

The State of the World's Human Rights; Israel and Palestinian Territories 2023

In May, Israel launched a five-day offensive in the occupied and blockaded Gaza Strip, killing 11 Palestinian civilians. Following a Hamas-led attack in southern Israel on 7 October during which at least 1,000 people were killed, of which 36 were children, and some 245 were taken hostage or captive, Israel conducted intense military operations that killed 21,600 Palestinians in Gaza, a third of them children, and wrecked 60% of homes. In October, Israel intensified its 16-year blockade on Gaza, cutting off all supplies, including food, water, electricity, fuel and medicines, aggravating the humanitarian catastrophe. Following 7 October, Israeli authorities increased restrictions on freedom of movement across the occupied West Bank. Israeli authorities deepened the apartheid system oppressing Palestinians in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, by implementing laws and policies of segregation, deprivation and forced displacement. In Gaza alone, 1.9 million Palestinians were forcibly displaced due to Israeli offensives, out of a population of 2.2 million. State-backed settler violence increased. In the Negev/Naqab in southern Israel, Israeli forces continued to demolish Bedouin homes and whole villages, including one village for the 222nd time. In the West Bank, Israeli policing operations were the most lethal since 2005, with 110 Palestinian children among those killed. Detentions of Palestinians without charge or trial reached record levels. Inside Israel, police sometimes used excessive force and arbitrary arrests at anti-government demonstrations, and imposed bans on anti-war protests in Palestinian communities. LGBTI people continued to face discrimination in law and practice.

Background

Politicians who incited racial hatred, and proposed to annex Palestinian territory and forcibly deport Palestinians, were given military and policing responsibilities by the Benjamin Netanyahu government. Finance minister Bezalel Smotrich became governor of the occupied West Bank in February, and security minister Itamar Ben-Gvir formed a volunteer “national guard” in April. Their Jewish supremacist notions became mainstream after Hamas’s 7 October attack (see Palestine entry).

On 25 July, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) received submissions regarding the legality of Israel’s occupation of the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT).

From September, the Israeli Supreme Court heard petitions against an amendment to the Basic Law: The Judiciary. The government-proposed amendment undermined the independence of the judiciary and its ability to preserve the civil rights of Jewish citizens.¹

Opposition to the government was manifest in weekly mass protests, which stopped after 7 October. Benny Gantz’s centrist party joined the government and emergency war cabinet on 11 October.

The defence ministry supported the evacuation of 54 communities in southern Israel and 43 in northern Israel after attacks from the Gaza Strip and Lebanon.

Violations of international humanitarian law

The Gaza Strip

The year’s first Israeli offensive against occupied and blockaded Gaza, from 9 to 13 May, killed 11 Palestinian civilians, including four children, and destroyed 103 homes. The initial air strike killed

Khalil al-Bahtini, a senior member of Al-Quds Brigades (the armed group affiliated with Islamic Jihad), his wife and young daughter, as well as their neighbours Dania and Iman Adas.² Al-Quds Brigades fired hundreds of indiscriminate rockets towards Israeli towns (see Palestine entry).

The second round of hostilities, with its cataclysmic humanitarian consequences for Gaza, saw unprecedented numbers of civilian casualties. On 7 October, amid the firing of thousands of indiscriminate rockets, fighters from Palestinian armed groups attacked southern Israel; at least 1,000 people were killed, and some 3,300 others injured, while some 245 were taken hostage and captive (see Palestine entry). In the following 12 weeks, Israeli forces' aerial bombings and ground offensives killed 21,600 Palestinians, a third of whom were children, according to Gaza's Ministry of Health.

Amnesty International's in-depth field investigation of the killing of 229 people in nine unlawful air strikes found that Israel violated international humanitarian law, including by failing to take feasible precautions to spare civilians, or by carrying out indiscriminate attacks that failed to distinguish between civilians and military objectives, or by carrying out attacks that may have been directed against civilian objects.³

On 19 October, an Israeli air strike destroyed part of the Saint Porphyrius church compound in Gaza City, where hundreds of displaced people were sheltering, killing 18 civilians. Ramez al-Sury's three children and 10 other relatives including babies were killed there.⁴ On 22 October, Israeli forces dropped US-made Joint Direct Attack Munitions, killing 19 civilians in the Abu Mu'eileq family home in Deir al-Balah in southern Gaza, the area then designated as safe by Israeli orders.⁵

According to OCHA, by the end of the year, 65,000 homes were destroyed, forcibly displacing 1.9 million Palestinians. In addition, 76 healthcare facilities, 370 schools, 115 mosques and three churches were damaged or destroyed.

