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Q&A

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With All Eyes on Gaza, Israel Tightens Its Grip on the West Bank

The Israeli army has locked down the West Bank since 7 October, staging several incursions into Palestinian cities, as settler violence also rises. In this Q&A, Crisis Group expert Tahani Mustafa looks at the consequences of this escalation.

Everyone is watching the war in Gaza. But what has been happening in the West Bank?

Conditions in the West Bank have deteriorated sharply in the weeks since Hamas's 7 October attack in Israel, mostly in an acceleration of pre-existing trends. The Israeli army has launched numerous raids that, along with acts of violence by Israeli settlers, are taking a mounting toll. Meanwhile, the army has locked down the territory, closing roads and imposing restrictions on internal movement, while also cracking down severely on Palestinian political expression. The economy is paralysed, at particularly high cost to the olive harvest taking place in October and November.

West Bankers fear worse is coming. They are caught between, on the one hand, a deepening occupation and escalating violence from the army and settlers, and on the other, a complete absence of political leadership or a political horizon, leaving them with no real way of checking Israeli actions.

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The situation is highly tense. Hamas's attack has enraged Israeli settlers and soldiers in the West Bank, whose fury has infused their actions against the Palestinian population. Meanwhile, the subsequent war in Gaza has distracted the world, giving them a freer hand to escalate in ways that would likely have drawn prompter and stronger international condemnation in the past.

Israeli soldiers and, in some cases, settlers have killed 216 Palestinians in the West Bank since 7 October, bringing the total killed in 2023 to date to 426, far more than the 170 killed in 2022, the year the UN declared the deadliest since 2006. Also since 7 October, the Israeli army has arrested 2,280 West Bank Palestinians, often in response to social media posts evincing support for Hamas or armed resistance but sometimes just sympathy for the plight of people in Gaza. Israeli authorities allege that many of these detainees are Hamas or Palestinian Islamic Jihad members. Those arrested, however, include several noted political figures, such as Ahed Tamimi and Omar Assaf, who are unaffiliated with any party. The army has raided Ramallah, the administrative centre of the Palestinian Authority (PA), on an almost daily basis. These operations have become more destructive, with greater damage to homes and businesses. Often, the damage

seems gratuitous, as when Israel tore up roads in Palestinian camps and cities, and when the army knocked down and stole the “Jenin Horse”, a sculpture in Jenin Camp symbolising freedom, erected by a German artist and residents to commemorate the 2002 Jenin massacre, and bulldozed the camp’s arched gateway. Israeli soldiers have committed similar acts of destruction in other densely populated Palestinian urban areas in the West Bank.

Alongside this campaign are the intensified measures of closure that are keeping many Palestinians more cooped up than usual. Israel holds the main West Bank highways and most of the subsidiary roads connecting Palestinian towns and villages. The army has shut down its regular checkpoints on the major arteries, stopping any movement through them, while many new improvised checkpoints have sprung up, run by settlers. Settler militias guarding the settlements have also blockaded Palestinian villages, using earth mounds, cement blocks and iron gates, sometimes alongside their checkpoints. Any Palestinian travelling on the roads risks being attacked.

News of what is happening on the ground is limited, due to the army’s movement restrictions and frequent harassment of journalists. There is more information now than in the first week after the 7 October attacks but still less than before. Civil society organisations monitoring the situation are relying on local volunteers, as their staff cannot travel freely.

How have settlers in the West Bank taken advantage of the media focus on Gaza?

The West Bank has seen a significant mobilisation of settlers since 7 October. The Israeli government has recruited volunteers from the settler population to form militias in the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Israel’s mixed cities, where Jewish and Arab residents live side by side. Israel’s national security minister, Itamar Ben-Gvir, who is himself a far-right settler activist, has euphemistically called these

militias “security squads”. In addition, most of the soldiers now deployed in the West Bank are reservists called up for Israel’s post-7 October mobilisation, and many of them reportedly come from the settlements themselves. The line between the army and armed settlers is therefore blurry. Moreover, Israeli soldiers were either idly watching or actively supporting settlers in over half of the serious attacks on Palestinian persons or property in the past month.

