

Settler Violence Is Turning the West Bank Into a Tinderbox

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

The West Bank has been a relatively minor front in Israel’s post-October 7 war, but if violence by far-right settlers continues to increase, the fallout could be substantial.

The early months of 2025 have seen a significant rise in extremist right-wing violence against Palestinians in the West Bank—an estimated 30 percent increase over the same period last year according to analysis of recent incidents. This surge is occurring at a time when Palestinian terrorism has significantly decreased, to an average of six major attacks per month between January and March, versus twenty-four per month during the same period in 2024. The decline in Palestinian attacks is a result of Israel Defense Forces (IDF) operations since October 7, 2023, aimed at dismantling terrorist networks in the West Bank, primarily in the northern part of the territory but also in the south. The increase in settler violence at a time when Palestinian terrorism is decreasing lends credence to the assessment that settler attacks are not simply a response to terrorism, as some have claimed.

A Long-Running Effort to Create “Facts on the Ground”

Far-right violence in the West Bank has been documented since the early 1980s, when a “Jewish underground” was discovered to be carrying out terrorist attacks against Palestinians. Since the early 2000s, these incidents have been continuously monitored and investigated by Israeli and international human rights organizations.

Right-wing groups in Israel often portray such acts as retaliatory or deterrent responses to Palestinian terrorism against Israeli settlers; they also reject the use of terms such as “Jewish terrorism” and “settler violence,” preferring the label “nationalist crime” or, more recently, “violations of the law.” This position aligns with government policies that oppose strong deterrent actions (e.g., administrative detention or restraining orders) and support calls to dismantle the Jewish Division of the Israel Security Agency (ISA), which leads intelligence and prevention efforts in this domain.

Those who consider extremist settler violence to be criminal rather than security-related partially justify this characterization by noting the profile of the perpetrators. For the most part, they are young people (often minors) and either second- or third-generation West Bank settlers. Many have dropped out of formal education or are loosely affiliated with alternative or rehabilitative educational systems. They tend to live in groups that encourage activism, withdrawal from conventional social frameworks, and a “return to nature.” As such, they often reject the authority of political figures (including official settler leaders), religious figures, and parental figures.

Since the late 1990s, these individuals—commonly referred to as “Hilltop Youth”—have been living in farms and outposts (i.e., settlements established without formal government permission) across the West Bank. Most of these sites are located in Area C, the portion of the West Bank under full Israeli control with an undefined future status. Yet they are also increasingly emerging in Area B, the zone that is under Palestinian civil authority and therefore more likely to be included in a future Palestinian state. Indeed, their primary objective is to enhance the Jewish presence in these areas while reducing the Palestinian presence, thereby creating facts on the ground to shape (or forestall entirely) any final-status agreement in the West Bank. This goal explains the lenient—at times even supportive—attitude that successive governments have adopted toward the Hilltop Youth over the past generation, with some officials viewing the movement’s role in preventing “Palestinian encroachment” on Area C as essential to a policy of de facto Israeli annexation.

In the current government, open support for Hilltop Youth has increased. Earlier this month, Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich and Minister for Settlement and National Missions Orit Strock held a widely publicized **ceremony** (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/government-gifts-state-financed-atvs-to-illegal-settlement-outposts/>) in which they handed over “security components” to farms and “young settlements” in the South Hebron Hills region. These included off-road vehicles, cameras, and night-vision equipment, with a special budgetary allocation of 75 million shekels (around \$20 million) earmarked for this purpose.

Violence by the Hilltop Youth dates back to the establishment of the first outposts in the 1990s. Over the years, these attacks, combined with shifts in Israeli policy, have contributed to displacing Palestinian communities from Area C, particularly in the South Hebron Hills and Jordan Valley. The current war in Gaza appears to have emboldened these groups even further. They have become increasingly aggressive, determined to drive more Palestinians from their homes, farmlands, grazing areas, and businesses while forcing them into densely populated Palestinian zones, including some areas outside Area B—notably the so-called “reservation area” in the Judean Desert. Most of the violent incidents documented in traditional and social media have taken place near outposts, though some occur near established, officially approved settlements as well. The perpetrators tend to use blunt weapons such as clubs and stones, and occasionally legal firearms.

Hilltop Youth have also carried widespread acts of vandalism against private Palestinian property (e.g., homes, businesses, vehicles, agricultural equipment), poisoned water sources, burned agricultural fields and pastures, and used various tactics aimed at denying Palestinians access to their land (e.g., barring them from olive groves during harvest season). According to the Israeli human rights organization Kerem Navot, between 2022 and 2024, the residents of more than fifty Palestinian communities **were expelled** (<https://www.keremnavot.org/theexpulsiononthemap>) due to settler violence.

Settler Attacks and the IDF

Palestinians also note that on some occasions, the IDF soldiers who are supposed to protect them instead participate in these violent incidents or stand by and allow them to occur. This phenomenon can be attributed in part to the fact that many Israeli security personnel in the West Bank are themselves settlers, though the IDF leadership has spoken out against these attacks. Additionally, the Gaza war has led to increased psychological fatigue within the armed forces, decreased operational discipline, and growing animosity toward Palestinians.

One particularly serious incident occurred on March 28 in the village of Jinba—part of the Masafer Yatta area of the South Hebron Hills, currently the most volatile friction zone between Hilltop Youth and Palestinians in Area C. Dozens of settlers **attacked** (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/idf-arrests-over-20-palestinians-after-settlers-raid-southern-west-bank-village/>) Palestinian residents and property, injuring at least six, four of whom required hospitalization. In addition, IDF soldiers operating there “**vandalized and damaged equipment** (<https://www.idf.il/en/mini-sites/idf-press-releases-israel-at-war/march-25-pr/summary-of-the-inquiry-on-the-vandalism-during-the-operation-in-jinba/>),” according to an IDF inquiry into the incident. The military leadership responded with harsh disciplinary measures, arresting several junior officers and soldiers.

Additional factors contributing to the recent surge in settler violence include: low motivation among law enforcement authorities (primarily the police) to address Jewish terrorism; the weakened status of the ISA; and perceptions that the Trump administration, **having lifted sanctions** (https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/trump-revokes-biden-executive-order-imposing-sanctions-on-violent-israeli-settlers/) imposed by the Biden administration on thirty individuals and organizations associated with settler violence, is more sympathetic toward Jewish settlement activity in the West Bank.

While Israel considers the West Bank one of several active fronts in the war it has been fighting since October 7, the territory has been a secondary theater so far, at least in terms of Israeli casualties. However, this could change if local violence by far-right elements intensifies. This front has the greatest potential to exact a significant toll on Israel in terms of lives lost, diplomatic fallout, and the diversion of substantial resources to contain it.

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