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## Operation Break the Wave: Israel's war on the people of the West Bank



Early on the morning of May 11th, close to the entrance to the Jenin refugee camp, an Israeli sniper shot and fatally wounded renowned Palestinian Al Jazeera correspondent, Shireen Abu Akleh. Shireen is regarded by many as having been 'the voice of Palestine': 'It might not be easy to change the reality, but at least I was able to convey the people's message and voice.' Her murder was the occasion for widespread disbelief, grief and anger.

True to form, the Israeli military initially denied responsibility for Shireen's death and tried to blame the shooting on the presence of 'armed Palestinians'. Months later, on the 5th September, the Israeli authorities did grudgingly admit that, 'There is a high possibility that Ms. Abu Akleh was accidentally hit by IDF gunfire that was fired toward suspects identified as armed Palestinian gunmen, during an exchange of fire in which life-risking, widespread and indiscriminate shots were fired toward IDF soldiers.' This concocted scenario contradicts indisputable evidence gathered through forensically detailed investigations by, among others, [B'tselem](#), [CNN](#), the [Washington Post](#) and [Al Jazeera](#), itself; although armed groups were operating in Jenin, there were no Palestinian gunmen in the area at the time.



As a TV reporter with Al Jazeera, Shireen Abu Akleh came to prominence in the early 2000s covering the events of the second Intifada and Israel's counter-insurgency campaign, *Operation Defensive Shield*. On that morning in May, she was with experienced colleagues, doing something she had done many times before: investigating and exposing the truth about Israeli military operations and their impact on Palestine's civilian population.

Clearly visible in her 'PRESS' jacket and helmet, Shireen was standing with fellow reporter Shatha Hanaysha and producer Ali Samoudi when three shots were fired. The second shot hit Samoudi in the back, just below his shoulder. Shireen barely had time to shout, 'Ali got injured,' before she was struck in the head.

Over the previous month, the Israeli military had mounted a series of aggressive incursions into Jenin city and the Jenin refugee camp. On the 9th April, following the killing of three Israelis in Tel Aviv by Ra'ad Khazem, and while searching for Khazem's father and brothers, Israeli forces killed 21-year-old Ahmad Nasser Sa'adi. The Israeli forces then ransacked dozens of homes including Khazem's, wounded and arrested a former political prisoner, Nouredine Saber al-Jarboa', and, for good measure, shot 18-year-old Hanan Khadour as she was on her way to school in a taxi. The next day, while pursuing a Palestinian vehicle in Jenin city, the Israelis fatally wounded 16-year-old Mohammad Hussein Mohammad Qassim. Hanan Khadour died of her wounds just over a week later on April 18th.

These Israeli incursions into Jenin had begun a week earlier, on March 31st, the day Israel announced its latest counter-insurgency offensive, *Operation Break the Wave*. With a funding allocation of 181 million shekels (approx. £45 million), *Break the Wave* was designed to stem what the Israelis described as 'a wave of terrorist attacks', by reasserting Israeli security control over the whole of the West Bank, including areas that are nominally under the control of the Palestinian Authority (PA).

In that respect, *Break the Wave* was modelled on *Defensive Shield*, a clear admission of the failure of the policies that had been pursued in the intervening two decades, aimed at pacifying the Palestinian resistance by co-opting the PA into the role of security sub-contractor. Israel could no longer rely on the PA to do the job, and would have to take back control. As then Prime Minister, Naftali Bennett, said, 'We are fixing a grave mistake: The neglect of Israel Police. A strong Israel Police is a strong Israel.'



The second Intifada effectively ended in 2005 with a ceasefire negotiated between Israel, Fatah and the PA at the Sharm el-Sheikh Summit. PA President Mahmoud Abbas agreed to disband the armed battalions of Fatah. Many of the fighters were subsequently incorporated into the PA security services. Over time, the Palestinian street's opposition and resistance to the PA's security role has become increasingly vocal and active, especially in the northern areas of the West Bank around Nablus and Jenin. The PA can now only enter Nablus with a large security presence. In September PA forces encountered fierce opposition when they went into Nablus to arrest Musab Shtayyeh, a member of the Al-Qassam Brigades, the military wing of Hamas. PA security forces don't enter the Jenin refugee camp at all.

