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Explainer



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Alex Kane, Mari Cohen, Jonathan Shamir, and Isaac Scher

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mainstreaming of many of Kahane's views has moved the far-right from fringe to center in Israel's public debate.

The events of May 10th—when religious Zionist Israelis celebrated Jerusalem Day, marking the Israeli occupation and conquest of East Jerusalem during the Six-Day War—reflect these blurring distinctions between Kahanism and the religious Zionist right. In a video that circulated widely online last week, groups of religious Zionist yeshiva students can be seen singing “Zechreni Na,” a revenge song that quotes the story of Samson from the Book of Judges, and that has become a far-right anthem. Composed by the Kahanist musician Dov Shurin, “Zechreni Na” was infamously sung at a 2015 wedding of two extreme-right militants by attendees who brandished guns and knives and stabbed printed-out photos of Ali Dawabshe, a one-year old Palestinian killed by a right-wing settler in an arson attack in the West Bank village of Duma. In short, even while right-wing religious Zionists and Kahanists belong to distinct ideological traditions, in practice their political movements have merged—and have gained unprecedented public support in Israel.

— JL, 5/20/2021

Israel, where he founded the Kach party. Kach's platform called for the expulsion of Palestinians from territories under Israeli control and for a state governed by Jewish religious law. Kahane also sought to criminalize marriage between Arabs and Jews and to bar Arabs from voting or holding elected office in Israel. In 1988, Kach was disqualified from running for seats in the Knesset under an Israeli law barring parties that engage in racist incitement. But Gopstein's Lehava, one of Kach's inheritors, remains one of the more active Kahanist groups in the extra-parliamentary arena.

Within the Knesset, the Kahanist mantle is carried by the Jewish Power (in Hebrew, Otmah Yehudit) party, led by Itamar Ben-Gvir. A veteran far-right activist, Ben-Gvir made his name as an attorney with Honenu, an organization that provides financial and legal assistance to Jewish Israeli terror suspects—for instance, the three Israelis suspected of killing Palestinian teenager Mohammed Abu Khdeir and the perpetrators of an arson attack on the Jewish-Arab Hand in Hand school in Jerusalem. The Jewish Power party ran in the March 2021 Israeli elections on a joint slate with the Religious Zionism party, currently led by Bezalel Smotrich, which boasts six seats in the Knesset.

The merger of the Jewish Power party with the Religious Zionism party reflects an ideological convergence that has taken place over the last several years between the religious Zionist movement—which believes in a divine Jewish right to the Land of Greater Israel and in Jewish sovereignty as a necessary prelude to the messianic age—and the Kahanist fringe. In earlier decades, these were related but distinct ideological tendencies with distinct social bases: religious Zionists have tended to be more affluent, educated, and Ashkenazi, while the Kahanist movement draws its more hard-core base largely from working-class Mizrahim and formerly ultra-Orthodox youth. Many in the religious Zionist movement once considered Ben-Gvir's views beyond the pale: In 2020, Naftali Bennett, erstwhile leader of the settler-right party Jewish Home, refused to merge his party with Ben-Gvir's. But a combination of realpolitik considerations by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu—who signed a vote-sharing agreement with Ben Gvir's party and needs its seats in the Knesset to remain in power—and the gradual

What are the reasons Palestinians have been demonstrating in East Jerusalem?

In late April, the Israeli police began to form nightly barricades at the Damascus Gate esplanade, a popular gathering place for East Jerusalemites—especially during Ramadan—and a major access point to the Old City. This move prompted protests from Palestinians, who saw the actions of the police as part of the broader repression of Palestinian cultural and political life in the city. After several weeks of near-nightly protests, at which heavily armed Israeli police faced unarmed Palestinian youth, the Israeli police removed the barricades.

At the same time, Palestinians have also been protesting in the neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah, where eight Palestinian families are facing eviction from their homes by right-wing Jewish settler groups. These Palestinian protesters have been met with violence not only by the Israeli police, who have fired rubber-coated bullets and stun grenades, but also from settlers and far-right activists, who in at least one instance opened fire with live ammunition on protesters throwing stones.

—JL, 5/13/21

Why are Palestinians facing eviction in Sheikh Jarrah?

The neighborhood known as Sheikh Jarrah lies about one kilometer north of Jerusalem's Old City. As Hagit Ofran, co-director of the Settlement Watch project at the progressive Israeli group Peace Now, explained to me, two Jewish religious associations—the Sephardi Community Committee and the Knesset Israel Committee—purchased the area in the late 19th century but never built on it. In 1948, during the war that followed Israel's declaration of statehood, Jordan took ownership of the area along with the rest of East Jerusalem. Around 700,000 Palestinians fled or were expelled from their homes during that war, in an event known as the Nakba, or catastrophe, and neighboring countries absorbed hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees. Jordan ultimately decided to use the land now known as Sheikh Jarrah

to settle Palestinian refugees, and built homes there for 28 Palestinian families in 1956.