Also on 7 October, the Israeli government blocked electricity sold to Gaza. On 9 October, it imposed a full siege, cutting off all supplies including food, water, fuel and medicines.

Media workers were also attacked. The Committee to Protect Journalists reported that 70 journalists were killed. Film-maker Roshdi Sarraj was killed in an air strike on 22 October on his home in Gaza City.

Medical personnel also faced attacks in the area. By December, 23 of 36 hospitals had been forced to close because of damage and lack of electricity. The WHO reported that 600 patients and medical personnel were killed in attacks on medical facilities, including 76 ambulances. In the north of Gaza, al-Ahli and al-Shifa hospitals were operating at 5% of capacity while being overwhelmed with wounded and sick people. Hospital bed occupancy was at 310%, according to the Palestinian Red Crescent Society. Its al-Amal hospital in Khan Yunis was targeted with a drone on 24 December, killing a 13-year-old boy.

Lebanon

Hizbullah, a political party with an armed wing, and other armed groups in Lebanon, fired rockets at northern Israel (see Lebanon entry). On 16 October, Israeli artillery used white phosphorus to shell the southern Lebanese town of Dhayra. Cross-border strikes killed some 120 people in Lebanon, and more than 10 in Israel. Israeli strikes on a group of seven journalists in south Lebanon on 13 October killed Reuters journalist Issam Abdallah.

Apartheid

Israeli authorities maintained their system of apartheid, passing laws that deepened the segregation of Palestinians from Israelis, confined Palestinians to deprived locations, and implementing policies that furthered the systematic dispossession of Palestinians. Wanton destruction, home demolitions, denial of access to livelihoods, and state-backed settler violence, all intensified forced displacement.

An amendment to the Citizenship and Entry into Israel Law passed on 15 February facilitated the stripping of Palestinians' citizenship and permanent residency, potentially rendering some Palestinians stateless. On 25 July, the Knesset approved an amendment to the Cooperative Societies Ordinance that expanded admission committees in 437 Jewish collective towns, with powers to exclude Palestinians under the vague pretext of "social unsuitability", according to Adalah, a legal organization protecting the rights of Palestinian citizens of Israel.

Forced displacement

OCHA recorded demolitions without military justification of 1,128 buildings, forcibly displacing 2,249 Palestinians in the West Bank including East Jerusalem. Additionally, the Israeli High Court of Justice approved the demolition of six homes of relatives of suspected attackers, despite Israeli civil rights organization HaMoked's objection that this constituted collective punishment. Meanwhile, Israeli authorities approved the construction of 18,500 settler homes in East Jerusalem alone, according to Israeli urban planners Ir Amim. Settlements in the rest of the West Bank, illegal under international law, also continued to expand.

Settler violence spread with the accession of politicians who incited racial violence, and significantly increased after 7 October. Israeli settlers killed 18 Palestinians and injured 367, while Palestinian attackers killed 18 settlers and injured 107, according to OCHA.

Military and settler actions created coercive environments that displaced all 1,009 inhabitants of 16 herding communities, according to human rights organization B'Tselem. On 11 October, Israeli settlers killed three Palestinians in a family home in Qusra, near Huwara. A fourth was shot dead when Israeli soldiers came to protect the settlers. On 30 October, dozens of settlers set fire to two homes in Isfay al-Tahta in Masafer Yatta, southern West Bank. Many settlers were armed, some wore army uniforms, and most violent settlers enjoyed impunity for their crimes.⁶

The authorities continued to deny recognition to Palestinian citizens of Israel in 35 Bedouin villages in the Negev/Naqab in southern Israel, and to conduct home demolitions there. In July, courts approved the forced eviction of all 500 residents of Ras Jrabah. The residents had asked to be incorporated as a neighbourhood into the nearby Jewish city of Dimona but the local authorities dismissed that request without due consultation. On 27 September, Israeli forces demolished the village of al-'Araqib for the 222nd time.