Of the 216 Palestinians killed in the West Bank and East Jerusalem since 7 October, settlers killed eight (compared with six since the beginning of 2023 and two in 2022). Of the 202 serious settler attacks recorded by the UN (an average of about seven a day, a significant increase over the pre-7 October level of three a day), 28 were directed primarily at people, 141 primarily at property, and another 33 at both people and property.

Settlers have also been involved in abductions of Palestinians who have been tortured. On 12 October, a group of soldiers and settlers detained and handcuffed three Palestinians from the West Bank village of Wadi al-Seeq, stripping them, photographing them handcuffed in their underwear and beating them severely over the course of several hours. They urinated and stubbed out cigarettes on two of them; they attempted to sodomise one with an object. Two of these Palestinians were PA officials. Videos have circulated on Israeli accounts on social media sites like Telegram showing the torture of a Palestinian snatched by Israeli settlers and soldiers.

Settlers have also forcibly displaced fifteen Palestinian communities, comprising 111 households or 905 people, 356 of them children, in Wadi al-Seeq and the South Hebron Hills, all in Area C, the 60 per cent of the West Bank under exclusive Israeli control. In northern parts of Area C, they have gone around towns and villages distributing leaflets threatening to expel residents who refuse to leave. The army has stood by passively during such actions.

What does daily life look like for West Bank Palestinians at present?

It was getting harder well before 7 October. Settler violence was already increasing; and army raids had done a lot of damage, both in terms of casualties and to property. But the difficulties Palestinians face in their daily lives have reached a new level.

Any form of private travel or public transport in the West Bank has become not just onerous but also dangerous, due to the closure and the settler violence. More than 100,000 Palestinians from the West Bank who are employed in Israel have been prevented from entering and have as a result lost their income. Most schools and universities have switched to online teaching out of concern for students' safety. Normal commerce has come to a halt, and nothing that the West Bank imports through Israel is getting through. Shortages in some areas are pushing prices up, including for items like chicken, with areas near chicken farms experiencing a glut while those farther away suffer scarcity. Increased settler attacks have also meant that many farmers either cannot reach their lands or have seen their crops destroyed.

Palestinian farmers have been attacked by settlers with sticks and stones when tending to their olive groves, and a farmer was killed with

also tortured detainees to pressure relatives to surrender. All these practices were common before 7 October, but now they seem more widespread. The videos of torture of Palestinians by soldiers and settlers have greatly deepened the worries of those with relatives in Israeli jails.

In addition to the shock many Palestinians felt at Hamas's attacks – both at the number of deaths, including among Israeli civilians, and the fact that Hamas was able to breach Israel's defences so completely and overran units of Israel's formidable army – Palestinians also have been fearful at how Israel might punish them collectively for what Hamas did. From the outset, they realised that the scale of Hamas's attack, the high Israeli death toll and the initial reaction from Israel's Western allies would unleash an Israeli response that even Israel's extreme right-wing government could not have imagined previously. They braced for the worst, not just in Gaza but also in the West Bank, where they suspect Israel of harbouring plans to expel Palestinians to Jordan after it has forced Palestinians in Gaza into refugee camps in Egypt's Sinai desert. They were alarmed by Israeli politicians' talk of a "second Nakba", a reference to the mass expulsion and flight of Palestinians in 1948 that seemed to signal

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live fire. Settlers have burned or stolen agricultural equipment and cut down olive trees.

A major concern for many West Bank Palestinians is conditions inside Israeli prisons, as some 7,000 Palestinians are currently held there. Since 7 October, these conditions have got much worse, with an increase in the incidence and severity of beatings and other forms of torture. At least six Palestinians arrested in the current campaign have died in Israeli custody. Other prisoners have reported broken bones and teeth. Interrogators have reportedly

Israel's intent to finish the job. These fears led Jordan's foreign minister, Ayman Safadi, to warn Israel that his government would regard any attempt to drive Palestinians out of Gaza or the West Bank as a declaration of war. As Western governments have largely been silent in the face of Israeli operations killing thousands of innocent Palestinians and destroying much of Gaza, anger and a sense of utter despair that things will ever improve is clearly growing, which could feed into more uncoordinated yet violent acts of resistance.