Sheikh Jarrah faced new uncertainty after Israel took over all of East Jerusalem, in violation of international law, during the Six-Day War in 1967. Upon taking control of the area, the Israeli Knesset passed the Legal and Administrative Matters Law, which declared that land in East Jerusalem that had belonged to Jews before 1948 would be returned to its original owners upon request. As Palestinian activists often note, this law enshrined a glaring inequality: It allowed Jews who fled or were expelled from East Jerusalem in 1948 to reclaim their land, while Palestinians who fled or were expelled from Israel at the same time are barred from reclaiming their homes by a different dictum, the Absentee Property Law, which transferred property “abandoned” by displaced Palestinians to the Jewish state. In Sheikh Jarrah, according to Ofran, this meant that the Sephardi Community Committee and Knesset Israel Committee were able to register as landowners under the Legal and Administrative Matters Law in the late 1960s, but the Palestinian refugees who live there could not recover their own pre-’48 property. They have remained in their homes in Sheikh Jarrah, despite efforts by the Jewish committees to evict them in the 1980s.

In 2007, the Jewish associations sold the land to a settler group called Nahalat Shimon (which is owned by a company, Nahalat Shimon International, based in the US). Nahalat Shimon soon filed eviction proceedings against Palestinians living on the land, and succeeded in evicting Palestinians from four homes in 2008 and 2009; Jewish settlers moved in. Palestinian Sheikh Jarrah residents report experiencing frequent violence and provocation from these settlers. Over the subsequent 12 years, as court cases concerning seven other houses have dragged on, Sheikh Jarrah residents have held weekly nonviolent protests against displacement. In February of this year, the Jerusalem District Court, rejecting an appeal, ruled that the residents of four houses—amounting to six families and 27 people—could be evicted. The families appealed, and the Israeli Supreme Court was scheduled to rule on their case this week, but delayed its decision in order to seek input from Israel’s attorney general. The court says it will announce a

envoy, she looked forward “to standing with Israel, standing against the unfair targeting of Israel, the relentless resolutions proposed against Israel unfairly.”

But what US leaders call the UN’s anti-Israel “obsession” could be read, more straightforwardly, as an attempt to hold the country accountable for its actions. UN Human Rights Council reports have repeatedly documented Israel’s war crimes in Gaza, while a 2020 UN Human Rights Office report shed light on the corporations facilitating Israel’s settlement project in the occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem. It is true that Israel often receives more UN focus than other states that abuse human rights: Israel is the only country in the world listed as a permanent “standing item” at the UN Human Rights Council. Israel is also the only country operating what human rights groups call an “apartheid” system, and carrying out an almost 54-year-old military occupation.

Part of the US’s motivation for blocking UN statements and resolutions may lie in the anxiety that such international attempts at accountability could draw attention to the US’s own tactics for fighting the “war on terrorism,” which are currently under investigation by the International Criminal Court. Supporting an investigation into Israeli actions would give legitimacy to the idea that not only US allies but the US itself can be held accountable for war crimes. — AK, 5/20/2021

Who were the right-wing Israelis who have been demonstrating in Jerusalem?

In late April, several hundred far-right Jewish demonstrators marched from the Jerusalem city center toward the Damascus Gate, at the entrance to the Old City, shouting “Death to the Arabs” and “may your villages burn down.” This demonstration was organized by Lehava, an anti-assimilation group led by Benzi Gopstein, ostensibly in response to videos of Palestinians harassing Orthodox Jews circulating on TikTok. Gopstein is a follower of the late Meir Kahane, an American-born rabbi who founded the Jewish Defense League in the US—which the FBI designated as a right-wing terrorist group in 2001—before moving to

decades before the creation of Hamas. “If Hamas gets quashed, you’re going to get another political party that calls for the same thing,” Baconi said.

In an essay for his substack, The Beinart Notebook, Jewish Currents Editor-at-Large Peter Beinart agreed. “If Israel eliminated Hamas, nothing fundamental would change,” he wrote. “As long as Israel denies Palestinians’ basic rights, Palestinians will keep fighting Israel. That fight began long before Hamas was created, and if Hamas were somehow destroyed, it would continue long after Hamas was gone.”

— MC, 5/20/21

Why did the US block the United Nations’ calls for a ceasefire?

