

The politics of slow unbinding

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A new resistance is emerging in the West Bank. (Shadi Jarar'ah / APA images)

If one were to spend one's time reading only Israeli analyses of current events in the occupied West Bank, one might come to the conclusion that the resistance we are witnessing there at the moment has no legitimate cause for its eruption.

In the Israeli view, this is not about Israel's expansionism, its refusal to reach a political compromise, its theft of land or Palestinian tax revenue.

It has nothing to do with trigger-happy soldiers, a military matrix of control over an occupied people or the Israeli state's tacit and overt support for organized and armed settler militias roaming the West Bank creating havoc.

In Israeli media discourse, none of the above has anything to do with the rebirth of a semi-organized Palestinian armed resistance in the West Bank.

Such wilful blindness is not to say that the genesis of the current political moment is not highly complex. It is. The emerging semi-organized resistance in the West Bank is a multifaceted phenomenon that was spurred by a mixture of factors arising from the reality of Israel's occupation.

These include the personal backgrounds of the fighters who initiated this new movement in Jenin and Nablus. It includes the collective memory of the role of resistance in forcing the evacuation of four illegal settlements in the Jenin area in 2005. It is tied to the collective pain caused by the many relatives and friends lost in the struggle against Israel.

It is also intimately connected to the various political rebellions that have emerged over the past six years: the [knife intifada](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/18/knife-intifada-palestinian-israel-west-bank) (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/18/knife-intifada-palestinian-israel-west-bank>), the various [Gaza assaults](https://electronicintifada.net/tags/2021-may-attack-gaza) (<https://electronicintifada.net/tags/2021-may-attack-gaza>), the [Ramadan habah](https://electronicintifada.net/content/how-palestinian-authority-manages-dissent/33546) (<https://electronicintifada.net/content/how-palestinian-authority-manages-dissent/33546>) (flare-up) of 2021, and other important moments that led to mass mobilizations.

But what is perhaps central to the emergence of this new resistance is the shrinking of the Palestinian Authority, a result of its inability to provide Palestinians with any semblance of hope or future. The PA has become a shadow that survives only through its

control of finances.

A process of unbinding

The Israelis treat the PA as a more complex version of the [South Lebanese Army](https://electronicintifada.net/tags/south-lebanese-army) (<https://electronicintifada.net/tags/south-lebanese-army>). The Americans are simply uninterested in a conflict that the Arab state systems seem to have [sidestepped](https://electronicintifada.net/tags/abraham-accords) (<https://electronicintifada.net/tags/abraham-accords>).

The Europeans, meanwhile, are unhappy about footing the bill for the PA, but for various complex reasons they tend to operate within the Israeli and American parameters.

In other words, the same powers that back the PA – the US, Arab states, the European Union, Israel – ignore it and thus directly or indirectly weaken it.

The small financial, business, security and political elite that benefits directly from managing the economic and bureaucratic space called the PA are incapable of providing their regional and international backers and allies with what they historically want from it: a tamed Palestinian nationalism that is willing to cooperate with Israel while anointing itself as a representative of the Palestinian people in the eyes of the Palestinian people.

This elite has lost this dual ability. Its unwillingness to use any political leverage to challenge Israel means it is almost completely sidelined, both by its allies and by Palestinian society looking for alternatives.

Furthermore, the elite is currently engaged in infighting around who will succeed the ailing Mahmoud Abbas, the PA's president. Many see themselves as successors, or back different horses in their own bid for influence and power.

In fact, one can see at least partially the rebirth of organized resistance as a kind of *unbinding* process between an infighting elite and a wider social base in revolt against it.

It is not surprising therefore to see fighters associated with Fatah – the dominant political faction in the PA – working side-by-side with members of Islamic Jihad, Hamas, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and non-affiliated fighters.

Or to see Palestinian security personnel [engaging \(https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/10/palestinian-security-forces-become-more-involved-resistance-west-bank\)](https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/10/palestinian-security-forces-become-more-involved-resistance-west-bank) in the armed resistance, ignoring and directly challenging the Fatah and PA leadership. Many of the key people in this new movement are understood to be ex-security officers or Fatah members, even as the resistance remains a localized phenomenon rather than a nationwide one for now.

