

# **The 'Israel is Arming' Campaign: A recipe for rising crime and violence among Palestinians**

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Position paper (2)

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## Introduction

This position paper discusses the direct relationship between the mass civilian armament of Jewish society in Israel and the rise in rates of gun crime and armed violence within Palestinian society. Recent years have witnessed an unprecedented rise in the number of Palestinian Arabs in Israel killed due to structural developments in organized crime and the wave of internal violence engulfing Palestinian society. The process is taking place in a context of an intentional lack of state regulation and complicity by the law enforcement agencies responsible for controlling the proliferation of murders. The stockpile of legal and licensed firearms within Jewish Israeli society, in the hands of individuals and located in military camps, constitutes a primary source of the supply of weapons and ammunition to Palestinian society.

Since October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2023, Israel's Minister of National Security, Itamar Ben-Gvir, has implemented measures to loosen policies and procedures governing gun licensing and firearm ownership, accelerating the armament of Israel's Jewish society, while exploiting the prevailing state of panic and fear.

This paper analyzes both the explicit and implicit objectives of the approach implemented by Ben-Gvir, and his predecessors, in pushing for a dramatic increase in the armament of Israel's Jewish society. It argues that this approach is consistent with the wider goals of imposing heightened Jewish control over Arab Palestinians within the Green Line, in addition to those in the West Bank and Gaza, and further regulating their behavior, as part of the practice of Jewish supremacy. Inside the Green Line, this program strives to further entrench Jewish supremacy by mobilizing Jewish society through a heightened sense of emergency, while arming a significant proportion of Jewish civilians, predominantly men, equipping and preparing them to suppress their Arab counterparts. In addition, experience has shown that mass civilian armament through loosened licensing procedures is highly likely to lead to an increase in the number of weapons transferred unlawfully to criminals or criminal organizations operating within Arab society, and thus to an upsurge in murder and crime rates, and in the number of casualties.

## The Israeli security establishment as a major supplier of weapons used for criminal activity

Over the course of the past decade (2014-2023), the proliferation of firearms among Palestinians inside the Green Line has left more than a thousand victims in its wake, including women and children. The vast majority of these victims, however, are men between 20 and 35 years of age. The decade's bloodiest year, by far, was 2023, with 244 murders, while the body count for the preceding year was 116.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The Abraham Initiatives. (2003). "Report on Crime and Violence in Arab Society – Summary of 2003". [Link](#) (in Hebrew)

Many unlawful firearms end up in the hands of Palestinian citizens in Israel. Most of them are in the possession of criminal groups, who acquire them by stealing them from military or civilian sources, including thefts from individuals and private security companies. Around 200 firearms are acquired in this way from civilian sources yearly, as well as large quantities of ammunition. The rest are purchased from soldiers who trade them for their own personal profit on the black market. Weapons are also obtained through theft and trafficking, particularly from reserves stored at Israeli military bases located throughout the country, and which are not stringently supervised. Thus, for example, in 2020, over 102,000 pieces of ammunition were stolen from the Israeli military, including bullets, grenades, missiles and bombs, in addition to 103 guns.<sup>2</sup>

Laxly-guarded military training zones are an easily accessible source of weapons, especially in the Naqab (Negev) region and the Golan Heights, where ammunition is often left behind after the end of training sessions. Ammunition may also be stolen directly from soldiers who fail to follow security protocols and leave their weapons unattended, or from military stockpiles, as well as from Jewish settlements in the West Bank.

The Israeli army is a main source of weapons and ammunition supplying Arab organized crime.<sup>3</sup> Another source is robberies from houses and vehicles, especially lightweight pistols, which can be privately held by civilians without any state oversight once they are granted this kind of license. as stated in an official response sent to the Gun Free Kitchen Tables Coalition by the National Security Minister in July 2023.<sup>4</sup> This was also among the findings of the annual report of the Israeli State Comptroller for 2021, entitled “Illegal Weapons Possession and Shooting Incidents in the Arab Community and in the Mixed Cities”.<sup>5</sup>

Not all weapons held by Palestinians inside the Green Line are unlicensed, however; some criminal organizations own private security companies, for example, and provide security services with licenses for firearm ownership and possession. They also provide protection services for public events that are subject to tenders and have close ties with public institutions such as municipalities, schools, and hospitals, or even with privately-owned public facilities such as restaurants, dance halls, and construction sites. As this all indicates, organized crime and the facilities vital to the life of Palestinians inside the Green Line are no longer totally unconnected. Furthermore, while the state is legally bound to enforce the

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<sup>2</sup> Response of the army to a Freedom of Information Act request filed as part of a petition to the Tel Aviv District Court, Administrative Petition no. 42805-12-21, *Gun Free Kitchen Tables v. The Israel Defense Forces*.

