

AVERTING WEST BANK COLLAPSE: HOW TO REVIVE PALESTINIAN POLITICS

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SUMMARY

- The Palestinian Authority, the West Bank's governing body, is decaying under dual pressure: the weight of Israeli occupation and President Mahmoud Abbas's tightening grip on power.
- Israeli settlement expansion, settler violence, financial sanctions and military control have hollowed out the PA's capacity to govern, while Abbas's dismantling of institutional checks and election-blocking has left a brittle system of personal rule.
- As the PA weakens, the West Bank is splintering into isolated enclaves where local actors, armed groups and NGOs fill the vacuum. Civil society is eroded and political alternatives suppressed. This is fuelling despair, emigration and rising support for armed resistance.
- With no functioning legislature, unclear succession rules and deep factional rivalries, the post-Abbas transition could tip the system into chaos—triggering competing power centres that Israel could exploit to weaken what's left of Palestinian national structures.
- Europeans, working with key Arab states, must back genuine political renewal and curb Israeli policies that suffocate Palestinian governance. Only coordinated pressure and support can rebuild legitimate institutions and keep alive any credible path to Palestinian self-determination.

Between occupation and oblivion

One afternoon in October, a group of Israeli settlers arrived at the Daghameen family's small home just south of Hebron, in Palestine's West Bank. They fired tear-gas canisters into the house, leaving five family members struggling to breathe, then splintered the doors, wrecked a sheep pen and damaged the family car. The settlers faced no consequences. For the Daghameens, there would be neither compensation nor justice.

Thousands of stories like this echo across the occupied West Bank, where Palestinians live in fear of Israeli settlers who want to push them off their land and, according to many right-wing Israelis, out of the West Bank altogether.

Some hundred kilometres north, in the small town of Sinjil, a Palestinian farmer in his late 40s says he can no longer walk through his neighbourhood, blocked by the security fences, gates and checkpoints that Israel has built over the last two years. "These fences do not protect us; they shut us in. We are waiting for the settlers to come and slaughter us."^[1]

More than 50 interviews conducted for this paper across East Jerusalem and the West Bank, as well as in European and Middle Eastern capitals, tell a similar story. Palestinian officials, representatives of political factions, civil-society figures and international donors all describe a West Bank oppressed and fractured by Israel and a decaying Palestinian governance system, under the Palestinian Authority (PA), unable to protect its citizens.

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Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu's government—the most extreme in the country's history—is engineering a radical new order designed to cement Israeli supremacy in the West Bank. Settlement expansion, escalating settler violence and increasingly aggressive Israeli military operations are reshaping its geography and demography. The aim is to destroy any remaining possibility of Palestinian self-determination. In line with this, influential figures in the Israeli government have openly called for the PA to be weakened or dismantled. Even in its enfeebled state, they see it as an obstacle to the full settlement of the West Bank.

The irony is that Israel's occupation has been strengthened by a PA that has fragmented the Palestinian national movement and become synonymous with Mahmoud Abbas's personal rule. Since his term expired 16 years ago, the PA president has clung to power by cancelling elections and flouting attempts to replace him or hold him to account. Once conceived as the embryo of Palestinian statehood, the PA is now widely discredited, bankrupt, politically paralysed, and unable and unwilling to oppose Israeli aggression.

An afternoon's drive from Abbas's seat of power in Ramallah—if the driver is not Palestinian and does not have to wait at several checkpoints—Gaza lies in rubble. For now at least, the ceasefire is holding. But with over 280 Palestinians killed since it came into effect on October 10th, it has been marked more by breaches than observance. For any peace deal to succeed, Gaza will need a revitalised government that can take control of the Strip from Hamas and sustain the fragile ceasefire. Arab states and Europe have pinned their hopes on the collapsing PA—Palestine's only internationally recognised government.

The trajectory is bleak. Absent a concerted international effort to curb Israeli aggression in the West Bank and mend the heart of Palestinian politics, the PA's decline will be terminal. The international community would lose its partner, and with it the last institutional pillar of a two-state solution they have long championed.

Gradual PA collapse will give Israel the chance to tighten its grip over the Palestinian territories. This could be preceded by two ruptures: a *de jure* Israeli annexation of the West Bank; or Abbas's incapacitation and an ensuing chaotic transition. At its most extreme, the erosion of central authority and violent political contestation, combined with expanding settlements and economic strangulation, could create a patchwork of enclaves violently governed by local power brokers that are exploited by Israel—or result in the outright expulsion of Palestinians, as some Israeli policymakers are calling for. Short of this, Palestinian institutions will continue to fall apart, fuelling popular despair, fragmentation and cycles of armed resistance as Israel corrals Palestinians into shrinking territorial enclaves.

But as this paper will argue, Palestine's fate is not yet set in stone. Recent international efforts to implement a ceasefire in Gaza and revive prospects of a two-state solution—through the New York Declaration and a wave of European recognitions of Palestinian statehood—can help prevent this unravelling. But this will require the gradual renewal of Palestinian politics and an end to Israel's occupation.

Europeans need to give their goal of Palestinian self-determination practical meaning by acting on both fronts. This means imposing greater legal and economic consequences on Israel to end its settlement and occupation of the West Bank. It also means prioritising Palestinian democratic transformation over autocratic stability to shape an inclusive Palestinian government attuned to the needs of its people. Without this, Gaza and the West Bank will struggle to escape the conditions driving radicalisation and emigration, while the prospects for Palestinian independence and a durable peace with Israel will wither beyond recognition.

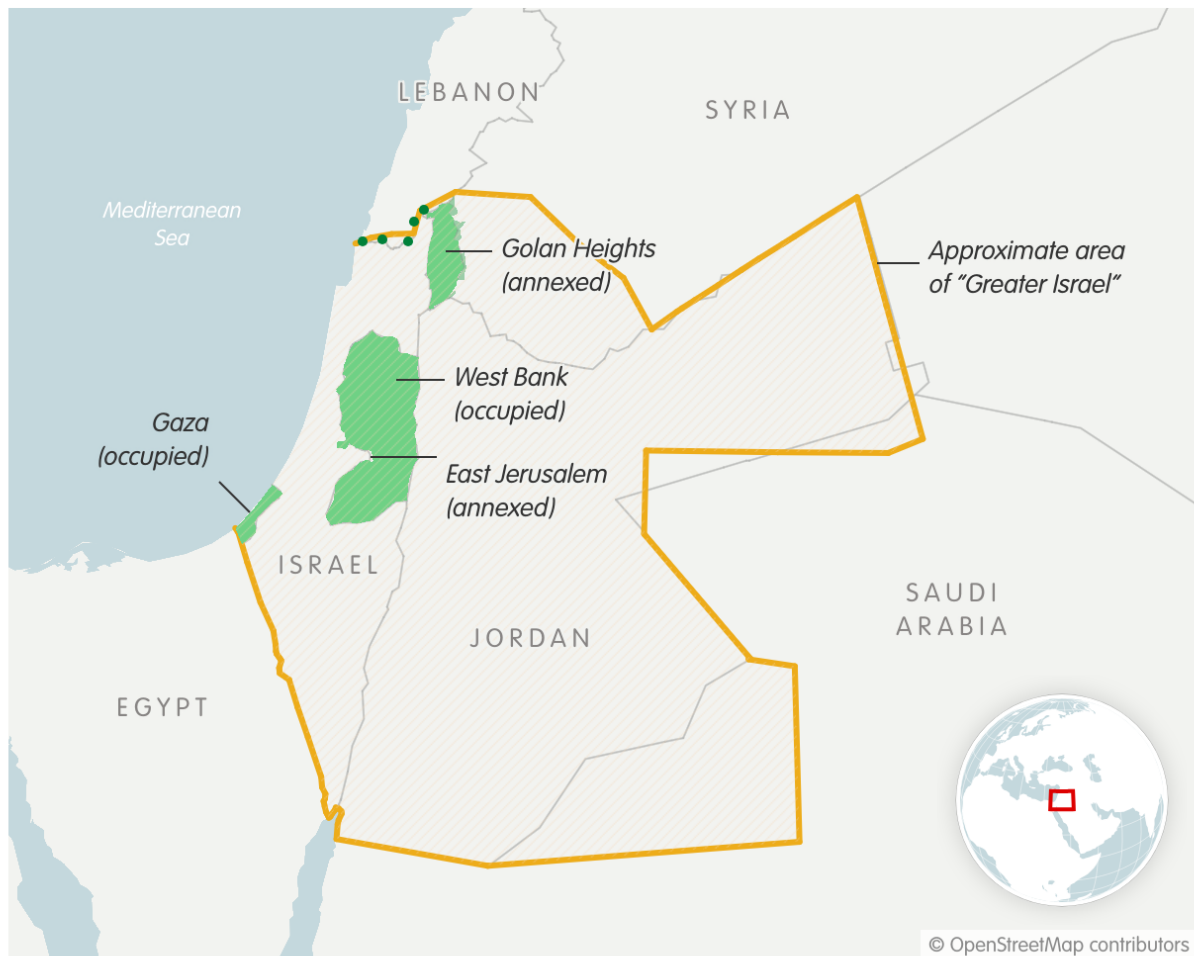
A land cut to pieces

Since October 7th 2023, Israeli forces and settlers have carried out one of their most relentless campaign of attacks, besiegement and land grabs in the West Bank since the occupation began in 1967. Though the violence is far less intense than in Gaza, observers have likened it to “Gazafication”—a pattern of widespread, seemingly punitive destruction of Palestinian houses and infrastructure, and the forced displacement of the local population.

Driving this is the settler movement, a collection of Zionist groups that claim a biblical justification to expand Israel’s territory well beyond its borders to form an amorphous “Greater Israel”. Backed by far-right ministers such as Itamar Ben-Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich, the movement seeks to incorporate the West Bank, Gaza and, at its most extreme interpretation, parts of Syria, Lebanon and Jordan, into Israel. Though only around 10% of Israelis are settlers, the movement exerts disproportionate power over the country’s politics, security institutions and public opinion, which it has used to mainstream the Greater Israel vision.

