

Palestinians inside Israel Are under Attack

By [Jonathan Cook](#)

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Was it meant as an epic parody or an insult to his audience's intelligence? It was hard to tell.

Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu took to social media to apologise for last year's notorious election-day comment, when he warned that "the Arabs are coming out to vote in droves" - a reference to the fifth of Israel's population who are Palestinian.

In videos released last week in English and Hebrew, Mr Netanyahu urged Palestinian citizens to become more active in public life. They needed to "work in droves, study in droves, thrive in droves," he said. "I am proud of the role Arabs play in Israel's success".

Pointedly, Ayman Odeh, head of the Palestinian-dominated Joint List party, noted that 100,000 Bedouin citizens could not watch the video because Israel denies their communities electricity, internet connections and all other services.

Swiftly and predictably, the reality of life for Israel's 1.7 million Palestinians upstaged Mr Netanyahu's fine words. In a radio interview, Moti Dotan, the head of the Lower Galilee regional council, sent a message to his Palestinian neighbours: "I don't want them at my [swimming] pools." Sounding like a mayor in the southern United States during the Jim Crow-era, he added: "Their culture of cleanliness isn't the same as ours. Why is that racist?"

Dotan was no extremist, observed the liberal newspaper Haaretz. He represents the Israeli mainstream. Notably, Mr Netanyahu did not distance himself from Mr Dotan's remarks.

At the same time, Samar Qupty, star of a new film on Palestinians in Israel called Junction 48, was questioned for two hours and then strip searched at Ben Gurion airport and denied her hand luggage before being allowed to fly to an international film festival.

Stories of state-sponsored humiliation at the airport are routine for Israel's Palestinian academics, journalists, actors and community leaders - in fact, for any Palestinian active in the public sphere.

The list of restrictions on Palestinian citizens is long and growing. A database by the legal group Adalah shows that some 60 Israeli laws explicitly discriminate against non-Jews, with another 18 in the pipeline.

Two laws passed last month intensify the repression of dissent. An Expulsion Law is designed to empower Israeli MPs to oust Palestinian lawmakers whose views offend them, while a Transparency Law stigmatises human rights groups working to protect Palestinian rights.

Recently leaked protocols reveal that the police have secretly awarded themselves powers to use live fire against Palestinian protesters in Israel, even if they pose no danger. Yet another law threatens jail for any Palestinian citizen who tries to dissuade another from volunteering in the Israeli army.

Growing numbers of Palestinian citizens, including poets and writers, are being jailed or put under house arrest for posts on social media the Israeli authorities disapprove of.

Defence minister Avigdor Lieberman recently compared the work of the Palestinians' national poet, Mahmoud Darwish, to Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. Darwish is banned from school curriculums.

The culture minister, Miri Regev, meanwhile, has tied state funding for theatre and dance companies to their readiness to perform in Jewish settlements, illegally located in the occupied territories in the West Bank.

In his video, Mr Netanyahu said: "Jews and Arabs should reach out to each other, get to know each other's families. Listen to each other."

And yet his officials have just halved funding for the training of Palestinian student teachers, though not Jewish ones, to deter the former from pursuing teaching careers. Jewish schools face severe staff shortages, but Israel's educational segregation is so complete that Palestinian citizens cannot be allowed to teach Jewish children.

Mr Netanyahu also extolled his government for a promise to increase funding for Israel's near-bankrupt Palestinian local authorities. He forgot to mention, however, that he had conditioned the money on the same councils demolishing thousands of homes in their jurisdiction. For decades Palestinians in Israel have been routinely denied building permits.

Israel's Palestinian citizens were not fooled by Mr Netanyahu's video. But as their leaders noted, they were not the intended audience. The video was a cynical PR exercise aimed firmly at the Europeans, who have been discomfited by Israel's increasingly repressive climate and the government's regular incitement against its Palestinian minority.

Mr Netanyahu is worried about a backlash in the West, including growing support for the boycott movement, European efforts to revive peace talks, and potential moves at the United Nations and International Criminal Court.

Palestinians in Israel have known worse repression than they currently endure. For Israel's first two decades they lived under military rule, locked into their towns and villages and largely invisible unless they agreed to do and say as they were told. Palestinian MPs could be elected to the parliament but only if they were first approved by Zionist parties like Mr Netanyahu's.

The Israeli right sounds ever more nostalgic for that era. Slowly the ethos of the military government for Israel's Palestinians is returning – and the perfume of Mr Netanyahu's soothing words about ending "discord and hate" will not cover the stench.

Jonathan Cook is a Nazareth-based journalist and winner of the Martha Gellhorn Special Prize for Journalism

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