

Jewish Extremist Violence in the West Bank Could Trigger a Second Front

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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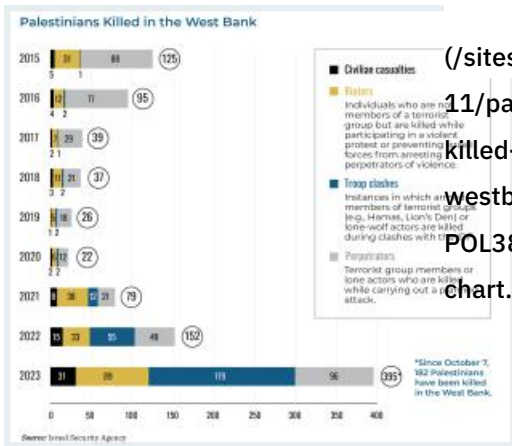
Brief Analysis

The combination of highly motivated young extremists on the ground, supportive far-right politicians back home, and ineffective local security measures may stoke a full-scale uprising if authorities continue to look the other way.

As Israel's military operations proceed in Gaza, the West Bank tops the list of potential friction points that could escalate into a second front. The territory's security environment has deteriorated substantially (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/second-palestinian-front-relative-quiet-restlessness-and-waiting>) over the past two years, and not just because Palestinian terrorist groups expanded (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/escalating-hamas-activity-west-bank>) their local influence—Jewish extremist elements from West Bank settlements and Israel have been fueling the violence as well. So far, Hamas has not succeeded in leveraging the Gaza crisis to tip the West Bank population into a mass uprising, but worsening Jewish violence against Palestinians is making that scenario increasingly difficult to avoid.

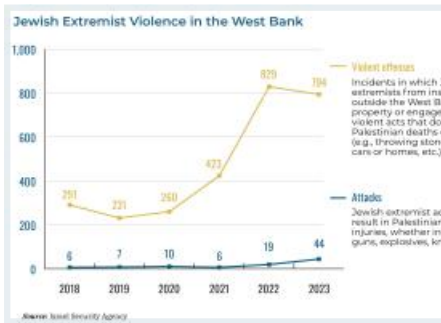
What Do the Numbers Say?

Since October 7, nine Palestinians have been killed in violent encounters with extremist Jewish elements in the West Bank, according to data from the Israel Security Agency (Shin Bet). These casualties are in addition to the 182 killed during Israeli counterterrorism actions in the West Bank over the same period.



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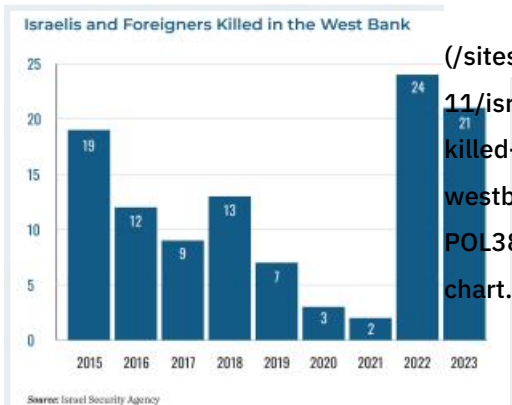
Meanwhile, traditional and social media networks have been flooded with videos of Jewish extremists attacking Palestinian residents, burning homes and vehicles, vandalizing businesses, destroying crops, threatening locals with weapons, imposing movement restrictions, and trespassing on homes, land, and natural resources. According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, violent acts by Jewish extremists increased to an average of **seven per day** (<https://www.ochaopt.org/content/hostilities-gaza-strip-and-israel-flash-update-35>) after October 7 compared to three per day the previous month, and Israeli authorities have not disputed these figures.