Since Israel’s assault on Gaza began, the United States has blocked the UN Security Council from releasing a statement calling for a ceasefire on four separate occasions, and has opposed a resolution making the same call. (A ceasefire is scheduled to go into effect at 2:00 am on May 21st, according to Israeli reports.) The UN Security Council requires consensus before releasing such statements, and the US has been the only power standing in the way of a UN-backed call to halt the fighting; resolutions, which are legally binding, do not require unanimous consent, but the US has the power to veto them. The move may seem counterintuitive, since the Biden administration has said it supports a ceasefire. White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki suggested on Wednesday that the US blocked the UN statements because they would “hinder” the goal of “ending the violence.” “The President has been doing this long enough . . . to know that sometimes diplomacy needs to happen behind the scenes; it needs to be quiet,” she said.

The US has a long history of defending Israel at the UN in response to what it claims is the body’s anti-Israel bias. In her last appearance before the Security Council as US ambassador to the UN, Nikki Haley called the international body “hopelessly biased” against Israel. The Biden administration has expressed an intent to continue opposing UN rebukes of Israel: During her Senate confirmation hearings, US ambassador to the UN Linda Thomas-Greenfield promised that, as UN

new ruling date within 30 days. In advance of the scheduled ruling, young Palestinians from elsewhere in Jerusalem came to join the Sheikh Jarrah residents in protest, where they were met with violent police repression

— MC, 5/13/21

Why are the Sheikh Jarrah evictions often described as “ethnic cleansing”?

The attempt to remove Palestinians from Sheikh Jarrah takes place within the context of a system of Israeli laws that works to increase the number of Jews and decrease the number of Palestinians in Israel and the Occupied Territories. (Human rights groups say the system meets the definition of apartheid.) For this reason, the writer and Sheikh Jarrah resident Mohammed el-Kurd, whose family lost half its property to settlers in 2009 and now faces removal from the other half, has pushed back on the use of the word “eviction” to describe the threat facing Sheikh Jarrah, arguing that the proceedings are more accurately understood as “forced ethnic displacement.”

While the Israeli Foreign Ministry and many Israel advocates have claimed the matter is simply a private real estate dispute, settler organizations—which insist on Jews’ divine right to occupy the entire city of Jerusalem—and some politicians have been explicit about their ideological goals in displacing Palestinians from Sheikh Jarrah. “I want Jerusalem to be Jewish,” one Sheikh Jarrah settler, Yonatan Yosef, told The New York Times last week. “This land belonged to the Jewish nation, to the Jewish people.” A deputy mayor of Jerusalem, Aryeh King, told the Times that having more Jews move into East Jerusalem was a way to ensure that future peace negotiators would designate the entire city as a Jewish capital. And Sheikh Jarrah is just one front in a larger settler enterprise: In the nearby neighborhood of Silwan, for example, 84 families face eviction suits filed by settler groups who say the land was originally owned by Jews in the late 19th century.

Resistance in Sheikh Jarrah, therefore, has become emblematic of a broader struggle against Israeli occupation and apartheid. Speaking of the Palestinian youth from outside Sheikh Jarrah who joined the recent

protests, Muna el-Kurd, Mohammad's sister, told +972 Magazine, "The issue of Sheikh Jarrah is their issue as well, our homes are their homes. What is happening to the homes here will happen to their homes in the future."

— MC, 5/13/21

Why did Israeli police enter the Al-Aqsa compound earlier this week?

A key word in the Israeli security forces' lexicon is "deterrence." Deterrence from what? In police terms, "public disorder"—a phrase frequently applied to any attempt to challenge Israeli dominance over the terms of life. Indeed, much of the Israeli police's behavior over the last several weeks can be explained by this principle. It's what led the police to set up the barricades outside the Damascus Gate, which they justified by claiming it was necessary to secure public order. (As one high-ranking police source told Haaretz reporter Josh Breiner, the decision to remove the barricades in response to Palestinian protests was "a total loss of deterrence.") It's also why Israeli police entered the Al-Aqsa compound—seemingly to suppress counter-protests in advance of an Israeli nationalist parade—and fired flashbangs and rubber-coated bullets at worshippers during the holiest part of Ramadan: because of a perceived need to show Palestinians who is in charge. Or as the Israeli police explained in a statement after the third consecutive day of raids on the Temple Mount: "We will continue to allow freedom of worship, but we will not permit public disturbances."