While Palestinians blame PA security forces for acting in opposition to popular resistance and are angry about the arrests of armed resistance fighters, Israel, on the other hand, blames the PA for every act of resistance they fail to thwart. Ronen Bar, head of Israeli intelligence services Shin Bet, has been saying for some time that the PA is suffering a political and economic crisis and that Israel needs to strengthen the PA. In recent months, Israel's Defence Minister, Benny Gantz, has met several times with PA President Mahmoud Abbas to discuss how to support the PA in its security role on behalf of Israel. This strategy of co-optation inevitably founders on the intransigence of the settler-led, Israeli right-wing that abhors the PA and everything it stands for, and would happily see it annihilated.



Immediately following the announcement of *Operation Break the Wave* Israel transferred 200 members of the IDF into its Border Police, and called up 300 special reservists to create a 'Shin Bet Brigade'. The IDF already has six regional brigades operating in the West Bank, plus a number of specialised counter-insurgency units, YAMAM, Sayeret Golani and the Givati Brigade.

Across the West Bank, in the two weeks between the 5th and 18th April, a mixed force of IDF, Border Police and Shin Bet carried out 109 search and arrest operations, shot and killed 13 Palestinians, and injured 947.

The number of these incursions grew significantly in May, and were increasingly focused on Nablus and Huwara as well as Jenin. Over the months since then, invading Israeli forces have been met with fierce,



popular resistance whenever they have attempted to enter any area of the Jenin or Nablus governorates, whether refugee camps, adjacent cities or villages. The Israeli military have been forced either to resort to operating undercover, disguised as civilians, or to enter with overwhelming force, leading to confrontations with crowds of youths throwing stones and Molotov cocktails, accompanied by occasional exchanges of gunfire. These raids often end with the killing of innocent bystanders as anyone in the street becomes a target.



This growing resistance movement is being led by a younger generation who have lived through the past two decades of repression. According to one of Fatah's leaders in Jenin, 'They have seen blood, tanks, Apaches, bombing and demolition; tanks that were running over people, over civilians, and crushing their bones. This new generation is ready for this stage, and those who are fighting today are the sons of fighters, the sons of martyrs, and the sons of prisoners, who fought in the battle of Jenin camp in 2002. We are proud of these patriotic actions everywhere, including Jenin camp, for they are a model to follow and are raising the morale of all generations.'



At its launch, *Operation Break the Wave* was presented as an immediate response to the killing of 9 Israelis in 3 separate incidents in Beersheba (March 22nd), Hadera (March 27th) and Bnei Brak (March 29th), that is, attacks inside Israel where relatively few incidents had occurred in the previous decade. The attack in Beersheba on March 22nd was carried out by a Bedouin from the Negev, and the attack in Hadera on March 27th was carried out by two Palestinian citizens of Israel from Umm al-Fahm. Only the attack in Bnei Brak was carried out by a Palestinian from the West Bank.

This suggests that *Break the Wave* had been planned for some time, and was motivated by a deeper concern on the part of the security apparatus and the Israeli state: fear of the insurgency that began to manifest itself in May 2021, which some have called the *Unity Intifada*; the first time Israel faced an uprising



across all sectors of its apartheid regime; in the West Bank, in Jerusalem, in Gaza, and, crucially, inside the towns and cities of Israel itself.

According to the deputy commander of the Israeli Menashe Regional Brigade (that operates in the area around Jenin): 'What we saw in May last year was different because it wasn't only a clear Palestinian enemy; we also dealt with violence by Arab-Israelis. And dealing with that is different because you aren't only dealing with the Palestinian facing you; it's also [the one] behind you.'

