

# Israel: Racist, Violent Policing Is at the Heart of Apartheid

Amnesty International report highlights how Israeli police protect Jewish supremacy from any challenge by Palestinian citizens

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Global Research, October 11, 2023

[Middle East Eye](#) 1 July 2021

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [Law and Justice](#)

In-depth Report: [PALESTINE](#)

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*Police made sweeping arrests of Israel's large minority of Palestinian citizens after protests rocked the country in May during Israel's [11-day attack on Gaza](#). Officers were documented beating demonstrators, and in some cases torturing them while in detention. Police also failed to protect the Palestinian minority from planned, vigilante-style attacks by far-right Jewish extremists.*

This was the damning verdict of an Amnesty International [report](#) published last week. The findings indicate that Israeli police view the country's Palestinian minority, a fifth of the population, as an enemy rather than as citizens with a right to protest.

The report echoes what Palestinian leaders in Israel and local human rights groups have long said: that the default policing of the Palestinian community in Israel is racist and violent. It reflects the same values of Jewish supremacy seen in the Israeli army's brutal treatment of Palestinians under [occupation](#).

The contrast between how police responded to protests by Palestinian citizens and supportive statements from their leaders, on the one hand, and to incitement from Israeli Jewish leaders and violent backlash from the Jewish extreme right, on the other, is stark indeed.

More than 2,150 arrests were made following May's inter-communal violence. But according to reports cited by Amnesty, [more than 90 percent](#) of those detained were Palestinian – either citizens of Israel or residents of occupied East Jerusalem.

Most face [charges](#) unrelated to attacks on people or property, despite how their demonstrations were widely portrayed by police and Israeli media. Rather, Palestinian protesters were indicted on charges [such as](#) “insulting or assaulting a police officer” or “taking part in an illegal gathering” – matters related to the repressive policing faced by the Palestinian minority.

## ‘Torture Room’

Amnesty cites repeated examples of unprovoked police assaults on peaceful protesters in cities such as Nazareth and Haifa. That contrasts with the continuing indulgence by police of provocations by the Jewish far-right, such as their march through Palestinian neighbourhoods of occupied East Jerusalem on 15 June, during which participants [chanted](#): “Death to Arabs” and “May your village burn.”



Patriot missiles in Israel target an Iraqi Scud missile. Alpert Nathan / Government Press Office. CC BY-NC-SA 2.0.

Amnesty also documents testimony that Israeli police beat bound detainees in Nazareth’s police station – setting up what the local legal rights group Adalah has [described](#) as an improvised “torture room”.

In addition, a protester in Haifa appears to have been tied to a chair and [deprived of sleep](#) for nine days, using torture techniques familiar to Palestinians in the occupied territories.

In contrast, Israeli police were alerted in real time to messages from Jewish far-right groups about precise plans to smash up “Arab” shops [and assault](#) Palestinian citizens on the street. And yet, police either ignored those warnings or were slow to respond. An [investigation](#) by Haaretz has further suggested that police subsequently failed to use film footage to identify these Jewish vigilantes and, as a result, made few arrests.

This picture of police turning a blind eye to planned Jewish violence echoes scenes from the time of the protests. Footage [showed](#) police officers allowing armed Jewish thugs – many bused in from settlements – to wander freely around Palestinian neighbourhoods during a curfew on the city of Lod. There was even footage of police and Jewish far-right extremists [conducting](#) what looked like joint “operations”, with police throwing stun grenades as Jewish extremists threw stones.

Jewish politicians who [incited](#) against the Palestinian minority – from Israel’s former president, Reuven Rivlin, and Lod’s [mayor](#), Yair Revivo, to far-right [legislator](#) Itamar Ben-

Gvir – have faced no consequences.

## Charged with ‘Terror Acts’

Instead, police arranged what amounted to a provocative, entirely unnecessary assault by special forces on the home of a Palestinian community leader, [Kamal al-Khatib](#), to arrest him. The deputy head of the northern Islamic Movement was charged with supporting terrorism after he expressed pride at what he called the minority’s [solidarity](#) with the people of Gaza and occupied East Jerusalem.

And last week, apparently too late for inclusion in the Amnesty report, Israel’s racist policing moved in new directions.

Small numbers of Palestinian citizens suspected of attacking Jews were charged with “terror acts”, in some cases without any physical or DNA evidence tying them to the crime. In several cases, the defendants were [indicted](#) based on confessions made after prolonged interrogation by Israel’s secret police, the Shin Bet.

Israel’s legal system is treating inter-communal violence as an act of terror when Palestinian citizens are involved, and as an ordinary law-and-order issue – assuming it is dealt with at all – when Israeli Jews are involved.

Underlining this distinction is the decision to place Palestinian citizens of Israel under administrative detention, jailing them without charge and not allowing lawyers to see the supposed evidence against their clients. This draconian move – with one such order [approved](#) last week by Defence Minister Benny Gantz – is usually reserved for Palestinians under occupation, not Israeli citizens.

