

Unjustified Use of Force and Crowd Control Weapons by the Police

Protest activity is a central component of a democratic society, especially when it is directed against the government and its policies.¹ A comprehensive legal study published by Zulat found that Israeli law affords only limited protection to the right to protest, while granting the police sweeping powers of enforcement and use of force against demonstrators. As a result, the police have developed common practices to suppress protests, ranging from preemptive steps before a demonstration (such as requiring a permit), through their conduct during the protest itself, and ending with measures intended to intimidate demonstrators after the protest has ended (such as arrest and release under restrictive conditions).²

These suppression practices primarily consist of the use of excessive force to bring about swift dispersal. Since January 2023, following the establishment of Israel's 37th government and the powerful protest movement prompted by its announcement about a regime revolution, the police have extensively used the protest-suppressing "toolbox" that has long existed under Israeli law: massive and unjustified use of physical force and crowd control weapons (CCWs).

After Itamar Ben-Gvir assumed the position of Minister of National Security, following the approval of Amendment No. 37 to the Police Ordinance ahead of the establishment of the government, Israel Police's policy has been characterized by persistent politically biased violence against demonstrators. Since the October 7th Hamas attack, Ben-Gvir's politicized police have suppressed protests whose common denominator has been opposition to government policy: demonstrations for the release of the hostages held in Gaza, against the continuation of the war, or in favor of establishing a state commission of inquiry and pursuing public and legal accountability on the part of Netanyahu and others responsible for the debacle. As a result of this policy, huge numbers of demonstrators were arrested, with some of them suffering irreversible bodily harm.³

*English-language reference. All other references in this document are in Hebrew.

¹ Eitay Mack, [*The Legal Infrastructure for the Suppression of Protests and Demonstrations in Israel](#), *Zulat* (3 May 2024).

² Eitay Mack, [*Ben-Gvir's Police Exploits Law Deficiencies To Suppress Protests](#), *Zulat* (4 Mar 2024).

³ See footnotes #1 and #2.

Furthermore, the politicization of the police is expected to intensify under the current government, among other reasons due to Ben-Gvir's unlawful involvement in the appointment of senior officers,⁴ as well as the government's initiatives targeting the judiciary and law-enforcement authorities, such as the bill seeking to politicize Mahash⁵ (Hebrew acronym for Israel Police's Internal Investigations Department). Even if they are not ultimately implemented, these steps set the tone, might lead to a further escalation of the violence directed at demonstrators and to labeling more groups and protests as illegitimate because of their opposition to government policy.

A database collecting reports on police violence against protesters lists 1,230 cases in 2024 (506 cases in 2023),⁶ with indictments filed only in 3 of the 307 cases opened by Mahash in the past two years.⁷ Moreover, the lenient handling of police brutality has often been coupled with failure to take the necessary steps to effectively protect demonstrators from violence by other civilians.⁸

This violence is manifested in the means used to disperse demonstrations, whose employment is supposedly regulated under Israel Police's standing operating procedures (SOP).⁹ However, these SOPs are vague and give ample leeway to officers on the scene, which is why the choice and intensity of use of crowd control weapons (CCWs) might be arbitrary and political. Moreover, although these CCWs are defined as "less than lethal," their use contrary to safety instructions might be fatal or cause substantial bodily harm.

For example, the police use Makhtazit and Skunk, vehicles mounted with cannons spraying water or a malodorous liquid, both of which shoot a high-velocity and imprecise stream that might hurt uninvolved bystanders. Referring to the very legality of using Skunk, Supreme Court Justice Anat Baron noted that it is a drastic measure, "given that the pungent and foul liquid it sprays sticks to a person's body for a long time and is accompanied by physical side effects that could allegedly evolve into health risks. This

⁴ Chen Maanit and Josh Breiner, [*Ben-Gvir Defies Deal With AG, Vows Continued Involvement in Israel Police Appointments](#), *Haaretz* (6 May 2025).

⁵ Eitay Mack, [*Subordination of Mahash to Minister of Justice: Proposal for Government Takeover of Prosecution Authorities](#), *Zulat* (18 May 2025).

⁶ [alimut.org](#): database collecting reports on victims and witnesses of violence.

⁷ Some 210 cases were closed, 42 were forwarded for disciplinary action, and decisions are pending in 52 cases. See Moshe Steinmetz, [Over 300 Mahash Cases, Only 3 Indictments](#), *i24news* (25 Mar 2025).