Throughout 2021, faced with increasing attacks by both settlers and Israeli forces, Palestinian communities across the West Bank continued to resist house demolitions and land seizures, notably in Beita and Massafer Yata. In East Jerusalem, local communities rallied against demolitions and expropriations in Sheikh Jarah and Silwan. In early May there were protests around the Damascus Gate in Jerusalem and mass mobilisations against threats to the Al Aqsa compound. During the 11-days of *Operation Guardian of the Walls* (Israel's bombing of Gaza between May 10th and May 21st), however, something new emerged: there were major protests in the predominantly Palestinian cities in northern Israel as well as in the 'mixed' cities such as Lod and Jaffa. Palestinian organisations in Israel began to take a leading role in the resistance, and on May 18th they called for a general strike, the Karameh (Dignity) Strike, a call that was then taken up in occupied East Jerusalem and the West Bank.

This year, alongside the continuing protests and campaigns in the West Bank, there has been a successful protest by communities in the Negev (the Nakab) against attempts by the JNF to annex land through a bogus tree-planting scheme.



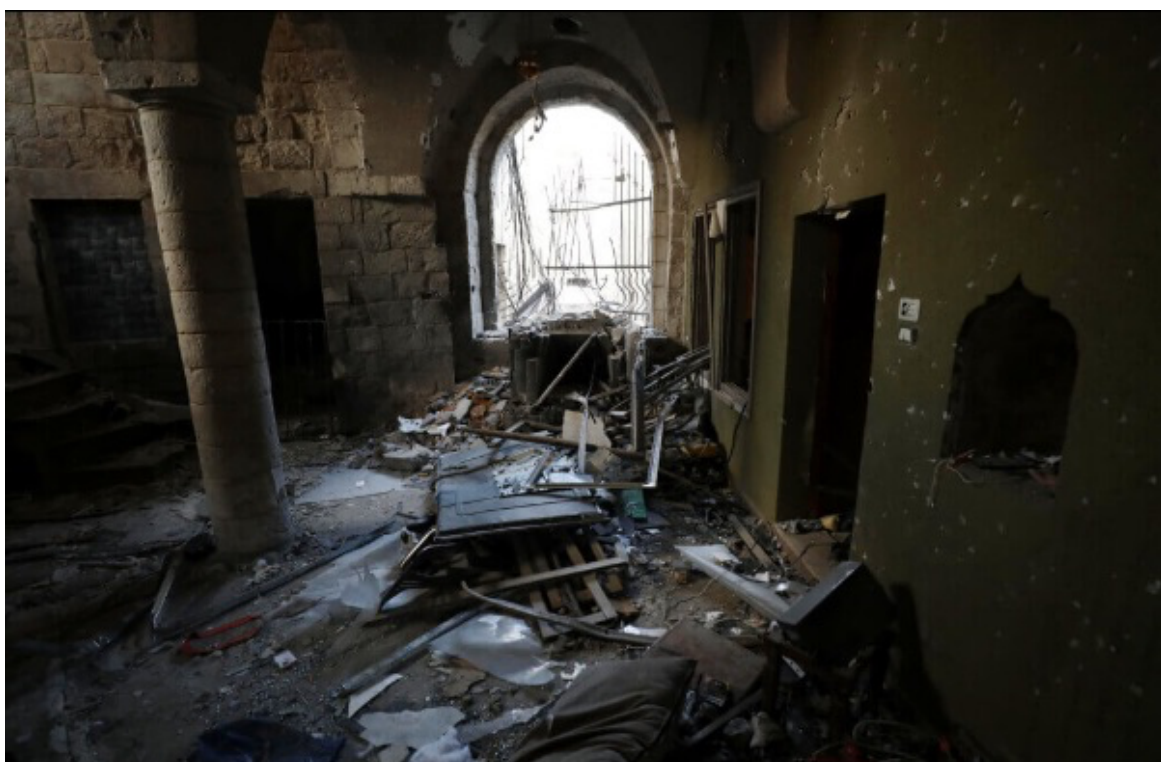
The attacks inside Israel in March and April highlighted the fact that Israel's separation barrier, its supposed security fence, was being breached on a regular and systematic basis. Israeli security forces knew at least three years ago that the 'security' function of the fence was a sham: 'We knew in 2019 that the situation [along the fence] would explode. The situation of the fence was just awful, and Palestinians just casually walked and drove through. With the security fence in such awful condition, we knew that the attacks in Tel Aviv and Bnei Brak would happen, and it was just a matter of time.'

