

# Mass protests for Israeli ‘democratic rights’ silent on Palestinian oppression

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Global Research, February 01, 2023

[Liberation: News Newspaper of the Party for Socialism and Liberation](#) 1 February 2023

*Opposition demonstrations of more than 100,000 people have taken place in Israeli cities since the new extreme right-wing government, including undisguised fascist ministers, took office on Dec. 30.*

*The protests, in the name of democracy, have been organized by multiple organizations and politicians focusing particularly on the new government’s attempt to weaken the judicial system and thereby grant itself unfettered power to enact its reactionary agenda.*

*Another major point of contention is a bill introduced by the new minister of communications aimed at shutting down the public broadcasting system, setting up a committee to supervise commercial media, severely restricting investigative reporting and making it illegal to publish most information obtained through recordings.*

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu desperately sought to return to office to avoid prosecution on corruption charges against him and his family. The new government he put together is so dominated by unabashed bigots that Minister of Finance Bezalel Smotrich had no compunction about recently stating in an interview, “I am a fascist homophobe.” Smotrich is also deputy speaker of the Knesset (parliament) and holds a second position in the ministry of defense giving him and his settler-based party control over much of the West Bank.

The glaring omission in the demonstrations has been any mention of those who are the primary targets of the new regime — and all preceding Israeli regimes — the Palestinian people. Even participation by Palestinians living inside the 1948 borders with the Palestinian flag has been discouraged or, in some cases, prevented. Instead, the protests have been seas of blue and white Israeli flags.

The fascist National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir threatened that anyone carrying a Palestinian flag in the Jerusalem protests would be arrested and jailed. He was saved the trouble of carrying out his threat by the protest organizers who made it clear that they didn’t want to “confuse” the message that this is a family dispute among Israel-loyal Zionists.

Leaders of the Israeli protests say that they are fighting for democracy. But it is not possible to speak of democracy in any real sense inside an apartheid system. Under the defunct South African apartheid system only whites could vote, go to court, print newspapers, etc., but no one could credibly call apartheid South Africa a “democracy,” and no one today can

credibly claim that Israel does not have an apartheid system. Apartheid is an international crime.

## Fascists in office — greenlight to settler mobs

Netanyahu's granting Smotrich's and Ben-Gvir's key positions in the repressive state apparatus promises stepped-up aggression against the Palestinians. But it should not be forgotten that in 2022 under the outgoing "centrist" government, 220 Palestinians were killed, including 56 children, and thousands wounded and imprisoned. Settler gangs backed by the police and army carry out non-stop attacks on Palestinian farmers, villagers and supporters. In just 10 days in October 2022, over 100 settler attacks were recorded in the West Bank and 39 Palestinians killed in that month alone.

Given the green light by the new government, settlers and the military have stepped up their aggression. On Jan. 27, an Israeli army attack on Jenin refugee camp left 11 Palestinians dead and more than 20 wounded. The next day saw massive protests across the West Bank and Gaza and an armed attack by a Palestinian on the illegal Israeli settlement of Neve Yaacov in Jerusalem, leaving seven dead and three wounded. The same night settlers carried out 144 reported attacks in the Nablus district of the West Bank alone.

Statements of sympathy and condemnation by President Biden, Secretary of State Antony Blinken and other U.S. officials have exclusively focused on Israeli casualties. Blinken, visiting the region and clearly worried that the policies of the recently installed government could lead to a new mass upheaval destabilizing the region, issued the familiar appeals for "both sides" to reduce tensions. This seemingly even-handed appeal is nothing but a fraud.

The U.S. sends \$4 billion annually in military aid to Israel while proclaiming, in Blinken's words, an "ironclad" commitment to Israel's "security." No such aid or commitment is promised to the Palestinians. And though U.S. officials and other supporters never tire of promoting the idea that Israel is "the only democracy in the Middle East," most of the world is well aware that Israel is in fact an apartheid state.

Israel, despite its relatively small size, has one of the most powerful militaries in the world thanks to hundreds of billions in U.S. military aid over the decades. The Palestinians have no air force, navy or other elements of a modern military. When Israel bombs Gaza, the pilots don't have to worry about air defenses — the Palestinians have none.

Last year, 29 Israelis were killed in conflict as compared to more than 220 Palestinians, but that is just part of story. While thousands of Palestinians were arrested by Israeli police, no Israelis were arrested by Palestinian police. No Israelis had their homes or farms destroyed as did thousands of Palestinians.

While more than 4,700 Palestinians are held illegally in Israeli prisons, exactly zero Israelis are held in Palestinian jails. Palestinians in the West Bank are subject to Israeli military code, while Jewish settlers are governed by Israeli civil law. Numerous moderate human rights organizations, including some inside Israel itself, have presented irrefutable evidence of the apartheid system.

Drawing an equal sign between "both sides," as Blinken did in his Jan. 30 speech is to draw an equal sign between the colonized and the colonizer, between the oppressed and the

oppressor. The aim is to perpetuate the Big Lie that dominates both the U.S. and Israeli mainstream as the justification for the crucially important military aid and diplomatic protection the U.S. ruling establishment extends to Israel.

Why? No one should believe that this is due to sympathy or friendship for Jewish people. Friendship and imperialist foreign policy are mutually exclusive categories. Israel is an integral force in the U.S. plans for global domination, situated in a particularly strategic region, the crossroads of Europe, Africa and Asia.

## The mask has been ripped off

That is what is so worrying to Israel's backers. It is impossible to paint a government dominated by right-wing religious zealots and outright fascists as a "liberal democracy." From day one of this administration, its leaders — starting with the Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu — have made clear their intention to annex as much territory as possible. The day before taking over Netanyahu issued a statement saying that the new government's top priority is to "advance and develop settlement in all parts of Israel — in the Galilee, the Negev Desert, the Golan Heights and Judea and Samaria [West Bank-ed]." The Negev and Galilee are areas inside the 1948 borders of the Israeli state that have large Palestinian populations.

Netanyahu's statement, underlined by the references to Negev and Galilee, is an open admission that the new government plans to accelerate the ethnic cleansing that began with the expulsion by means of terror of more than 750,000 Palestinians in 1948 and 1949. Another 300,000 Palestinians were driven out during the 1967 war when the West Bank, Gaza, East Jerusalem and the Golan Heights were conquered.

While there was the pretext for a half-century of a "two-state solution" where the Palestinians would be granted a West Bank/Gaza/East Jerusalem state, this is hardly mentioned anymore except to placate the benefactors in Washington.

Today, the Israeli and Palestinian populations in what was the British Mandate (colony) of Palestine from 1920 to 1948 are almost the same, a little over seven million each. But that is where the similarity ends. The Israelis live in a highly modernized and highly militarized state. The Palestinians exist on broken up pieces of land under various forms of law, economy and governance, constantly under threat of military attack from the air, sea and land. Hundreds of thousands still live in refugee camps in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and inside occupied Palestine.

Despite all the suffering inflicted on the Palestinian people over the past century and more, they have never given up their movement for self-determination and liberation. Nor will they do so today. While there is no predicting in advance how the struggle will unfold, it is clear that the situation is highly volatile now. The antiwar and all progressive movements must be on alert and continue to stand in solidarity with the Palestinian people in their just struggle.

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