What have President Mahmoud Abbas and other PA leaders said about the Gaza war? How are they responding to Palestinian anger in the West Bank?

The PA in Ramallah looks weaker than ever before amid today's crisis. On 5 November, visiting Ramallah, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said the PA should play a key role in whatever comes next in the Gaza Strip. His proposal does not rhyme with the fact that the PA was slowly collapsing even before 7 October, mired as it has been in economic crisis, political fragmentation and loss of popular support as a result of its ineffective, corrupt leadership, as well as Israel's systematic undermining of its base. PA officials have suggested, moreover, that any arrangement pertaining to administration of Gaza could happen only in cooperation with Hamas, which they describe as an intrinsic part of the Palestinian polity.

The PA's apparent complicity with Israel amid the army raids and settler rampages has made it even more the butt of Palestinian scorn. The PA moved to suppress popular protest in the West Bank after 7 October, allowing only its loyalists to take to the streets in tame demonstrations against what Israel is doing in Gaza. It now seems to want to wait out the Gaza war, concerned solely with its short-term survival and incapable of pushing back against Israeli army and settler actions.

President Mahmoud Abbas denounced Hamas the day after the 7 October attack, saying the group does not represent the Palestinian people, but he retracted that statement after facing a furious backlash when Israel began bombarding Gaza. He voiced the PA's first criticism of Israel after it was reported that an attack on Gaza City's al-Ahli hospital had killed some 500 Palestinians (the Palestinian health ministry later put the number of victims at 470). Prime Minister Mohammed Shtayyeh claimed that the PA is engaged in intensive, behind-the-scenes diplomacy to stop Israel's assault, but if it is, the results have been nil.

The past month's events constitute an existential threat to the PA. If Hamas, or at least its

political wing, manages to survive the war in something resembling its current form, many Palestinians could see that as victory for the group in the face of the Israeli onslaught. More of them may come to accept Hamas's claim to be leading Palestinian national resistance to Israel's occupation. Should that occur, more groups in the West Bank could decide to resist by violent means, further undermining the traditional Palestinian leadership and the PA's strategy of accommodation with Israel. But the greater threat to the PA's future is Israel further constraining its activity, potentially consigning it to irrelevance, regardless of the outcome in Gaza. This could inaugurate a new and more brutal phase of occupation, with increased settler and army aggression in the West Bank, as seen since 7 October.

What has been the impact of these events on armed groups in the West Bank?

A new generation of armed groups – unaffiliated with Fatah, the PA's dominant element, Hamas or any other political faction – arose in the West Bank in 2021 as a response to Israel's search-and-arrest operations in Area A – urban areas, constituting about 18 per cent of the West Bank, under the PA's control – with their attendant fatalities and property damage. Israel and the PA largely succeeded in killing, detaining or co-opting the fighters of these armed groups since then. As a result, the West Bank was relatively quiet following Israel's two-day assault on Jenin refugee camp to root out one such group, the Jenin Brigades, in July.

Today, however, Israel's actions could trigger more violent forms of resistance. These would likely be diffuse, as Palestinians are divided. The divisions are the result of both Israel's strategy of preventing mass mobilisation after the second intifada in 2000 and the collapse of the PA's leadership in what Palestinians see as their struggle for national liberation. Hamas's actions in themselves are unlikely to catalyse more violence in the West Bank; the hardening military occupation will take care of that. But Palestinians may draw lessons from the group's

use of the element of surprise on 7 October. The popular disaffection with political factions and despair at a brutal and seemingly never-ending occupation that motivated the formation of these groups are still very much present.

Armed groups have started to reestablish themselves across the northern West Bank, including in cities like Jenin and Tulkarem that have seen some of the deadliest clashes since 7 October, mostly involving Palestinian fighters who have gone there to help fend off Israeli incursions. They have manufactured and deployed improvised explosive devices against Israeli forces during these incursions; improved their surveillance capabilities; laid effective ambushes; engaged in combat with soldiers from elite Israeli army units; and – for the first time in June and on several subsequent occasions – forced Israel to respond with airstrikes on residential neighbourhoods to protect and extract its troops. From its side, the Israeli army has honed its search-and-arrest tactics since 7 October, first clearing explosive devices with bulldozers or by digging up city streets, then moving in with overwhelming force to kill or arrest fighters.