The workforce in the booming Israeli construction sector is mostly made up of Palestinians, predominantly from the West Bank, but also Palestinian citizens of Israel. According to some estimates, as many as 30,000 Palestinians have been entering Israel illegally every day by crossing through holes in the fence. Since April the Israeli military have stepped up their patrols along the fence and have killed several Palestinians as they were attempting to cross into Israel. Furthermore, Israeli police have been carrying out enforcement raids on constructions sites inside Israel, checking for entry permits, with one Palestinian being shot dead during a raid in Ashkelon.



According to data published by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHAoPT), in the first nine months of this year, Israeli forces have carried out 2,616 search and arrest operations. The majority of the raids have taken place in Jenin or Nablus and their surrounding areas, but have also taken in dozens of other smaller towns and villages, mainly in the northern West Bank, as well as communities near Hebron, Ramallah, Bethlehem and Salfit.

Many of the raids have taken the form of collective punishment operations. Every time Israeli forces attempt to carry out a military operation in the Jenin refugee camp and fail, it begins targeting civilians in the streets and firing live bullets at them. 'They are using civilian casualties as a method to punish the resistance and to hide its failure from the Israeli citizens.'





As a form of punishment, the houses of suspects are 'mapped' for demolition. On the 6th September Israeli forces entered Jenin at dawn and, after a prolonged confrontation with protesters and armed fighters, blew up Ra'ad Khazem's family home, damaging other homes in the vicinity. Thousands of family members of those arrested or killed have had their entry permits to Israel cancelled. Hundreds of extra road blocks and checkpoints have been set up, and on the 10th of October the whole of Nablus was sealed off indefinitely. Likewise, the Shuafat refugee camp in Jerusalem was blockaded for four days following the killing of an Israeli soldier at the entrance to the camp.



So far in 2022, 132 Palestinians, including 28 children, have been killed by Israeli forces in the West Bank, and 8,086 have been injured. B'Tselem has for a long time criticised Israel's open-fire regulations which allow 'unjustified use of lethal force' and convey 'Israel's deep disregard for the lives of Palestinians and facilitate Israel's continued violent control over millions of Palestinians.'

In a statement, the local UN Human Rights Office has said that the number of Palestinians killed by Israeli security forces in the West Bank and east Jerusalem increased by 46% in the first half of 2022, compared to the previous year. 'In a number of incidents, it appears that lethal force was used by Israeli forces as a first rather than as a last resort to confront the alleged threat. ... Lack of accountability for these violations remains pervasive. Such impunity also allows further violations to occur.'

This disregard for Palestinian lives is apparent in Israeli military reports and the Israeli media's coverage of their 'conduct of counterterrorist operations': 'Israeli security forces used crowd dispersal methods'; 'the soldier fired and neutralised the suspect'; 'soldiers used live ammunition according to the open fire regulations'; 'soldiers responded with riot dispersal means and live fire'; 'the soldier shot at him in accordance with procedures'; 'they encircled the home and applied a pressure method to force him to surrender'. The latter instance involved the firing of an anti-tank missile that blew out the front of the suspect's house.



So far this year Israel has arrested 5,300 Palestinians, including 11 women and 620 children. At least 1,610 of those arrested were placed in 'administrative detention' which allows for them to be held without charge or trial. The Palestinian Prisoners Association has reported that, 'There are currently 800 Palestinian administrative detainees still held in Israeli jails.' Palestinians regard these arrests as 'abductions' since they are carried out by an illegal occupying power that under international law has no jurisdiction.

