

# Israel-Palestine: A Spiral Toward Catastrophe

Friday 10 February 2023, by [FINKEL David](#) (Date first published: 4 February 2023).

**The degenerative spiral in the so-called Israel-Palestine “conflict” is nowhere near reaching the bottom yet. Even to begin understanding it requires, first, demystifying terms like “conflict,” “cycle of violence” and related phrases that disguise the realities of *daily* killings – and violations of human rights and international law so routine (and so enabled by U.S. government policy and inaction) that they no longer qualify as news.**

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Even before the Jenin massacre by the Israeli military — followed by a lone Palestinian gunman killing seven Israelis outside a synagogue at a settlement in occupied east Jerusalem — the incidence of Palestinians shot dead by Israeli soldiers or settlers comes pretty close to the rate of mass shootings in the USA.

Justifying the raid on the Jenin refugee camp — the same locality where one or more Israeli snipers murdered journalist Shireen Abu-Akleh only months ago — the military said it was to remove an “Islamic Jihad” cell. Presuming this to be true, the question is: Why there would be such a cell there in the first place?

If there were any hope of peace, no such Islamic Jihad cell would exist, if only because the community wouldn't tolerate it. In the present unbearable circumstances, people see these militant groupings as the only resistance in town, even though there is no “armed-struggle” road to Palestinian freedom. That's why these episodes will increase in number and escalate in violence.



*Rally in London to commemorate the Nakba and to protest the Israeli Army murder of Al Jazeera journalist Shireen Abu Akleh while she was covering their raids on the West Bank town of Jenin in May 2022. (Photo: [Alisdare Hickson](#), [CC BY-SA 2.0](#), via Wikimedia Commons)*

In the following notes I'll try to lay out a few basic realities, and point to some important sources that English-speaking readers can follow for accurate information and unvarnished analysis.

**1.** What's called a “conflict” is actually an entirely asymmetric war of ethnic cleansing, waged both

by official agencies of the Israeli state and semi-unofficial settler gangs against the Palestinian population — from Hebron and Jenin in the West Bank, to east Jerusalem, to Arab communities inside Israel, whose rights are increasingly under threat. The violence, dispossession and movement restrictions are by no means random: They are a highly organized and systematically implemented system that anti-occupation activist Jeff Halper calls the “Matrix of Control.”

The reality is succinctly laid out by Amjad Iraqi in [The myth of the ‘cycle of violence’](#) in the online +972 magazine:

This power imbalance lies at the heart of a fundamental difference in the way each side tends to speak about the other’s violence: when Palestinians spotlight Israeli brutality, they are demanding the end of their oppression; when Israelis point to Palestinian violence, it is usually to justify that oppression. It is yet another link in the chain that Palestinians are trying to break: the world’s belief that their lives only matter if their colonizer decides they do.

**2.** When we hear that Israel has elected “the most rightwing” government in the country’s history, the term requires specialized definition. In usual political discourse, “right or left wing” refers primarily to economic, fiscal and social policy (as in “free market” vs. “social democratic”) and only secondarily to racialized issues. In the Israeli context, “rightwing” overwhelmingly means *extreme anti-Arab racism*.

In this specific sense of the term, Israeli politics has indeed been “moving rightward” for decades. Keep in mind, of course, that more than five million Palestinians living under Israeli occupation in the West Bank and siege in Gaza have no vote at all for the government that rules, ruins and routinely destroys their lives.

**3.** Without going too far into the “inside baseball” of Israeli politics, it should be noted that the most recent election was not so much a sharp shift in voters’ opinions, but more about party alignments. Binyamin Netanyahu, whose principal goal is avoiding prosecution and prison for corruption and bribery in office, orchestrated an amalgam of fringe rightwing forces into an electoral bloc called “Religious Zionism” to support his return to power.

On the other hand, the sad-sack vestige of “left” Zionism, Meretz (which should have faced reality and dissolved years ago to support the Arab-led Joint List), refused to even block with the Labor Party (itself in terminal decline) and was shut out of the Knesset (Israeli parliament). At the same time, the inherently unstable Arab-led bloc (formerly “Joint List”) of Palestinian nationalists, Islamists, and Arab and Jewish Israeli leftists fell apart, and the Palestinian-nationalist party Balad fell 15,000 votes short of the threshold for the minimum four-seat representation.

