

The Third Front: Settler Violence in Gaza War's Shadow and the Impact on Area C

Special Report - Settlement Watch Team

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In the first three weeks since the outbreak of the war on October 7 following the horrific atrocities committed by Hamas terrorists, there has been a [sharp rise in settler violence against Palestinians in the West Bank](#). Taking advantage of the war, a group of violent settlers is carrying out an organized operation to expel Palestinian communities residing in Area C through organized attacks, threats, intimidation, property damage, and even physical assaults, mainly in the southern Hebron hills and the Jordan Valley. Some of these actions are carried out by settlers dressed in IDF uniforms, while others have been recruited to the reserves to defend the settlements following the war.

In addition to the attacks on Palestinian communities, an organization, [supported by prominent settlers](#), aims to prevent Palestinians from harvesting their olives. Alongside a [campaign demanding that the IDF prohibit Palestinian movement](#), organized groups of settlers are forcing Palestinians off their lands through threats and [violence](#). These actions have resulted in the displacement of [nearly 600 Palestinians from 13 communities](#) who were forced to abandon their homes due to fear of settler attacks. Since the war began, over a hundred Palestinians have been killed in the West Bank, some by settler gunfire. Apart from this violence, there is an emergence of new outposts and road breaches under the guise of the war.

According to Peace Now's assessment, most of the attacks are coming from a particularly violent group of outposts, and targeted measures against these illegal outposts could potentially calm the attacks. To prevent further escalation, there is a need to intensify law enforcement actions against violent settlers to arrest them and create deterrence. Additionally, aggressive settlers should not be provided with weapons or equipment to carry out violent acts against Palestinians. Decisive actions need to be taken, and any soldier who acts violently and contrary to military orders should be immediately dismissed.

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The West Bank since October 7:

The massacre in the Gaza Envelope on October 7 immediately impacted the situation in the West Bank. Fearing similar attacks by Palestinians against settlements, the IDF took a series of steps aimed at safeguarding settlers' security and preventing escalation in the West Bank:

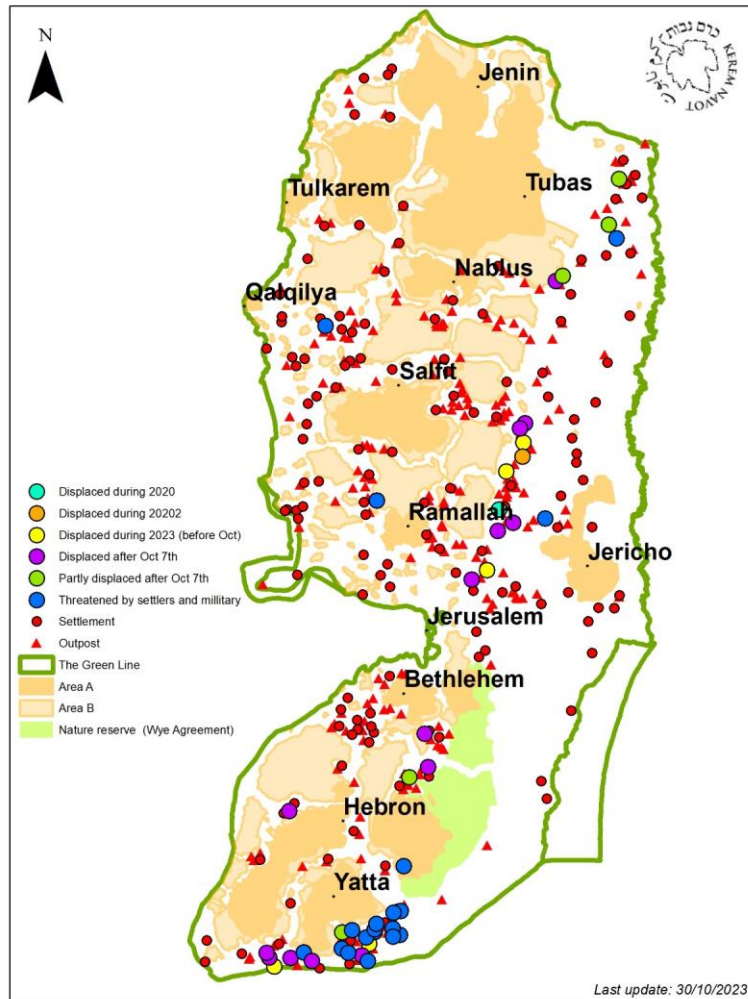
1. Closure of hundreds of access roads linking Palestinian towns and villages to the main roads in the West Bank. Entrances and exits to many Palestinian communities were blocked by the IDF using dirt mounds and iron gates. For example, Highway 60, the main thoroughfare connecting the southern and northern regions of the West Bank, has been nearly closed to Palestinian movement.
2. Strengthening defense for settlements by mobilizing reserve soldiers, some of whom are settlers themselves, [for the protection and security of the settlements](#). This step includes the [distribution of thousands of weapons](#) to settlers.
3. Preventing the entry of Palestinian workers into Israel and all settlements, including industrial areas. It's worth noting that until October 7, [approximately 150,000 Palestinians were employed in Israel and settlements](#), constituting around [20% of the Palestinian workforce in the West Bank](#).