<sup>3</sup> Office of the State Comptroller and Ombudsman. (May 18, 2021). “Annual Report No. 71c. Illegal Weapons Possession and Shooting Incidents in the Arab Community and in the Mixed Cities.” [Link](#) (in Hebrew).

<sup>4</sup> Nitzan, Faibish; Avgar, Ido. (February 13, 2024). “Approaches to Licensing Private Firearms in Israel”. Knesset Research and Information Center. [Link](#) (Hebrew).

<sup>5</sup> Office of the State Comptroller, *supra* note 4.

lawful operations of registered companies and official institutions, in practice it contributes indirectly to the funding of crime, through a variety of companies and institutions.<sup>6</sup> Ironically, the Israeli police sometimes pays for protection services from private security companies in order to safeguard their stations. Such was the arrangement in Kufr Qassem in mid-2017, for example, when a citizen was killed by a bullet fired by a hired guard who had been employed to maintain security at the town's police station.<sup>7</sup>

### **Loosened eligibility criteria and zero oversight increase armed chaos**

A full picture of today's small arms proliferation in Israel can only be formed through an understanding of the situation as it stood before October 7<sup>th</sup>, clarifying how political and security events such as 'Operation Al-Aqsa Flood' were exploited to push for policies facilitating the distribution and proliferation of firearms among male Jewish citizens. The call to arms has also been expanded to include Jewish women. The distribution of 'legal' weapons implemented by National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir, following 'Operation Al-Aqsa Flood', carried out by Hamas, and the genocidal war on Gaza, waged by Israel, has negatively impacted Palestinians in Israel, and those under occupation in East Jerusalem and the West Bank. Control of their lives, displacement and dispossession are being further entrenched through intimidation at gunpoint, and often their actual murder by settlers and other Israeli citizens, as well as soldiers. These impacts are visible in the sharp increase in the number of Palestinian deaths in the West Bank, and in the violence perpetuated by armed settlers.

Proliferation policies have become more pronounced since October 7<sup>th</sup>, after National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir loosened and accelerated the process for licensing firearm possession. This line of action is not completely novel, however, as similar initiatives were launched by previous ministers assigned to the Ministry of National (previously Public) Security. In the past decade, since Gilad Erdan became the Minister of Public Security, in 2015, there have been ongoing attempts to change armament policies in Israel, with the support of a pro-gun lobby comprised of Jewish activists led by the current Speaker of the Knesset Amir Ohana (himself a former Minister of Public Security). Such attempts to change policies are emulating the United States, whose constitution is interpreted by many (led by the pro-gun camp) to stipulate the right of individuals to bear arms, alongside the right to work and the right to personal property, etc.

This approach contradicts the recommendations of the Cohen Committee (1992), which examined and weighed firearm proliferation and identified a need to continue the "policy of limiting and restricting"

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<sup>6</sup> Zoabi, Haneen. (June 2017). "Policies of the Israeli Police towards Crime within Arab Society". Al-Tirah Press.

<sup>7</sup> Portal of the Carmel and the North. (November 21, 2019). "Closure of Case against Security Guard at the Kufr Qassem Police Station". [Link](#) (Hebrew).

all aspects of armament within the civilian sphere. Subsequently, several other committees were appointed to examine various facets of the issue, the last of which was the Ronen Committee (2019), which found numerous failures in the practices of the branch in charge of issuing civilian gun licenses. This committee also found that the relevant authorities were not acting to remedy these failures and stated, “Most of the failures and shortcomings occur in the area of supervision and oversight [of privately-owned weapons]; this area is one of the most important primary functions of the branch in charge, which has been distinguished, to date, by a lack of professionalism, effectiveness, authority and capacity.”<sup>8</sup>