In addition to Al-Aqsa's religious significance for Muslims—it is Islam's third-holiest site—the mosque is one of the most important Palestinian national symbols. "Al-Aqsa is in many ways the last place of Palestinian, Muslim sovereignty in Jerusalem, perhaps even within the entire country," explained Palestinian journalist Suleiman Maswadeh on Israel Public Broadcasting's Marhebet podcast. Israeli attempts to exert control over the site thus constitute a serious political provocation. In 2017, Israeli forces set up metal detectors at the Al-Aqsa Mosque entrances in response to a shooting by three Palestinians on the Temple Mount that killed two Israeli policemen. Palestinians responded with

huge towers that also house offices and residential apartments, international humanitarian law—which is supposed to govern how Israel and Hamas fight—takes other considerations into account, including whether the military advantage conferred by a strike outweighs the harm to civilians.

"Deliberate targeting of civilian objects and extensive, unjustified destruction of property are war crimes," said Saleh Higazi, deputy director for the Middle East and North Africa at Amnesty International. "Destroying entire multi-story homes, making tens of families homeless, amounts to collective punishment of the Palestinian population and is a breach of international law. Even if part of a building is being used for military purposes, Israeli authorities have an obligation to choose means and methods of attack that would minimize risks posed to civilians and their property."

— AK, 5/18/21

If Israel destroyed Hamas, would that help resolve the conflict?

Israel-advocacy talking points frequently describe Hamas as the ultimate source of violence in Israel/Palestine, defending Israeli military actions as necessary responses to Hamas's rocket fire. But Palestinian activists note that Israeli aggression in Gaza—which it first occupied in 1967—and elsewhere in Palestine long predates Hamas's founding in 1987. "For decades before the founding of Hamas, the Gaza Strip was attacked, occupied, and massacres were committed there, civilians were killed, way before rockets or Hamas," Jihad Abusalim, a writer from Gaza, wrote on Twitter. Abusalim added on Twitter that even nonviolent resistance from Palestinians is often harshly punished: "As we saw in 2018, during Gaza's protests near the borders, hundreds were killed when no rockets were being fired."

Baconi said on Unsettled that occupation and denial of self-determination inevitably produce armed resistance. Other Palestinian nationalist movements—some of them leftist and secular—engaged in sometimes violent struggle against Israel for

Palestinian civilians as human shields during previous wars in Gaza, when Israeli troops were present on the ground. (So far, Israel is fighting today's war from the sky and from just outside of Gaza.) In 2009, B'Tselem documented how Israeli soldiers used a 53-year-old Palestinian man as a human shield, forcing him to "enter five houses in the area and gather the occupants of each house in one room." Only after the man entered those other Palestinian homes did "the soldiers enter each house and search it," according to B'Tselem. After Israel's 2014 assault on Gaza, B'Tselem again received testimony from Palestinians who said soldiers had used them as human shields. Similarly, in 2014, Defense for Children International–Palestine documented an incident in which Israeli soldiers forced a 16-year-old, at gunpoint, "to search for tunnels for five days, during which time he was interrogated, verbally and physically abused, and deprived of food and sleep." DCI–Palestine noted: "The Israeli military has consistently accused Hamas of using civilians—particularly children—as human shields, but this incident represents a clear case of their soldiers forcing a child to directly assist in military operations."— AK, 5/18/21

Why is Israel bombing entire buildings? Does that mean that's where Hamas is?

On May 15th, an Israeli airstrike destroyed the al-Jalaa tower in Gaza City, which housed the offices of Al Jazeera and the Associated Press. Though Israel argued that the strike was justified because Hamas used parts of the building as a military intelligence base, it provided no concrete evidence to support that claim. By contrast, the AP said it had "no indication" Hamas used the building, something it "actively" checked. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said he had seen no evidence to back up Israel's claims of a Hamas presence in the building. Later, he said he had received intelligence on the Israeli strike, but would not provide details on its contents.

But even if Hamas operatives were in the building, that wouldn't have made the strike permissible under international law. Though Israel claims that the presence of Hamas officials justifies the bombing of

mass demonstrations. After a weeks-long crisis—during which Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmoud Abbas temporarily froze PA relations with Israel—the Israeli government removed the metal detectors.

Against the backdrop of an unceasing occupation in the West Bank and ongoing attempts to displace Palestinians from East Jerusalem, the Israeli incursions into the Al-Aqsa Mosque triggered the current crisis. When Israel moves to exert control over the site, Maswedeh said, "it generates the feeling for Palestinians that, in the blink of an eye, they're going to take away the last place we have, and we're not going to let that happen."

— JL, 5/13/21

Where is the Israeli left at this moment?

While there are Israeli human rights NGOs and civil society groups doing important work, documenting abuses and providing legal support to Palestinian protesters, left-wing political opposition to the current government's policies is marginal. There are a few reasons why.