“Greater Israel”

— “Greater Israel” ■ Israeli occupied territory ● IDF outposts in south Lebanon

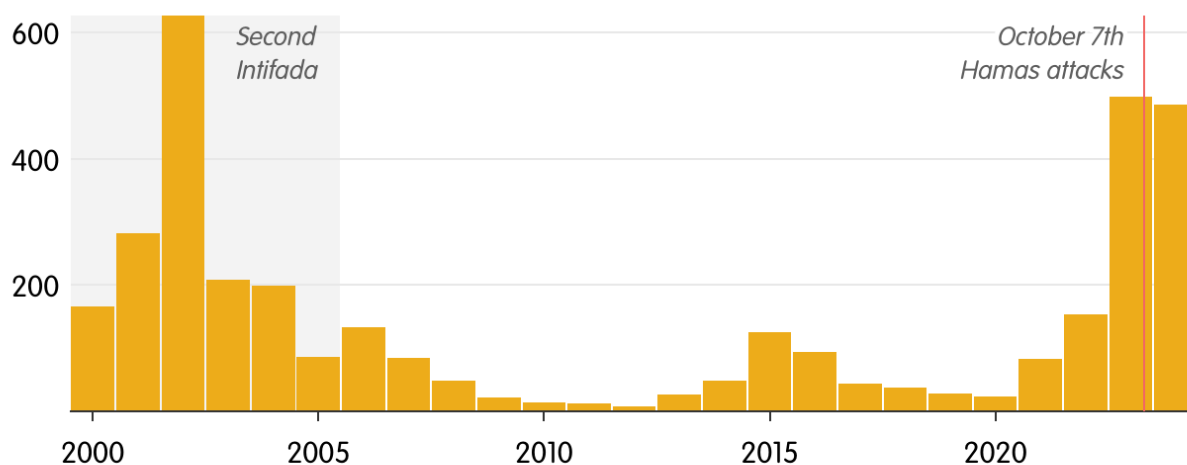


Reproduction of “Greater Israel” map shown at “Israel is Forever” event during the speech of Israeli finance minister Bezael Smotrich, Paris, France on March 19th 2023.

Source: Institute for the Study of War; UNDOF; Aljazeera; BBC.
ECFR · ecf.eu

In the past two years alone, Israeli settlers and security forces have killed 1,012 Palestinians in the West Bank. Thousands more have been wounded and over 14,000 arrested in increasingly indiscriminate mass detention campaigns. Since the beginning of the occupation, Palestinian sources estimate up to one million have been arrested, thousands of them without charge. Among those targeted are not just militants but also bystanders and journalists, as well as Palestinian municipal and governorate officials, such as the mayor of Hebron and governor of Ramallah.

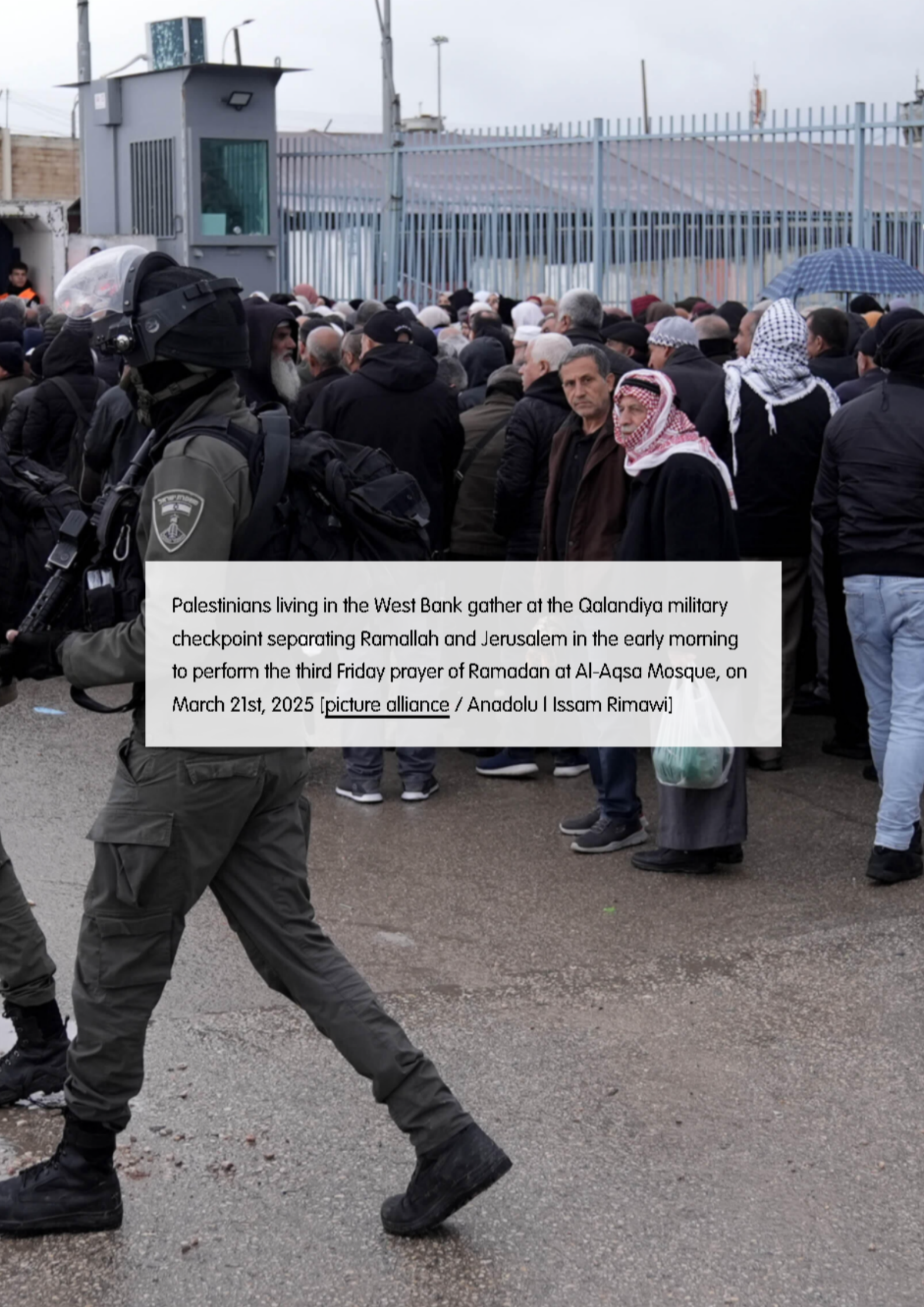
Palestinians killed by Israeli security forces and settlers in the West Bank, 2000-2024



Source: B'Tselem
ECFR · ecf.eu

The deep sense of insecurity that most Palestinians feel will deepen as the Israeli Knesset moves to introduce a mandatory death penalty against Palestinians who “intentionally or recklessly” kill Israelis “with the objective of harming the state of Israel or the rebirth of the Jewish people.” This would likely be broadly applied to the West Bank, where Palestinians face a 99% conviction rate in military courts.

Maps of the West Bank are cut up by the biggest expansion of Israeli settlements since the Oslo peace process in 1993, which divided the West Bank into areas A, B and C under varying degrees of PA and Israeli military control. The territory has since become a patchwork of Israeli controlled roads, barriers, checkpoints and military “firing zones”, severely restricting Palestinians’ daily movement. A trip to school or the doctor can mean hours of waiting at a checkpoint, where Israeli soldiers sometimes turn people back or arrest them arbitrarily. Even members of the PA security force are held up, humiliated, and then prohibited from moving between the West Bank enclaves they administer and control. ^[2]



Palestinians living in the West Bank gather at the Qalandiya military checkpoint separating Ramallah and Jerusalem in the early morning to perform the third Friday prayer of Ramadan at Al-Aqsa Mosque, on March 21st, 2025 [[picture alliance](#) / Anadolu | Issam Rimawi]

Israel frames these actions in security terms. In reality, such measures are intended to assert its hold over the West Bank. Carving up the territory has unravelled the social, political and economic ties that have long bound together West Bank communities. Villages are now severed from agricultural hinterlands, the economy is strangled, and PA rule is further undermined. The result is a coercive environment that suffocates daily life.

Palestinians fear Israel is seeking to corral them into shrinking, isolated enclaves in preparation for their mass expulsion. These fears are well grounded. Having openly advocated such an outcome in Gaza, the Israeli government has emboldened the settler movement to demand a similar mass transfer of West Bank Palestinians to Jordan. Of course, the Israeli government may not follow through with such plans. Evicting Palestinians would be seen by Jordan as an act of war; and the US administration would likely oppose it.^[3] But Israel's systematic destruction of Palestinian homes and livelihoods could achieve a similar result in the long term: by making tens of thousands homeless and increasingly destitute, expropriating land and choking the Palestinian economy, Israel is forcing Palestinians to leave in search of a better life.

One-fifth of Palestinians in the West Bank wanted to emigrate on the eve of the October 7th attacks. This has since risen as a result of Israel's intensifying occupation. "Everyone who has the means to do so are now seriously considering leaving" explained one West Bank resident. "They are looking for more security and a better life elsewhere, and think it's only a matter of time before they are forced off their land in any case. The choice they face is staying and risking death, or leaving."^[4]

The settler movement unleashed

Settlers are the sharp edge of Israel's expansionism. Settler attacks have reached the highest levels on record and are increasingly targeting Israeli soldiers. After "some concern" from the US, the Israeli government has promised to take action against "the attempt by a handful of extremists to take the law into their own hand". In reality, such violence is inseparable from the broader settler movement and the Israeli state that backs it. Since 1967, wherever they have gone, the state has followed to protect and entrench their territorial gains.

West Bank areas of control and Israeli settlement

- Separation barrier ■ Barrier planned or under construction ◇ Major checkpoints
- Israeli settlements and ■ outposts




Source: B'Tselem
ECFR · ecf.eu

With the 2020 election resulting in Israel's most extreme coalition, the settler movement now deploys the full power of Israeli state bureaucracy—and is more emboldened and radical than ever. Under Netanyahu, the settler-dominated government has been working to double the number of Israelis in the West Bank to one million, entrench Jewish supremacy, and block any remaining possibility of Palestinian independence.

In June 2024, Netanyahu appointed Smotrich as a minister in the defence ministry with the power to administer Palestinians living in Area C, including the ability to demolish Palestinian homes built without Israeli permits. (Such permits are nearly impossible to obtain: 95% are rejected, with only 10 approved each year for a population of 300,000.) Then, in March this year, Netanyahu created a defence ministry office to administer the settlements, headed by Hillel Roth, a settler and confidant of Smotrich. This has effectively given the movement direct control over settlement planning by circumventing the military bureaucracy that had previously slowed construction.

More recently, the Israeli government announced a new land registration process in Area C to block PA efforts to register Palestinian-owned land and, according to Israeli defence minister Israel Katz, “to strengthen, consolidate, and expand Jewish settlements in Judea and Samaria [the West Bank]”. A proposed law allowing Israelis to directly purchase Palestinian land instead of having to go through companies registered with Israel’s Civil Administration could accelerate this by simplifying the settlement process.

A similar process is underway in Israeli-annexed East Jerusalem, where another settler activist, Henanel Gurfinkel, was appointed by Israel’s finance ministry (also controlled by Smotrich) to head the Custodian of Absentee Property division, giving him the power to confiscate Palestinian property to promote new settlement projects in the city.



An increase in settler violence against Palestinian communities has followed. Though this is often seen as distinct from state violence, it is an extension of it. Israeli security forces regularly stand by as settlers attack Palestinians and their property, before detaining the Palestinians victims. According to Yesh Din, an Israeli human rights organisation, 94% of Israeli police investigations into settler offences against Palestinians since 2005 were closed with no charges filed. Convictions are even rarer.

