

Settler Violence in the West Bank: A Decades-Long Reign of Terror on Unarmed Palestinians

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Global Research, January 24, 2014

[+972 Magazine](#) 21 January 2014

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

In-depth Report: [PALESTINE](#)

The burned door of the Khalil family home, months after settlers set it on fire while seven family members slept inside. (Photo: Activestills.org)

Kamal Shaban, a farmer in the West Bank village of Sinjil, is watching workmen repair a local family's house that had recently been firebombed by settlers in the middle of the night, forcing the parents and five children asleep inside to flee to the rooftop. As for himself, Shaban tells me that during the autumn olive harvests, settlers have stoned the laborers in his fields, turned over a tractor, stolen sacks of olives and once broke a worker's arm with a big rock – all under the eye of Israeli soldiers required by the Supreme Court to protect the farmers.

He asks: “Why do the United States, the European Union and the United Nations call Hamas terrorists and Hezbollah terrorists, but they don't call these people terrorists?”

The phenomenon of settler violence against Palestinians, which is as old and as vibrant as the settlements themselves, tells you everything you need to know about how serious Israel is about ending its rule over a foreign people. It also tells you everything you need to know about how serious the world is about forcing Israel to end it.

Settler violence, lately characterized mainly by masked young men roaming the West Bank and attacking Palestinian farmers with stones, clubs or rifles and burning their olive groves, their fields, and occasionally their schools, mosques and homes, is a unique feature of the occupation. Unlike every other aspect of it – the conquest of another people's homeland by military force and land theft, the brutality, the house demolitions and expulsions, the whole system of officially sanctioned subjugation – settler violence is something nobody outside the radical fringe in Israel will defend. This, alone, they'll denounce.

And yet it goes on. The world doesn't penalize or even threaten to penalize Israel for it.

If a decades-long reign of terror on unarmed Palestinians by Jewish gangs backed by an army of occupation is tolerable, not only to Israel but to the United Nations, European Union, United States and the rest of the world, then everything Israel does to the Palestinians is tolerable. Then the occupation as a whole is tolerable.

An attack each day

Settlers attack Palestinians in the West Bank on an average of once a day, according to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). Last year there were 399

assaults – 93 in which Palestinians were injured, another 306 in which their property was damaged or destroyed. The frequency of these attacks has stayed fairly stable over the last four years, but it is quadruple the rate in 2006, when OCHA began tracking these incidents.

As we drove in Zakaria Sadah's van up Route 60 through the northern part of the West Bank, he pointed out some of the landmarks. "In this house we're passing," he narrated, "a group of settlers went in and attacked a mother and her children, stripped their clothes off, sent them to the hospital. That house over there, about 15 settlers set it on fire, some soldiers were in on it, too. In that village over there they burned the sports hall, uprooted olive trees three or four times..."

Sadah, the West Bank field worker for Rabbis for Human Rights, takes us through the heartland of the "price tag" movement – near the Nablus-area settlement Yitzhar and the settler outposts Esh Kodesh, Adei Ad, Shvut Rachel, Kida and Ahiya, and, surrounded by them, two of the most frequently targeted Palestinian villages, Jalud and Sinjil.

"In the seat you're sitting in," he tells me, "the ambassador from Belgium sat, diplomats from the EU sat, the UN, the U.S. Next week I'm taking someone from the American consulate so he can see what the settlers are doing. I take foreign VIPs on tours about once a month, and they're all shocked at what they see."

After they get over being shocked, do they do anything with what they've learned?

"No," said Sadah. "Some of them say they're going to talk to somebody, they're going to change things. Nothing happens."