"Over 15 years or so, there has been a total convergence between what the Israeli right says about issues of security and what the Israeli center-left says," explained Yonatan Levi, a research fellow at Molad: The Center for the Renewal of Israeli Democracy. With no hope of creating an independent Palestinian state on the horizon, the center-left has no alternative to offer to the right's paradigm of "managing" the occupation in perpetuity. In fact, the center-left parties—from TV personality Yair Lapid's centrist Yesh Atid, to Labor, to, in many instances, the social-democratic Meretz—have "started parroting the right's messages," Levi said. This means that when Israel begins a military operation in Gaza, the public debate is polarized not between left and right, but between right and even further right—for example, between those calling for Israel to deal "forcefully" with Hamas and hardline settlers calling for Israel to reoccupy the Gaza Strip. "And when you abandon the field to the right," Levi added, "the field keeps sliding rightward." In Israel, roughly 37% of Jews identify as right-wing, 55% as centrist, and just 8% as left-wing.

Of course, there are political parties, like the joint Arab-Jewish socialist party Hadash and the Arab nationalist party Balad, whose members often appear at demonstrations organized by largely Jewish-led anti-occupation and peace movement groups calling for an end to the war in Gaza. These protests tend to draw several hundred, or at most a few thousand, participants. Meanwhile, the Joint List, the coalition of Arab-led parties in the Knesset of which Hadash and Balad are part, comprises just 6 of 120 seats in the Knesset. “The right has sold the Israeli Jewish public [on the idea] that territorial compromise equals a security disaster,” Levi said. Those who insist otherwise are numerically small and “in terms of their influence, it’s quite limited.”

— JL, 5/13/21

What about the different Palestinian political groups?

Palestinian politics is fragmented not only by political tendency but also by geography. In 2007, after the last Palestinian legislative elections held to date, the Islamist group Hamas ousted the ruling nationalist party Fatah from the Gaza Strip, leaving Fatah, led by Mahmoud Abbas, in control of the West Bank. That split persists today. Increasingly, many Palestinians are critical of the Palestinian leadership, especially that of the Palestinian Authority (PA). “There has never been as wide a gap between the Palestinian polity and the leadership as there is today,” writes Marwa Fatafta, an analyst for Al-Shabaka. As PA president, Abbas has maintained close cooperation with Israeli security forces and has worked to quash opposition to his rule. Similarly, in Gaza, as Palestinian analyst Tareq Baconi writes, “through a dual process of containment and pacification, Hamas has been forcefully transformed into little more than administrative authority.”

These authoritarian realities in Gaza and the West Bank do not leave substantial room for opposition. The Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), which includes a range of smaller parties, has also been subsumed by the PA in the years since the Oslo Accords. Still, even with the Palestinian legislative elections that were planned for May 22 indefinitely postponed—due in part to Israel’s refusal to allow East Jerusalem Palestinians to vote—the prospect of the elections has

the fray helps Hamas stay relevant. It also reflects Hamas’s view that popular protests are unlikely to succeed without force, according to a May 14th article by Baconi for the London Review of Books. Still, Baconi wrote in the piece that Palestinians are “divided” over Hamas’s actions. “Some see them as a sign of a Palestinian military force rallying to their protection, unlike the leadership in the West Bank,” he wrote. “Others view the barrages as a cynical effort by Hamas to co-opt the success of grassroots movements in Jerusalem and elsewhere. And many worry that Gaza is once again paying the price.”

— MC, 5/18/21

Does Hamas use civilians as “human shields”?

The answer to this question is complicated, with no easy “yes” or “no.” Gaza is one of the world’s most densely populated places. It would be impossible for armed fighters to find a place far away from civilian areas. “There is almost no way to fight from [Gaza] without exposing civilians to danger,” analyst Nathan Thrall told The New York Times. Hamas is Gaza’s governing body, and a part of the fabric of its civilian life. Gaza’s police officers and health ministry officials are all Hamas-affiliated. Hamas fighters do not sleep in army bases; they sleep in their homes. (It’s worth noting that Israel’s army headquarters is likewise located in a residential part of Tel Aviv, near a hospital and a museum.)

It’s also true that, even if a greater separation between warfare and civilian life were possible, Hamas’s leadership might not view it as desirable. Hamas, which is at a severe military disadvantage when facing the weight of the Israeli army, uses guerilla tactics to compensate. Attempting to confine the fighting to areas apart from residential zones would thus undermine Hamas’s military operation. Hamas’ guerilla tactics have been condemned by the international community: In 2014, Hamas stored weapons inside schools run by UNRWA, the UN agency for Palestinian refugees.