Smoke and flames rise from vehicles belonging to Palestinians, set on fire by Israeli settlers seizing Palestinian land under the protection of Israeli soldiers, in the village of Turmus Ayya near Ramallah, West Bank, on October 19th, 2025. [[picture alliance](#) / Anadolu I Issam Rimawi]

Settler violence against Palestinians and their property had reached unprecedented levels by 2023, well before October 7th. Since the Hamas attacks, Israel has doubled down. It has distributed over 120,000 guns and 157,000 gun licences to settlers in the West Bank, relaxed limits on weapon ownership, and formed 527 new settler militias. These militias are euphemistically termed “security squads” by Itamar Ben-Gvir, another hardline settler minister in charge of national security. Though the stated goal of these measures is to guard against the possibility of an October 7th-style attack in the West Bank, the immediate effect has empowered settlers to unleash further violence.

The settlers’ ABCs

Given its ideological significance, East Jerusalem has long borne the brunt of Israeli settlement action since its illegal annexation in 1980. However, the scale of construction in the past few years exceeds that of any period in the last two decades.^[5] The settler population in the city alone reached 233,600 at the end of 2024.

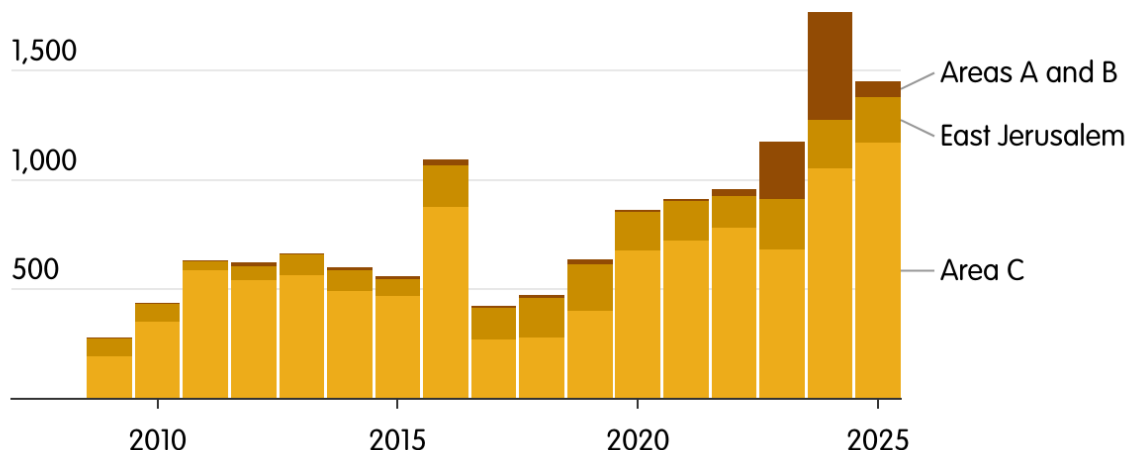
Of all settlements, the advancement of the E1 bloc on the outskirts of Jerusalem most undermines a two-state solution—and was once cast as a red line by the EU. Alongside the expansion of other Jerusalem settlements such as Givat Hamatos and Har Homa (also in violation of EU red lines), E1 will fully detach East Jerusalem from the West Bank. This hinders the chances of East Jerusalem one day serving as the future Palestinian capital and splits the West Bank in half, “bur[ying] the idea of a Palestinian state,” in the words of Smotrich.

Israeli settlement advancements in the West Bank,

Outside Jerusalem, Israeli settlement has targeted the West Bank’s Area C, which the Oslo Accords placed under full Israeli administrative and security control. It is home to an additional half a million settlers living alongside some 300,000 Palestinians. In May 2025 alone, Israel announced the construction of 22 new settlements in what Peace Now described as “the most extensive move of its kind” since the accords were signed.

There too, the pace of demolitions of Palestinian homes is accelerating, from around 270 structures in 2017 to over 1,000 this year so far. This has gone hand in hand with a campaign of concerted harassment to force out vulnerable Bedouin communities such as the Jahalin, Mleihat and Ka’abneh and make way for new settlement construction in areas around Jerusalem and the South Hebron hills.

Demolitions in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, 2009-2025



2025 data is up to November 9th 2025

Source: OCHA

ECFR · ecfr.eu

Israeli authorities are also beginning to focus on Area B, which falls under PA administration but Israeli security control, by adopting a similar set of coercive policies. These include tightening permit restrictions for residents of isolated villages such as Beit Iksa, demolishing Palestinian homes near Bethlehem under the guise of nature preservation, and for the first time allowing the establishment outposts (illegal even under Israeli law) deep into Area B.

Even the scattered enclaves of Area A are not immune. Placed under exclusive PA control and devoid of any settlements, Israel has asserted strict control over them. Here, Israel is also accelerating the demolitions of Palestinian buildings and homes since October 7th, justified through the issuing of “special emergency” regulations to create 75-120 metre “buffer zones” around Israeli settlements. This has been accompanied by the wholesale destruction and depopulation of refugee camps, such as in Jenin, under the guise of counterterrorism. The PA has been powerless to stop this, and in the case of Jenin its forces helped the Israeli army.



Israeli bulldozers demolish a Palestinian home deemed to have been built without a permit in the village of Al-Funduq, east of Qalqilya in the West Bank on October 27th, 2025. [picture alliance / apaimages | Mohammed Nasser]

Over the past three decades, Israel has exploited the West Bank's geographic division to absorb the territory while it entrenches the systematic subjugation and disenfranchisement of Palestinians. To mitigate international reprobation, authorities have tried to construct a convenient fiction that the territory is neither occupied nor annexed; at odds with the overwhelming weight of international legal opinion and its own actions.

The international community has, perhaps inadvertently, played into Israel's shell game by watching the wrong moves. In September 2020, the United Arab Emirates justified its normalisation of relations with Israel as a move to prevent formal annexation. European countries have long focused on deterring settlement construction in critical areas like E1 and overt annexation. Even the Trump administration has slapped down initial steps by Israel's Knesset in October 2025 to apply Israeli law to the West Bank, which the US vice president called "stupid".

But the reality on the ground is that annexation is already taking place in all but name. Each Palestinian home destroyed and each settlement built chips away at Palestinian independence—and with it the prospects of peace and security for Israelis and Palestinians.

Israel's strangling of the Palestinian Authority

Israel has simultaneously eroded the Palestinian state from within by undermining its government, the PA. Previous Israeli governments preferred a weak but capable PA that could work as its partner in sustaining occupation and the broader status quo envisaged by the Oslo Accords. In practice, this arrangement minimised the need for direct Israeli military control over West Bank cities and towns by giving Palestinians a modicum of autonomy over their day-to-day affairs in exchange for close security cooperation. The current far-right government, however, sees even a weakened and subservient PA as an unacceptable embodiment of Palestinian nationalism and self-determination.

Netanyahu's government has mounted a loud public campaign to castigate the PA as a supporter of Palestinian terrorism. Central to this are largely debunked accusations that PA textbooks contain anti-Semitic tropes and glorify violence. Israel has also accused the PA of incitement through its financial support payments made to Palestinian prisoners held in Israeli jails and the families of those killed by Israeli forces (which Palestinians refer to as "martyrs"). To drive home the point, Israel has dubbed this "pay to slay".

The Israeli government is lobbying foreign donors to stop funding the PA, or at least heavily condition this on Palestinian "deradicalisation". In doing so, Netanyahu's government not only wants to weaken the PA's legitimacy in the West Bank. By discrediting the PA on the international stage, Netanyahu can then claim—as he regularly does—that there is no partner for peace on the Palestinian side and that the two-state solution is therefore impossible. This also doubles as a pretext for excluding the PA from playing a role in Gaza's post-conflict stabilisation and keeping the West Bank separate from Gaza—thereby facilitating Israel's control over Palestinians and further sabotaging prospects for a two-state solution.

The economics of control

Israel's smear campaign has provided a flimsy pretext for withholding over \$2bn in tax clearance revenues collected on the PA's behalf since 2018—a violation of its commitments under the Oslo Accords. These funds are the PA's most critical source of income; their loss has crippled the authority's ability to pay wages and provide services.

Though Abbas formally eliminated support payments to the prisoners and families of those killed by Israeli forces in February 2025 (under US pressure) and invited the US to audit the PA's accounts, Israeli ministers claim these payments are continuing through a different channel, creating a new "terror state". As a result, Israeli sanctions remain, depriving the PA of two-thirds of its domestic revenue and stripping it of much of its remaining value to Palestinians as a provider of jobs and services. Combined with a decade of dwindling donor support, Israel's

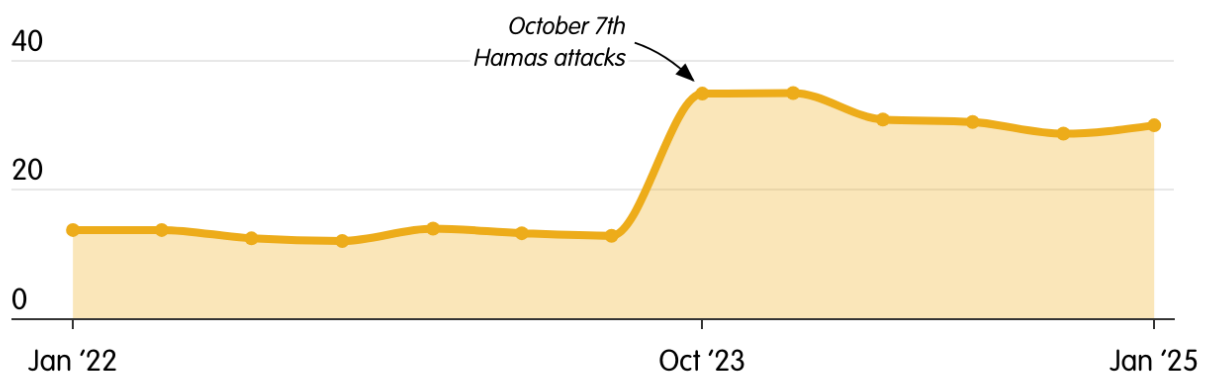
financial strangulation is pushing the PA to the brink of collapse and taking the West Bank's economy down with it.

Today, the PA can afford to pay only half the salaries of its 90,000 workers. With employees working just two days a week, services like healthcare and education are falling apart. Even the PA security forces—the one remaining pillar of PA rule which works closely with the IDF to suppress Palestinian armed groups—have had to take a pay cut, forcing some of the over 40,000 security force members to take on a second job. While few to date have turned their guns on Israelis, thousands of armed, humiliated and underpaid men are a long-term threat to both the PA and Israel.