Settler Violence and Forcible Transfer of Palestinian Communities:

Since October 7, there has been a sharp increase in the intensity and severity of violence by settlers against Palestinians, with 2-3 violent incidents per day, [reaching up to 7 violent incidents per day](#).

1. **Threats and attacks on Palestinian communities in Area C** – Daily attacks and threats against Palestinian communities in the southern Hebron Hills and the Jordan Valley have occurred since October 7. Close to 600 Palestinians from 13 different communities have already fled their homes due to settler pressure since October 7, with dozens of other communities facing attacks and threats. The attacks and communities' status can be viewed on the [B'Tselem website](#) and the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs ([OCHA](#)) website.

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Source: Kerem Navot

- 2. Confrontations and shooting incidents** – Even before October 7, there was a pattern of groups of settlers going to Palestinian villages to provoke residents, throw stones, and damage property. In many cases, this led to direct clashes with Palestinians attempting to protect their property and drive off the settlers. IDF soldiers were called to the scene to protect the settlers from Palestinians, using means to disperse protests, and sometimes using live fire. Since October 7, there has been an increase in shootings using live ammunition. In several cases, [settlers have been documented shooting at Palestinians](#) and even at [Israeli activists accompanying Palestinians in the southern Hebron Hills](#). Sometimes it becomes difficult to discern whether the shooting is from the IDF or from settlers. Three particularly severe shooting incidents collectively resulted [in the killing of four Palestinians in the village of Qusra](#), clashes involving [a settler from the Havat Maon outpost in Tuwani](#), and the [killing of a](#)

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[Palestinian in As-Sawiya by a settler coming from the Rechelim settlement](#). In some cases, IDF soldiers are absent and don't protect the Palestinians, while in other cases, the soldiers are present but do not prevent settler shooting and sometimes fire live ammunition themselves.

3. **Prevention of olive harvest** – Since October 7, settlers have launched a campaign to prevent the olive harvest in Tuwani, claiming that the harvest poses a security threat because the harvesters provide intelligence to the settlements. Settlers demand the army stone the harvesters, and in certain cases, the settlers themselves exit vehicles to [drive off the harvesters away](#).



A flyer distributed among settlers urging prevention of Palestinians from conducting their harvest.

Settler Interference in IDF Military Actions and Establishment Facts on the Ground

Settlers have persistently pressed upon the IDF and the government to act according to their political and security convictions and interests. On multiple occasions, settlers have taken it upon themselves to establish facts on the ground contrary to both military orders and the law (such as establishing illegal outposts and the like). Indeed, since October 7, under the guise of the ongoing conflict, settlers have

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intensified their efforts to create new realities through activities like [road incursions](#), establishing outposts, and seizing new territories.



Road opening to a new outpost on the borders of the village of Beit Awwa, Hebron area.

In addition to these actions, a phenomenon is emerging where settlers are intervening not only in political matters but also in the security and tactical operations of the IDF. Settlers are not content with just attempting to influence the army's decisions through governmental and military command channels but have started to set security precedents on the ground, contrary to the army's position. Examples include:

1. On October 18, in the evening, settlers spotted a Palestinian truck carrying equipment of the Palestinian Authority on Route 60. They decided to [prevent the transfer of the equipment and quickly organized to block the road](#) and stop the truck near the Eli settlement. IDF forces had to intervene and return the truck to Beit El and subsequently to Ramallah. The truck was intended to strengthen the Palestinian Authority's security forces in the northern West Bank, a move that from Israel's perspective would reinforce Israeli security. In practice, the settlers undermined Israel's security policy.