⁸ The alimut.org database recorded 291 reports on violence by civilians against protesters in 2024 and 646 in 2023. See footnote #6.

⁹ [SOP for Deployment of Mounted Police Units](#), *Israel Police's Operations Directorate* (2 Aug 2020).

being the case, the use of Skunk may be considered only in the event of violent and serious rioting or in the absence of any other choice, and even then, in a limited and proportionate way in accordance with the relevant regulations on the subject."¹⁰

Despite this ruling, there are many examples that the police continue to use Makhtazit and Skunk in contravention of safety instructions and regulations.¹¹ The stun grenades hurled at protesters, also in violation of SOPs and safety instructions and thereby endangering their wellbeing, is yet another example of the disproportionate use of CCWs.¹² In some cases, these CCWs are activated by Border Police officers whose operational training includes extensive use of such means.

According to Zulat's analysis, several key factors contribute to concerns about the disproportionate use of police force at demonstrations:

- 1) Politically biased police: As long as the police remain subordinate to the Minister of National Security under Amendment No. 37 to the Police Ordinance (which empowers the minister to set Israel Police's policy and the general principles governing its activity), there is a risk of politically biased enforcement and the application of improper considerations when using police forces to suppress protests.¹³
- 2) Immunity from criminal and disciplinary prosecution: As shown by the data presented above, officers who used unwarranted force against demonstrators enjoy almost sweeping immunity, thereby further encouraging a lack of restraint and excessive use of force.¹⁴

¹⁰ [Supreme Court Case 5882/18 Shmuel Aharon Epstein Kreis v. Israel Police](#), *Nevo* (19 Aug 2020).

¹¹ See, for example: Or Kashti and Shirly Seidler, [When Police Flex Their Muscle Against Protesters](#), *Haaretz* (19 Dec 2013); Josh Breiner, [*Water Cannons to the Head: Police Disperse Anti-Netanyahu Protesters Against Regulation](#), *Haaretz* (26 Jul 2020); Itay Ron, [Contrary to Regulations Police Direct Water Cannons at Demonstrators' Heads](#), *Hamakom-The Hottest Place in Hell* (3 Apr 2023); [Civil Democratic Movement @democracymvt](#), *Twitter* (1 Mar 2023, 23:12).

¹² See, for example: [News Israel 13 @Newsisrael13](#), *Twitter* (1 Mar 2023, 13:46); Liran Levy and Meir Turgeman, [Officer Who Threw Stun Grenades Questioned by Mahash: 'I Aimed at an Open Area, I Didn't Hit Demonstrators'](#), *Ynet* (12 Mar 2023).

¹³ [Police Ordinance-1971 \[New Version\]](#), *Nevo* (last updated 2 Mar 2026).

¹⁴ Eitay Mack, [*The Legal Infrastructure for the Suppression of Protests and Demonstrations in Israel](#), *Zulat* (3 May 2024).

- 3) Deployment of Border Police personnel: The absence of a clear definition of the conditions for deploying these paramilitary troops versus civilians heightens concerns about excessive use of force against demonstrators.

Following are Zulat's proposed legislative amendments aimed at upholding the safety and wellbeing of demonstrators:¹⁵

1. Add a clause to the Police Ordinance stating that a lawfully-approved protest will be dispersed by force proportionate to the circumstances, with the Israel Police being held criminally responsible for the violation of this requirement.
2. Add a clause to the Police Ordinance establishing the obligation of a police officer deployed to a demonstration to wear a bodycam to collect adequate documentation of the event. This documentation will be stored by the Israel Police, will be available to the public, and will be forwarded to the agency investigating complaints against violent police officers.
3. Amend the Police Law to require disciplinary prosecution of a police officer who violates open-fire instructions or uses CCWs and unwarranted force.
4. Add a clause to the Police Ordinance compelling Mahash to open a criminal investigation in every case of a police officer causing bodily harm or affecting a person's health.
5. Abolish the cumbersome mechanism in the First Schedule to the Police Law that assigns the authority to prosecute police officers for unauthorized and disproportionate use of force in the performance of duty to the Attorney General or a designated delegate.
6. Add to the Israel Police's SOPs the conditions for the deployment of Border Police personnel at protests. Limit their use to cases of extreme violence by demonstrators, and prohibit their deployment to non-violent protests.

¹⁵ The bills are attached to this document as Appendix A.