The PA's budgetary woes could worsen still. After a protracted campaign by Israeli-aligned groups, in June the US Supreme Court ruled that American citizens who are victims of terrorist attacks in Israel can sue the PA and the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) for damages in US courts. This could amount to millions of dollars in damages and bankrupt these institutions.

In the wake of the October 7th attacks, Netanyahu's government also suspended 100,000 permits for Palestinians to work in Israel as a source of cheap labour. The ban severed another economic lifeline for many Palestinian families and remains in place as Israeli authorities attempt to bring in more overseas labourers from Asia to reduce the country's economic dependence on Palestinian workers. As a result of Israeli actions, West Bank unemployment has skyrocketed from 12% in 2022 to 35% in the wake of the attacks.

West Bank unemployment, in %



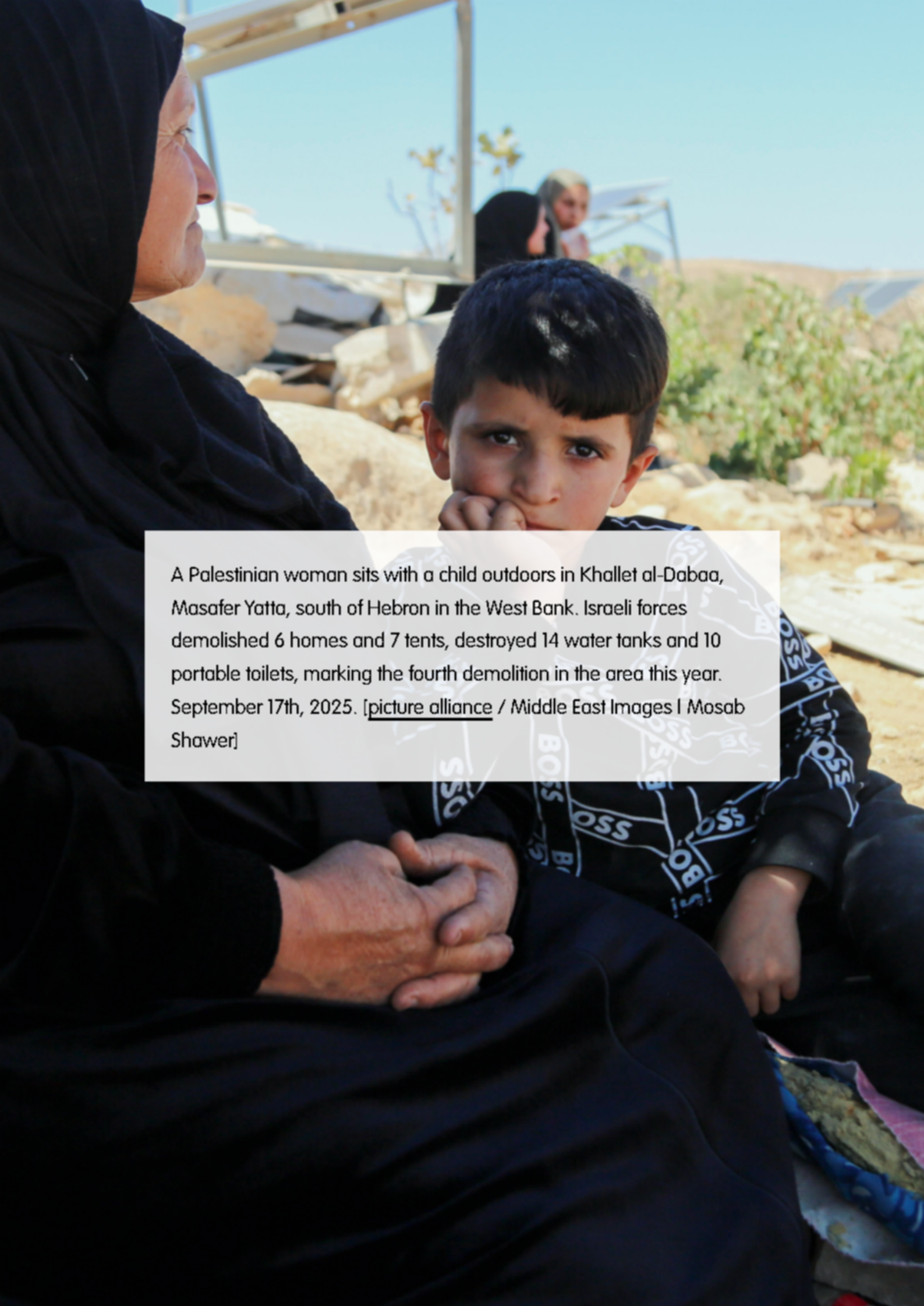
Source: UNCTAD
ECFR · ecf.eu

At the behest of Smotrich, the Israeli government could go even further by scrapping the annual waivers that let Palestinian banks process transactions with Israeli ones—which they rely on as per the Oslo Accords. Without these waivers, Palestinians would be cut off from the

international financial system, and the West Bank would plunge deeper into financial crisis.

To cripple the West Bank's governance, the PA is not Israel's only target. The government is also working to dismantle an already cash-strapped UNRWA, the UN agency in charge of administering and serving Palestinian refugees. In October 2024, it banned the agency from operating in "Israeli territory", including East Jerusalem (which Israel illegally annexed in 1980) and has vowed to shut it out from Gaza, similarly accusing it of radicalising Palestinians.

At the same time, Israeli military operations are uprooting UNRWA from Palestinian refugee camps in the West Bank. This is severely limiting Palestinians' access to basic services such as healthcare and education, increasing humanitarian hardships and piling more pressure on the PA. For the effected refugees, this has yet again shown the PA's unwillingness or incapacity to advocate for them among its international partners.



A Palestinian woman sits with a child outdoors in Khallet al-Dabaa, Masafer Yatta, south of Hebron in the West Bank. Israeli forces demolished 6 homes and 7 tents, destroyed 14 water tanks and 10 portable toilets, marking the fourth demolition in the area this year. September 17th, 2025. [[picture alliance](#) / Middle East Images | Mosab Shawer]

Israel has turned the West Bank into a pressure cooker, creating the political and economic conditions for explosive violence. Despite significant flare ups, especially in the north of the West Bank, a full-scale outburst has so far been contained by escalating repression and control from Israel and the PA, which continues to cooperate closely on security. But as Israel constrains the PA's ability to provide essential services, fund its security forces and deter dissent through employment, the means of containing unrest are fast eroding.

A more fragile PA—struggling to keep up with the political, social and economic fallout of Israel's occupation and settler movement—will have less political will and resources to enforce its writ and substantively oppose Israeli occupation.

The constant instability and occasionally violent resistance that occurs under a weak Palestinian administration affords Israel plenty of opportunity to decry “the absence of a peace partner” and make harsh reprisals against Palestinians. This narrative undermines the viability of the PA's existence in the West Bank and doubles as justification for the expansion of Israel's illegal settlements. The irony is that even as Israel weakens the PA, Palestinians criticise the PA for acting as an extension of Israel's occupation by prioritising Israel's security interests over theirs. The critique is well founded.

The unravelling of Palestine from within

In 2011, Palestine was statehood ready. The EU's senior diplomat Catherine Ashton, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund all praised Abbas for establishing the administrative and fiscal foundations of a functioning state. Fourteen years later, those achievements have largely evaporated.

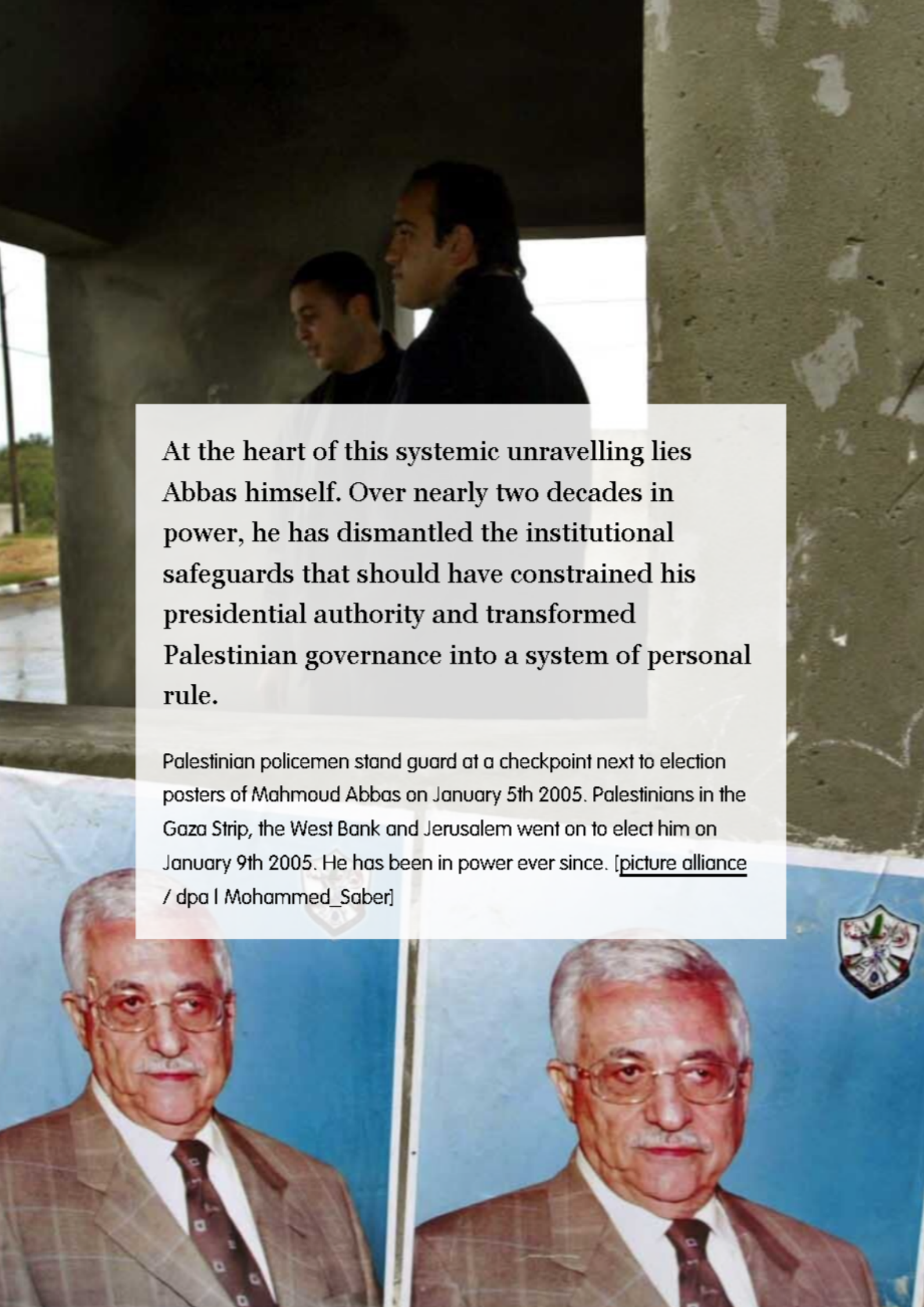
Israeli occupation and strangulation of the PA have left a population impoverished, desperate and with no means to enact political change. It is under these conditions that Abbas has monopolised power and hollowed out the Palestinian political system. He won support from international donors and at least tacit support from Israel by making it clear from the beginning of his presidency that he would cooperate fully in prioritising Israeli interests. His pursuit for external legitimacy and domestic control has come at the expense of popular support and Palestine's nascent democracy—the one that ushered Abbas into power in 2005.