There’s something else that gets left out of discussions of Israel, Hamas, and “human shields”: The fact that human rights organizations have repeatedly documented instances of Israeli soldiers using

rockets if Israel did not withdraw its security forces by 6:00 pm. That evening, rocket fire from Gaza commenced. The journalist Neri Zilber argued in *Newlines Magazine* that the use of rocket attacks to respond to police violence marks a departure from Hamas's previous strategy of avoiding escalation as long as Israel stuck to the agreed terms of its blockade of Gaza—a shift that may have caught Israeli security forces unawares. Since May 10th, Hamas has fired more than 3,000 rockets into Israel; most casualties have been prevented by Israel's sophisticated Iron Dome defense system, but 12 Israelis have been killed, including two children. Israel's bombing of Gaza, conducted in response to the rockets, has killed 213 Palestinians in Gaza, including 61 children.

Since Israel's disengagement from Gaza in 2006, Hamas has frequently attempted to use rocket fire to exact concessions relating to Israel's administration of Gaza's borders—pushing successfully for the expansion of access to the Strip, and the adjustment of some terms of the blockade. Baconi argued on *Unsettled* that this strategy hasn't improved life for Gazans, especially since it has prompted violent retaliation from Israel. Still, he noted, Hamas can point to the fact that its violence has extracted certain concessions from Israel—such as the release of 1,000 Palestinian prisoners in exchange for the release of Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit—while the party's rival, the Fatah party that controls the PA in the West Bank, can demonstrate no success in counteracting Israeli settlement expansion, even as it remains open to negotiating with Israel.

Zilber argues that Hamas initiated rocket attacks on Israel in part to send a message to Palestinians. Fatah, long the leading force in Palestinian politics, is weak; faced with indications that his party had lost popular support, PA President Mahmoud Abbas recently postponed what would have been the PA's first elections in 15 years. By seeking to demonstrate its power while an impotent PA stands by, Hamas may be attempting to position itself as the defender of a united Palestinian struggle that reaches beyond Gaza. Many young Palestinians protesting in Jerusalem and elsewhere have become disillusioned with aging and authoritarian leadership in both Hamas and Fatah; entering

sparked the emergence of several new Palestinian parties that were slated to compete against Hamas and Fatah, such as the youth-led *Nabd al-Balad*; the National Democratic Assembly, led by Yassir Arafat's nephew Nasser al-Qudwa and supported by jailed militant Marwan Barghouti; and a faction led by Mohammed Dahlan, a former Fatah leader exiled in the UAE.

Now, in the latest round of Palestinian demonstrations in East Jerusalem, “with the Palestinian Authority (PA) having no jurisdiction in East Jerusalem,” journalist Dalia Hatuqa writes, “the protests in Sheikh Jarrah and the Old City have largely been grassroots-based social-media enhanced popular movements without the formal political leadership that usually governs such a showing in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.” The scope of the protests, which have spread out from East Jerusalem to Palestinian cities and neighborhoods throughout Israel, has not been seen since the years of the Second Intifada. “The recent calls to action in Jerusalem have thus activated a large number of young Palestinians and helped facilitate unparalleled connections with Palestinians in communities within Israel, in cities and towns that have not seen protests for decades,” writes Palestinian scholar Dana El Kurd. “It's likely these connections will build capacity for longer-term strategies and sustained mobilization efforts.”

—JL, 5/13/21

What is the Biden administration's position on what's happening right now?

President Biden's position is the same as the one every past president of the US has taken when confronted with an Israeli attack on Gaza. Biden told reporters May 13th that Israel has a “right to defend itself,” but expressed hope the fighting would end “sooner rather than later.”

The administration's only novel remark on the crisis came from Secretary of State Antony Blinken, who has repeatedly said in conversations with foreign officials that “Palestinians and Israelis deserve equal measures of freedom, dignity, security, and prosperity.”

In both cases, the rhetoric fails to acknowledge the US's central role in backing Israel's army and protecting the state from facing diplomatic pressure for its human rights abuses against Palestinians. Every year, the US sends \$3.8 billion in military assistance to Israel, the largest US foreign military aid package. Israel is required to spend 75% of that money on American weapons made by American companies, while the rest is spent on Israeli-made weapons under a unique agreement reached with the US government. (The provision allowing Israel to spend US money on Israeli-made weapons will be phased out by 2028, though this will not meaningfully impact the way US aid serves to support Israel's system of control over Palestinians.) This means that the Israeli F-16s dropping bombs over Gaza were paid for with US taxpayer dollars. Biden may express hope for peace, but he, like his predecessors, has declined to use the US's significant source of leverage to influence Israel's actions.

Meanwhile, US support at the United Nations shields Israel from diplomatic censure. This week, the US twice blocked the UN Security Council from releasing a statement on the crisis. (Consensus is needed for the UN Security Council to release a statement. The US was the only power standing in its way.)