In Gaza on 12 October, the Israeli army issued a vague collective "evacuation order" to all 1.1 million residents in northern Gaza. In November and December, Israeli forces ordered the displacement of civilians in southern areas, including Deir al-Balah and Khan Younis. By early December, 1.9 million Palestinians were forcibly displaced in Gaza.

Unlawful killings

West Bank including East Jerusalem

The year was the deadliest for Palestinians in the West Bank since 2005, as Israeli policing operations became increasingly lethal amid impunity for police killings and incitement from leaders.

According to OCHA, Israeli forces killed 493 Palestinians, mostly civilians, during operations against armed groups in Jenin and Nablus. Over 12,500 were injured.

Defence for Children International-Palestine reported that Israeli forces killed 110 children in the West Bank including Jerusalem in 2023. On 5 June, Mohammed al-Tamimi, aged three, succumbed to his wounds after being shot by Israeli forces in Nabi Saleh north of Ramallah as his father drove him to a birthday party. No criminal investigation was opened.

Throughout the year, Jenin refugee camp in the north endured Israeli law enforcement operations that killed at least 23 Palestinians between January and July. Revenge attacks by armed Palestinians against Israeli civilians killed four near the settlement of Eli on 20 June. On 21 June, hundreds of settlers attacked the Palestinian village of Turmusayya south of Eli, killing one resident and setting 15 houses on fire. From October, Israeli forces raided Jenin repeatedly, killing at least 116 people, according to the Palestinian ministry of health, including in an air strike on Al-Ansar mosque on 22 October.

Right to truth, justice and reparations

Israeli authorities failed to promptly, thoroughly and independently investigate crimes and violations committed by the Israeli army, including unlawful killings in the West Bank and war crimes in Gaza. Israel continued to refuse to cooperate with the UN commission of inquiry and to deny entry to the UN Special Rapporteur on the OPT. At the end of October, the ICC prosecutor visited Israel, the West Bank, and the Rafah Crossing on Egypt's border with Gaza. On 29 December, South Africa applied to the ICJ for proceedings to be initiated against Israel regarding its breaches of the 1948 Genocide Convention in Gaza.

Freedom of movement

Arbitrary restrictions on Palestinians' movement were further tightened after 7 October, in some cases amounting to collective punishment. The closures prevented patients' transfer to hospitals.

In the West Bank including East Jerusalem, OCHA documented 645 checkpoints, roadblocks and barriers, 80 of which were in Hebron in the south, where some 600 settlers lived illegally in the midst of the most populous West Bank city. After 7 October, the Israeli army imposed a 14-day total curfew on some 750 families in 11 neighbourhoods in downtown Hebron, according to B'Tselem. Checkpoint 54 in Hebron, fortified with facial recognition technology, automated the exclusion of Palestinians. Facial recognition technology also restricted Palestinians' access in East Jerusalem.⁷ The army imposed closures of villages and refugee camps, and restricted access to farmland.

Thousands of workers from Gaza in Israel and the West Bank found their work permits revoked without warning on 11 October, when Israeli forces detained them. They were held incommunicado for at least three weeks on military bases, where two of them died; the deaths were not properly investigated. Israeli forces shot at least eight Palestinian fishermen at sea, causing permanent injuries. More than 90% of fishermen's families lived in poverty, according to the Gaza Fishermen's Union, due to restrictions on fishing areas and exports.

Right to health

Health services in the OPT deteriorated from January, when Israel withheld tax revenues collected on behalf of Palestinian authorities, resulting in medicine shortages. Due to Israel's blockade, nearly 400 children in Gaza were denied access to critical treatment in the first half of the year, according to Save the Children.

Gazan health facilities were wrecked by attacks from October onwards, and medical reserves were used to treat some 55,000 injured people. As the borders were sealed, even severely injured people could not seek treatment outside Gaza. Overcrowding in improvised shelters with one toilet per 486 people, no clean water or sanitation, caused a surge in respiratory, stomach and skin infections. One thousand injured children had legs amputated in inadequate conditions, according to UNICEF. By mid-December, 93% of people in Gaza were starving, according to the WHO, making them vulnerable to death from otherwise curable diseases, with pregnant and breastfeeding women at particular risk.