What remains two decades later is a fragmented, brittle order with a mere façade of statehood. Beneath is a system devoid of legitimacy, incapable of improving the lives of its citizens and trapped in a collapsed peace process that does not offer national liberation; only the entrenchment of Israeli occupation. In turn, a weaker state and a disenfranchised population is

easier to exploit and oppress, ripening the conditions for further Israeli annexation and an even weaker PA. Quickly, the West Bank is spiralling towards full collapse.

At this stage, the PA is beginning to fragment into localised institutions only nominally in control of scattered and poorly administered territorial enclaves, even as Abbas keeps a firm grip over the skeletons of central institutions. Local officials and community leaders are trying to fill the gaps in service provision. In doing so, they have had to turn to a hodgepodge of international and local aid organisations, which is complicated by UNRWA's existential crisis.

Abbas's destruction of the state

The background of the top half of the image shows two men in profile, facing right, standing at what appears to be a checkpoint. They are wearing dark clothing. The background is a mix of dark and light areas, possibly a building and an outdoor area. The bottom half of the image features two side-by-side portraits of an elderly man with white hair, glasses, and a mustache, wearing a brown suit and a patterned tie. The portraits are set against a blue background. A small, circular emblem is visible in the bottom right corner of the right portrait.

At the heart of this systemic unravelling lies Abbas himself. Over nearly two decades in power, he has dismantled the institutional safeguards that should have constrained his presidential authority and transformed Palestinian governance into a system of personal rule.

Palestinian policemen stand guard at a checkpoint next to election posters of Mahmoud Abbas on January 5th 2005. Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, the West Bank and Jerusalem went on to elect him on January 9th 2005. He has been in power ever since. [[picture alliance](#) / dpa | Mohammed_Saber]

Abbas's centralisation of power has been comprehensive. He has marginalised rivals, concentrated power among a tight circle of loyalists, and systematically eroded checks and balances due to the control he exerts over the main pillars of the Palestinian national movement. In addition to being president of the PA, he heads the PLO, an umbrella organisation of predominantly left-wing Palestinian parties that is the internationally recognised representative of the Palestinian people. Abbas also leads the Fatah party, a secular party co-founded by Yasser Arafat in the 1950s which has largely dominated Palestinian politics since.

Thanks to his full and unrestrained control, Abbas has amended the PA's Basic Law to strengthen his executive powers, dissolved the elected Palestinian Legislative Council in 2018, blocked presidential and parliamentary elections since 2006, and promoted his Fatah supporters to head the PA's security forces and governorates. Not even the judiciary, nominally independent, has escaped his grasp: judges are appointed and dismissed by presidential fiat while the constitutional court serves as a rubber stamp.

In April 2024, Abbas dealt another blow to any hope of restoring Palestine's democracy by appointing a political ally, former prime minister Rami Hamdallah, to head the Central Elections Commission. This undermined what had, until then, been an independent and credible institution overseeing national elections.

Most recently in August 2025, Abbas appointed a committee to draft a new Palestinian constitution. This could have been a step toward institutional renewal, but in true Abbas style, it will likely be used to reinforce his control. The committee which was supposed to include national, political and civil society figures has been packed with Abbas loyalists and is operating without transparency or public consultation.^[6] And in the absence of an elected legislature, any new constitution would be promulgated by decree, granting the president the final say.

Abbas has bled the once-diverse Palestinian national movement dry, draining the modicum of cross-factional consensus it once had. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the PLO. Once the beating heart of the Palestinian national movement, it lies lifeless. Abbas has stacked both the PLO Executive Committee and the Palestinian Central Council with his allies, increasing the latter's membership from 108 to 260 members with little transparency or consultation. As one long-standing PCC member mused, "no one knows who these [new members] are or the criteria used" to select them.^[7]

Such actions ensure that these bodies function as instruments of patronage and an extension of Abbas's rule, rather than arenas of debate and consensus making. Even his announced plan to hold "elections" to re-activate the PLO's dormant parliament, the Palestinian National Council, by the end of the year would be unlikely to restore the organisation's legitimacy in the absence

of any reform to its membership selection process. This is currently determined through opaque factional bargaining rather than by a direct vote from Palestinians in Palestine and the diaspora.

An internal wound

Abbas's deconstruction of the Palestinian state has been accentuated by a deep split within Palestinian politics. After Hamas won legislative elections in 2006, Fatah launched a failed US-backed coup to oust it from power, triggering a civil war during which Hamas expelled Fatah-controlled PA security forces from Gaza and established its own de facto government. In doing so, the Islamist group took over key PA institutions in Gaza, separating the territory's administration from that of the West Bank, which remained under full PA control. Gaza and its new government were quickly placed under international sanctions and a tightened Israeli blockade, which cut the Strip off from the West Bank.

The nearly two decades since have been filled with failed reconciliation agreements. After each agreement, Abbas has systematically stalled their implementations, fearing he would lose his grip on power and that there would be international blowback should he be seen to make a deal with Hamas.^[8] In Istanbul in September 2020, for example, Palestinian factions agreed to hold elections for the PA and PLO. This fell apart in April 2021 when Abbas cancelled the election for the PLC. Talks have continued since October 7th 2023; in Cairo in December 2023, Beirut in January 2024, Moscow in February 2024, Beijing in July 2024 and again in Cairo in October 2024—all to no avail.

This pattern of obstruction was on full display in February 2024 when Abbas flouted a deal agreed with Palestinian factions, including Hamas, to establish a government of national consensus comprising independent technocrats—agreed as a stepping stone towards democratic elections. Instead of consulting other Palestinian factions as agreed, he unilaterally appointed a new technocratic government, led by prime minister Mohammad Mustafa. One senior Fatah official described the move as indicative of “the rot at the root of the system”.^[9] During the subsequent reconciliation talks hosted in Beijing, Abbas pledged to reshuffle the cabinet to form a “interim national reconciliation government” that could return the PA rule to Gaza with the support of all Palestinian factions—a commitment he is yet to honour.

With efforts to form a national reconciliation government now blocked, Palestinian factions have agreed to the formation of an apolitical “community support committee” to manage Gaza's post-war governance, an idea that has since been taken up in Trump's 20-point plan. Except, so far, Abbas has not issued the required presidential decree to formally establish it, and the factions have yet to fully agree on committee members.

While he is reluctant to take responsibility for a devastated and war-torn Strip, the Palestinian president has likely also calculated that his leverage over Hamas would grow as the movement comes under increasing political and military pressure, allowing him to impose terms rather than compromise.^[10] Instead of relinquishing some power, Abbas is hardening his stance on Hamas under the slogan of “one gun, one authority”—and he is doing so with international backing. But by demanding the group’s submission to his rule, the PA president plays right into Israel’s hands: stalling intra-factional talks, hindering the chances of national reconciliation and political renewal, and ultimately leaving the West Bank and Gaza weaker in isolation.

The succession breaking point

Having amassed uncontested power over the PA, PLO and Fatah, Abbas has positioned himself as the lone pillar propping up a fragile Palestinian state. When the 90-year-old goes, the whole political structure he has built around him could come crashing down. Even if a successor emerges, a system without sufficient financial and popular capital will struggle to transfer power smoothly and defuse the political challenges sure to follow.

By dissolving the PLC in 2018 and blocking new legislative elections, Abbas removed the primary mechanism to manage the immediate aftermath of his sudden incapacitation or death. According to the PA’s Basic Law, the interim speaker of parliament would act as interim president and a presidential election would be held within 90 days. This role would have fallen to Aziz Duwaik, a member of Hamas’s political party and a red line for Fatah and most likely its European donors.

After several years of constitutional uncertainty, Abbas designated the speaker of the PLO’s parliament, Rawhi Fattouh, to act as interim president for the 90-day period. But less than a year later, in October 2025, the Palestinian leader changed his mind, issuing a “new constitutional announcement” without consultation that favoured another long-time supporter, Hussein al-Sheikh.

Sheikh’s anointment as Abbas’s designated successor comes on the heels of his appointment just six months earlier to the newly created positions of PA vice president and deputy chairman of the PLO. Following Abbas’s example, he has sought to elevate his supporters to key positions within the PA, including a failed attempt to replace the powerful head of Palestinian General Intelligence Service, Majed Faraj.^[11] However, despite his accumulating institutional powers, he still faces considerable challenges to keep his positions beyond the transitional period.

First, Sheikh would have to deal with widespread opposition, especially within Fatah, which has to agree on the party’s future presidential candidate. This raises the chance of a clash with other senior leaders, who hold more sway among the party’s central committee and its membership.

Second, and perhaps the far greater challenge, Sheikh would have to win a free and fair election. His deep unpopularity among the party's grassroots and broader Palestinian public makes this a struggle. According to a May 2025 poll, 73% Palestinians are dissatisfied with the decision to appoint him. According to a leading Palestinian pollster, his name simply “doesn’t exist in the public consciousness” as a genuine presidential contender; he is currently attracting less than 2% support.

Turning this around would require, at the very least, a reversal in Israel’s approach to the PA that tangibly improves Palestinians’ lives, to which he could claim credit. “Ideology won’t get us anywhere anymore. If Hussein [Sheikh] can return 250,000 permits for West Bankers to return back into the Israeli labour market, then Palestinians would consider voting for him,” Abbas Milhem, the director of the Palestinian Farmers Union and member of the Palestinian NGO network explained. “We need someone with leverage over Israel and its Western and regional allies.”^[12]

If Sheikh considers an election too risky for his leadership ambitions, he could follow in his predecessor’s footsteps. With his position at the top of the PLO (which technically supersedes the PA) and a potentially friendly constitutional court, he could give himself an open-ended mandate to head the PA and indefinitely postpone elections—just as Abbas has done since his presidential mandate expired 16 years ago.

Beyond its constitutional illegality and fractious impact within Fatah, circumventing elections would deal the final blow to the political system’s legitimacy and leave a post-Abbas PA struggling to survive in any meaningful form. To cling to power in such a situation without a popular mandate, the next president might resort to the greater securitisation of public space in an attempt to maintain control. Given Palestine’s factious politics, this would likely spark more violence and dissent.