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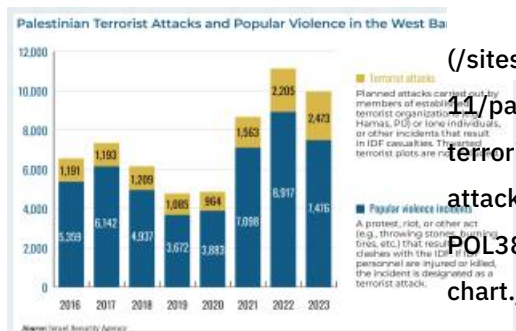
Such violence is hardly a new phenomenon—it stretches back decades and has seen multiple shifts in content and frequency. Since October 7, however, Jewish extremist attacks have grown to larger dimensions and penetrated relatively quiet areas such as Umm Safa and Burqa. And although these acts were previously carried out covertly in order to conceal the perpetrators’ identities, they are now becoming increasingly visible and defiant.

To be sure, some of these acts have been driven by the surge of Palestinian attacks in the West Bank, which have tripled in number since October 7 and killed a total of 45 Israelis over the past two years. This spike has deepened the sense of insecurity among Israeli settlers and motivated radical elements to pursue revenge attacks—sometimes immediately in the form of large-scale assaults on Palestinian communities.



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The town of Hawara is emblematic of these problems. In February, two Israelis were shot and killed by terrorists who were believed to come from the Hawara area. In response, a **large Jewish mob** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/israel-expands-settlements-smotrich-increases-his-authority>) raided the town, killing one resident, injuring hundreds, and burning numerous homes and cars. In August, two more Israelis were killed in another local shooting attack. And after Hamas's October assault on Israel, three Palestinians in Hawara were killed in clashes with Jewish extremists. Law enforcement in the town—Palestinian or Israeli—is virtually nonexistent.



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Another West Bank flashpoint has emerged between Israeli and Palestinian shepherds. Many Israeli settler shepherds attempt to justify their expansion of grazing lines by claiming that they are protecting open areas from Palestinian takeover, but this practice effectively excludes Palestinians from lands they have used for many years for their own livestock or crops. In response, Palestinian herders have repeatedly asserted their own claims on these areas, further heightening the intercommunal tension. Since October 7 alone, **more than 1,149 Palestinians** (<https://www.ochaopt.org/content/hostilities-gaza-strip-and-israel-flash-update-35>) have reportedly been forced to abandon places of residence, employment, or grazing due to threats and violence from Jewish extremists.

Indeed, **recent polling data** (<https://pcpsr.org/en/node/957>) indicates that Palestinian residents in the West Bank have become increasingly fearful of Jewish extremist violence amid the Hamas-Israel war. Many locals are concerned that these extremists will take advantage of two wartime developments—the shift in international attention to Gaza and the imposition of additional Israeli military restrictions on their daily movements—to carry out punitive attacks with the tacit support (or, at least, indifference) of the Israel Defense Forces. Most Palestinians **have no confidence** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/how-palestinian-authority-failed-its-people>) that the Palestinian Authority or IDF will provide for their security, so they increasingly support the formation of local armed groups to protect their communities. Yet militant and terrorist actions by these new armed groups can often trigger the same types of Jewish violence that local Palestinians say they fear.

Who Are the Extremists?

Only a few hundred Jewish extremist activists currently operate in the West Bank, but they are responsible for inciting or carrying out much of the violence described above. Most of them are males age 14 to 19. Two decades ago, a previous generation of similar-age extremists collectively known as the “Hilltop Youth” laid claim to the entirety of “Eretz Yisrael” (the Land of Israel) through various acts of violence. As many as 90 percent of them hailed from West Bank settlements. Eventually, many of them settled down into family life and abandoned violent confrontation.

Today's generation of radicals is different in several respects. The 2005 disengagement from Gaza triggered broad changes in Israel's religious sector, with the extreme right edge viewing the move as both a major crisis and a turning point in their attitude toward the state. Since then, the West Bank has become a magnet for far-right youths eager to contribute to settling the “Land of Israel” and reducing the Palestinian presence in what they see as the Jewish

homeland. Many of them drop out of the education system, disconnect from their families, leave their homes in Israel, and move to the West Bank. There, they tend to establish illegal outposts and regard the rule of Israeli law as a recommendation rather than a requirement.

