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‘The police and military can’t be everywhere’: Israelis wrangle over easing gun controls

Supporters say move would plug security gap but critics fear it could fuel crime and violence



A shooting range in a Golan Heights settlement. Israel's national security minister Itamar Ben-Gvir is seeking to broaden gun ownership © Jalla Marey/AFP/Getty Images



James Shorffer in Gush Etzion MAY 13 2023



At the Caliber 3 shooting range in Gush Etzion, a cluster of Jewish settlements in the occupied West Bank, business is booming.

“I’ve seen a big uptick,” said Sharon Gat, an Israeli colonel who founded the business in 2007. “Gun sales in the last two months have grown by 100 per cent, and the number of people coming to train [has also risen]. It’s always like that when the violence is up.”

For some at the range, obtaining a gun is a reaction to the wave of bloodshed that has engulfed [Israel](#) and the West Bank for the past year. The surge in violence has become the worst for a decade, with Israeli forces killing more than 250 Palestinians in a series of near-nightly raids in response to a spate of Palestinian attacks that have killed more than 40 Israelis.

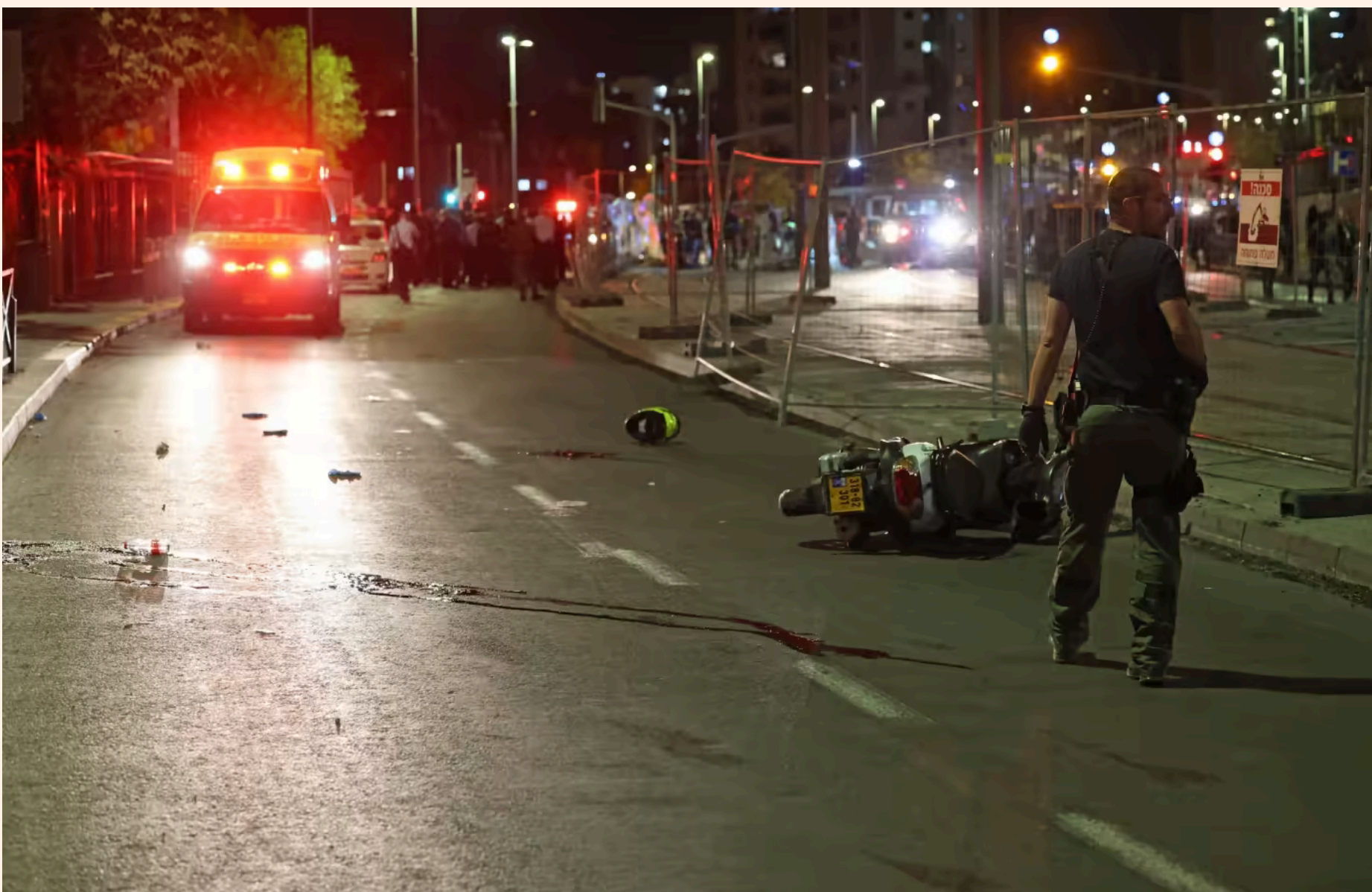
But broader gun ownership is also a goal championed by Israel’s ultranationalist national security minister Itamar Ben-Gvir, who argues it would make the public safer. Critics dispute this, saying that more guns will fuel violence rather than deter it and exacerbate already soaring tensions between Israelis and Palestinians.