For Israel, a civil war in the event of Abbas’s incapacitation would threaten the security of its settlements and likely be exploited by Hamas. To avoid this, Netanyahu’s government would no doubt deploy its immense means of control. It would also be sure to exploit the political chaos, as it has often done, to turn a Palestinian leadership mired in internecine power struggles against itself and prevent the emergence of a united front more capable of challenging Israel’s occupation.

Politics in freefall

After nearly two decades without national elections, most Palestinians no longer view the PA or the PLO as legitimate representatives of their national movement but rather as an extension of Israel’s occupation. In an October 2025 opinion poll, 83% of West Bankers wanted Abbas to

resign, and nearly half supported the dissolution of the PA altogether.

Once in the vanguard of Palestinian liberation, Fatah and its aging leadership are also broadly discredited. In an interview for this paper, a dissident Fatah official was scathing: “The [Palestinian] Authority has turned into a beggar to secure salaries, and its political stance has come to rely not on citizens’ needs but on personal interests.”^[13]

In tandem with the PLO’s and PA’s decline, Fatah has lost its mantle of popular national leadership. “As Fatah we used to draw on multiple sources of legitimacy—revolutionary, political and electoral”, another senior Fatah official noted. “Today we no longer have any of that.”^[14]

The party has also lost the support of its grassroots. Many of the same factors are at play: a lack of political advancement and access to PA patronage networks, including job opportunities and financial handouts.

In theory, popular disaffection with a divided and declining Fatah party could create space for new political forces to emerge. A significant cross section of Palestinian society feels unrepresented by the established political parties. According to an October 2025 poll, only 20% of Palestinians in the West Bank would vote for Fatah (versus 32% for Hamas). By contrast, 32% of Palestinians say they do not feel represented by any of the current parties.

In practice, however, restrictive laws on party registration, Israeli arrests and assassinations of political figures, and Fatah’s monopoly over the West Bank’s patronage system make it nearly impossible for new political movements to emerge.

Avenues for alternative political organisation have been further hampered by an ailing Palestinian civil society. Once the engine of political pluralism and grassroots mobilisation against Israel, it has splintered along local and factional lines, undermined by Israeli criminalisation and shrinking international funding.

The PA has also intensified its co-option and repression of West Bank civil society in recent years. Its security forces regularly use the 2017 Cybercrime law (passed by presidential decree) to silence online criticism of the PA and Abbas, while street-level protests are met with brute force. After Abbas cancelled the electoral process in 2021, pro-democracy protests erupted across West Bank towns that summer only to be violently repressed: PA security forces beat and arbitrarily arrested prominent activists which government officials dismissed as “troublemakers”.^[15] Then, in June, a prominent pro-reform activist who stood for election in 2021, Nizar Banat, was beaten to death in the custody of PA security forces, sparking widespread protests demanding accountability.

All of this benefited Hamas, which successfully positioned itself in opposition to the established order and as the only force capable of confronting Israel. At local elections in the West Bank in December 2021 and March 2022, and student elections at Birzeit university in May 2022, independent candidates backed by Hamas performed strongly despite PA and Israeli interference that favoured Fatah candidates.^[16] It received votes from its growing constituency alongside protest votes from those disaffected from Fatah's rule. As one Palestinian commentator summed it up, "Fatah has left a political vacuum that Hamas, inadvertently or not, is filling".^[17]



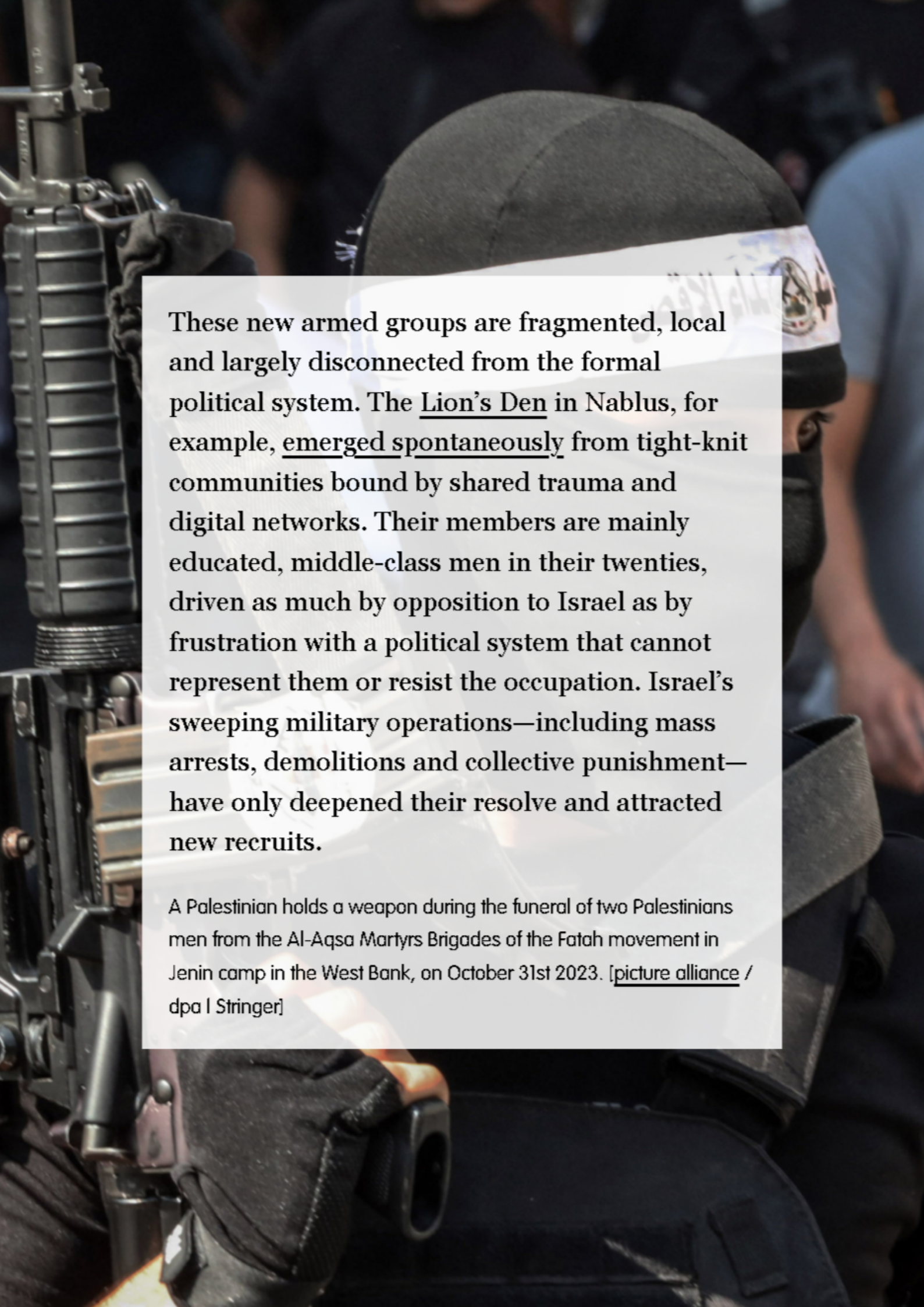
Palestinian supporters of Hamas in Gaza City celebrate the group's victory at student council elections at the West Bank's Birzeit University, May 18th 2022. [picture alliance / NurPhoto | Majdi Fathi]

Hamas's October 7th attack led to a spike in support for the group in the West Bank, reflecting rising support for taking up arms. As one Hamas leader dryly noted in an interview, "explosions happen when all horizons are closed".^[18] Even in the wake of Gaza's devastation, Hamas continues to out-poll Fatah in the West Bank.

When explosions happen

The rise of armed groups is the clearest symptom of the West Bank's political collapse. With the intensification of Israeli occupation and Abbas's unchecked authoritarianism blocking avenues for institutional change, Palestinians are increasingly turning to arms as an outlet for their helplessness and anger. As the institutions of Palestinian governance disintegrate and national leadership recedes, a new generation of militants is moving into the void.

Armed resistance has long been a feature of Palestinian politics, waxing and waning with the fortunes of diplomacy. Today, those in the West Bank are impoverished, disenfranchised and disillusioned with a political system that has brought the territory closer to collapse and annexation. The latest wave of militancy began in Jenin in 2021 before spreading to Nablus, Tulkarem and other northern towns, sparked out of a combustible mix of Israeli repression and political paralysis.



These new armed groups are fragmented, local and largely disconnected from the formal political system. The Lion's Den in Nablus, for example, emerged spontaneously from tight-knit communities bound by shared trauma and digital networks. Their members are mainly educated, middle-class men in their twenties, driven as much by opposition to Israel as by frustration with a political system that cannot represent them or resist the occupation. Israel's sweeping military operations—including mass arrests, demolitions and collective punishment—have only deepened their resolve and attracted new recruits.

A Palestinian holds a weapon during the funeral of two Palestinians men from the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades of the Fatah movement in Jenin camp in the West Bank, on October 31st 2023. [[picture alliance](#) / dpa | Stringer]

Though the groups include members linked to Fatah, Hamas and Islamic Jihad, they present themselves as non-factional, emphasising national unity over the divisions that have hamstrung elite politics.^[19] On the ground, these factions have formed joint groups, such as the Jenin Battalion. For many Palestinians, even for those not supportive of armed resistance, they embody an authenticity and courage that the official leadership have seemingly lost.

Perhaps most revealing of the state of Palestinian governance, these armed groups have not tried to govern or seize control of the PA. In the words of one young militant in March 2023, “Anyone can take over the PA, the question is what do you do with it once you have it?” Instead, the groups hoped to spark political renewal, including elections and improved governance.

Despite their symbolic appeal to many, military expertise and organisational capacity of these groups quickly hit a ceiling. Poorly equipped and loosely coordinated, they rely on smuggled weapons and personal networks rather than central organisation. Their successes—briefly repelling Israeli raids or attacking Israeli military checkpoints—have largely been limited and fleeting.

This has coincided with a rise in more individualistic shootings targeting Israeli settlers in the West Bank and so-called lone-wolf killing sprees in cities such as Jerusalem and Tel Aviv—which armed groups distance themselves from given the violent reprisal these attacks trigger against local communities.^[20]

The groups also lack effective leadership. Their founding generations have either been killed by Israel or captured by PA security forces. The death of charismatic leaders—such as Ibrahim al-Nabulsi in August 2022—has stripped the armed movements of coherence and popularity. This has been exacerbated by Israel’s heavy and indiscriminate repression which has turned local communities against these groups, and sparked brutal “street justice” carried out by gunmen against suspected collaborators.^[21]

The PA, fearful of losing control and eager to reassure international backers, has oscillated between co-optation and suppression of the militias. Its security forces have targeted militants with links to Hamas while offering amnesty and jobs to those tied to Fatah. Though such efforts have been blunted by its lack of legitimacy and weakened patronage power, the PA was still able to reach a deal to demobilise the Jenin Battalion in January 2025 through the mediation of local clans, community leaders and civil society.