For the most part, Jewish extremists are not organized in disciplined groups with a clear leadership structure, nor are they driven by a single, coherent ideology or rabbinical authority. To the contrary, their jumble of ideologies and lack of clear hierarchy has complicated efforts to rein in those who resort to violence. Some live in communes where older people or authority figures from past eras of settler confrontation provide guidance (though not orders). Their activities are usually financed by Israeli NGOs that advocate settling the entire “Land of Israel.”

Growing Political Support, Ineffective Security Measures

A key factor behind this year’s steady upsurge in West Bank violence is the support that Jewish extremists receive from certain political actors in Israel, some of whose personal profiles match or closely resemble those of the Hilltop Youth. For example, Zvi Suktot, who was just appointed (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/ultranationalist-mk-tzvi-succot-appointed-head-of-knesset-west-bank-subcommittee/>) chairman of the Knesset Subcommittee on Judea and Samaria (i.e., the West Bank), is a former Hilltop Youth, while Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich was arrested in July 2005 for suspected involvement in a plot to violently disrupt the disengagement from Gaza (he was eventually released without charge). During the current Gaza war, Smotrich has tried to hold up all tax transfers to the Palestinian Authority, and both he and Suktot have called for the creation of “buffer zones” around West Bank settlements that would prohibit Palestinians from entering these areas and cut into the lands they use for olive harvesting. This rhetoric has been echoed on the ground, where Jewish extremists have deliberately damaged Palestinian olive groves in various parts of the West Bank.

Regrettably, Israel’s security institutions have not done enough to stop such offenses, despite the fact that Jewish extremist violence runs the risk of undermining national interests by stoking a full-blown confrontation in the West Bank. The attitudes of some Israeli authorities range from incompetence and denial to sympathy and outright identification with the perpetrators. Meanwhile, the “soft tools” advocated by some political and religious leaders—education, welfare, engagement—have not made much of a dent in the extremist phenomenon.

As a result, efforts to bring violent extremists to justice are often thwarted by bureaucratic and systemic obstacles. Arrests are difficult to make because security services have trouble collecting evidence on suspects, and those perpetrators who are brought in for questioning tend to be simultaneously boastful about their intentions and steadfastly uncooperative. Sometimes, security agencies bypass regular criminal procedure by imposing administrative orders on suspects that allow for house arrests and prohibitions on contact with other suspects. Yet these procedural deviations can be very controversial in some political circles and are often interpreted by extremists as “proof” that Israel’s security establishment is collaborating with the Palestinian “enemy”—a rationalization that removes any hesitation they might have about attacking Israeli personnel.

Given this phenomenon, IDF Spokesperson Daniel Hagari urged West Bank settlers on October 14 (

[%D7%99%D7%A9%D7%99%D7%A8-141023/](#)) not “to interfere with the thwarting of terrorism,” noting that responsibility for their security “lies solely with the IDF.” The vast majority of Jewish settlers recognize this key IDF role and are loyal to the state and its institutions. Yet such views do not extend to groups of highly motivated Jewish extremists.

Conclusion

Despite all these potential triggers, Palestinians in the West Bank have largely refused to heed calls for mass violence over the past several years, including exhortations by Hamas leaders after October 7. Many political, social, and economic factors help explain this refusal, but the most important motive stems from the second intifada (2000-2005), an uprising whose outcome showed Palestinians that violence does not guarantee political dividends and can actually damage their national goals and personal lives in many ways.

Even so, the Gaza war will continue posing three key challenges to this status quo: intensified Israeli security operations in the West Bank; restrictions on Palestinian local movements and job opportunities inside Israel; and worsening violence by emboldened Jewish extremists. The first two challenges are inevitable security conditions necessitated by the unprecedented Gaza crisis. Yet the third is something Israel can certainly curtail if it makes a more concerted and effective effort to counter Jewish extremist activity. Failure to do so could tip the West Bank population past the breaking point and into full-blown confrontation with Israel, opening another front in the war and dramatically complicating the IDF’s ability to secure the borders and protect citizens.

Neomi Neumann is a visiting fellow at The Washington Institute and former head of the research unit at the Israel Security Agency. ❖

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