Hamas justified its 7 October attack by referring to al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem's Old City. What has been happening there since that day?

Al-Aqsa has long been a flashpoint. The compound is holy to Muslims worldwide and to Jews as the site of the ancient Temples. An understanding known as the Status Quo has kept an Israeli-Jordanian condominium managing the site since Israel occupied it in 1967. In recent years, the Status Quo has begun to break down, due to increasing Israeli restrictions on Muslim access to the mosque, as well as actions by right-wing religious-nationalists like Ben-Gvir to assert Israel's claim to the whole compound. These actions in turn have sparked confrontations. Tensions in East Jerusalem have been particularly high since 7 October. In the following weeks, Israeli security personnel have killed six Palestinians in the city, and

detained dozens, often based on their social media activity.

At the start of the Gaza war, violence erupted between Palestinian protesters and Israeli forces in several parts of East Jerusalem, including the Old City. The protests occurred despite closures throughout the city and its suburbs, which, as elsewhere in the West Bank, have greatly impeded Palestinian movement and created severe shortages of essential goods. Pedestrian traffic through police checkpoints has completely halted, and public transport is not running because of roadblocks. Shuafat, the only Palestinian refugee camp within city boundaries, has seen Israeli incursions leading to mass arrests and significant destruction of property. Soldiers have routinely harassed, stopped and searched people, including school-children, without giving a reason.

Access to the Old City is once again limited, especially in the al-Aqsa compound, where Friday prayers have been restricted for Muslims under 60 since 7 October. The Israeli police has stepped up its presence, with 2,500 officers and volunteers patrolling the Old City and its vicinity. Jewish worshippers have continued to force their way into al-Aqsa with police protection to pray at the site in violation of the historical Status Quo. It was precisely these types of incursions that Hamas claim partly motivated the 7 October attacks.

How have Western countries responded to what is happening in the West Bank?

The U.S. and other Western states have done little to rein in Israel or the settler violence it has enabled in the West Bank. They have recently started to be more critical in public pronouncements, but, for the most part, without substantive action in support of their statements. Meanwhile, the situation on the ground continues to deteriorate by the day and Palestinians' daily lives become ever harder.

The problem is less Western capitals' lack of response to the worsening situation in the West Bank than the fact that none of them have addressed the real problem, which is that the

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Israeli government and army are enabling the settlers. Indeed, Western governments have not even acknowledged the Israeli government’s complicity, far less taken concrete steps to deter it from its current course.

For example, France condemned what is happening in the West Bank, going as far as to call Israeli settler violence a “policy of terror”, and called on the Israeli authorities to take “the necessary measures to protect the Palestinian population”. But it did not acknowledge that those same authorities are deeply implicated in the violence.

The Biden administration in the U.S. has described settler violence as a “serious threat” to peace. Against that backdrop, it is considering steps to ensure that Israel does not use U.S.-supplied weapons to equip settler groups in the West Bank that have been implicated in much of the violence perpetrated against Palestinian residents in Area C, a condition Israel reportedly agreed to. President Biden also stated that for the first time the U.S. is prepared to sanction Israeli settlers involved in attacks on Palestinians in the West Bank, which may include visa bans.

Separately, the Biden administration has warned Israel is violating its visa waiver agreement, which came into force on 27 September, by preventing West Bank Palestinians with U.S.

citizenship from entering Israel. If this issue is not resolved soon, Israeli citizens could be denied entry to the U.S. without a visa. Yet this measure is a routine administrative sanction based on an existing bilateral visa agreement, not a sanction imposed in response to settler violence.

A more substantial development in terms of holding Israel accountable for settler violence is the legislation New York’s state assembly is considering, which would stop charities from sending money to fund the expansion of illegal Israeli settlements in the West Bank. The legislation would allow the state to sue the groups and permit Palestinians harmed by the activities these groups finance to sue them for damages. ■