The Lion's Den group, for instance, is a cross-party alliance, but also one with its own distinct local identity.

Israel's strategic assumption

Since 2005, a hidden assumption seems to have dominated Israeli strategic thinking: Palestinians in the West Bank reached an almost irreversible point of surrender in the wake of the [second intifada \(https://electronicintifada.net/tags/second-intifada\)](https://electronicintifada.net/tags/second-intifada).

That intifada took a heavy toll on people's resilience, capabilities, and desire to continue fighting the occupation. Palestinians did emerge from the second intifada with some minute successes in Gaza and around Jenin (the 2005 unilateral Israeli [withdrawal \(https://english.wafa.ps/Pages/Details/90583\)](https://english.wafa.ps/Pages/Details/90583) from Gaza and four settlements and an army base in the Jenin area), but also with serious internal divisions that climaxed with the Hamas takeover of Gaza.

Israel assumed that such a trajectory meant Palestinians in the West Bank were in no position to challenge its illegal settlement expansion. Since the Oslo process started in 1993, the settler population in the West Bank has risen steadily. In the first seven years after the Oslo Accords were signed – roughly the period it was meant to take to finalize an agreement – the number of settlers doubled.

Population growth has barely slowed down since. From 2010 to 2021, the settler population [rose by 42 percent \(https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/wbank-settler-population-up-42-since-2010-report/2170039\)](https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/wbank-settler-population-up-42-since-2010-report/2170039).

Israel could safely continue its settler-colonial appropriation of space with little consequence. After all, the PA was busy with a state-building project that Israel had no intention of allowing to materialize.

Hence, ex-prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu only [spoke](https://www.haaretz.com/2008-11-20/ty-article/netanyahu-economics-not-politics-is-the-key-to-peace/0000017f-f49d-d47e-a37f-fdbd12a10000) of “economic peace.” A close adviser – to both Netanyahu and the man who finally replaced him as prime minister, Naftali Bennett – later [spoke about](https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2021-09-05/ty-article/highlight/the-thinker-whos-inspiring-israels-pathbreaking-prime-minister/0000017f-e480-d38f-a57f-e6d24dfb0000) “shrinking the conflict.”

Danny Danon, Israel’s former ambassador to the UN, even [wrote a piece](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/24/opinion/palestinian-peace-bahrain-conference.html) in *The New York Times* titled “What’s Wrong With Palestinian Surrender?”

In other words, Israel had nothing to offer the Palestinian leadership except a minimal financial space for the appropriation and accumulation of money by a small clique in the business, security and political spheres.

This assumption even made it to American peace proposals. The much-talked-about [Trump plan](https://electronicintifada.net/blogs/omar-karmi/trumps-win-win-plan-hands-everything-israel) included no right of return, no contiguous state, no self-determination and no equal rights. The plan was nothing but a slightly improved version of the current reality, in return of near-complete capitulation and obscure promises of more money.

Israelis were delighted. The West Bank was the least worrisome of the different Palestinian geographies. Events in May 2021 further confirmed this. The flare-up in Jerusalem around Ramadan that year [spread](https://electronicintifada.net/content/israel-attacks-gaza-after-jerusalem-defeat/32936) to Palestinians in Israel and turned into an all-out assault on Gaza.

But in the West Bank, participation was weak and contained. Yes, more than 30 people were killed there during the Ramadan flare-up. But the distance between what the West Bank could do and what it did remained large.

In Jerusalem demonstrators were even heard to shout slogans like: “For God’s sake, the West Bank where are you?” Or: “For God’s sake, oh West Bank, yalla!”

Israeli newsrooms were celebrating Palestinian security cooperation as effective and a central element in neutralizing the role Palestinians in the West Bank can play in popular and armed resistance. Indeed, Israel was more surprised by the political energy in places like Lod, Ramla, Jaffa, Naqab, Akka, Haifa and other villages and towns than about Jenin, Nablus, Tulkarm, Ramallah, Hebron and Bethlehem.