Israeli settlers who came from the direction of Yitzhar set fire to Palestinians fields in the village of Asira al-Qibliya. Several of the settlers opened fire on the Palestinians who came to defend their property, hitting Nimer Najem, 24, in his face. May 19, 2012. Video by B'Tselem

'There's a lack of political will to stop the violence'

Connie Martinez-Varela Pedersen, director of international advocacy for Yesh Din, one of the most vital Israeli human rights organizations working in the West Bank, says she's talked to diplomats from around 20 countries about the issue of settler violence, and gives regular briefings about it to European, American and Canadian officials. They duly report on the attacks and Israel's response to them back to their foreign ministries or other relevant departments in their home countries.

"They get it," Pedersen says. "They get that there's a lack of political will to stop the violence. The sense you get from them is – here we are talking about the same issue again. In a way there's nothing to even talk about. It's a no-brainer – it's so obvious to everyone that there's something wrong."

That's the feeling I had when I called a European diplomat stationed in Israel to talk to him about the issue: the very clear sense that we both knew what the other thinks about it because there's nothing else one could possibly think, so what is there to discuss? But just to hear it from the mouth of someone representing the big wide world in this country, I called him, and he spoke on condition that he wouldn't be identified.

"European diplomats in Israel are definitely aware of the problem, we've written a joint

report about it in the names of all the member states of the EU, it's been mentioned in the conclusions of the European Council. There have also been private demarches [diplomatic statements, often protests] about it from individual EU countries to Israeli authorities. We're mostly concerned with the issue of impunity for the settler attackers."

Do you think these reports and demarches affect Israel's handling of the problem?

"No, I don't think so."

I asked him why he thought that was. He laughed drily; what could he say?

What effect, I asked, does Israel's indifference to these reports and demarches have on the European diplomatic corps in this country?

"Well, I think it leads to a measure of frustration."

'My God, they're burning down the house!'

The high-water mark of international recognition of the problem of settler violence, in the view of people at Yesh Din, was President Obama's remark about it in his speech at the Jerusalem Convention Center last March. "It is not just when settler violence against Palestinians goes unpunished," the president said.

We drove into the village of Sinjil, where one of the worst settler attacks on Palestinians in recent years took place on November 14. At about two in the morning, a car carrying four young men passed an isolated house at the end of a road where Khaled Dar Khalil, his wife Rowaida and their five children, ages 16 months to eight years, were sleeping. Two young men got out of the car, poured gasoline under the porch, broke the glass enclosure in front, threw Molotov cocktails through the windows, and drove away.

"My husband saw it from our bedroom window upstairs. He was yelling, 'My God, they're burning down the house!'" said Rowaida. The front door was blocked by fire, the house was filling up with smoke, so the family ran up the stairs and out onto the roof, where they waited for the Palestinian fire department to arrive.



Khaled Dar Khalil inspects the damage inside his home, which was torched by Jewish settlers, Sinjil, West Bank, November 14, 2013. Five children were treated for smoke inhalation. (Photo: Oren Ziv/Activestills.org)

That was not the first time the property had been firebombed; Molotov cocktails were thrown at the yard about six months before and about two years before that, Rowaida said. "The house is pretty exposed," she said by way of explanation. Khaled said Israeli police showed up to investigate, and he's gotten telephone calls since from a detective who, he said, "seems interested."

The day after this latest arson at the home, a driver pulled up in front and called out to Rowaida, "I'm coming back to burn what's left of you," and took off, she recalls.

Workmen were at the house the day I was there; it needs heavy repairs for the collapsed ceilings and other damage. The parents and children are okay, except for three-year-old

Nisreen. “She’s still scared,” said Khaled. “She cries at night.”

Rowaida spoke to me in English with an Americanized accent. The 38-year-old woman said she lived in Springfield, Massachusetts for many years before and after her marriage, and, like her husband and children, is a U.S. citizen.

“People from the American consulate came here after the fire,” she said. “They’ve called me a couple of times since to see how we’re doing.”

All American citizens, the family of seven, including five children, were the victims of a murder attempt because they are Palestinian, their house was firebombed in the middle of the night by Israel’s lords of the land. It was the third time the family had been targeted with Molotov cocktails by these people in two years – and not a word of protest was heard from the United States.



