apartheid and Persecution*, HRW, 2021; Haaretz, [online](#), 21 January 2020.

they conquered and to acquire as much land as they could.³ Golda Meir put it even more starkly in 1969: 'It was not as though there was a Palestinian people in Palestine considering itself as Palestinian people and we came and threw them out and took their country away from them. They did not exist.'⁴

Today, a bundle of Israeli strategies share the objective of re-establishing the biblical-historical state of Israel to the detriment of several Palestinian population groups. These populations have been intentionally segmented by Israel to facilitate achievement of this objective: a) discrimination of Israeli Arabs as second-class citizens, b) containment of Gazans through siege, c) expropriation of East-Jerusalemites and d) exploitation as well as displacement of West Bankers (see Map). Tel Aviv's strategies towards Israeli Arabs and Gazans (a and b) are essentially control-focused, whereas Israeli strategies towards the West Bank and East-Jerusalem are displacement-focused (c and d). Strategies of control reduce the cost of implementing strategies of displacement.

With time, Israeli methods have become less violent and more administrative / pseudo-legalistic, in line with the state's increasing capabilities. Where the Israeli appropriation of the village of Deir Yassin in 1948 required Jewish militia to massacre its inhabitants, the postponed expulsion of Sheikh Jarrah's citizens in 2021 is being accomplished by court order. In political and legal terms respectively, the UN Security Council and the International Court of Justice have assessed most of these Israeli strategies as being in violation of international law.⁵ Many international peace initiatives – including the 1993/95 Oslo Accords – failed to halt them.⁶

Since 2009, the Israeli approach of segmentation has proved successful under the governments of Prime Minister Netanyahu. Consider the growing marginalisation of Israeli Arabs, three Gaza wars that triggered no international action to speak of, prevention of any resurgence of organised political Palestinian activity in East-Jerusalem, and maintaining a pliant Palestinian Authority. Yet the recent violence suggests that Israel's control strategies related to Israeli Arabs and Gazans face new problems.

Israel's 2 million citizens of Arab descent advocated more loudly for equal rights. Yet, compared with other groups of Palestinians, their suppression is legally more difficult for Tel Aviv and harder to defend internationally. As this group of citizens has been consistently marginalised politically, discriminated against, underserved and painted as enemies of the Israeli-Jewish state, it has less to lose than is commonly assumed.⁷ Israeli Arabs lived under martial law before 1967 and have been second-class citizens since. The Nation State Law even formalised this status in 2018.

In addition, with help from Iran, instead of being contained Hamas might be capable of creating a more modest version of Hezbollah's 'rocket front' to Israel's north. Both fronts would join a similar threat from Iran-linked forces in Syria and Iraq. While Israeli conventional military supremacy remains unchallenged, it has not faced asymmetric warfare of the Iranian variety.

If Israeli control strategies related to Israeli Arabs and Gazans start consuming more resources and incur higher costs, while Palestinians in East-Jerusalem and the West Bank unite under a revitalised PLO in a campaign of nonviolent resistance, Tel Aviv will face a challenge surpassing the first Intifada of the late 1980s.

3 This is well documented by the New Israeli Historians. See: Morris, B., *Righteous Victims*, New York: Vintage Books, 2001.

4 Cited in Nusseibeh, S., *Once upon a country: A Palestinian life*, London: Halban, 2007, p. 172.

5 For example the Fourth Geneva Convention, Art. 1 of the UN Charter (on self-determination) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

6 Lovatt, H. *The end of Oslo: A new European strategy on Israel-Palestine*, ECFR, 2020, [online](#).

7 Averbukh, L., *Towards Jewish-Arab Normalization in Israel*, Berlin: SWP, 2021; OECD, *Economic survey of Israel*, Paris: OECD, 2018. Note that the Israeli government launched a ILS 15 billion community improvement plan in 2015.

THE POLITICAL AND DEMOGRAPHIC SITUATION OF ISRAEL AND PALESTINE

POLITICAL CONTEXT

-  AREA ANNEXED BY ISRAEL
-  AREA CONTROLLED BY HAMAS
-  WEST BANK AREA A (CIVIL AND ADMINISTRATIVE CONTROL BY THE PALESTINIAN AUTHORITY)
-  WEST BANK AREA B (PALESTINIAN CIVIL CONTROL AND JOINT ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN SECURITY CONTROL)
-  WEST BANK AREA C (FULL ISRAELI CIVIL AND SECURITY CONTROL)

