

West Bank Palestinians 'exhausted' by omnipresent Israeli surveillance

Hebron, Palestinian Territories

Rotating cameras planted on a rooftop terrace "follow our every move", said Hebron resident Umm Nasser, protesting intensified Israeli surveillance of her occupied West Bank city since the start of the Gaza war.

"Psychologically, I'm exhausted," admitted the 55-year-old Palestinian woman.

She lives above the Abu al-Rish checkpoint, the site of frequent violence at the heart of historical Hebron.

It is one of numerous sentry boxes manned by Israeli forces separating Palestinian streets from Jewish settler enclaves in the old town, which hosts a disputed holy site. Known to Muslims as the Ibrahimi mosque and to Jews as the Cave of the Patriarchs, it is revered by both faiths.

Dozens of heavily armed Israeli soldiers guard the site, assisted by security cameras.

Umm Nasser said that surveillance enhanced by artificial intelligence tools has become "especially difficult during the war" between Israel and Palestinian group Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

To Umm Nasser, the use of technology is stifling.

"We've tried putting pieces of wood or fabric over the cameras to maintain our privacy, but every time, the army removes them," she said.

"One day, soldiers took our identity cards and told us they were going to use them for a facial recognition system."

She said she hadn't heard about it since.



Israeli security forces check a car that was reportedly used by a Palestinian to carry out a thwarted ramming attack against troops positioned near the settlement of Kiryat Arba on the outskirts of the occupied West Bank town of Hebron

since 1967.

'Automated surveillance'

Shai Cohen, a 23-year-old Israeli settler, said the surveillance cameras scattered all over the city "very (much) help us" to feel safe.

Israel describes itself as a "start-up nation" and takes pride in its leading cyber industry and cutting-edge surveillance and weapons technology.

Facial recognition technology -- highly regulated in civilian settings -- is used by Israeli forces along with a range of advanced tools in the Palestinian territories they have occupied

"Blue Wolf", for example, is an app soldiers use on their mobile phone. They take face pictures of Palestinians, which are then checked against a database.

Once matched, the system indicates whether the person photographed is wanted for arrest.

This system is part of the Israeli army's "frictionless occupation strategy", said Sophia Goodfriend, a doctoral student specialising in artificial intelligence and human rights.

The app "relies on automated surveillance technology, often based on artificial intelligence and designed to reduce interaction" between soldiers and Palestinians, Goodfriend told AFP.

Another system, "Red Wolf", has been deployed at Israeli checkpoints in Hebron since at least 2022, according to an investigation by human rights group Amnesty International.

Soldiers know "before I approach the checkpoint that I'm 'red' in the system. It means I'm 'a threat'," said Hebron activist Issa Amro, lamenting yet "another layer of humiliation".

He said residents had their photos taken without their consent, and they do not know how

Israel uses their images and data that it collects.

The army in late 2022 confirmed it was testing a surveillance system with riot control tools, developed by a private firm, Smart Shooter.

The remote-controlled system can fire shots which, according to the army, are not lethal.

Asked by AFP about the system and the "Wolf" software, the Israeli military did not comment.

'Anxiety and fear'

The automated tools make for "more and more efficient" control over the lives of Palestinians who are further "dehumanised" in the process, according to Israeli anti-occupation group Breaking the Silence.

"The very purpose and essence of the system is to create anxiety and fear," said Adel, a rights defender living in Israeli-annexed east Jerusalem who asked to use a pseudonym because of security concerns.

"Our behaviour and movements are scrutinised."

In east Jerusalem, he said, facial recognition technology is regularly used by Israeli forces during demonstrations.

Adel recalled an inspection at a checkpoint when "many pages of data appeared on the tablet" used by the soldiers.

"They mentioned an arrest that occurred several years earlier and for which I had been cleared by the courts," he said.

Tensions have soared since October 7, when Hamas militants breached the Gaza border and attacked southern Israel, triggering a devastating war.

Hamas fighters began their attack

by targeting remote-controlled surveillance and defence systems on the border.

The unprecedented attack resulted in more than 1,160 deaths in Israel, mostly of civilians, according to an AFP tally based on official data.

Israel retaliated with a massive military offensive that has killed more than 27,500 people in the besieged Gaza Strip, also mostly civilians, according to the Hamas-run territory's health ministry.

Footage and media reports from Gaza have raised concerns over the use of facial recognition technology by Israeli forces there, too.

The army said that as part of the war it was conducting "security and intelligence operations".

Online videos from mid-November showed Gazans, fleeing south for safety, passing through gates allegedly equipped with surveillance tech.

And official Palestinian news agency Wafa reported "smart" cameras had been installed at Gaza City's Al-Shifa hospital during a raid by Israeli troops.



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Blinken in Qatar on tour to seek 'enduring end' to Gaza war

Palestinian Territories

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken visited Qatar yesterday on his latest Middle East crisis tour, seeking a new ceasefire and "an enduring end" to the Israel-Hamas war.

The US top envoy was later bound for Israel, hoping to shore up support for a truce deal that was hashed out in Paris in January but has not yet been signed off on by either Hamas or Israel.

Heavy strikes and fighting in Gaza killed at least 107 people in 24 hours, said the health ministry in the Hamas-ruled territory that has been under almost four months of bombardment.

Fears grew for more than a



US Secretary of State Antony Blinken (L) meets with Qatar's Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani at Lusail Palace, in Doha

million Palestinians crowded into the far southern Rafah area as the battlefield draws ever closer in Israel's campaign to

eradicate Hamas over the October 7 attack.

Israeli Defence Minister Yoav Gallant warned on Monday that the military "will reach places where we have not yet fought... right up to the last Hamas bastion, which is Rafah", on the Egyptian border.

Palestinian Raed al-Bardani, 32, who has been displaced multiple times and now lives in Rafah with his wife and four children, charged that "the goal is to destroy Rafah because it is the only area that the occupation has not yet destroyed".

"Where will we go if they storm Rafah?" he asked.

Blinken -- on his fifth region-

al tour since the bloodiest ever Gaza war broke out -- earlier met Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi in Cairo, a day after he held talks with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in Riyadh.

Blinken and Sisi "discussed ongoing efforts to secure the release of all hostages held by Hamas," said State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller.

The US envoy also "expressed appreciation for Egypt's leadership role in facilitating the delivery of humanitarian assistance to Palestinians in Gaza".

And Blinken emphasised Washington's "rejection of any

forced displacement of Palestinians from Gaza and commitment to establishing a Palestinian state that provides peace and security for Israelis and Palestinians alike", Miller said.

Israeli troops, with air and naval support, have been engaged in heavy combat centred on Gaza's main southern city of Khan Yunis, the hometown of Hamas's Gaza chief, Yahya Sinwar, much of which has been reduced to rubble.

Israel accuses Sinwar of masterminding the October 7 attack, which resulted in the deaths of about 1,160 people, mostly civilians, according to an AFP tally based on official figures.