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2. On the same day, from the east of Bethlehem, the army decided to remove a checkpoint at the entrance to the Palestinian village of Ras Karkar near the settlement Ma'ale Amos. Settlers prevented the opening of the route and stopped Palestinian cars from passing. Ultimately, the road remained closed at the settlers' demand.
3. On October 12, 2023, the funeral of the four Palestinians killed from the village of Kusra was held. According to reports, the route from the hospital in Salfit to the village of Kusra was coordinated and approved by the IDF. Settlers from the area organized to prevent the funeral, and near the Ali settlement, they blocked the road. Confrontations took place, leading to the fatal shooting of a father and son from Kusra, presumably from their car (it is not known if by settlers or the IDF). The funeral procession failed to reach Kusra in the end.
4. The Gush Etzion Brigade decided to remove one of its officers from their position, apparently due to the officer's perceived non-adequate response against Palestinians. Settlers from the area, especially from the Tekoa settlement, organized a protest against the Brigade's decision. This was mainly curtailed due to the understanding of the discharged officer that the critique of the local residents against the Gush Etzion Brigade weakens their security. The officer declared he would accept responsibility.

These actions by settlers not only disrupt the IDF in its numerous military missions and redirect forces to incidents initiated by settlers, but also affect the army's ability to determine and implement operational and security decisions. In other words, a small minority of citizens, driven by extreme ideology, are dictating Israel's security policy in the West Bank and interfering with its mission to defend the settlements and Israel.

Blurring the Boundaries between the IDF and Settlers – Weapon Distribution and Settler Recruitment

1. **Weapon Distribution** – With the outbreak of the war, the IDF initiated an operation to distribute weapons to settlers. [Thousands of weapons have been provided to settlers so far](#). The head of the Samaria Regional Council proudly stated that he procured hundreds of weapons from foreign donations and coordinated [their distribution to residents in partnership with the IDF](#). Furthermore, since October 7, [the Israeli police has eased significantly the procedure of](#)

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[granting gun licenses](#), enabling those previously unauthorized to carry firearms to acquire them, especially among settlement residents. Amid the existing tensions in the West Bank, the proliferation of weapons, particularly among those lacking experience in wartime confrontations or having extreme ideological leanings supporting the expulsion and aggression towards Palestinians, might lead to quick escalation and potentially fatal mistakes.

2. **Reservist Enlistment** – Normally, the settlements operate designated security units composed of settlement residents and Security Coordination Officers, trained and funded by the military, intended to provide initial responses during attacks on the settlements. Since October 7, a significant reinforcement in guarding the settlements has been necessary due to heightened tensions, alongside many members of these security units being called up for reserve duty within their respective units. In an effort to strengthen security and surveillance in the settlements, the IDF has enlisted reservist soldiers, many of whom are settlers themselves, to focus on the ongoing security within the settlements. Reservist soldiers, irrespective of their political views, are committed to military commands. However, there have been instances where settlers serving in military units have engaged in threats and attacks on Palestinian communities. In such cases, it is unclear whether this is done under military orders, personal beliefs, or if these individuals are civilians who wear military attire without being officially drafted (every Israeli military graduate has uniforms at home). This situation blurs the distinction between the IDF and the settlers, raising significant security concerns regarding the trust in ensuring the safety of all West Bank residents, including both Israeli settlers and Palestinians, and prompts critical questions. This is in contrast to settler civilians who, driven by extreme ideologies, use their weapon power to implement political goals of expulsion of Palestinians from their surroundings.
3. **Sources of Violence – Handling Particularly Violent Settlements** – Besides all the aforementioned concerns, it is important to note that the vast majority of West Bank settlers are not involved in violence against Palestinians. The centers of violence are specific areas and certain settlements and outposts from where most attacks against Palestinians emanate. Despite the rise in violent incidents since the war in Gaza, the majority of the violence originates from a small number of settlements, concentrated in specific areas.

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Main Sources of Violence:

1. Southern Mount Hebron: Ma'on Farm, Mitzpe Yair, Meitarim Farm.
2. Nablus Area: Yitzhar and its outposts, Ronen's Farm, Homesh.
3. East of Ramallah: Outposts surrounding Kochav Hashachar, Neria Farm, Micha's Farm.
4. South of Nablus: Settlements like Shilo (particularly Adei Ad), Malachei Hashalom.
5. Other Areas: Settlements and outposts in the Jordan Valley, such as the Nahal Kana Farm, and more.