Rowaidah and Khaled Dar-Khalil stand with their children on the roof of their house, where the family hid during the fire-bomb attack, Sinjil, West Bank. (Photo by Activestills.org)

I wanted to ask the U.S. embassy in Tel Aviv about it, but my request for an interview was denied. It seems that one 11-word sentence in Obama’s speech didn’t have such a huge impact on Israeli or American policy toward the problem of “settler violence against Palestinians going unpunished.”

It’s understood that Israel could stop the violence if it wanted to, but for obvious domestic political reasons it doesn’t want to: Israel has no intention of taking harsh, extended measures against any part of the settler movement. Thus, the general view is that Israel chooses to turn a blind eye to these Jewish terrorists.

“Israel is a country that zapped Sheikh Yassin from the skies, that seemed to know about every terror bombing a day before it happened. Israel can get shit done. They really can stop this,” said the Israel-Palestine bureau chief of a major foreign news organization.

“The clearest proof that there is no serious intent to stop the violence is the olive harvest. There’s always a [spike in violence](#) during the harvest, which comes in October, and the army accompanies the farmers to the olive groves, so it knows exactly where the violence is taking place. It’s a perfect opportunity to catch the settler attackers, but they don’t,” said Reut Mor, spokesperson for Yesh Din.

Masked settlers, who came from the direction of Yitzhar, [beat Palestinian olive farmers](#) near the West Bank village of Burin, October 20, 2013

[A recent Yesh Din study found that 97.4 percent](#) of Israel Police investigations into the destruction of Palestinian-owned olive and fruit trees are closed due to what the NGO’s lawyers termed “circumstances testifying to investigative failure.”

In the old hillside village of Jalud, which faces the hilltop outposts Esh Kodesh, Ahiya and Shvut Rachel a few hundred meters away, farmer Ibrahim Haj Mohammed says he’s lost hundreds of trees to settler attacks over the years. “I’ve complained to the police more than 10 times – once I got a telephone call back from them,” he says.

On October 9 a couple of dozen settlers converged on Jalud. One group threw rocks at pupils in the village elementary school while a second group threw rocks at villagers' cars and a third group set fire to olive groves, including Mohammed's.



Scorched land in the Palestinian village of Jalud. In the background, the settlement of Shvut Rachel, from which Esh Kodesh is an offshoot outpost. (Photo by Activestills.org)

"I made a complaint that day to the police," he says, "and two or three days later I went to the Sha'ar Binyamin station to see what was happening. I spoke to a policeman and he said, 'Your case is being handled by a detective who is on holiday today, and if he needs you, we will talk to you.' Nobody's contacted me since."

Yet the problem goes beyond Israeli authorities turning a blind eye; when soldiers get to the scene of a settler attack on Palestinians, as often as not they stand by obediently – as seen in this B'Tselem video of a January 6 [settler attack on the village of Urif](#) – and take action only after the Palestinians start throwing rocks back, which is when the troops turn their tear gas and rubber-coated (but potentially lethal) bullets on the Palestinians.

"The village of Burin, which is between Yitzhar and a row of Har Bracha outposts, sometimes gets attacked by settlers three times a week. They always have the army with them, and when the young Palestinians in the village start throwing stones back, the army attacks the village. It works every time. The settlers know that if they start, the army will finish up, and much more brutally than they can manage. And they know nothing will happen to them – even if they're arrested, the case will be closed, they'll never get indicted," said Reut Mor.

"There's no way three settlers would attack an entire village with stones if they didn't know they had armed soldiers behind them," adds Mor.

"A couple of years ago a teenager was killed in Qusra – like it always happens, the settlers from Esh Kodesh came down to destroy their crops, then the villagers threw stones at them, then Israeli soldiers came, and the Palestinians see them as one with the settlers, so they started throwing stones at the soldiers, too, and the soldiers opened fire," said B'Tselem spokesperson Sarit Michaeli.