New spaces of resistance

These celebrations have proven premature.

Around the beginning of 2022, the Israeli narrative around the West Bank started to change. The Israeli army was conducting wider and more frequent arrest operations across the West Bank, a trend that has continued until the present.

In a [two-week period \(https://www.ochaopt.org/poc/27-september-10-october-2022#:~:text=Overall%2C%20Israeli%20forces%20conducted%20145,number%20of%20arrests%20\(43\).\)](https://www.ochaopt.org/poc/27-september-10-october-2022#:~:text=Overall%2C%20Israeli%20forces%20conducted%20145,number%20of%20arrests%20(43).) from the end of last month until the middle of October, for instance, the Israeli military conducted 145 search-and-arrest operations and arrested 127 Palestinians, including 13 children, across the West Bank.

At the same time, Israel faced an [increasing number \(https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2022-09-11/ty-article/.premium/shin-bet-chief-says-palestinian-authority-losing-grip-on-increasing-west-bank-violence/00000183-2d9d-dd3c-a3cf-ffbfc52c0000\)](https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2022-09-11/ty-article/.premium/shin-bet-chief-says-palestinian-authority-losing-grip-on-increasing-west-bank-violence/00000183-2d9d-dd3c-a3cf-ffbfc52c0000) of attacks, up from 19 in 2020 to 98 in 2021. This year, and until the end of September, there have already been around 130 attacks.

In May, Israel [embarked \(https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/israel/defense/1662395493-israel-1-500-palestinians-arrested-in-operation-break-the-wave\)](https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/israel/defense/1662395493-israel-1-500-palestinians-arrested-in-operation-break-the-wave) on a new operation to counter the rise of attacks called “Break the Wave.” The operation would focus on repairing the separation wall and fighting the rise of resistance groups in Jenin refugee camp and Nablus, not least through large-scale arrest campaigns.