Unlike in the US, there is no general right to bear arms in Israel. But Israelis can typically get a licence for a firearm and 50 bullets if they meet certain criteria, such as living in an area with heightened security threats, passing a medical test, having no criminal record and completing weapons training. About 140,000 Israelis hold licences.

After a Palestinian gunman [shot dead seven Israelis](#) in the Neve Ya’akov settlement in January, Ben-Gvir — a settler previously convicted of inciting racism and supporting a terrorist organisation — pledged to loosen the rules and speed up licensing. He reiterated his ambitions last month after reports he had decided to make it easier for former combat soldiers, active reservists, police and firefighters to obtain guns.

“There is no reason why tank and combat engineering soldiers, who made up . . . frontline forces on the battlefield, should not be allowed to carry weapons,” he wrote on Twitter.

Boosting gun ownership is one of a number of measures demanded by Ben-Gvir in response to the spiralling tension, which include [establishing a national guard](#) and imposing the death penalty for terror killings. The violence poses a challenge to Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s hardline government, which has accused its predecessors of being soft on security.



The aftermath of the Neve Ya’akov shooting, in which seven Israelis died. Advocates of looser gun laws say the move could help prevent attacks © Ahmad Gharabli/AFP/Getty Images

Advocates argue that arming more civilians would plug gaps the security forces cannot fill. “We in Israel understood that the police and the military and the security can’t be everywhere every time,” said Gat. “You have to create a layer that isn’t dependent on those . . . And we decided that it will be civilians.”

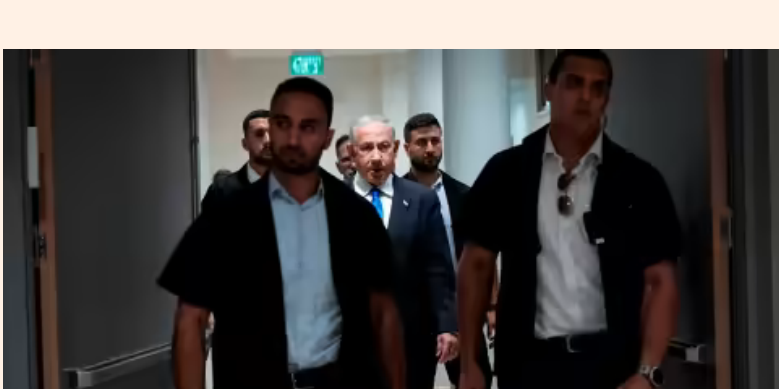
Among those who have recently applied for a licence is Mike Epstein, a 32-year-old from Tekoa, a settlement near Hebron. He did so because his family was growing and he had heard “first-hand stories of people who were in incidents”.

“[It’s] something I hope to never, ever have to use except on the range,” Epstein said, as he picked up his new handgun at Caliber 3. “But . . . I’d like to have it on me in case of an emergency.”

However, critics dismiss Ben-Gvir’s plans as a political gimmick. “This is a way for him to get votes very easily without struggling with the limits of [his] power in the hierarchy of the government,” said Eitay Mack, a human rights lawyer. “But I think he’s pushing Israel to a place that is going to be very, very dangerous for everybody.”

Noa Sattath, head of the Association for Civil Rights in Israel, said attackers were unlikely to be deterred as their chances of being killed were already high. Only 5 per cent of incidents classified by Israel as terrorist attacks between 2018 and 2020 were thwarted by armed civilians or security guards, she added, citing data from the ministry of internal security.

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Others argue letting more civilians own weapons would be counter-productive. While gun violence remains low, it has risen since the last loosening of licensing rules in 2018, with the number of people killed with firearms in criminal circumstances rising from 84 in 2019 to 117 in 2021, according to data collated by Gun Free Kitchen Tables (GFKT), an alliance that backs stricter gun controls.

Rela Mazali, co-founder of GFKT, said if rules were eased again, some weapons would end up being used in organised crime, murders and domestic violence — in particular against women — and would increase deaths by suicide. “[Guns] do not protect civilians,” she said. “[In fact], they’re endangering more and more civilians.”

The prospect of wider gun ownership has alarmed Palestinian citizens of Israel, who fear the weapons will be turned against them. After a Palestinian citizen of Israel was shot dead by a Jewish Israeli following a road-side scuffle last week, Walid al-Huashla, an MP from the United Arab List, warned Ben-Gvir’s plans would lead to “chaos and street executions”. A lawyer for the suspect denied the incident had a nationalist motivation.

“It’s already terrifying living here as a Palestinian. You can’t make any mistakes,” said Diana Buttu, a Palestinian analyst and former negotiator. “At any time the police can view us as a threat and gun us down. And now [Ben-Gvir] wants to extend this to private citizens.”