Moreover, there are currently 23 Palestinian political prisoners enduring severe torture and harsh treatment in PA prisons across the occupied West Bank. They are mainly held in the notorious Jericho Prison, known locally as the 'slaughterhouse'. In September, dozens of Palestinian families, activists and factional leaders organised a protest in the centre of Ramallah calling for the PA to release political prisoners. The protesters raised placards which said that the PA 'should protect Palestinians, not detain them', and that 'Palestinian prisoners inside PA jails are heroes, not criminals'. This was clearly a step too far for the PA, and its undercover security forces attacked the protesters, tore up the placards, beat them and dispersed them forcefully. The protesters described the attack as 'treason... on behalf of the Israeli occupation.'





Popular disaffection with the PA is a major concern for the Israeli security apparatus. That, and the internal divisions within Israel itself. It's notable that the small number of attacks on Israelis have been carried out by Palestinians with no obvious political affiliations. The armed resistance that has emerged and developed during the period of *Break the Wave*, principally *Areen al-Usud (The Lion's Den)* in Nablus and the *Jenin Brigade* in the Jenin refugee camp, draw on support from different armed factions, including *Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ)* and disaffected members of the *Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade*, the military wing of *Fatah*. *Operation Breaking Dawn* (the Israeli bombing of Gaza on the 5th, 6th and 7th August during which 48 Palestinians were killed) was aimed at PIJ leaders based in Gaza, the first time Israel had conducted an operation in Gaza to stem a movement in the West Bank. So far, it seems to have failed in its objective.

Despite all the evidence of the daily acts of oppression Israel commits, amounting to a systematic regime, Western politicians are still in denial about Israeli apartheid. No doubt, in so far as they take notice of the current situation at all, Western politicians will wring their hands, complain about Palestinian terrorism and emphasise Israel's right to self-defence, as Joe Biden did earlier in the Summer. This is to ignore the fact that, at least as far as the West Bank is concerned, as a belligerent occupier, Israel is the aggressor, and that, under international law, Palestinians have a right to resist. It also overlooks the huge imbalance between Israelis and Palestinians when it comes to the capacity for committing violence.

Israel is one of the world's most militarised societies. Its annual military expenditure of US\$24.3 billion represents 5.7% of its GDP or \$2241 per head of population, one of the world's highest per capita expenditures. Israel itself is awash with weapons. The majority of adult Israelis have undergone two years of military conscription, including firearms training. 1.6 million men and 1.5 million women under the age of 50 are available for military service. There are currently 169,500 active personnel and 465,000 reservists out of a population of 8,922,892. As of July 2022 there were 196,409 gun licences in Israel. 151,015 private firearms are currently in the possession of 141,646 authorized civilians.

In April, following the attack in Bnei Brak, the then Prime Minister, Naftali Bennett, called on gun owners to arm themselves in public. In the past few weeks armed settlers have run amok in the city of Huwara. Supported by MK Bezalel Smotrich settlers have blockaded Nablus; others have laid siege to Ramallah. Two weeks ago, MK Ben Gvir brandished a gun during a provocative visit to Sheikh Jarrah.



After blockading Nablus for two weeks, the Israeli military has launched a major offensive in the centre of the old city killing 5 people. including 3 members of the *Lions Den* unit. With Israeli elections likely to return an extreme right-wing government, led by Benjamin Netanyahu and including figures such as Ben Gvir, the prospect of more confrontation and the shedding of more Palestinian blood is only too real. Whichever parties come to power, it makes little difference; the settler-colonial project is still the agenda. As long as they have military superiority, some Israelis, it seems, are always spoiling for a fight.



If *Operation Break the Wave* was intended to quash the rising tide of Palestinian resistance, it has so far spectacularly failed, giving birth, instead, to an increasingly militant and popular movement for liberation from Israel's system of apartheid. But it is a movement that is hemmed in and under siege from a state that was born in violence and for whom violence is its natural reflex.