However, according to a Western military official working on security coordination between Israel and the PA, Israel “wanted them dead” and quickly undercut the Jenin deal, launching its most brutal military crackdown to date later that month.^[22] Israel’s “Operation Iron Wall”, levelled the Jenin camp, displacing its inhabitants and systematically destroying their homes, before moving on to other camps and centres of armed resistance including Nur al-Shams and

Tulkarm. Over 40,000 were directly displaced, with no prospect of return.

The Jenin Battalion insurgency is now largely crushed. But the dynamics that fuelled the insurgency—political disenfranchisement, economic despair and humiliation under occupation—are unresolved. Popular support for armed resistance continues to simmer beneath the surface, erupting into sporadic violence. This is taking the form of attacks against Israeli military and settlers, including the use of improvised explosives, regular street clashes and lone attacks against civilians.

As the post-Abbas transition draws near, the interplay between political succession and militancy is becoming ever more volatile. Fatah’s internal rivalries are already spilling into the security sphere as competing leaders cement and expand their patronage networks to bolster their own influence. Some armed groups now act as proxies in this succession struggle, with senior security and political figures acting as their benefactors—further blurring the line between national resistance and factional contest.

Reform without representation

Squeezed by a brutal occupation, the dysfunctionality of the PA and the broader political system is apparent to all—whether PA officials, international stakeholders or Israel—and each want a different fix. What is often ignored in this is what Palestinians want.

At one end of the spectrum is the Israeli vision. In his September 29th speech at the White House, Netanyahu defined reform as Palestinian “deradicalisation” and the “fundamental, genuine and enduring transformation” of the PA, or its replacement by those “committed to a genuine peace with Israel.”

Beyond the issue of textbooks that “that teach hatred to [sic] Jews” to Palestinian children, this would entail no “incitement” against Israel in Palestinian media, broadly defined as any opposition to Israel and its occupation. The Israeli government also wants the PA and PLO to stop legal action against it at the International Criminal Court and International Court of Justice, and to go beyond its current recognition of Israel by explicitly recognising the country as a Jewish state.



Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu shakes hands with US president Donald Trump after a news conference in the State Dining Room of the White House, Washington, September 29th 2025. [[picture alliance](#) / ASSOCIATED PRESS | Alex Brandon]

These are Netanyahu's long-standing demands, and he has convinced the US administration and numerous European officials of their validity. Many of these elements were cast as critical foundations for Palestinian statehood in Trump's 2020 Peace to Prosperity plan for ending the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and have since been incorporated in his 20-point plan and UN Security Council Resolution 2803 as conditions for the PA's return for Gaza.

For their part, European officials have conditioned EU funding on changes to PA textbooks and ending PA welfare payments to prisoners and "martyrs".^[23] Abbas has largely acquiesced on these two issues, even firing his finance minister, Omar Bitar, in November 2025 for allegedly continuing financial payments to some Palestinians prisoners held by Israel. More remarkably, Abbas endorsed the new US-drafted security council resolution which effectively precludes the PA's return to Gaza and the relaunching of future peace talks until it undertakes the reforms demanded by Israel. But in the words of one frustrated senior Palestinian government official, "whatever we do, it's never enough."^[24]

Europeans have also backed the reform agenda championed by PA prime minister Mohammad Mustafa—which focuses on technocratic improvements such as tightening fiscal management, improving service delivery and stimulating investment—by increasing emergency funding to the PA. To his credit, Mustafa is advancing this plan despite Israeli constraints. In doing so, the prime minister managed to unlock a €1.6bn EU support package for 2025 to 2027 and establish a Palestine Donor Group co-managed by the EU and Arab states.

European funding to counter Israeli sanctions is a lifeline for the PA and provides leverage over Abbas.^[25] But Europe's focus has so far been mostly technical and does little to address the deeper political and institutional decay caused by Abbas's monopolisation of power and the authority's fractured politics.

European policymakers, however, have repeatedly voiced support for Palestinian goals of national unity and elections. As a condition for France's recognition of Palestine, President Emmanuel Macron secured Abbas's commitment to a national election by June 2026 and the drafting of new party legislation to rejuvenate Palestinian governance.

It is also praiseworthy that the New York Declaration on implementing the two-state solution, endorsed by a large group of European and Arab states in July 2025, calls for elections and national re-unification under the PA and PLO. Spearheaded by France and Saudi Arabia, the declaration was also cited in Trump's Gaza plan and resolution 2803 as a metric for PA reform.

These are important shifts. But these principals have yet to translate into material steps by European governments—many of which appear to still be searching for the chimera of short-term stability under the authoritarian rule of Abbas or a future successor. Instead, they need to invest in the required democratic transformation to allow for genuine stability to take root in the long term.

Change is in the eye of the beholder

For its many faults, there is no substitute to the PA. As the only internationally recognised Palestinian government, it still acts as a check on full Israeli settlement of the West Bank and provides the institutional foundations of Palestinian statehood. Empowering and re-legitimising it is an urgent and necessary part of any deescalation strategy in the West Bank, efforts to secure a sustainable ceasefire in Gaza, and the revival of credible Israeli-Palestinian peace talks. These steps cannot be built on repression and the shrinking choices that breed despair and armed revolt, but on the opportunities and security that Palestinian governance should offer its people.

Supporting renewal and tackling Israel's occupation—rather than merely sustaining the political status quo—is the only way to keep alive the prospect of Palestinian democracy and self-determination. A legitimate, representative leadership is essential to define the boundaries of acceptable compromise and to avoid concessions that further undermine Palestinian rights. It is also needed to organise the political authority to argue its positions internationally, build consensus and apply pressure—including public censure—on actors that deviate from this. Until Palestinians have legitimate institutions that speak for them, some will be driven to violence to make themselves heard.

Genuine renewal begins with an end to the politics of monopolisation and impunity that have defined the Abbas era. This means restoring the democratic mechanisms of presidential, legislative and PLO elections; institutional reforms to end one-man rule and reviving internal checks and balances; and rebuilding the PLO on an inclusive, representative basis that reflects the diversity of Palestinian political life in both the occupied territories and the diaspora. It also means revitalising local governance and re-empowering civil society as a legitimate space for political mobilisation. Only then can new movements and a new generation of leaders gradually emerge to break the duopoly that Fatah and Hamas have over Palestinian politics.

Palestinians are not in a position to do this on their own. Political reform will require significant, sustained international support and a stable environment on the ground if it is to have a chance of success. European countries are uniquely placed to pressure Israel to give Palestinians the space they need to revive their politics and prevent Abbas from blocking this

yet again. They have been deeply invested in the Palestinian project since the signing of Oslo Accords in 1993, while the EU has played a decisive role in establishing the PA and sustaining its finances, and is the largest single donor to Palestinian institutions.

Europe must now align its agenda with widespread Palestinian demands for political renewal and de-occupation—rather than trying to manage the PA’s institutional decline and a collapsing West Bank order. A new Palestinian leadership, accountable to Palestinians themselves and empowered with a fresh electoral mandate, would meet the pre-conditions that European and Arab governments have put on the PA for it to take control of Gaza. It would also give more legitimacy to Palestine’s institutions and strengthen its capacity to negotiate a lasting and credible peace agreement with Israel. Short of this, cycles of violence will continue to tear the West Bank apart, and with them, Europeans’ long-standing goals of a two-state solution and lasting peace.

Renewing Palestinian politics

European donors need to hold Abbas to his commitment to a more accessible, inclusive and representative system through free and fair elections. For this, changes to PA and PLO rules are essential. The PA needs a new Parties Law to make it easier for political parties to register and fundraise. It also needs to remove restrictive candidacy criteria: minimum age requirements and Abbas’s declaration that they must accept a two-state solution and PLO political platform (understood as recognition of Israel, commitment to the Oslo Accords and non-violence). Both conditions have stifled activists and limit genuine political representation.

Renouncing violence is a valid demand to participate in PA elections. However, by forcing candidates to accept the two-state Oslo paradigm, Abbas again finds himself at odds with the significant majority of Palestinian who oppose such pre-conditions. These restrictions may disproportionately impact younger, progressive activists who advocate for a unitary Jewish-Palestinian state and reject the Oslo Accords for its disastrous impact on Palestinian rights. According to the May 2025 poll, 27% of West Bankers do not support a two-state solution and 38% support a singular state.

In the past, European policymakers have been ambivalent about the exercise of Palestinian democracy. They have showed little enthusiasm for free and fair elections—especially if they could bring Hamas or other critics of Oslo-era diplomacy into the political mainstream. Europeans saw a possible rupture with the status quo as too destabilising. As such, Europeans have long focused on keeping the PA on “life support”.^[26] This strategy has simply slowed its decline—genuine democracy is the only way to stabilise and legitimise the Palestinian political system.

Europeans should condition their significant financial support to the PA on genuine political renewal. This requires moving beyond predictable and tired tweaks of the status quo and towards institutional change; funding should be conditional on deep institutional reform, not just fiscal transparency or service delivery. Progress should be measured by realistic standards shaped by Palestinian needs rather than maximalist Israeli positions aimed at fatally wounding rather than strengthening the PA.

The aim of conditional European funding should be to strengthen the credibility and legitimacy of Palestine's national institutions. This includes creating space for new progressive movements and civic initiatives that support non-violence, as well as enhancing institutions' ability to represent Palestinians in future negotiations with Israel. Elections for a new PLC should be the immediate priority, as they are more feasible than elections for the PNC, the PLO's legislative body intended to represent Palestinians wherever they are in the world.

With this in mind, **Europeans should press Abbas to commit to a new, inclusive constitution** that reflects Palestinian political plurality and national consensus through transparent and broad-based public and cross-factional consultations. Other funding benchmarks should include restoring the independence of the judiciary and Central Elections Commission, and curbing human rights abuses by PA security forces.

While Abbas has nominally agreed to a number of these steps, it is clear he will not implement these in an inclusive way as this would threaten his hold on power. ^[27] **Europeans need to ensure meaningful and comprehensive implementation, rejecting Abbas's longstanding efforts** to project cosmetic reforms on the world stage as cover to strengthen his hold on power and further exclude political critics.

Elections that are free, fair and inclusive could bring about a generational and ideological shift in Palestinian leadership, breaking Abbas's suffocating hold over the PA's institutions. Figures such as Marwan Barghouti—imprisoned by Israel but popular in opinion polls—could replace the aging and autocratic leader as a unifying figure, even from his Israeli prison cell. But senior PA officials, including Sheikh, are long rumoured to have been lobbying Israel and the US against Barghouti's release, fearful of the threat he could represent to their power and that of Abbas.^[28]

Change at the top would also almost certainly mean a more confrontational diplomatic and civil-rights strategy towards Israel and its occupation. It could mobilise popular protest, increase demands for accountability and reassert Palestinian sovereignty on the ground. This shift would align with the majority view among Palestinians and create opportunities to escape the failed Oslo paradigm and chart a new political route. Just as importantly, it could create a new Palestinian leadership with the necessary domestic legitimacy to secure a credible peace agreement with Israel.

