

Korean equipment and Palestinian state

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Published Aug 22, 2025 1:23 pm KST Updated Aug 22, 2025 1:24 pm KST

The images tell a harrowing tale. Families, held at gunpoint by black-clad soldiers, watch in horror as excavators raze their homes to the ground. Mothers, holding their babies in their arms, plead with soldiers in a last-ditch effort to save their places of refuge from the wrath of roaring bulldozers. Children stand terrified by monstrous machines that lurch forward amidst the rubble of broken windows and walls.

These scenes are set in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, and they are becoming increasingly common. The black and yellow heavy-duty vehicles the occupying Israeli military uses to turn Palestinian homes into piles of cement and clouds of dust bear a familiar label printed in large white letters: Hyundai.

Photos and videos of these scenes are part of a visual archive published earlier this year by Amnesty International Korea. The archive accompanies a report on Israel's use of HD Hyundai machinery in unlawful demolitions of Palestinian-owned homes and businesses in the occupied territories. These demolitions, the report says, "may constitute grave breaches of international humanitarian law that amount to war crimes." Amnesty International has called on HD Hyundai "to immediately suspend distribution of its products in Israel" and to take measures "to ensure its operations, products or services do not perpetuate human rights abuses."



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HD Hyundai was also recently mentioned in a report by Francesca Albanese, the U.N. special rapporteur on Palestine. Her report, titled “From Economy of Occupation to Economy of Genocide,” notes that since October 2023, Israel has frequently used HD Hyundai machinery “in the urban destruction of Gaza, including flattening Rafah and Jabalia.”

While Korean bulldozers are helping Israel to erase the last remaining shreds of Palestinian territories, a new diplomatic initiative for the recognition of Palestinian statehood is underway. In July, delegates from several countries and international organizations met in New York City for a high-level conference on the “Peaceful Settlement of the Question of Palestine and the Implementation of the Two-State Solution.” Their declared objective was to discuss tangible steps toward “the realization of an independent, sovereign, economically viable and democratic State of Palestine living side by side, in peace and security with Israel.”

The vision of side-by-side Jewish and Arab states in historic Palestine has gone through several iterations. Its origins can be traced to the 1930s, when the British colonial administration in Palestine, finding it difficult to mitigate rising tensions between the native Arab population and the new Jewish settlers arriving from Europe, briefly entertained a plan to divide the territory into separate Jewish and Arab areas.

The proposal was shelved, only to resurface in 1947 with the U.N. Partition Plan for Palestine. Though the vast majority of Palestine’s then-population were native Arabs, the U.N. plan earmarked the majority of the land — approximately 56 percent — for the formation of a Jewish state. An Arab state was to be established in about 43 percent of the land, and the remaining less than one percent — including Jerusalem — was to be placed under international administration.

But the lines on the 1947 map had to be redrawn even before the ink had dried. Israel has never had defined borders, neither at its creation, nor now. By March 1949, when the first Arab-Israeli war ended with the Armistice Agreements, Israel had annexed an additional 20 percent of historic Palestine. The remaining territories — including the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem — were occupied during the June 1967 war.

In the aftermath of that war, a new iteration of the two-state solution came into being. Its broad strokes were outlined in a 1981 peace initiative presented by then-Saudi Crown Prince Fahd bin

Abdulaziz Al Saud: Israel was to withdraw to the pre-1967 borders, and an independent Palestinian state was to be established in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank with East Jerusalem as its capital.

Despite enjoying near-unanimous international support, the proposal for a two-state solution based on pre-1967 borders has been running on empty for quite some time. The simple fact is that Israel has never agreed to a Palestinian state. Even in the 1993 Oslo Accords, the Israeli side agreed only to Palestinian “self-government” rather than statehood. Since Oslo, Israel has ceaselessly expanded its borders, annexing more Palestinian land and creating more Jewish-only settlements in the occupied territories.

The home demolition policies in the West Bank and the ongoing ethnic cleansing campaign in the Gaza Strip are motivated by a single objective: forcing Palestinians out of their homeland and ensuring — as Israel’s ruling Likud Party charter states — that “between the sea and the Jordan there will only be Israeli sovereignty.”

Helping Israel to realize this objective are not only HD Hyundai machinery, but also arms purchased from Korean manufacturers. The latter, according to an investigative report by Hankyoreh 21, amounted to almost 8 billion won in 2024 alone. Korea’s increasing economic entanglement in the infrastructure of the occupation flies in the face of Seoul’s stated commitment to a two-state solution. While it has yet to recognize the State of Palestine, Korea was among the participants in the July conference on Palestinian statehood. In April, Korea was also one of 12 U.N. Security Council members to vote in favor of a resolution supporting Palestine’s membership in the U.N.

These diplomatic maneuvers might eventually culminate in Korea’s recognition of a Palestinian state. But with or without recognition, the real question is whether the Korean government would be willing to match its diplomatic support for a two-state solution with concrete action.

Will Korean-made arms and heavy-duty machinery continue to enable Israel’s actions in the occupied territories, or will Korea join other countries — including some of Israel’s Western allies — that are now taking a tougher stance on Israel’s human rights and international law violations? Suspending arms exports to Israel and implementing the recommendations of the Amnesty International report would be good first steps in the latter direction.

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