

Israel Reshapes West Bank Refugee Camps: From Civilian Zones to Security Theaters



On January 21, 2025, Israel launched its military campaign “Iron Wall,” targeting refugee camps in the northern West Bank. The campaign, led by Border Police, special forces, the Shin Bet, and the army, aimed to “preserve the military’s freedom of movement across the West Bank, dismantle and neutralize terrorist infrastructure, and pursue ticking time bombs,” according to the Israeli daily Yedioth Ahronoth.

This campaign marks a systematic Israeli effort to reshape the geographic and demographic realities in the West Bank—particularly in northern camps. The operations have gone beyond conventional security measures to dismantle the urban fabric of the camps through home demolitions, road construction, and the forced displacement of residents.

Israel’s shift in policy reflects a broader strategy to raise the cost of Palestinian resistance and reduce the camps’ role as social incubators of dissent, thereby paving the way for deeper Israeli control over the territory.

The measures go beyond confronting armed resistance. They are part of a larger “Zionist resolution” strategy aimed at dismantling any resistant community

structures and redistributing populations into isolated, easily controlled “cantons.”

Israeli Defense Minister Yisrael Katz described the campaign as “the most significant operation since 1948,” underscoring its sweeping strategic ambitions.



A Comprehensive Reengineering

The “Iron Wall” operation signals a new phase of military escalation. Now approaching 130 consecutive days, it has involved large-scale incursions using armored forces, D9 and D10 bulldozers, and attack drones—making clear that the goal is not only to suppress armed resistance but to fundamentally reconfigure the infrastructure of northern West Bank camps.

The heaviest operations have targeted Jenin and the Tulkarem and Nur Shams camps. Bulldozers and military trucks have carved new roads through the camps, transforming narrow alleyways into wide streets to facilitate future military operations.

On the ground, the destruction has been staggering. At least 600 homes were demolished in the Jenin camp, forcibly displacing hundreds of families. In the Tulkarem camps, 400 homes have also been destroyed.

One of the most devastating aspects has been the targeting of water, electricity, and communication networks. In Jenin, the destruction of sewage and water

infrastructure has triggered an environmental crisis, complicating the return of residents and shutting down four hospitals due to water shortages—deepening the humanitarian catastrophe.

The campaign also involves policies of forced displacement. Over 40,000 Palestinians have been compelled to flee their homes under threat of bombardment and bulldozing.

Meanwhile, Israel has escalated its targeting of UNRWA, passing legislation to block the agency's activities in the West Bank and Jerusalem, threatening its ability to provide services to refugees. Relief and reconstruction efforts have also been obstructed through road closures and the denial of humanitarian aid, worsening the plight of thousands of displaced people.

Alongside military action, Israel is exerting economic and social pressure on camp residents by shuttering markets and businesses and halting economic activity. In Jenin alone, more than 4,000 workers have lost their livelihoods due to the offensive.

Cumulative Aggression

Israel's reengineering of the refugee camps didn't begin with "Iron Wall." It has evolved since 2023, when a new strategy emerged in Jenin, including widespread destruction of infrastructure, road razing, and expanded drone strikes.

In July 2023, Israel launched a major assault on Jenin dubbed "Home and Garden," involving intense bombardment, the leveling of entire neighborhoods, and the construction of new roads.

In September 2023, it targeted the Tulkarem and Nur Shams camps, expanding roads and carving military passages under the guise of security operations.

By the end of 2023, Israel began systematically dismantling infrastructure—particularly water, electricity, and sewage networks—while blocking any repair or reconstruction efforts.

Israel also held meetings with local officials in Jenin, announcing plans to convert the camp into a regular neighborhood of the city, effectively stripping it of its refugee status. In January 2025, it declared the camps would "no longer be sanctuaries," launching forced urban redevelopment and widespread demolitions to assert security control.



Israel wants to turn occupied West Bank into rubble like Gaza, says Haaretz
By February 2025, home demolitions were underway in phases in Jenin, with entire streets leveled, marking the onset of a final re-planning stage.

Forced displacement is expected to continue into mid-2025, with many evacuees unlikely to return to the camps and instead resettling in cities. By year's end, Israel is expected to finalize a transformation of the camps into open suburban areas—integrating them into Palestinian urban centers under Israeli control and phasing out UNRWA's role.

Erasing the Camps' Identity

Israel's combined military and political efforts aim to fundamentally alter the reality of the refugee camps, threatening the Palestinian identity rooted in them. The new architecture being imposed seeks to convert these historically autonomous zones into securitized areas under tight control.

The camps, with their dense housing and narrow alleys, have historically complicated Israeli military operations and provided cover for resistance. That reality is being reshaped through extensive demolitions to open up new military corridors. Surveillance points and drones have been deployed to curtail resistance activity.

These refugee camps—symbols of the Nakba and the right of return—are now

targets for erasure, both physically and symbolically.

Israeli policies blocking reconstruction and international aid compound this erasure, making it increasingly difficult for the camps to recover.

With homes razed, neighborhoods fragmented, and movement restricted, life in the camps becomes unsustainable for many families, accelerating forced migration.

These policies are achieving long-term strategic aims. Israel seeks to turn the camps into uninhabitable zones, stripping them of their capacity to resist occupation and eroding their status as sanctuaries for Palestinian refugees.

Annexation Without Cost: Finalizing “Conflict Resolution”

The dismantling and redesign of refugee camps in the northern West Bank are part of a broader Israeli strategic vision aligned with the “Zionist resolution” doctrine, championed by key figures in Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s right-wing government.

This vision revolves around three core objectives: dismantling the infrastructure of resistance, eroding Palestinian national identity, and redistributing Palestinians into Israeli-controlled enclaves.

The government aims to eliminate any perceived security threats in areas targeted for annexation by removing resistance groups—seen as the main obstacle to imposing direct Israeli control.

Active resistance in northern West Bank deters settlers and delays the expansion of settlements. Thus, eliminating resistance hubs is crucial to completing annexation and settlement projects.

Israel is also preparing a security landscape conducive to annexation without the risk of broad armed confrontation—by depopulating areas of resistance fighters who might form a permanent front of opposition.

The dismantling of camps is just the beginning of a potential large-scale demographic reshuffling of the West Bank in favor of settlement expansion.

This strategy includes redefining centers of authority by dividing the Palestinian population into isolated geographic cantons, eliminating any potential for unified resistance or cohesive political movement.

It involves boosting the role of tribal leaders, business figures, and security officials at the expense of national factions. Israel has already begun implementing this by meeting with clan elders and businessmen in Jenin to cultivate alternative local leadership aligned with Israeli interests.



Thomas Coex, AFP Israeli settlements seen from Bethlehem in the West Bank
Amid growing uncertainty about the Palestinian Authority's future, Israel is laying the groundwork for a decentralized administrative model. It seeks to dismantle centralized governance, making it harder to reunify the Palestinian population politically.

Ultimately, the goal is to replace the Palestinian Authority with localized governance run by economically and security-dependent elites tied to Israel. In this light, what is happening represents one of the gravest phases in the history of the Palestinian cause. The demographic and political map is being redrawn in ways that weaken any future possibility for effective resistance or national unity, entrenching irreversible realities on the ground.

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