Why does the US continue to back Israel, regardless of who is president? In addition to the emotional connection that many Americans—especially American Jews—feel toward Israel as a Jewish state and a purported fellow democracy in a volatile region, there are two important, material reasons: First, Israel is the most reliable US ally in a region rich in oil that is central to the US economy. And second, Israel-advocacy groups spend millions of dollars on lobbying and donations to politicians to cultivate Congressional support for Israel. These factors have driven the US to hold tight to its alliance with Israel—and to support Israel's abuses of Palestinians.

— AK, 5/14/21

charter is quite perplexing . . . I think that it's seen as a way of maintaining [their] ideological commitments." — MC, 5/18/21

How do Palestinians feel about Hamas?

Hamas's leadership in Gaza is controversial among Palestinians. The organization is authoritarian, harshly punishing dissent within Gaza, and strictly enforcing Islamist social norms. "I've seen how those who have political power in Gaza are fighting to control every aspect of our lives there, and only fueling hatred," the Gazan photographer Jihad al-Seftawi said in an interview in Jewish Currents. "And they are especially opposed to any forms of dissent or calls for change." A March poll of Palestinian voters in Gaza and the West Bank—ahead of planned legislative elections that have since been postponed—showed that Hamas had the support of 30% of voters, behind Fatah's 43%. Some Palestinian political commentators say the group has lost popularity as its leaders have continued to lead prosperous lives amid mass economic deprivation stemming from Israel's blockade of Gaza.

At the same time, Baconi notes that some Palestinians see Hamas as their best hope for nationalist resistance to the occupation—especially as compared to Fatah, which is often seen as a corrupt participant in administering the occupation. "Palestinians living under occupation [are] seeking dignity and a better life," he said. "Hamas understands that, and Hamas speaks to that . . . Many Palestinians would choose Hamas over Fatah because of that." — MC, 5/18/21

Why did Hamas start firing rockets? What do they hope to achieve?

On May 10th, Hamas issued an ultimatum for Israeli police to evacuate the East Jerusalem neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah—where heavily armed security forces had clashed with unarmed Palestinian protesters—and the Al-Aqsa Mosque, where police had fired rubber-coated bullets at worshippers. Hamas pledged to begin firing

In January 2006, the last time that the Fatah-led Palestinian Authority (PA)—the body created to govern Palestinians under the Oslo Accords—held legislative elections, Hamas ran for the first time, and won 45% of votes among Palestinians in Gaza, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem, enough to capture a majority of legislative seats. As Baconi writes in *Hamas Contained*, Hamas’s campaign successfully emphasized Fatah’s corruption—especially compared to its own record of administering social welfare services like medical centers and schools across the West Bank and Gaza—and played to widespread frustrations with the failed Oslo peace process, in which Fatah played a central role. “Support of armed struggle or Hamas’s Islamic ideology did not feature prominently in its electoral platform or constitute the majority of its votes,” Baconi writes. “Nonetheless, Hamas’s leaders interpreted the movement’s victory as a resounding endorsement of its worldview.”

The election caused international uproar: The US and Israel froze funding they had provided to the PA and refused to recognize any Palestinian government involving Hamas, even as Fatah and Hamas attempted to form a unity government. Israel imposed a land, air, and sea blockade on Gaza, which remains to this day. Eventually, the US helped fund a Fatah coup attempt, which led to an official split in Palestinian leadership: Fatah regained control of the PA in the West Bank, while Hamas retained power in Gaza.

In addition to its armed resistance tactics—which, since the Second Intifada, have usually involved rocket fire from Gaza into Israel—Hamas is notorious for its founding charter, which conflates Judaism with Zionism and plays on antisemitic tropes of Jewish global control. Hamas has never officially repudiated its original charter, but it released a new political document in 2017, which “affirms that its conflict is with the Zionist project not with the Jews because of their religion.” Baconi found in interviews with Hamas’s current leaders that many have a sophisticated understanding of the difference between Judaism and Zionism. “I do think that the [original] charter isn’t representative of Hamas’s political thinking today and isn’t representative of the degree of sophistication they have in engaging with Israel,” he said on *Unsettled*. “The question about why Hamas wouldn’t renounce the

Are there any ways US citizens could put pressure on the Israeli government to halt the violence?

Yes, there are numerous ways for people in the US to organize in response to this crisis. In Congress, the only vehicle that exists to pressure Israel is Congresswoman Betty McCollum’s HR 2590, better known as the Palestine Children and Families Act. The bill’s aim is to prohibit US aid from being used by Israel to demolish Palestinian homes, detain Palestinian children, and annex Palestinian land. So far, there are only 19 co-sponsors on the bill. US citizens can call their representatives and tell them to co-sponsor HR 2590.