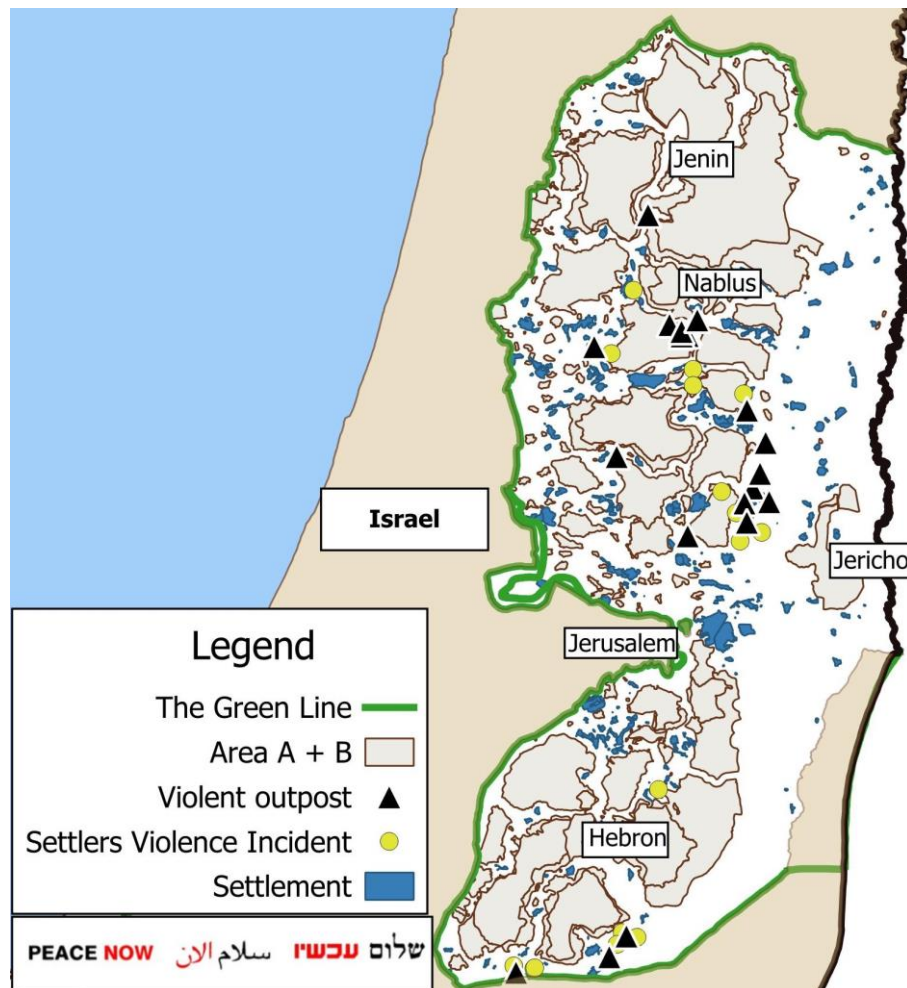
These are the main sources of violence identified by Peace Now, and the IDF certainly knows how to identify these primary and significant centers.

The Challenge of Settler Violence and Proposed Actions for Mitigation:

The challenge of settler violence poses a significant and complex issue for the IDF and the Israeli Police. Nonetheless, focusing efforts on the centers of violence, particularly on illegal outposts from which many violent incidents emanate, might lead to a substantial reduction in such violence. Three courses of action could assist in this regard:

1. **Removal of Violent Outposts** – It's crucial to emphasize that not all outposts are legal, and they need to be evacuated, especially when they serve as hubs for violence and pose a threat to Palestinians and the IDF's operations. Some outposts are agricultural farms where only a few settlers reside, making it relatively easier to vacate.
2. **Law Enforcement** – Currently, violent settlers enjoy almost complete immunity without arrests or legal prosecution. It is vital to note that even without evacuating these outposts, significant reductions in violence could occur through law enforcement, arrests, and legal proceedings against these known and identifiable violent settlers.

- Discipline Measures and Suspension of Violent Soldiers** – In cases where it becomes evident that regular or reservist soldiers are involved in acts of violence or misconduct, it's essential to ensure they are arrested and brought to justice. If, due to wartime conditions, there is no choice but to recruit settlers to safeguard the settlements, ensuring that violent settlers do not receive weapons and uniforms, and that they are not enlisted into the reserves in the area, is critical.



Incidents of settler violence and their origins in the settlements and outposts in the West Bank.

Conclusion:

The war in Gaza has created a new reality where the security system in the West Bank increasingly relies on settlers within the framework of operational activities, becoming more dependent on them. Ideological and violent settlers leverage the war to coerce the military for their own goals of expulsion and harm to Palestinians, even interfering with IDF activities. This blurring of boundaries between the army and civilians, which has always been a significant problem in the Israeli occupation system in

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the territories, might cause a dire deterioration, potentially leading to the creation of a third front in the West Bank.

Meanwhile, amid the war, a group of settlers managed to strengthen their hold over Area C, advocating for the coercive displacement of Palestinians and exacerbating the discriminatory practices and oppression against them in the West Bank. A decisive political decision to evacuate violent outposts not to disrupt security during wartime could prevent numerous attacks. Initiating law enforcement against violent settlers could restrain and deter others. Preventing the conscription of violent settlers into the reserves and the immediate dismissal of reservist soldiers involved in or enabling violence are essential steps, not mandating political decisions.