Sattath said she was also concerned that along with Ben-Gvir’s other ambitions — such as setting up a national guard and involving Israel’s Shin Bet internal security service in policing Arab society — wider gun ownership could exacerbate tension between Israel’s Jewish majority and its minority groups, such as Palestinians and the Bedouin.

“In this atmosphere of incitement and the stoking of fear and violence, we worry that these guns would not be used for security,” she said. “Stoking fears and talking about guns may alleviate some of the [security concerns in society]. But in reality, increasing gun ownership will lead to more deaths and more violence.”

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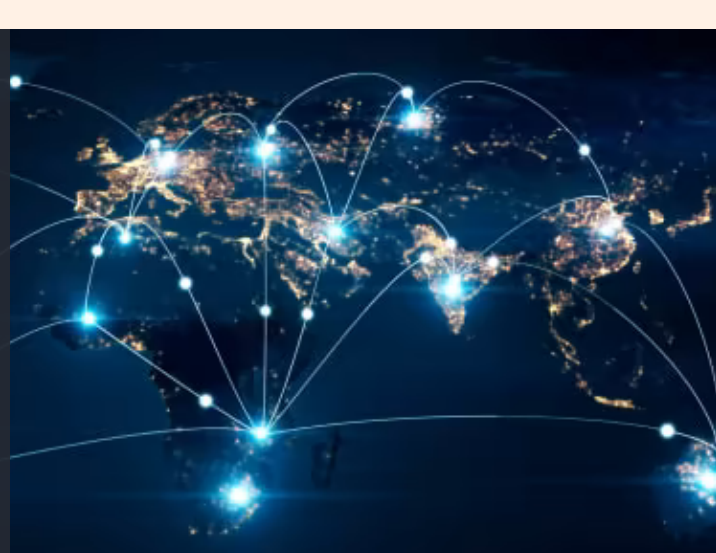
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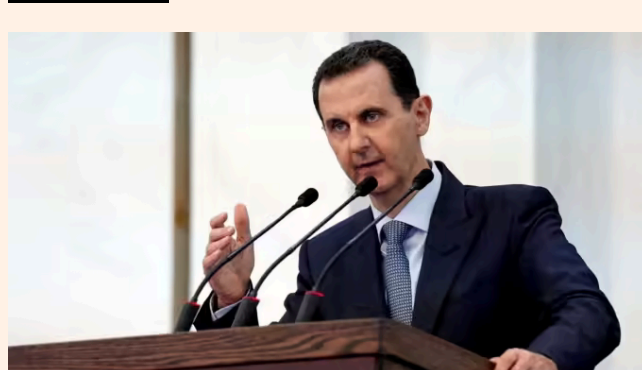


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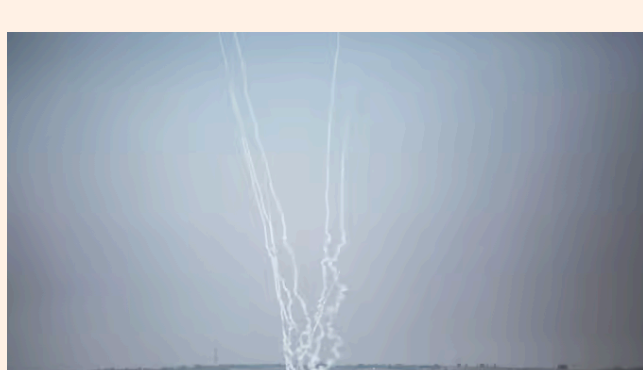
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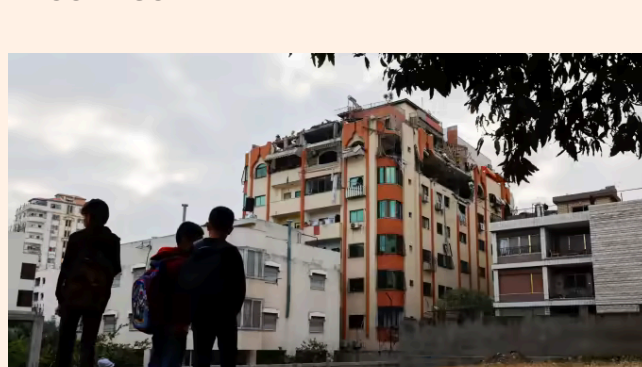
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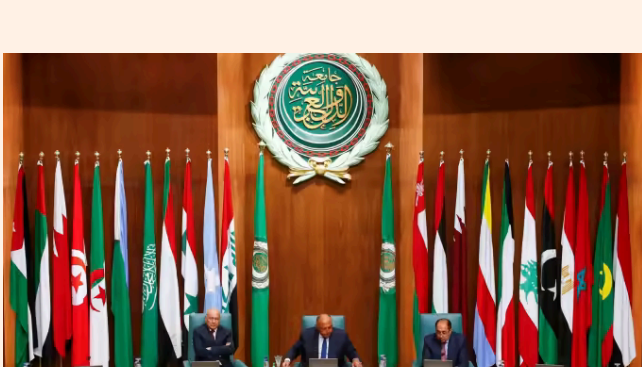
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