

Palestinians in Israel Now Face Far-right Mob Violence Backed by the State

Protests by Palestinian citizens are being greeted with a mix of police violence and vigilante-style attacks from Jewish fascists

By [Jonathan Cook](#)

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With Jerusalem ablaze and Gaza on the brink of another major [Israeli onslaught](#), it has been easy to overlook the rapidly escalating ethnic violence inside Israel, where one in five of the population is Palestinian.

These [1.8 million](#) Palestinians – Israeli citizens in little more than name – have spent the past week venting their frustration and anger at decades of Israeli oppression directed at their own communities inside Israel, as well as at Palestinians under more visible occupation.

Already the protests, which have been sweeping Palestinian communities inside Israel, have been greeted with a savage backlash – a combination of official violence from Israeli police and vigilante-style violence from far-right Jewish gangs.

Israeli politicians have been warning noisily of “Arab [pogroms](#)” against the Jewish population. But with the rising influence of the openly fascist far-right in Israel – many of them armed settlers, some with ties to military units – there is a much greater danger of pogroms against the Palestinian minority.

Israel’s Palestinian citizens have been at the heart of the wave of protests in occupied East Jerusalem that began a month ago, at the start of Ramadan. With the aid of their Israeli ID cards and relative freedom of movement, many travelled to East Jerusalem in organised [bus convoys](#). They bolstered numbers in the demonstrations at [Sheikh Jarrah](#), where many Palestinian families are facing expulsion from their homes by Jewish settlers, backed by the Israeli state. They also participated in the defence of al-Aqsa Mosque.

But last weekend, as social media was flooded with clips of police storming al-Aqsa and of Jewish extremists excitedly cheering a fire near the mosque, protests erupted inside Israel too. There have been nightly demonstrations in larger Palestinian towns, including Nazareth, Kafr Kanna, Kafr Manda, Umm al-Fahm, Shefa-Amr and Beersheva. Police have responded

in familiar fashion, firing stun grenades into the crowds and smothering them with tear gas. There have been large numbers of [arrests](#).

Boiling point

Some of the most violent clashes, however, have been taking place elsewhere, in communities misleadingly described by Israel as “mixed cities”. Israel has traditionally presented these cities – Lod (Lydd), Ramle, Jaffa, Haifa and Acre (Akka) – as examples of “Jewish-Arab coexistence”. The reality is very different.

In each, Palestinian citizens live on the margins of a former Palestinian city that was ethnically cleansed upon Israel’s [founding in 1948](#) and has been aggressively “Judaised” ever since.

Palestinian residents of these cities have to deal daily with the racism of many of their Jewish neighbours, and they face glaring institutional discrimination in planning rules designed to push them out and help Jews – often members of the settler movement or extremist religious students – [take their place](#). All of this occurs as they are tightly policed to protect Jewish residents’ rights at their expense.

Resentment and anger have been building steadily for years, and now seem to have reached a boiling point. And because the “mixed cities” are among the few places in Israel where Jewish and Palestinian citizens live in relatively close proximity – most other communities have been [strictly segregated](#) by Israel – the potential for inter-communal violence is especially high.

The roots of what some still view as a potential new intifada, or Palestinian uprising, risk being smothered in areas of Israel. The more the Palestinian minority protests against the structural discrimination it faces, the more it risks inflaming the passions of the Jewish far-right.

These Jewish fascists are riding high after their parties won six parliamentary seats in Israel’s March election. They are seen as integral to any coalition government that caretaker **Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu** may [put together](#).

Driving Palestinians out

For years, the settler right has been trying to drive remaining Palestinian families out of the “mixed cities”, especially those in the centre of the country, next to Tel Aviv. They have received state help to set up extremist religious seminaries in the midst of [Palestinian neighbourhoods](#).

Now under cover of protests, the far-right has the chance to up the stakes. Its newest legislator, **Itamar Ben Gvir**, has claimed, fancifully, that police are being prevented from [dealing with the protests](#) firmly enough. The barely coded message is that the far right needs to take the law into its own hands.

More surprisingly, Ben Gvir was echoed by the government’s police minister, **Amir Ohana**, who [called](#) on “citizens carrying weapons” to work on the authorities’ behalf by “immediately neutralising threats and danger”. Social media has also been awash with calls from activists to arm themselves and [attack](#) Palestinian communities in Israel.

On Wednesday, the results of the incitement were all too evident. Jewish gangs, many of them masked, [smashed and looted](#) Arab-owned shops and food stalls south of Tel Aviv. Hundreds of onlookers were filmed by an Israeli TV crew watching as a driver was dragged from his car and severely beaten. Though the rampage had been going on for much of the evening, police were [nowhere in sight](#).

Palestinian residents of mixed cities have been hurriedly organising defence patrols in their neighbourhoods. But with many members of the Jewish far right licensed to [carry firearms](#), the reality is that Palestinian communities have few ways to protect themselves effectively.

Some of the worst scenes have [emerged from Lod](#), where local Palestinians live in a few ghettoised neighbourhoods stranded in the midst of what is now effectively a Jewish city next to Tel Aviv.

'Iron fist'

Confrontations on Monday led to an armed Jewish resident [fatally shooting](#) a Palestinian father-of-three, [Musa Hasuna](#). The next day, his funeral [escalated into a riot](#) after police tried to [block](#) the mourners' route, with the torching of cars and visible symbols of the Jewish takeover of central Lod, including a synagogue.