(Many readers are by now no doubt wondering: what about Palestinian violence against settlers, not to mention against other Israelis? My answer is that there is no comparing the violence of people living under colonial rule with that of the colonists.)

Price tag: 'A brilliant exercise in branding'

The popular term for settler violence in recent years is "price tag" – "*tag mechir*" in Hebrew – which settlers often spray paint on a Palestinian mosque, house or car they've torched. The idea is that the attack is the "price tag" the settlers are putting on the most recent action by the army or government that they consider harmful to their cause, or on the most recent Palestinian attack against Israelis. (On occasion, such graffiti has accompanied settler arsons against left-wing Israeli activists, churches and army property.)

The term emerged after the 2005 disengagement from Gaza and evacuation of the West Bank outpost Amona in early 2006, signaling yet another escalation in settler militancy. It has been a hugely successful propaganda tool for the settlers for two reasons: One, it

conveys the message that these attacks are reprisals, even self-defense. Two, as Yesh Din's Mor says, "It shifts all the attention to the attacks accompanied by 'price tag' graffiti, and gives the impression that this is all the settler violence there is, when in fact it's a very small portion. 'Price tag' was a brilliant exercise in branding by the settlers."

If there is a single image that illustrates how settler persecution of Palestinians is an accepted fact of life, it is the chain-link and cloth netting hung over stretches of the souk in Hebron to catch at least some of the rocks, bricks, bottles, soiled diapers, eggs, urine, bleach and other ammunition tossed over from the adjacent Avraham Avinu and Beit Hadassah buildings, where most of Hebron's settlers live. Above the souk are two Israeli army lookout posts with a clear view of what goes on below.

"We yell up to the soldiers to stop the settlers from attacking us, but they don't pay any attention," Jamal Maraga, who runs a fabric stall in the souk, told me early this month, pointing out the scarves on display that had been stained by eggs. A boy showed me a brick that had fallen out of the sky recently. A man who'd been hit in the chest with a rock a couple of days before was giving the details to a pair of Norwegian observers from TIPH, the Temporary International Presence in Hebron. In the previous week, the souk vendors had closed up their shops to protest the army's failure to protect them from settler assaults.



Jewish settlers throw liquids into the Hebron Souk during a weekly protest against the occupation, Old City of Hebron, May 22, 2010 (Photo by: Silan Dallal/Activestills.org)

'We expect that they are actually using the information'

The people from TIPH say the level of settler attacks against Palestinians in Hebron has gone down in recent years. An official with a foreign agency operating in Hebron put it this way: "The Palestinians in the city, what can I say, have given up the fight. They have to survive, so they are very patient with the settlers. They know their children are exposed to the settlers' children, and there's a lot of tension. They're neighbors after all."

TIPH, whose observers have been patrolling the Jewish-Arab seam line in Hebron since 1997, stays absolutely neutral. It records every disturbance of the peace, whether by settler, soldier or Palestinian, and sends confidential reports to its six member nations (Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Switzerland, Italy and Turkey) as well as to Israel and the Palestinian Authority.

I asked the head of the TIPH mission, Christine Fossen, a lawyer and local police chief in Norway, what those countries do with the documentation of settler attacks on the city's Palestinians.

"They follow our reports closely, they're working mostly in diplomatic channels," she said. "We don't know what different diplomatic missions do, but we know they are very interested in what we are writing and we expect that they are actually using that information."

Settler violence isn't new, so it ceases to be of interest

One of the reasons settler violence doesn't create much of a ripple internationally is that outside of Israel, it rarely makes the news. "Dog bites man is not news, and settlers behaving badly is dog bites man," said the local bureau chief, who's been covering this

region for many years. “And it’s not new, it’s been going on for decades, so it ceases to be of interest.”

