

Settler violence and demolitions in the West Bank

Background

Settler violence is a term referring to attacks by Israeli civilians living in settlements against Palestinians and their property in the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

- Settler attacks are typically motivated by ideology, and seek to displace Palestinians through fear, dispossession, and confining Palestinians to smaller areas of the West Bank.
- There are currently approximately 700,000 settlers living in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem. Most of these settlers are non-violent.
- The Israeli government has tried to clear Area C as a matter of policy for 15 years, through house demolitions, building permits, and firing zones.

The issue at hand is systemic. Settlers are allowed to carry out violent acts with impunity and this is part of a clear working policy to forcibly displace Palestinians from Area C and beyond.

Types of settler violence

- Extremist settlers use different forms of violence in the West Bank such as throwing stones, bulldozers, and live fire. They also engage in the destruction of private property.
- Settlers have recently begun a new practice of economic violence, by confiscating sheep, goats, and cattle herds and demanding extortionate fees from Palestinian farmers for their release.
- These confiscations are conducted ostensibly under the bylaws governing local settlements. According to Israeli human rights organisation Yesh Din, these bylaws cannot legally apply to Palestinians, only to Israeli settlers. Palestinians can't defend themselves through legal means.

Statistics: '2023 was the most violent year in settler violence against Palestinians in the West Bank in both the number of incidents and their severity.' – Yesh Din¹

- Some 93% of the herding communities surveyed by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) in Sept 2023 reported a higher frequency of settler violence and 90% reported that the severity of the settler violence had increased since the start of 2022.
- OHCA reported a daily average of three settler-related incidents in the first eight months of 2023 compared to the two-per-day average in 2022.

Failure of the IDF to protect occupied Palestinian population

- The Palestinian population is recognised as protected persons under international law, thus the failure of IDF soldiers to respond to settler violence is a breach of their duty.
- Israeli security forces were present in 46% of incidents documented by Yesh Din during the 2023 olive harvest in which Palestinians were prevented from harvesting olives, assaulted, or had their possessions stolen.

¹ https://s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/files.yesh-din.org/Updates+to+the+International+Community/Diplouupdate_221223.pdf

Failure of Israeli police to investigate violent settlers

- 93% of police investigations concerning settler violence **fail to lead to indictments**.
- 57.5% of Palestinians who were victims of settler violence between January to September 2023 **did not file a complaint**, compared to 40% during the same period in 2022.
- Between 2017 and 2020, Yesh Din documented 60 police complaints regarding incidents of settler violence. Only 38 incidents were investigated, and **no indictments were filed**.

Demolitions

- An estimated 18,000 Palestinian structures are currently under demolition threat in Area C, including hundreds of homes and 58 schools.
- In 2023, Israeli authorities demolished 1,004 Palestinian homes and other structures in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem. This surpassed 2022 figures. Most of these structures were demolished due to lacking building permits, which are near impossible to obtain for Palestinians in Area C.
- At least 350,000 dunams in Area C are now **not accessible** to Palestinians.

Since October 7th

- According to the FCDO, from the start of October to December 2023, there have been more than 343 violent attacks which killed 8 Palestinian civilians, injuring more than 83 and forcing 1026 Palestinians from their homes.
- Since 7th October, more than 4000 additional dunams have been taken over from Palestinians and fenced off. Settlers also set up roadblocks to deny Palestinians access to agricultural roads.
- Between October and November 2023, there were 113 violent incidents in which Israeli settlers or soldiers disrupted or prevented the harvesting of olives, according to Yesh Din.
- There were no detentions, interrogations or arrests in relation to the cases, except for one case where a suspect was arrested and quickly released.

What foreign governments have done

- The UK government has issued sanctions, including financial and travel restrictions, against four Israeli settlers who the UK claims have committed human rights abuses against Palestinians.
- The US has also sanctioned 4 settlers, with one in common with the UK list.
- US financial sanctions have ramifications for Israeli banks and the financial system due to the 'secondary sanctions' provision which means that sanctions will be applied to individuals and institutions deemed to be supporting those on the sanctioned list.
- In response to the US sanctions against violent settlers, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's office issued a statement saying that "Israel takes action against all law-breakers everywhere, and therefore there is no need for unusual measures on the issue".
- France had already announced sanctions in February against 28 individuals who have been found guilty of violence against Palestinian civilians in the West Bank.
- On 15 December 2023, the UK and 14 other countries plus the EU issued a statement 'calling on Israel to take immediate and concrete steps to tackle record high settler violence in the occupied West Bank.'

Recommended policy ideas

- If the next batch of sanctions are broader and **target bigger names and organisations** then this will have a huge impact in Israel. Those involved in settler violence need to know that there are consequences, and Israel's government must understand the international community won't be silent on the issue.
- The list of those to be targeted by further sanctions could include **mayors and local council leaders** in settlements who incite violence, as well as the **companies that are responsible for building the infrastructure of violent outposts**.
- The sanctions should go beyond individuals, and target the institutions, entities and NGOs which are supporting the outposts which are driving the settler attacks.
- Sanctions are a leverage to stop escalation in the West Bank, Lebanon and Gaza. This means the window to implement them could be small.