In recent years, the Ministry of National Security has submitted several bills to amend the eligibility criteria for a civilian gun license under Israel’s Firearms Law and through secondary legislation of regulations, towards the gradual acceleration of a process that has been underway since the era of former Minister Erdan. The most recent was a bill originally proposed by Ben-Gvir in June 2023. Days after Hamas attacked, he sought to exploit the widespread sense of trauma and the state of emergency, and his proposed measures were approved by the relevant parliamentary committees on October 15<sup>th</sup>, 2023, thereby enacting the mass civilian armament of Jewish society into Israeli law. Under the pretext of “security considerations”, the criteria for obtaining a civilian gun license were dramatically altered and eased without any professional discussion, in service of Ben-Gvir’s declared political agenda of strengthened Jewish supremacy. This administrative, undemocratic move drew sharp criticism, including from the press. The Legal Advisor to the Committee for Interior Affairs (a representative of the Ministry of Justice), argued that the new criteria, put in place for an indeterminate period, had not been subject to serious debate, and consequently constituted an abuse of power by the Parliamentary Committee for National Security during wartime.<sup>9</sup>

Some of the key measures introduced by the amended regulations include:-

- A lowered level of military training required for a civilian gun license; in certain cases, this criterion is waived and replaced by a requirement of just one year of civilian volunteer service, which enables and encourages women to bear arms;
- A reduced period of military service required from applicants for a gun license; this criterion was designed to grant licenses to young settlers, who perform partial terms of military service;

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<sup>8</sup> Ministry of National Security. (June 11, 2020). “Report of the Ronen Committee” (February 2019). Report of the committee to investigate the process for obtaining a license for private firearm possession, p. 86. [Link](#) (Hebrew).

<sup>9</sup> Shpigel, Noa, Shimoni, Ran. (October 16, 2023). “National Security Committee approves regulations that make it easier to obtain weapon licenses”. Haaretz. [Link](#) (Hebrew).

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- Expanded eligibility categories, extended, for instance, to individuals from farmers' families rather than farmers only, and to emergency service personnel, including ZAKA<sup>10</sup>, whose expertise is limited to identifying dead bodies, and collecting bodies and body parts;
- Automatic extension of private gun licenses for an additional six-month period, without any review, refresher training, or verification of the holder's eligibility.

In addition to expediting the process of obtaining a private gun license, the Ministry of National Security has formed large numbers of "community security squads". Municipalities and various local communities have organized armed squads, in coordination with, and encouraged by, the ministry and the police and/or the army, and in some cases independently. Firearms are distributed to volunteer recruits or to military reservists who carry out reserve duty in these squads. Most of the weapons handed out to squad members are apparently M16 rifles issued to individuals based on their military training (of which a relatively low level is required). This procedure totally bypasses licensing procedures for private civilian guns – whether loosened or not – and permits squad members to take firearms home, presenting a direct threat to the safety of Jewish women and children.

Community security squads are welcoming almost everyone, in the absence of clear guidelines or governing legislation, and their ranks have also been swelled by people who hold racist views. These squads pose a serious challenge in particular in the mixed cities, where both Palestinian Arabs and Jews reside. Noteworthy here is a notorious incident involving a racist Israeli performer known as the rapper "The Shadow", who set up his own armed group in Tel Aviv, published a video of himself harassing Arab passers-by, and told the press that his goal was to protect Jews from Arab residents of Yafo (Jaffa).<sup>11</sup>

The express objective of Minister Ben-Gvir in expediting and facilitating civilian armament, using multiple means and frameworks, is enforcing and strengthening Jewish supremacy through the surveillance and persecution of Palestinians inside the Green Line and in the West Bank. This process is to be carried out by civilians – Jewish civilians – as well as security forces, all of whom are presented with perpetual claims of the need to be prepared and ready to protect Jews, individually and collectively, from an impending 'deluge'.

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<sup>10</sup> The ZAKA non-governmental rescue and recovery organization works to "identify the victims of disasters", and is a group of community emergency response teams in Israel, each operating within a police district, during emergencies, disasters and accidents.

<sup>11</sup> Shimoni, Ran. (November 2023). "Huldai voices his concern to the Police Commander of the Tel Aviv District about the recruitment of 'The Shadow' to a local protection unit in the city". Haaretz. [Link](#) (Hebrew).