Presumably that’s why the January 7 incident in the West Bank village of Qusra, where settlers once again attacked Palestinian farmers but this time [got caught and beat up by the villagers](#), did make the international news – marauding settlers getting their clocks cleaned by their Palestinian targets is, [as Yossi Gurvitz wrote](#), a case of man bites dog.

Some village leaders protected the 15 or so settlers from possibly getting lynched by an angry crowd of locals before turning them over to the army. Some of the settlers escaped the soldiers’ grasp, while the others were brought before a judge and ordered under house arrest for five days. Zakaria Sadah of Rabbis for Human Rights, who helped the village leaders protect the settlers from the crowd, said the invaders destroyed about 40 olive trees before being caught.

In Qusra they were celebrating that night. The village imam, Ziad Oudeh – who Sadah said was also one of the locals protecting the settlers from further harm – told *Haaretz* it was “like a wedding. People sang ‘God is great’ all night. For four years we’ve been suffering from these settlers, and people feel we’ve paid them back.” Sadah said village leaders told him that in recent years, Qusra has been attacked by settlers 66 times.

[Click on each village to see more details about recent settler attacks]

In Israel, the pathetic spectacle of these frightened, bleeding young fanatics, and the fact that Palestinians who are ordinarily their victims saved their lives and handed them over to the army, provided another occasion for officials to decry the “price tag” phenomenon and pledge to uproot it.

Empty pledges to act

Defense Minister Moshe Ya’alon said: “The unacceptable trend known as ‘price tag’ is in my opinion terror in every sense of the word, and we are acting and will act against the perpetrators, firmly and with zero tolerance, in order to eradicate it.”

His statement echoed the one last June from Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to the torching of cars and spraying of anti-Arab graffiti in Abu Ghosh, an Israeli Arab village popular for its tourist restaurants. “What happened today in Abu Ghosh,” said Netanyahu, “goes against Judaism’s *mitzvot* [commandments] and against the values of our people and our state. Just this week we made decisions that allow us to act more forcefully against the people who commit these crimes and we will do so with full force.”

Netanyahu’s predecessor, Ehud Olmert, [twice used the word “pogrom” in late 2008](#) to describe separate shooting attacks on Palestinians by settlers from Yitzhar and Hebron. “In the State of Israel, there will be no pogroms against non-Jews,” he told his cabinet. “This is an intolerable phenomenon and it will be dealt with in the strongest way by Israel’s law enforcement authorities.”

Unacceptable. Terror in every sense of the word. Zero tolerance. Against our values. Pogroms. Intolerable.

The Esh Kodesh settlers’ ill-fated attack in Qusra on January 7 was the first incident of settler violence cited by [OCHA in its weekly report](#) from the occupied territories for January

7-13. It was not, however, the last.

“At least five other settler attacks recorded during the remainder of the week were reportedly carried out by settlers in retaliation for the Qusra incident,” OCHA wrote. “A total of six Palestinian vehicles were burned or damaged near Al Jalazun Refugee Camp (Ramallah), in Al Funduq (Qalqilya) and in Kifl Haris (Salfit). Settler raids also took place in Sinjil and [Madama](#)(Nablus), during which ‘price tag’ slogans, such as ‘death to the Arabs,’ were sprayed on houses and shops.”

On January 15, the day after the most recent of OCHA’s weekly reports was issued, [a mosque in the northern West Bank village of Deir Istiya was torched](#); luckily the fire didn’t spread beyond the front door. *Haaretz* reported that the graffiti “Arabs out,” “Regards from Qusra,” and “Revenge for spilled blood in Qusra,” was sprayed on the mosque’s walls.

All in a day’s work. This is nothing new in the annals of the occupation, nor in the annals of colonialism; the bold young men of history’s settler movements have never been known for their decency toward the “natives.” The only unique thing about Israeli settler violence is that it grows out of the Israeli occupation, which is the only outpost, excuse the pun, of colonialism still standing in the so-called democratic world. And as long as that occupation lasts, so will settler violence. Literally, it comes with the territory.

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