## Settling Scores

In its report, Amnesty pointed to public statements from Israeli police commanders indicating that the current harsh crackdown is really [about](#) “settling scores”. And in part, that is true.

Nearly two decades ago, a judicial-led public inquiry [concluded](#) that Israeli police treated Palestinian citizens as “the enemy”. Nothing has changed since. Police regard it as their primary job to protect the privileges of the Jewish majority by keeping the Palestinian minority crushed and obedient, as a subordinate community inside a self-declared Jewish state.

The eruption of protests in May, which caught police off-guard, was implicitly a sign that they had failed in that role. Police [interpreted](#) the demonstrations as a public humiliation for which “deterrence” needed to be urgently restored.

Israeli politicians, including the then-police minister, Amir Ohana, as well as the Jewish far-right, viewed the protests in much the same light. They [argued](#) at the time that [police](#) were being [held back](#) by legal niceties, and that it was the job of Jewish citizens to [back police](#) by taking the law into their own hands.

Yet, the “settling of scores” with the Palestinian minority relates to a separate matter. External observers, such as Amnesty, tend to notice Israel’s racist policing only when direct violence is used against Palestinian citizens. But the Palestinian minority’s

experience of discrimination from police is much broader.

For years, the minority has been taking to the streets in large numbers to protest against not only the violent policing of dissent, but a complementary near-absence of policing [towards](#) Palestinian communities in Israel when it comes to tackling crime.

The harsh repression seen in recent weeks contrasts strongly with police inaction as a crime wave has swept Palestinian communities, with each year bringing a [record number](#) of violent deaths. Both Palestinian and Jewish criminal gangs have exploited the policing void in Palestinian towns and villages, knowing that they are free to act as long as the violence is “Arab-on-Arab”.

Even during the [Covid-19](#) lockdowns, Palestinian community leaders kept up the pressure, leading go-slow convoys of dozens of cars along Israel’s busiest roads to [draw attention](#) to Israel’s racist policing priorities.

These presented a different kind of humiliation for police. Unusually, commanders were forced onto the back foot, swallowing unrelenting criticism and condemnation for failing to deal with crime in Palestinian communities. It even became one of the top issues for Palestinian parties in Israel’s string of recent elections.

Now, police are having their moment of revenge. “You want more active policing? We’ll give you more active policing. See how you like this!” seems to be the new message of the mass round-ups.

## Jewish Supremacism

The reality is that both kinds of policing towards Palestinian citizens – the violent policing of dissent, and the lack of policing of crime – are rooted in the same, ugly ideology of Jewish supremacism.

This is the same supremacism highlighted in a [report](#) early this year by the Israeli human rights group B’Tselem. It broke new ground in the human rights community by explicitly identifying Israel as an apartheid state, one that treats Palestinians as inferior, whether in the occupied territories or inside Israel, and Jews as superior, whether in Israel or in the illegal settlements.

The new Amnesty report is the latest snapshot of a society where everything follows that apartheid logic, including policing. That should surprise no one, because apartheid is, by definition, systematic.

Most Jewish Israelis, whether they identify with the left or right, have shown little interest in the lethal crime wave that for years has washed over Palestinian communities near their own, despite the regular protest campaigns by the Palestinian minority.

And now – through their silence – most ordinary Jewish Israelis and their politicians have demonstrated that they support, or are at least indifferent to, the current crackdown by police on the Palestinian minority. The deeper causes of May’s protests, and the violent backlash from the far right, appear to have provoked little self-reflection.

The Israeli Jewish public seems equally unconcerned by the fact that Jewish far-right thugs have chanted “death to Arabs” on their streets, that videos show police cooperating with

those thugs, or that police have been making mass arrests of Palestinian citizens for weeks on end, while failing to search for the Jews who were filmed attacking Palestinians.

## Belligerent Occupation

The truth is that Israeli police get away with racist, violent policing because wider Israeli Jewish society approves. Police regard themselves as defenders of a [Jewish supremacism](#) that many ordinary Jewish citizens see as their birthright.

The Palestinian minority hoped that it had opened a tentative conversation with Israeli Jews both about the responsibilities of police in a state claiming to be a democracy, and about the right of Israel's 1.8 million Palestinian citizens to personal security.

There was much fanfare at Mansour Abbas's United Arab List becoming last month the [first party](#) representing Palestinian citizens to enter an Israeli government coalition, ousting former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu from power. Like other Palestinian parties, Abbas put changes to the racist police culture in Israel at the top of his [platform](#).

But any signs of progress have been all too readily snuffed out by a reassertion of Jewish supremacism by police and their Jewish far-right allies, and by the silent complicity of wider Israeli Jewish society.

Israel had a chance to address its racist policing policies, but that would have required the difficult work of examining the much wider apartheid structures that underpin them. Instead, most Israeli Jews are happy to reassert the status quo – oppressing all Palestinians under Jewish rule, whether they are subjects of a belligerent occupation or third-class citizens of a Jewish state.

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*Featured image: ISRAELI BORDER POLICE OPERATING IN THE CITY OF LYDDA (LOD), MAY 11, 2021.  
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