

Abandoned by the state, Palestinian citizens of Israel face record crime wave

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Amid a proliferation of weapons and worsening police negligence since Oct. 7, violence by criminal organizations in Arab towns has reached historic levels.

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“If I can stay with my family abroad, I’ll be able to raise my children normally. But if I have to return to Israel, I’ll turn my children into criminals.” A. is a Palestinian citizen of Israel, who has been pursued by a criminal organization and is now trying to leave the country with his family. “In our reality today, you have to be a criminal in order to survive, and it’s clear that the situation will get worse in the coming years.”

Some may say this is an exaggeration, and insist that Palestinian citizens of Israel lead normal lives, better than most Palestinians and Arabs. But in addition to widespread discrimination against and increasing [political persecution](#) of Palestinian citizens by the Israeli government, the number of Palestinian victims [of organized crime](#) continues to rise at a frightening rate.

According to [a Taub Institute study](#), the Palestinian Arab community in Israel had the third-highest murder rate among OECD countries in 2019 — just below Mexico and Colombia — with 11.11 murders per 100,000 citizens, a figure that tripled for those between the ages of 20 and 34. The study also noted that murders in Palestinian Arab communities more than doubled, from 109 cases in 2022 to 233 in 2023, with a consistent climb in the murder rate every month through last September.

“There are few villages that have not experienced shootings, or where there are no threatened families, demands for protection money, car bombings, and so on,” said Rawyah Handaqlu, an attorney who heads the Emergency Headquarters to Combat Crime in Arab Society — an emergency body established last September by the High Follow-Up Committee and the National Committee of the Heads of Arab Local Authorities.

“It’s not just about the number of fatalities,” she explained. “Entire families have left the country or changed their place of residence, others are hiding in their homes, not to mention the daily explosions, the burning of cars, and all those injured in the attacks, which sometimes are not even reported in the media.”

Rawyah Handaqlu, an attorney who heads the Emergency Headquarters to Combat Crime in Arab Society. (Lime Production)

Since the beginning of this year, 86 Arab citizens have been murdered — a startlingly high number

that suggests the murder rate this year will be similar to last year's. Yet although the numbers are roughly the same, criminal organizations have recently escalated their tactics, publishing lists of murder targets, abducting civilians, and hiding the bodies of their victims.

"Today, for example, we no longer hear about a stabbing: there are now anti-tank missiles, mortar shells, and drones. In the absence of the law, things are developing horribly," Handaqlu warns.

"The heads of the criminal organizations know exactly how the police work, and they plan their work accordingly, so you feel that things are coordinated," A. said. "In the absence of any real deterrent, the pace of their activity only increases." He notes that in past years, gunmen would burn their getaway vehicle in a remote area in order to hide and destroy any evidence. But now, they will blow it up near the crime scene — and if they previously limited their attacks to certain targets, now they will go after the target's family as well.

"I'm not surprised that there are some who have killed 10 or 20 people in recent years," A. told +972. "No one prosecutes them, most murder cases are closed or dragged out, and all the evidence from security cameras, witnesses, fingerprints, and traces is 'wasted'." He has no hope that the situation will improve; in the coming years, A. warns, "only your fists will protect you."

'We hold the police unequivocally responsible'

In the media, political discourse, and among the Israeli public, Druze communities are often seen as separate from the Palestinian minority — a perception that some Druze reinforce themselves, especially during periods of heightened security, when they call attention to the fact that Druze citizens serve in the army and security services. But when it comes to organized crime, as well as house demolitions and other forms of discrimination, they face the same threats as the rest of Palestinian society.

In recent months, the murder rate has significantly increased in Druze communities, including Yarka, Isfiya, Abu Sinan, and others. The village of [Isfiya](#) alone witnessed five murders between April 12 and May 12, with two of the victims found dead long after they had been kidnapped. In response, according to journalist and social activist Wissam Ghoutani, many village residents came out to [protest](#) violent crime and police inaction.

Mourners attend the funeral of 66-year-old Salman Khalab, one of four shooting victims, in Yarka, August 23, 2023. (Flash90)

"We hold the police unequivocally responsible, as the institution responsible for our security, and who have negligently allowed things to deteriorate here for years," Ghoutani affirmed. Five people were killed in Isfiya and not a single suspect was arrested. We only hear that 'the police are opening an investigation.'"