SOURCE: UNITED NATIONS

ISRAELI POPULATION CLASSIFIED AS ARAB BY ISRAEL (2019)*

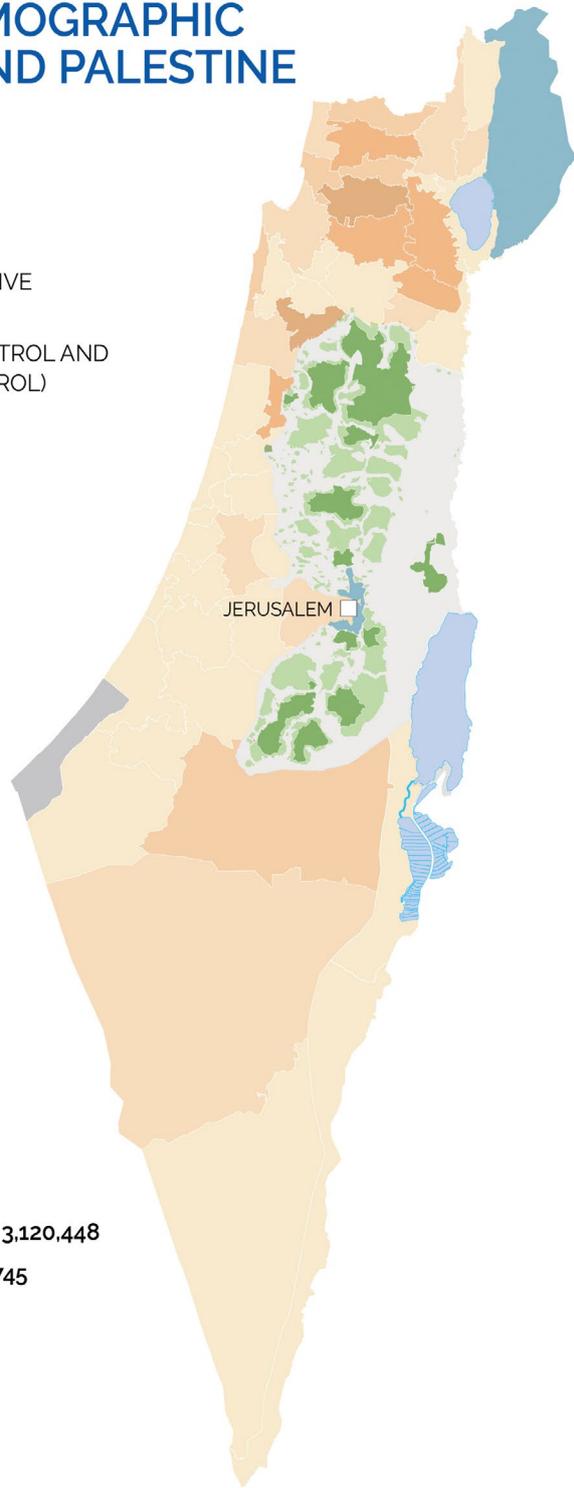
-  LESS THAN 10%
-  BETWEEN 10% AND 40%
-  BETWEEN 40% AND 60%
-  BETWEEN 60% AND 90%
-  OVER 90%

SOURCE: ISRAELI CENTRAL BUREAU OF STATISTICS

WEST BANK AND GAZA POPULATION

- FORMAL SETTLEMENTS (2017): **131**
- INFORMAL SETTLEMENTS (2017): **110**
- TOTAL NUMBER OF SETTLERS (2017): **622,670**
- OF WHICH IN EAST JERUSALEM (2016): **209,270**
- PALESTINIAN POPULATION IN WEST BANK (2021): **3,120,448**
- PALESTINIAN POPULATION IN GAZA (2021): **2,106,745**

SOURCES: ISRAELI CENTRAL BUREAU OF STATISTICS, PALESTINIAN CENTRAL BUREAU OF STATISTICS, B'TSELEM



*THE ISRAELI CENTRAL BUREAU OF STATISTICS INCLUDES THE ARAB POPULATION OF EAST JERUSALEM IN THE JERUSALEM REGION

What now?

Israel faces two options. One is to do more of the same: long-term discrimination against many of its own citizens and residents, repression of millions of Palestinians, and recurring violence. The other option is a slow reconceptualisation of the Israeli state and Zionist political thinking so that it can accommodate equal rights for all its citizens and residents as well as shared sovereignty over the wider area of Israel/Palestine.

At the moment, there is little that forces Tel Aviv to entertain the second option. In contrast, EU countries (including the Netherlands) have long advocated for it. If more violence is to be avoided, greater pressure on Israel is therefore in order, with international law as its point of departure. That means invoking Article 2 of the EU-Israel Association Agreement, which governs trade between the EU and Israel,

as prelude to suspending the agreement given the scale of Israel's human rights violations against Palestinians and Israeli Arab citizens. It also means mobilising strong diplomatic and legal support for Palestinian residents of East-Jerusalem, engaging Hamas in a conversation about the development of Gaza as well as the conflict (next to Fatah), and recognising the state of Palestine.

If a new Israeli government demonstrates a serious intent to engage in peace negotiations based on mutual compromise, EU countries might consider a more phased approach. The new coalition that is currently being formed, is unlikely to produce significant policy changes on the Palestinian issue because it includes center-left as well as nationalist-right parties, and is largely united by a desire for a different Prime Minister. But it might nevertheless draw critical lessons from the recent violence, and act upon them.

About the Clingendael Institute

Clingendael – the Netherlands Institute of International Relations – is a leading think tank and academy on international affairs. Through our analyses, training and public debate we aim to inspire and equip governments, businesses, and civil society in order to contribute to a secure, sustainable and just world.

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