A fact-sheet entitled “The Guns of October: The mass armament of civil spaces in Israel”) co-authored by Rela Mazali and Smadar Ben Natan<sup>12</sup> (who co-founded the Gun Free Kitchen Tables Coalition), argues that the mass civilian armament of Jewish citizens signals an impending disaster. It poses a direct risk to Palestinian citizens of Israel, given the threats and targeting they faced in May 2021 (during the ‘Uprising of Dignity’). Since October 7<sup>th</sup>, Israel’s Palestinian citizenry has been subject to collective condemnations by the police, and experienced unprecedented levels of persecution by Jewish civilian groups and institutions, including employers, universities, hospitals and public service providers. In addition, Palestinian activists from Israel, both men and women, have been personally persecuted by Jewish colleagues at work, by neighbors in mixed cities, by municipal officials and mayors, and in university classrooms, as have artists, academics and lawyers, among others.<sup>13</sup>

Mazali and Ben-Natan emphasize that the reckless rush towards civilian armament will inevitably increase murder rates – which are already high. It will likewise amplify the manifold forms of armed violence, and may greatly increase incidents of suicide and injuries within Israeli society in general. In addition, this rush will have a particular impact on people who are mentally or cognitively challenged, primarily from marginalized backgrounds. Since 2019, nine such people have been shot dead inside Israel by security forces. Moreover, mass armament places those who oppose the government, non-violent protestors and activists in danger; indeed, these groups are already being threatened via social media and on the streets. Furthermore, the process will imperil refugees and asylum seekers, alongside members of other vulnerable groups.<sup>14</sup>

## Conclusion

Within mere months, Ben-Gvir’s policy of facilitating and increasing civilian armament has, so far, placed more than tens of thousands of newly-acquired firearms in the hands of members of Israel’s Jewish population. In some cases, in keeping with Ben-Gvir’s declarations and aims, these weapons have been aimed at Palestinians inside the Green Line. Some of those targeted, among them the Palestinian youth Juma’a al-Danfiri in the Naqab (Negev), have been executed under the guarantee of impunity granted to Jewish citizens. Al-Danfiri was shot dead by a member of a community security squad operating in a

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<sup>12</sup> Mazali, Rela; Ben-Natan, Smadar. (November 7, 2023). “The Guns of October: The mass armament of civil spaces in Israel”. [Link](#) (English).

<sup>13</sup> Position paper. (November 2023). “The War on Gaza: The policy of silencing, intimidation and persecution towards Palestinians in Israel”. Mada al-Carmel. [Link](#).

<sup>14</sup> The authors also stress the particular impact of mass armament on women of all backgrounds, especially those living with violent family members and placed at increased risk in their homes, including of intimidation, coercive control, injury and death, due to the presence of firearms.

town in the Naqab, on the pretext that the victim had intended to commit a robbery. Other recent incidents have ended in damage to property due to stray bullets.

According to testimonies reported on social media and recorded by Gun-Free Kitchen Tables, some community security squads conduct field patrols to hunt down Arab citizens. Add to that the direct and indirect damage inflicted on vulnerable sections of Israeli society, as per statements made by the Union of Social Workers that the presence of weapons eradicates personal safety and security within families and homes, amidst the scourge of domestic violence. Furthermore, weapons have been used to intimidate activists, male and female, in Jewish peace movements opposed to the genocidal war. Predictably, these weapons will also lead to a rise in suicide rates, as medical authorities have cautioned. The chief concern, based on past experience, is that growing numbers of weapons may reach the hands of Arab criminal organizations through various means, and exacerbate violence and crime within Arab society. It will be some time before state authorities update their databases, calculate official victim counts, and tally the number of stolen civilian and military firearms conveyed to criminal, largely Arab, organizations after October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2023.

While the future may look bleak, it remains imperative to challenge both the spread of firearms and the wider context of militarization. Readily and widely-accessible firearms are destroying social systems, and eroding the foundations of democracy and healthy relationships. Their proliferation is pushing a national minority, caught between the hammer of the fascist Israeli regime and the anvil of criminal gangs, into a bewildering state of personal insecurity and stunted social development, with the full complicity of Israel's security establishment.

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