Ghoutani conceded that other factors — including unemployment, lagging public investment in education, sports, and infrastructure, and even culture — contribute to crime. He also advocated for renewing the activities of reconciliation committees, a traditional forum for mediating disputes in Arab society, and to grant them the authority to address crime head-on.

"But the war between criminal organizations in Arab society and the chaos that exists today are greater than anything else [facing the Arab community]," he insisted, "and it is the police, as a powerful state security apparatus, that is supposed to deal with them."

A proliferation of weapons

Following the October 7 attacks, National Security Minister Itamar Ben Gvir moved quickly to expand gun ownership among Jewish civilians, and recently [celebrated](#) the approval of more than 100,000 new gun licenses. With more weapons on the street, according to Handaqlu, gun violence at the hands of criminal organizations has also proliferated. “The weapons distributed today under the pretext of Jewish security will be used against Arabs,” she predicted, “especially with the deteriorating economic situation and the chaos of the war.”

Handaqlu’s work is only made more difficult by Ben Gvir and the lack of cooperation from his ministry — a departure from the ministry’s role under former Minister of Internal Security Omer Barlev and his deputy Yoav Segalovich, who collaborated with Arab Knesset members and heads of Arab municipalities. “Unfortunately, the minister incites against Arab society or uses organized crime as an excuse to attack it, and he has even gutted existing government programs for Arab society.”

Israeli minister of National Security Itamar Ben Gvir and Police Commander Yoram Sofer present a new proposal to eradicate crime in the Arab sector, August 17, 2023. (Yonatan Sindel/Flash90)

In March 2023, for instance, Ben Gvir decided to freeze the ministry’s cooperation in the “Stop the Bleeding” program, an initiative designed to deal with the rising violence and crime in Arab society. Forced to come up with alternative solutions, Handaqlu convened a roundtable of civil society institutions and representatives from several ministries, and has continued to work with local authorities to help improve their response to criminal activity and assist those affected by it.

On the problem of police negligence toward crime in Palestinian communities, Handaqlu admitted that “we must cooperate with them, regardless of the existing mistrust, because they are responsible for our security.” But she also acknowledged that the police are subject to policies dictated by the government, which currently seems bent on making the situation worse.

The Knesset is currently preparing to pass the Law to Expand the Means to Combat Criminal Organizations, which would give Ben Gvir, as Minister of National Security, the sole authority to use anti-terrorism tactics in the fight against domestic crime. This would amount to a remarkable expansion of Ben Gvir’s powers, which he is almost certain to use against — not for the benefit of — Arab citizens.

“If this law had passed before October 7,” Handaqlu suggested, “perhaps the minister would have declared the entire Arab society a terrorist organization.”

Baker Zoubi

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P.S.

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<https://www.972mag.com/palestinian-citizens-israel-record-crime-wave/>

A version of this article was first published in Hebrew on Local Call. Read it [here](#).

- Baker Zoubi is a journalist from Kufr Misr currently living in Nazareth. Baker has been working in the field of journalism since 2010, initially as a reporter for local Arab media outlets, and later as an editor of the Bokra website. Today, he also works as a researcher and editor for television programs on the Makan and Musawa channels. He writes and posts on his Facebook page various opinion pieces on politics and social issues related to Palestinian society. Recently, he also started writing for Local Call.

- Our team has been devastated by the horrific events of this latest war – the atrocities committed by Hamas in Israel and the massive retaliatory Israeli attacks on Gaza. Our hearts are with all the people and communities facing violence.

We are in an extraordinarily dangerous era in Israel-Palestine. The bloodshed unleashed by these events has reached extreme levels of brutality and threatens to engulf the entire region. Hamas' murderous assault in southern Israel has devastated and shocked the country to its core. Israel's retaliatory bombing of Gaza is wreaking destruction on the already besieged strip and killing a ballooning number of civilians. Emboldened settlers in the West Bank, backed by the army, are seizing the opportunity to escalate their attacks on Palestinians.

This escalation has a very clear context, one that +972 has spent the past 13 years covering: Israeli society's growing racism and militarism, the entrenched occupation, and an increasingly normalized siege on Gaza.

We are well positioned to cover this perilous moment – but we need your help to do it. This terrible period will challenge the humanity of all of those working for a better future in this land. Palestinians and Israelis are already organizing and strategizing to put up the fight of their lives.

Can we count on your [support](#)? +972 Magazine is the leading media voice of this movement, a desperately needed platform where Palestinian and Israeli journalists and activists can report on and analyze what is happening, guided by humanism, equality, and justice. Join us.

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