On a visit to the city, Netanyahu denounced the events as "anarchy" and [warned](#) that Israel would use an "iron fist if necessary".

On Wednesday night, a [curfew](#) was imposed on the city, and under a [state of emergency](#), control passed from the local council to police. Netanyahu said he had been working to [overcome](#) legal obstacles to give police even greater powers.

Echoing Netanyahu and the Jewish fascist parties, Israeli Police Commissioner **Yaakov Shabtai** [argued](#) that the explosion of Palestinian unrest had been caused by police being "too soft".

Over the past few days, there have been tit-for-tat [violent attacks](#) on both Jewish and Palestinian citizens, with beatings, stabbings and shootings that have left many dozens injured. But claims of an imminent "civil war" in places such as Lod, as its Jewish mayor characterised the situation this week, fundamentally misrepresent the [dynamics at play](#) and the balance of power.

Even if they wanted to, Palestinian communities have no hope of taking on heavily armed security forces and Jewish militias.

Eruption of anger

What the state is doing in Lod and other communities – through the police and proxy settler allies – is teaching a new generation of Palestinian citizens a lesson in Jewish-state civics: you will pay a deeply painful price for demanding the rights we pretend to the world you already have.

Certainly, Netanyahu seems to have no real commitment to calming the situation, especially as violence between Jewish and Palestinian citizens takes his [corruption trial](#) off the front pages. It also feeds a right-wing narrative that is likely to serve him well if, as expected, Israel [heads back](#) to yet another general election in a few months' time.

But other Israeli officials are stoking the flames, too – including President Reuven Rivlin, who unlike Netanyahu, is supposed to be a unifying figure. He denounced Palestinian citizens as a “bloodthirsty Arab mob” and, in an inversion of the rapidly emerging reality, accused them of [conducting](#) what he called a “pogrom” in Lod.

For decades, Israel has tried to cultivate the improbable notion for western audiences that its Palestinian citizens – restyled as “Israeli Arabs” – live happily as equals with Jews in “the only democracy in the Middle East”.

Israel has carefully obscured the minority’s history as Palestinians – clinging on to their lands during Israel’s mass ethnic cleansing operations in 1948 – as it has the [systematic discrimination](#) they face in a self-declared Jewish state.

As a consequence, the eruption of anger in Palestinian communities inside Israel is always difficult for Israel to manage narratively.

Treated as an ‘enemy’

Since the grip of a military government was loosened in the late 1960s, the Palestinian minority has staged constant protests. But massive, nationwide street demonstrations have erupted only once every generation – and they are always brutally crushed by Israeli forces.

Badly bloodied, Palestinian citizens have been forced to retreat into unhappy, and temporary, quiescence.

That was what happened in the 1970s during Land Day, when Palestinian communities launched their first one-day general strike to protest the state’s mass theft of their historic farming lands so that Jewish-only communities could be established on them. Israeli officials, including then-Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, were so incensed by the strike that they sent in tanks. Six Palestinian citizens [were killed](#) as a result.

The protests returned in October 2000, at the start of the [Second Intifada](#), when the Palestinian minority took to the streets in solidarity with Palestinians under occupation who were being killed in large numbers in the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza.

Within days, 13 demonstrators had been gunned down, and hundreds more were seriously wounded as Israeli police used live ammunition and rubber-coated metal bullets as their first-line of [crowd control](#).

A subsequent judicial inquiry, the Or Commission, concluded that police [viewed the minority](#) as an “enemy”.

Double discrimination

The new generation protesting this week knows of the October 2000 protests chiefly as stories told by their parents. They are finding out first-hand how much has changed in Israel’s racist policing in the intervening two decades.

In fact, questions about the role of Israeli police and their relationship to Palestinian communities inside Israel have been [at the forefront](#) of political debates raging among Palestinian citizens over the past two years.

The Palestinian minority has long suffered a doubly discriminatory approach from Israeli security forces. On one hand, police have shirked a normal civilian policing role in Palestinian communities in Israel. That has allowed criminal elements to flourish in the vacuum created by this neglect. Murders and shootings are at an [all-time high](#).

On the other hand, police are quick to crack down when Palestinian citizens engage in political dissent. The current arrests and police violence are part of a familiar pattern.

Many of the factors that brought Palestinians out into the streets in 2000 have not gone away. Violent, politically repressive policing has continued. House demolitions and racist planning policies still mean that Palestinian communities are chronically overcrowded and [suffocated](#). Incitement from Jewish politicians is still [the norm](#). And Palestinian leaders in Israel continue to be [excluded](#) from the government and Israel's main institutions.

Permanent underclass

But in recent years, matters have deteriorated even further. The passage of the 2018 nation-state law means the minority's legal position is formally worse. The law has explicitly [relegated](#) Palestinian citizens to a permanent underclass – not really citizens at all, but unwelcome guest workers in a Jewish state.

Further, the ascendant Jewish far-right has a mounting grievance against the Palestinian minority for standing in the way of its securing a solid electoral majority in a run of elections over the past two years. The success of Palestinian parties is seen as effectively blocking Netanyahu from heading a stable [coalition](#) of the ultra-nationalist right.

And, with a two-state solution firmly off the table for all of Israel's Jewish parties, Palestinian citizens are staring at a political and diplomatic cul-de-sac. They have no hope of emerging from under the shadow of an Israeli security paradigm that readily views them as a fifth column, or a Palestinian Trojan horse inside a Jewish state.

It is that very paradigm that is currently being used against them – and justifying police and settler violence in places such as Lod, Jaffa and Acre.

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