Others may want to focus their attention on the network of US nonprofits that funnel millions of dollars to the Israeli settlement project. These nonprofits receive tax-deductible donations from private American donors, which they send to fund Israeli settlement infrastructure in occupied East Jerusalem and the West Bank. While some of these organizations are probably impervious to pressure from progressive activists due to their right-wing politics, others, like Jewish Federation groups, may be more open to hearing complaints given that they seek to represent a broad spectrum of American Jews, many of whom oppose Israeli settlements. If you want to help prevent the flow of these funds, you can donate to and support American Jewish groups advocating against settlements. The nonprofit rabbinic organization T’ruah has repeatedly called on the IRS to revoke the tax-exempt status of American Jewish groups that fund Israeli Jewish terrorism against Palestinians, while Americans for Peace Now has launched calls to Jewish Federations of North America to stop funding settlements.

Lastly, there are boycott and divestment campaigns you can join as part of the global Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement. In 2005, over 170 Palestinian civil society groups called on the international community to boycott Israeli products, divest from corporations that do business in Israel, and impose government sanctions on Israel. Right now, BDS activists are calling for a boycott of Pillsbury because the company has a factory in a West Bank settlement. Others are focusing on stopping the Israeli weapons

company Elbit System's involvement on the US–Mexico border, where it has installed dozens of surveillance towers as part of the US government's attempt to curtail unauthorized crossings. Boycotting companies that do business with the Israeli military or anchor Israeli settlements chips away at Israel's discriminatory system.

— AK, 5/14/21

Israel recently signed high-profile normalization agreements with Arab states in the Gulf. Has this done anything to limit Israel's abuses of Palestinians?

The short answer is no. In fact, the opposite is true: The promise of open diplomatic and economic ties once gave the Arab states leverage with which to pressure Israel to halt its abuses of Palestinians. The Abraham Accords—the name given to Israel's normalization agreements with Bahrain, the UAE, Sudan, and Morocco—which deepened trade, ended Arab boycotts of Israel, and created open diplomatic ties between the Arab states and Israel, therefore lessened Israeli officials' incentive to negotiate a peace deal with the Palestinians, since the normalization agreements confer many of the regional benefits that once seemed attainable only by signing a peace deal.

“There was a lot of spin that marketed the Abraham Accords as making peace at hand and making a two-state solution easier,” said Khaled Elgindy, a senior fellow at the Middle East Institute. “What we've seen is the exact opposite. It's minimized what little incentive Israel had to deal with the Palestinian issue.”

But in many ways, the accords only formalized a diplomatic reality that had already taken shape. In recent years, Israel has developed quiet business ties with these countries, save for Sudan. Now, this business—including Israel's sale of sophisticated surveillance equipment to the Gulf States, for use in repressing internal dissent—can be conducted openly. An increase in hostilities against Palestinians is unlikely to jeopardize these lucrative ties. Though the images of Israeli police invading Al-Aqsa Mosque angered many Arab citizens in the countries that signed deals with Israel, there has been no sign that their

authoritarian governments are reconsidering the decision to sign the accords.

— AK, 5/14/21

What is Hamas?

Hamas is a Palestinian militant political group that was founded in Gaza by members of a Palestine chapter of the Muslim Brotherhood—a Sunni Islamist movement that seeks to free Arab states from Western imperialism—in 1987, against the backdrop of the First Intifada, a Palestinian uprising against the occupation that took place in the West Bank, Gaza, and within the state of Israel. As Tareq Baconi, analyst at The International Crisis Group and author of *Hamas Contained: The Rise and Pacification of Palestinian Resistance*, has explained on the *Unsettled* podcast, Hamas's formation was spurred partly by discontent with the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), a Palestinian resistance movement founded in 1964. The PLO and its dominant secular Fatah faction had led armed Palestinian resistance to Israeli occupation for 20 years, but by the late 80s it had begun to contend with the limits of its militant strategy and was preparing to make certain concessions to Israel—including officially recognizing Israel and endorsing a two-state solution in which Israel would retain sovereignty over its pre-1967 borders. Hamas offered an alternate option that promised not to compromise on Palestinian sovereignty over the entire land or to legitimize Israel as a state. (As *The Wall Street Journal* and *The Intercept* have reported, Israel, in fact, initially offered financial support to the Islamists who formed Hamas, in the hopes that they would check the power of the PLO.)

During the Second Intifada in 2000, Hamas was the most destructive of the Palestinian groups that carried out suicide bombings in Israel. From that period until Israel's 2005 disengagement from the Gaza Strip, Baconi says on the podcast, Hamas “believed that the more pain it could inflict on the Israeli public, the more likely [it was that] the Israeli public would pressure their government to let go of the territories.”