**4.** As a result, Netanyahu’s rightwing nationalist-religious coalition wound up with 64 seats in the 120-member Knesset. Half of these belong to Netanyahu’s traditional-right Likud, the other half to various religious parties — Religious Zionism, Shas and United Torah Judaism. (Can you imagine a U.S. party called “United Bible Christianity”? Come to think of it, maybe it’s better not to ask.)

Netanyahu and the Jewish religious fanatics mostly despise each other, but they use each other in a marriage of convenience — in a very loosely similar manner to the way that Kevin McCarthy’s speakership position in the U.S. House of Representatives depends on the lunatic fringe of the lunatic fringe of the Republican Party. Netanyahu has handed over the ministries for controlling the Occupied Palestinian Territories, borders and police to Itamar Ben-Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich —

names you'll be getting to know better as outspoken advocates of killing and expulsion of Palestinians, including those holding Israeli citizenship if they show insufficient fealty to the "Jewish state."

Netanyahu has also appointed a ministerial guardian of "Jewish Identity," Avi Maoz who, among other pleasant features, loathes homosexual rights and would love to tighten rules on recognizing Jewish conversions not performed by the Orthodox rabbinate. Given the strong standing of Queer rights in the non-Orthodox sectors of Israeli society, the well-known use of "pinkwashing" as an asset in Israel's international liberal reputation — and above all, the horror of U.S. Jewish community leaders over arbitrary theocratic denial of the identity of many American Jews including children in mixed marriages — it seems likely at least for now that this particular creature will be largely kept, forgive the expression, in the closet.

(On this controversy see, for example, the *New York Times* article [Netanyahu's New Ministers Have Very Strict Ideas About Who Is a Jew](#). Although the U.S. Jewish leadership is largely prepared to forgive almost all of Israel's atrocities, conveniently blaming "Palestinian rejectionism" for the regrettable "cycle of violence," a challenge to the highly pluralist realities of American Jewish life is something they can't afford to accept.)

## **Why the Protests? Do They Matter?**

It is logical to ask here why mass weekly protests have broken out inside Israel over the new government, and more importantly, why supporters of Palestinian freedom should much care. After all, the growth of settlements, step-by-step *de facto* annexation, confiscations, murderous repression and mass incarceration in the Occupied Territories have proceeded under all secular-led Israeli governments "left" or "right."

As the Netanyahu government moves to wipe out the authority of the Israeli Supreme Court to act as a check on parliamentary power, many observers note that the tens of thousands of flag-waving, overwhelmingly Jewish citizens rallying to "save our democracy" are defending a *status quo* that's been lethal to Palestinian rights and lives for decades.

The criticism is absolutely on target. The anti-Netanyahu and anti-theocratic rallies cannot transform the basic realities of life in a Jewish-supremacist state. One of the leaders of the opposition, former defense minister Benny Gantz, openly boasts of "how many Arabs I've killed" in his military career.

Nonetheless, there is significance in the large-scale resistance to the new government's drive to strip the semi-independent judiciary of its power — something that's happened in Hungary's self-styled "illiberal democracy" or in Poland among other examples. We've also seen positive cases like Brazil and Bolivia, where high court rulings respectively freed Lula from a frameup prison conviction and reversed a coup against president Evo Morales, helping prevent potential fascist consolidations of power in two major South American nations.

In Israel, the Supreme Court offers the most threadbare and practically meaningless protections against the routine land confiscations, home demolitions and arbitrary imprisonments that Palestinians experience. However, when parliament-appointed electoral bodies seek to bar Arab parties from Israeli elections, Court interventions have restored them to the ballot. This means something for formal democracy at least. (Netanyahu's own motivations have more to do with passing a law, free of judicial review, to stop his own ongoing corruption prosecution.)

## **Israel and the Empire**

U.S. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken's visit to Israel and the Palestinian Authority had nothing to do with Palestinian rights, beyond the most superficial cosmetic appearances. In reciting the mantra of the long-dead "two-state solution," Blinken was simply telling anyone who paid attention that nothing new is on the table.