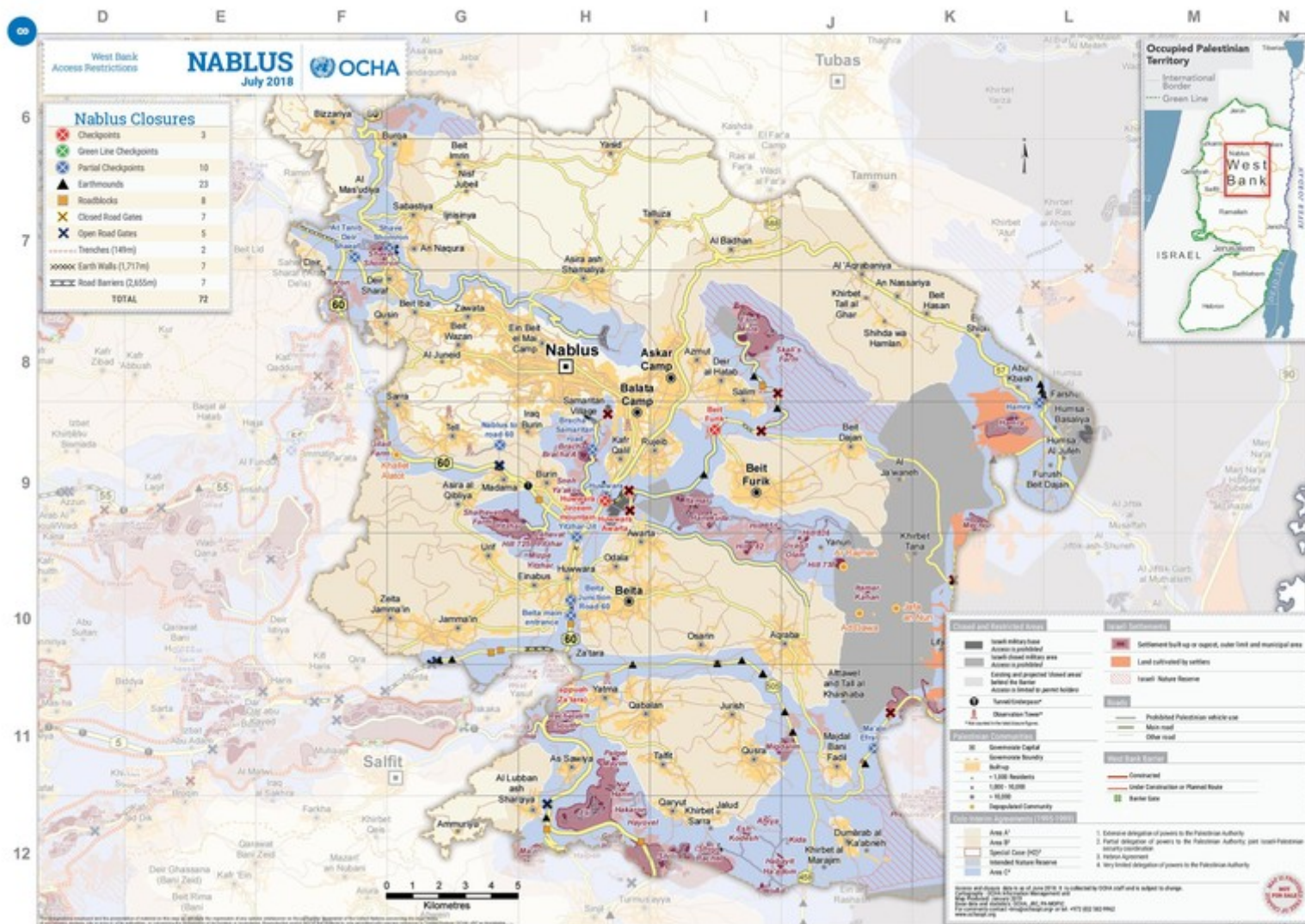
The resistance still grew despite – or perhaps because of — the fact that Palestinians in the West Bank have to deal with a holy trinity of counterinsurgency measures: a PA security apparatus cooperating with Israel; relative spatial separation that allows Israel to employ intense firepower; and an Israeli military that has near complete freedom of movement inside Palestinian areas, enabling it to conduct arrest and assassination operations.

Residents in the Jenin refugee camp, the old city of Nablus, and other small clustered and highly dense spaces needed a new strategy to overcome some of the above-mentioned challenges.

They carved out small spaces of resistance where Israel and the PA cannot operate without facing heavy firepower. The strategy has provided these groups the ability to operate in relative freedom.

Most of the armed groups' current posture is defensive. They engage Israel's army when it enters these dense clusters.

Nablus proxy war



Nablus is surrounded by settlements, military bases and checkpoints. (UNOCHA)

Israel is adjusting. Faced with the need to minimize contact in these spaces, the military leadership [let it be known](https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2022-09-30/ty-article/premium/the-politics-behind-targeted-west-bank-assassinations/00000183-8b0c-d91b-a7c7-af2dedae0000) (<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2022-09-30/ty-article/premium/the-politics-behind-targeted-west-bank-assassinations/00000183-8b0c-d91b-a7c7-af2dedae0000>) that it would use airpower in the form of attack drones to target fighters in these small clusters.

This would be the first use of these drones in the West Bank. They are used regularly over Gaza. Israel, it seems, is starting to treat these spaces like mini Gazas, applying a military strategy that seeks to fight from a safe distance.

This yearning for distance has two components, both part of a strategy of fighting with proxies and by remote control. The first is using tactics and tools to remove soldiers from the battlefield. The second is to place the PA front and center, removing direct friction between Israeli soldiers and fighters.

Nablus is critical. Despite the importance of Jenin and its camp in the rise of this semi-organized phenomenon, the struggle in Nablus, given the role of the PA and the strategic importance of the city and its environs, is more important.

Since the Israeli withdrawal in 2005, Jenin has had little settlement infrastructure in its immediate vicinity. It is instead surrounded by military bases, installations and the separation wall.

