

The State of Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories

The Government of Israel continued to violate human rights and international humanitarian law in the context of Israel's occupation of the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and Gaza (Occupied Palestinian Territories, or OPTs). The Palestinian Authority (PA) and Hamas, the de facto administration in Gaza, continued to commit human rights abuses.

Protests and escalations of violence between Israel and Palestinian armed groups in Gaza continued. According to the Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT), a unit within the Israeli Ministry of Defence, 277 rockets and other projectiles were launched into Israeli territory in 2020. In total, three Israeli civilians were injured. According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), five Palestinian civilians were killed, including four by live ammunition fired by Israeli forces.

The overall humanitarian crisis in Gaza was exacerbated by COVID-19. The main civilian crossing into Israel was largely closed for all but humanitarian cases. The UK continued to fund projects to help address Israeli restrictions on movement and access to and from Gaza.

Israel continued its systematic policy of illegal settlement expansion in the OPTs, a breach of international humanitarian law which the UK continued to oppose. Israel advanced over 9,000 housing units in the West Bank (OPTs). Several plans were taken forward in sensitive areas in and around Jerusalem, including 'E1' and Givat HaMatos, which threatened the viability of a two-state solution.

Israel demolished Palestinian structures at an increasing rate, leaving those displaced more vulnerable to COVID-19. According to OCHA, 854 structures were demolished^[footnote 101] or seized across the West Bank and 1,001 Palestinians were displaced as a result, the highest figures since 2016. OCHA estimated an additional 970 Palestinians were at risk of eviction from their homes in East Jerusalem. The UK continued to make clear its opposition to demolitions and evictions, and to fund legal aid for Palestinians contesting related cases.

OCHA reported that 24 Palestinians had been killed by Israeli forces in the West Bank. The Israeli Security Agency (ISA) reported that two Israeli civilians and one Israeli soldier had been killed by Palestinians. According to OCHA, the number of acts of violence and vandalism perpetrated by settlers against Palestinians increased for the fourth year running. ISA recorded 1,248 violent attacks by Palestinians in the West Bank. In May, the killing by Israeli Border Police of unarmed, disabled Palestinian Iyad Hallaq in Jerusalem's Old City drew wide condemnation. Israeli prosecutors notified the police officer involved of their intention to indict on charges of 'reckless homicide'. The UK continued to call for investigations into, and accountability for, excessive use of force in the OPTs.

The number of Palestinian minors in Israeli detention decreased, with 131 detained at the end of December 2020. The UK continued to seek improvements in their treatment, including access to legal representation, notification of their legal rights, and an end to physical violence. According to the UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, most Palestinian prisoners continued to be held in Israel, despite international law providing that protected persons be detained in the OPTs.

In the West Bank (OPTs), monitoring groups reported allegations of ill-treatment and torture by PA Security Forces. The PA also continued to restrict space for civil society and freedom of expression. The UK continued to urge the PA leadership to respect human rights, properly investigate complaints of ill-treatment, and improve the security sector's compliance with international human rights standards. We also called for the establishment of a National Preventive Mechanism Against Torture.

In Gaza, Hamas continued to exercise strict control over civil society and to carry out arbitrary summons and arrests of journalists and political activists. In October, a Gaza Military Court convicted peace activist Rami Aman and two colleagues of 'weakening the revolutionary spirit' in relation to their participation in a Zoom call with Israeli youth in April.

Hamas issued 17 death sentences in 2020. While the UK maintained a no-contact policy with Hamas, we continued to make clear our objections to its use of the death penalty, for example in parliament. Its military wing remains proscribed organisation.

Despite continued verbal commitments from the PA, there was limited progress on women's rights. COVID-19 lockdowns led to sharp increases in reports of domestic violence. 14 women were killed as a result of gender-based violence. The Family Protection Bill, which would increase the protection of women's rights in law, was not ratified. However, the PA did continue to improve diversity in public institutions, such as opening a new UK-funded female training facility at the Palestinian Security Forces Central Training Institute in Jericho, providing accommodation and training for female officers.

Israel remained an open democracy, underpinned by robust institutions and a vibrant civil society. However, the space for those criticising Israel's conduct in the OPTs continued to come under strain. In February, Israel suspended its ties with the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), following a disagreement over the release of a database highlighting companies working in Israeli settlements. In June, Israel refused to renew visas to employees of the OHCHR, raising concerns over the organisation's ability to monitor human rights issues.

In 2021, the UK will continue to engage with the Palestinian Authority and Government of Israel on human rights issues in the context of the occupation. We shall continue to oppose actions that constitute violations and abuses of international human rights law and international humanitarian law by the Government of Israel, the Palestinian Authority and Hamas, and to support the work of civil society actors, including through our programmes.