Palestinian political reconciliation

For this to succeed, cross-factional consensus is required between Fatah-Hamas. Without an agreement between the two dominant parties, there can be no national reunification, national elections or re-legitimisation of PA institutions. Hamas represents a significant part of Palestine's political spectrum, with 32% support in the West Bank. It cannot just be militarily defeated or sanctioned away, as the past two years of war and two decades of sanctions make abundantly clear. Prospects for peace will hinge on drawing moderate elements of Hamas into the political tent, instead of excluding them and letting a more extreme wing tear it down from the outside.

Europeans should not oppose the inclusion of Hamas in the Palestinian political system. This does not mean returning Hamas to government: the group has been clear it does not want to. It views running the state as too much of a burden and a distraction from its core mission of ending Israel's occupation. Yet even if Hamas no longer seeks to govern directly, the group will almost certainly contest new legislative elections as a political party. Whether or not it wins a plurality of votes, it will likely confine its role to that of opposition.^[29] As one senior official from its moderate wing put it, "Hamas is the one with [the most] influence in Palestinian society. But we don't want to monopolise power."^[30] In doing so, the group would signal its acceptance of the PA and take a step towards political transformation, empowering leaders who call for a non-violent political future (as happened in Syria with the former al-Qaida leader and now President Ahmed al-Sharaa). **Europeans should therefore not oppose Hamas's participation in future Palestinian elections**—provided it endorses the principles of non-violence and democratic governance.

For progress on this track, **Europeans will need to create the political cover and impetus for Abbas to move towards national reconciliation** talks with all Palestinian factions, including Hamas, that ends in an agreement. This should start with the creation of an interim Palestinian-led committee in Gaza, which is needed to both stabilise the Strip and reunite the West Bank and Gaza as a unified political entity. A national election by the end of 2026 would have to follow, as per Abbas's promise to hold a vote within one year of a ceasefire in Gaza. This would need to be accompanied by PLO reform through the inclusion of Hamas and by giving all Palestinians, including those in the diaspora, a direct vote in its membership.

Opposing Israeli occupation

None of this can succeed without confronting the debilitating environment created by Israel's deepening, violent occupation. Giving Palestinians the space to renew their political system requires ending Israel's settlement construction, campaign of arrests, financial sanctions,

forcible expulsions and wider constraints on Palestinian freedom of movement. It also means stripping away the layers of occupation Israel has spent decades building up with the intent to bury any possibility of Palestinian freedom.

A credible European policy must impose punitive consequences on Israeli actions that violate Palestinians' rights and international law, and erode the very statehood European countries claim to support. Critically, Europeans must sustain the pressure that has been building on Israel over recent months; progress in Gaza is a sign that this is working rather than a reason to ease off.

Europeans will need to show determination and resolve by immediately **expanding sanctions against Israel's settlement project and its supporters**, including settlement councils, as well as key government officials such as Hillel Roth and Henanel Gurfinkel, and organisations that fund the settler movement such as Ataret Cohanim and the Jewish National Fund's "Himnuta" real-estate subsidiary.

EU member states should also make a new push to secure a qualified majority to **suspend preferential trade tariffs under the EU-Israel Association Agreement**. This is vital if Israel continues its efforts to kill off all prospects for a two-state solution, including its advancement of settlements such as E1, blocks future Palestinian elections in East Jerusalem or thwarts the full implementation of Trump's 20-point plan.

European action against Israel should be coupled with **a ban on trade, services and investments involving Israeli settlements**. This should include additional differentiation measures to fully exclude settlements from all bilateral relations with Israel, including taxation, social security and research agreements. Though critical to success, Israel's settlements fall outside of Trump's 20-points. Europeans should therefore act forcefully.

Germany and Italy are the two main blockers of EU measures against Israel. They must recognise their unconditional political alignment with Netanyahu's government is not compatible with Europe's broader geopolitical aspirations, nor Israel's own long-term security interests—even as it subjugates Palestinians and buries the chances of a two-state solution.

Drawing on the New York Declaration, Europeans should **encourage other international partners to take similar measures**. These could be enshrined in a UN General Assembly resolution and enacted should Israel not commit itself to an irreversible pathway towards a two-state solution within a specified deadline. As part of this, the General Assembly could demand that Israel meet a series of incremental benchmarks, such as fully withdrawing from Gaza once an international stabilisation force is deployed, returning all confiscated tax clearance revenues to the PA, freezing settlement construction and ending settler violence, and allowing Palestinian elections that include East Jerusalem.

Doubling down on Arab-European coordination

Europeans can significantly increase the prospects for peace by advancing concrete steps to hold Israel and its settlements to account. But their influence will be strongest when coordinated with Arab partners, especially key Gulf states. Europeans worked closely—and with a degree of notable success—with Arab partners to push the Gaza ceasefire and key elements of Trump’s 20-point plan away from more maximalist Israeli positions. These regional partners bring crucial political and financial weight to the table, which Europeans should harness to align with their own strategy. Saudi Arabia, in particular, has been a driving force behind recent progress and the New York Declaration.

A joint case should be made to Trump that genuine and inclusive Palestinian political renewal, as outlined in the New York Declaration, as well as clear restrictions on Israeli actions in the West Bank, offers the best means of ensuring the success of his “historic” deal. It is clear that Riyadh has far greater weight to make this case in Washington than European capitals, but the case will be even stronger if made together, alongside other key states such as Qatar and the UAE.

This coordinated strategy should extend to measures on the ground, reinforced by a shared European-Arab outreach and financial support package in the West Bank, for the PA and even Hamas. Combined support and pressure will make a far stronger case to Abbas for embracing renewal while also ensuring that Hamas internalises that the only path towards their goal of liberation is one of political transformation.

Before peace slips away

In a matter of days, Israeli settlers have left a trail of destruction across the West Bank: a charred mosque, trucks swallowed by flames, and a Reuters journalist left bloodied and battered. In the same breath, Israeli forces shot a teenager dead in a raid on the Askar refugee camp. Alongside the Daghameen family, and thousands of others like them across the West Bank, these victims are not protected the next time Israeli settlers or occupation forces attack them or vandalise their property. Meanwhile, the PA continues to bend over backwards to please Israel in the hope of ensuring the body’s international relevance and survival.

Europe faces a defining choice. It can continue propping up this failing system, hoping that Israel’s coercive hand or a change of personalities in Palestinian politics will somehow avert collapse. Or it can finally confront the rot at the root of the crisis: a vicious cycle of unbridled Israeli aggression that feeds the decay of Palestinian legitimacy, representation and accountability.

For those European states committed to Israeli security and Palestinian rights, it is time to act before a worst-case scenario of violent state collapse kills off all prospects of a more hopeful and stable future. They must seize the momentum of the ceasefire in Gaza to push for a wider and deeper transformation in both Israeli and Palestinian positions. Anything less would limit the Gaza plan to a short-term, and ultimately doomed, conflict management.

Supporting genuine Palestinian political renewal, anchored in democratic participation, institutional reform and reconciliation is necessary for any long-term peace. But to save Palestinian politics, Europeans must first challenge and punish Israeli actions—and given the deteriorating facts on the ground, they must do so urgently. The future of any viable peace process, and what is left of Europe’s credibility in the Middle East, depends on whether European leaders can boldly confront these deteriorating dynamics. Only then can Palestinian politics—and peace—be born again.

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- [1] Interview with local resident and member of the Palestinian Farmers Union (PFU), Sinjil, West Bank, July 16th 2025.
- [2] Senior official from PA Ministry of Interior, Ramallah, July 28th 2025.
- [3] Senior Jordanian government and military officials, Amman, October 2024.
- [4] Palestinian resident of Ramallah and member of the board of Directors of the Palestinian NGO network, Ramallah, July 10th 2025.
- [5] Discussions with the Israeli settler watchdog, Ir Amim, London, October and November 2025.
- [6] Author's interviews with senior Fatah/PLO officials, Ramallah, July 2025.
- [7] Author's interview with member of the Palestinian Central Council and former PA advisor, Menaggio, Italy November 2025.
- [8] Senior member of Fatah's central committee 1, Ramallah, March 2024; member of the Palestinian Central Council and former PA advisor, Geneva, May 2025.
- [9] Senior PLO member and Fatah dissident, Ramallah, March 28th, 2024.
- [10] Discussions with foreign diplomats and Palestinian officials, Jerusalem and Ramallah, May 2024.
- [11] Member of the Palestinian Central Council and former PA advisor, Menaggio, November 2025.
- [12] Author's interview with Abbas Milhem, director of the Palestinian Farmers Union, Ramallah, July 22nd 2025.
- [13] Author's interview with dissident Fatah official, Ramallah, July 11th 2024.
- [14] Author's discussions with Fatah members in Ramallah, Nablus and Jenin, January 2024.
- [15] Author's interview with senior PA official, phone call, August 1st 2021.
- [16] Author's interviews with candidates in West Bank local elections, December 2021 and March 2022; and with Birzeit University Student Council members, Birzeit and Ramallah, May and July 2022.
- [17] Author's interview with Fatah splinter group member, phone call, April 24th 2024.

- [18] Author's interview with member of Hamas' Political Bureau, Doha, April 15th 2024.
- [19] Author's interviews with members of the armed groups in Jenin, Tulkarem, Jericho, Ramallah, March 2023-February 2025.
- [20] Interviews with members of the armed groups in Jenin, Tulkarem, Jericho, Ramallah, March 2023- February 2025.
- [21] Interviews with local communities in Jenin Camp, Tulkarem and Nur Shams camps and armed groups, March 2023-February 2025.
- [22] Author's interview with an international security coordinator working with the PASF, West Bank, March 5th 2025.
- [23] Author's meetings with European Commission officials, Brussels, March 2025.
- [24] Author's interview with senior PA official 2, Naples, October 2025.
- [25] Copy of EU briefing document, "Palestine Donor Group: Concept note and deliverables", seen by author, November 20th 2025.
- [26] Author's interview with senior European official, Geneva, September 2025.
- [27] "Palestinian Government Reform Program: Progress – Update Brief", State of Palestine, Prime Minister's Office, September 2025.
- [28] Meetings with senior Fatah officials, Ramallah, May 2025.
- [29] Interviews by ECFR visiting fellow Muhammad Shehada with Hamas officials in Doha and Istanbul between December 2024 and October 2025.
- [30] Author's interview with senior official from Hamas' Political Bureau, Doha, January 25th 2024.

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