Nablus, on other hand, is dotted by a large number of settlements. It is a critical node in Israel's settler presence in the West Bank.

This creates anxiety among Israel's security establishment. The fear is that armed groups will compromise the settler presence in the area and necessitate a further deployment of troops from an already stretched military.

In the past month, Israel has engaged in a [public effort \(https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2022-09-11/ty-article/.premium/israel-asks-qatar-to-press-abbas-to-calm-west-bank-may-ask-other-states-for-help/00000183-28f3-d157-a5bf-2ff344bd0000\)](https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2022-09-11/ty-article/.premium/israel-asks-qatar-to-press-abbas-to-calm-west-bank-may-ask-other-states-for-help/00000183-28f3-d157-a5bf-2ff344bd0000) to pressure the PA to do more to fight armed groups.

Public statements by various Israeli officials, reports of Qatari mediation, and [direct meetings \(https://english.alaraby.co.uk/news/high-level-meeting-held-between-pa-leaders-israel-officials\)](https://english.alaraby.co.uk/news/high-level-meeting-held-between-pa-leaders-israel-officials) between Palestinian and Israeli officials all suggest there is concerted Israeli pressure on the PA to step up its efforts to contain the newly born resistance.

The PA seemed initially reluctant to engage in such a fight and largely relied on a strategy of information gathering, social defamation in the form of rumors denouncing fighters as criminals, and [direct negotiations](#)

(<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20221004-pa-is-negotiating-with-resistance-fighters-in-nablus-to-sell-their-weapons-israel-media/>).

From an Israeli perspective, the PA's active engagement in counterinsurgency efforts helps turn this into an internal Palestinian struggle and removes some of the pressure from Israel's shoulders. Israel wants to export a security problem. The logic is that Palestinian society fears internal civil fissures and would seek the absence of civil strife even at the expense of organized resistance.

Another intifada nears

The PA responded to Israel's pressure by [arresting](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/9/20/palestinian-man-killed-in-ongoing-clashes-with-pa-in-nablus) (<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/9/20/palestinian-man-killed-in-ongoing-clashes-with-pa-in-nablus>) two fighters in Nablus, including the high-profile Musab Shtayyeh. The arrest prompted protests against the PA and clashes between demonstrators and the PA security forces – in scenes reminiscent of clashes with Israeli soldiers – caused the death of one.

Shtayyeh is part of the Lion's Den group. But he is affiliated with Hamas. The PA did not expect an all-out rebellion in relation to an arrest of an individual tied to Hamas. It has used the past 16 years to transform the internal Palestinian divide into one replacing the enmity with Israel.

The PA has arrested hundreds of Hamas members with little resistance. It therefore found itself alone in highlighting the latter's association with Hamas, and found a large part of its own political base unconcerned – as evidenced by the broad participation in the Nablus protests in response to his arrest – with such a distinction.

This also shows that the current challenge to the PA leadership and Israel is not only from Islamist opposition groups or clusters of activists tied to the political left, but increasingly from within the PA's own fold.

Ironically, Israel's pressure on the PA to act more forcefully to confront these groups is only a short-term tactic. In the medium term, the harder the PA pushes, the more it hastens the process of *unbinding* between a large social base tied to Fatah and an increasingly irrelevant PA leadership.

For years, Israel has spoken of severing the roots of Palestinian resistance. Instead of severing the roots, however, in 2022 Israel finds itself in a battle reminiscent of the peak of the second intifada.

In fact, Israel today stands at the cusp of a developing Palestinian revolt that could easily morph into an intifada.

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🔗 [Lion's Den \(/tags/lions-den-0\)](#) [Palestinian Authority \(/tags/palestinian-authority\)](#) [Palestinian security forces \(/tags/palestinian-security-forces\)](#) [Hamas \(/tags/hamas\)](#) [Fatah \(/tags/fatah\)](#) [PFLP \(/tags/pflp\)](#) [Nablus \(/tags/nablus\)](#) [Jenin \(/tags/jenin\)](#)