Blinken instead is navigating the murky waters of "geopolitics." While the United States sees Israel as a crucial strategic pivot in the evolving U.S. confrontation with Iran, it's important to make sure that Israel won't unilaterally launch a premature war. Rather, imperial strategy is to deepen Israel's growing relations with the most repressive Arab dictatorships — Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf kingdoms — in their anti-Iran alliance. At the same time, those regimes for their own reasons are sending feelers to Tehran for rapprochement — which Iran's rulers also need at a time when they're in all-out war against their own population.

Israel is also seeking to maintain its good relations with both Ukraine and Russia during Russia's horrific invasion. (In a particularly absurdist example of pseudo-sophisticated media punditry, CNN's Jake Tapper asked Netanyahu if he might be a "mediator" between the two.)

In short, as in almost every international crisis, the Palestinian people are collateral damage, with lots of popular sympathy especially in the Arab world and global South, but no real allies among state elites.

## **What to Do?**

What's happening in Israel, then, is the rapidly accelerating consolidation of an ethno-religious supremacist regime with colonial and apartheid features. In this context, what are the openings and responsibilities for solidarity activism?

In this writer's personal opinion, for those of us who are not Israeli or Palestinian, musings about a democratic "one-state solution" are largely meaningless, although I deeply admire the voices on the ground who are thinking through what it might mean and how to get there.

Be that as it may, there are vital practical tasks facing us:

- 1.** Build and defend the BDS (boycott/divestment/sanctions) campaign proclaimed by Palestinian civil society organizations. The movement is growing, particularly targeting U.S. corporations' complicity in the most brutal practices of the Occupation, which is why it is under attack on university campuses, in rightwing state legislatures and in the U.S. Congress.
- 2.** Speak out, and support the resistance, against ongoing ethnic cleansing in neighborhoods like Sheikh Jarran and Silwan in east Jerusalem, Masafer Yatta, the south Hebron hills, removals of Bedouin in the Naqab (Negev), and much more.
- 3.** Support the brave voices in Congress speaking for Palestinian rights, including Rashida Tlaib (Michigan) and Ilhan Omar (Minnesota, who on February 2 has just been stripped of her seat on the House Foreign Affairs Committee in a retaliatory partisan attack by Kevin McCarthy). Support Rep. Betty McCollum's bill on "defending the rights of Palestinian children and families living under Israeli occupation," demanding the end of U.S. funding for the incarceration of Palestinian young people.
- 4.** Find an organization to join or support whichever pro-Palestinian organization best suits your

situation, whether it's the U.S. Campaign for Palestinian Rights, Adalah, Palestine Legal, Friends of Sabeel North America, Jewish Voice for Peace, If Not Now — or perhaps a social justice group in your union, neighborhood or religious community that will take up the cause.

## **David Finkel**

### **Resources**

There are a variety of sources of important information that you won't generally find in establishment media. Here are a few:

The above-mentioned online +972 (<https://www.972mag.com/>) carries analyses by Palestinian and Israeli writers on immediate events and underlying trends. Deserving of support!

The extensive reports by Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and the Israeli human rights watchdog B'Tselem offer extensive documentation of what AI calls Israel's practices of "apartheid and persecution."

The independent ezine *al-Jadaliyya* ([www.jadaliyya.com](http://www.jadaliyya.com)) is a valuable source on Palestine as well as the overall region.

The daily broadcast of "Democracy Now" ([www.democracynow.org](http://www.democracynow.org)) carries consistent coverage of events in Palestine as well as other global and domestic news.

Peter Beinart's weekly columns and subscription broadcasts are consistent sources of insight, including on the debates in the U.S. Jewish community (where he is frequently viciously attacked).

To see what we're up against, don't ignore the right wing! For voices of support of Israeli policies, advocacy of the Israel Victory Project calling for total Palestinian defeat and surrender, and regular attacks on "radical Islam," see Daniel Pipes' online *Middle East Forum* ([www.meforum.org](http://www.meforum.org)). There are also, of course, numerous outlets of apocalyptic Christian Zionism in the United States. My personal favorite is called *Southwest Radio Church* ([www.swrc.com](http://www.swrc.com)), although it often requires a fairly strong stomach.

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## **P.S.**

- Solidarity. Posted February 4, 2023:  
<https://solidarity-us.org/a-spiral-toward-catastrophe/>