Arbitrary detention

Israeli forces arrested 2,200 Palestinians in the month following 7 October, according to the Palestinian Prisoners Club.⁸ Israeli authorities invoked the “Unlawful Combatants” Law, a category that does not exist in international humanitarian law, to hold without charge or trial 661 Palestinians from Gaza. Some 3,291 Palestinians were held under administrative detention, without charge or trial, according to HaMoked.

The ICRC confirmed that Palestinian prisoners were denied contact with their families and lawyers after 7 October, under “state of emergency” orders that were extended on 31 October until the end of the year.

Israeli authorities refused to share their summary of evidence and arguments in the conviction of prisoner of conscience Mohammed al-Halabi, a humanitarian worker from Gaza.

Torture and other ill-treatment

On 5 and 6 April, Israeli forces beat men, women and children worshipping at Al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem, inflaming religious tensions. They arrested at least 450 Palestinians on the mosque esplanade, later released barefoot and beaten.

Torture and other ill-treatment increased after 7 October, with at least six prisoners dying in unclarified circumstances, according to the Public Committee against Torture. Israeli soldiers beat Palestinians while detaining them in the street in Gaza blindfolded, stripped of their clothes, with their hands tied, on two occasions.⁹

In March, a court extended the prolonged solitary confinement of Ahmad Manasra, who suffered repeated mental health crises.¹⁰ In May, prisoner Khader Adnan died after a three-month hunger strike without adequate medical care, making him the first Palestinian prisoner to die on hunger strike in 30 years.

Freedom of expression and assembly

After the government announced judicial reform plans in January, hundreds of thousands of Israelis demonstrated in protest. Police in some cases responded with excessive force and carried out dozens of arbitrary arrests.

Military Order 101 continued to suppress Palestinians’ right to peacefully protest and assemble in the West Bank. In September, Israeli forces vandalized the student council building of Birzeit University. On 8 November, the High Court of Justice rejected a petition demanding police permission for anti-war demonstrations in Palestinian towns in northern Israel. Demonstrations by Jewish citizens of Israel were permitted.

Right to a healthy environment

In September, the government approved a climate change bill, which committed to reducing emissions by 30% by 2030 but lacked enforcement mechanisms.

Israel, a high-income country, failed to take steps to phase out fossil fuels. Rather, on 29 October, the energy ministry launched new gas exploration.

The heavy bombardment of Gaza emitted pollution and greenhouse gases, harming the environment and health for years to come, according to the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights and the environment.

LGBTI people's rights

Government ministers incited discrimination against LGBTI people and women, whose personal status continued to be governed by religious law. On 28 December, the Israeli High Court ruled that the state can no longer discriminate against same-sex couples looking to adopt children.

Conscientious objectors

Eight conscripts – Jewish and Arab citizens of Israel – were imprisoned for refusing military service, stating that their principles forbid the oppression of Palestinians. Yuval Dag was imprisoned four times between March and June.

1. [“Israel/OPT: Defending the rule of law, enforcing apartheid – the double life of Israel’s judiciary”](#), 13 September
2. [“Israel/OPT: Civilian deaths and extensive destruction in latest Gaza offensive highlight human toll of apartheid”](#), 13 June
3. [“Israel/OPT: Damning evidence of war crimes as Israeli attacks wipe out entire families in Gaza”](#), 20 October
4. [“Israel/OPT: ‘Nowhere safe in Gaza’: Unlawful Israeli strikes illustrate callous disregard for Palestinian lives”](#), 20 November
5. [“Israel/OPT: US-made munitions killed 43 civilians in two documented Israeli air strikes in Gaza – new investigation”](#), 5 December
6. [“Israel/OPT: Impunity reigns for perpetrators of settler violence”](#), 3 March
7. [Israel/OPT: *Automated Apartheid: How Facial Recognition Fragments, Segregates and Controls Palestinians in the OPT*](#), 2 May
8. [“Israel/OPT: Horrifying cases of torture and degrading treatment of Palestinian detainees amid spike in arbitrary arrests”](#), 8 November
9. [“Israel/OPT: Urgently investigate inhumane treatment and enforced disappearance of Palestinians detainees from Gaza”](#), 20 December
10. [“Israel/OPT: After nearly two years in solitary confinement, Ahmad Manasra too ill to attend his hearing”](#), 21 September