Extremist Settler Terrorism and Violence in the West Bank: New Data Calls for a New Strategy

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Brief Analysis

Acts of violence by extremist settlers have risen sharply in scale and severity, shifting from largely reactive incidents to a more proactive, strategic effort aimed at displacing Palestinian communities and seizing territory.

Despite differences in how various agencies collect and define extremist settler violence in the West Bank, all available information shows that the problem has steadily expanded over the past three years, as reflected in the boldness of the perpetrators and the number, severity, geographic spread, and growing level of organization behind these actions. In practice, such violence has become part of a broader set of coercive measures aimed at pressuring Palestinian communities to abandon their property, thereby consolidating Jewish control over these areas. Apart from the dangers posed to Palestinian civilians, this shift holds substantial risks for Israel's international legitimacy, the rule of law in the West Bank, and the future of any possible diplomatic resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. An effective response must be founded on three essential pillars—policy, policing, and intelligence-driven prevention—but all three are currently showing fatal cracks.

What the Data Shows

In general, two different measurement systems are used to track incidents of extremist settler violence. The Israel Defense Forces (IDF), Israel Security Agency (ISA), and Israel Police use a military security framework that counts only physical assaults, shootings, stone throwing, and arson. By contrast, UN agencies and human rights organizations also count threats, intimidation, roadblocks, and property damage. Yet while the tallies differ, the trend is the same: both datasets show a sharp and sustained rise in the level and frequency of violence against Palestinians in the West Bank, especially since the October 7, 2023, attacks.

According to IDF data, the number of "nationalist crime" incidents (the terminology used for physical assaults) rose to 870 in 2025, up from 495 the previous year. Similarly, attacks classified as "severe" rose from 83 to 120.

Palestinian fatality rates are rising as well, with the ISA reporting 15 killed in settler attacks from January to August 2026, nearly twice the 8 killed in all of 2025.

Meanwhile, according to data collected by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) between January and July 2026, extremist settlers carried out 1,380 attacks across roughly 250 communities, resulting in injuries to approximately 900 Palestinians (some of them at the hands of Israeli security forces during local operations spurred by these confrontations). OCHA data **further shows (https://www.ochaopt.org/content/humanitarian-situation-report-4-september-2026)** that the monthly average of such incidents increased nearly fourteenfold between 2020 and 2026.

Changing motives have also produced a qualitative shift in the violence. Whereas most extremist settler attacks were previously driven by revenge or a desire to establish deterrence following Palestinian terrorist attacks (e.g., so-called "price tag" incidents), perpetrators no longer seem primarily motivated by those factors. This shift is partly due to the decline in Palestinian terrorism in the West Bank and Jerusalem. According to ISA data, Palestinian attacks dropped from 414 in 2023 to 68 in 2025; in the first half of 2026, just 21 attacks were recorded. Israeli fatalities from such attacks likewise declined, from 46 in 2024 to 25 last year and only 3 this year as of July.

With fewer Palestinian attacks to avenge, settler violence has become less a reactive phenomenon and more a proactive tool in the struggle for presence and control in the West Bank. Most perpetrators reside in, or operate from, outposts and farms erected in the empty, open areas between Jewish and Palestinian communities rather than established settlement blocs (for more on these sites, see the next section). In addition to physical assaults, they usually commit other violations that signal their broader intent to force Palestinians out, such as preventing access to agricultural land; destroying crops, olive trees, and farming equipment; vandalizing homes and water/electricity infrastructure; and stealing or killing livestock.

Previously, these intercommunal attacks occurred mainly in Area C, the portion of the West Bank placed under full Israeli control by the Oslo Accords. Yet recent months have seen a shift toward Area B (Palestinian civil administration and Israeli security control) and even Area A (full Palestinian control). For instance, areas near the northern village of Qusra—located partly in Area B and partly in Area C—have seen frequent but discrete extremist attacks evolve into sustained pressure, culminating in a **de facto siege (https://www.timesofisrael.com/still-no-arrests-over-settler-attack-on-qusra-though-some-suspects-are-identifiable/)** beginning in August. Extremist violence has also expanded southward since 2023 after previously focusing on northern parts of the West Bank.

Who Are the Attackers, and Who Supports Them?

The hard core of extremist settlers who carry out most of the violence consists of roughly 300-500 activists. Most of them are young men age 13-19 who reside in isolated outposts, and many are part of the so-called "Hilltop Youth" (HY). Although some of them come from established settler families, they generally exhibit characteristics associated with at-risk youths: dropping out of school, disconnecting from social and family networks, living without adult supervision, and in some cases amassing prior criminal records. Operating in small groups, they develop extreme ideological identities that are nurtured by living in environments with no clear boundaries and minimal law enforcement, allowing them to transform previous patterns of delinquency into what they frame as an "ideological mission."

Many of these young men work (and sometimes live) on local "green farms" and use them as launch points for their attacks. The farm owners are usually neither young nor socially marginal, but they provide indirect support for the perpetrators by giving them access to steady income, land, and logistical infrastructure. According to data from the Farms Association, the number of such sites has nearly doubled to more than 100 farms since the Gaza war, encompassing around 250,000 acres of land across the West Bank and greatly expanding the operational space

available to these extremists.

There is no formal chain of authority, however—these young perpetrators operate through a decentralized, nonhierarchical structure. They do use a few geographic hubs as spaces for socialization and ideological reinforcement, most prominently the settlement of Yitzhar just south of Nablus. Although this is not a command center, it is an environment in which radical ideas receive greater legitimacy and influential rabbinical, ideological, and social figures are active.

Some of these key religious figures are devotees of Rabbi Yitzchak Ginsburgh and the "Od Yosef Chai" yeshiva. They do not issue operational instructions to violent extremists, but their teachings create a conceptual foundation that perpetrators often use to justify their actions. For instance, in an article published September 11 in the Israeli newspaper *Makor Rishon*, Rabbi Menachem Ben-Shahar—a leading radical figure who was arrested in October 2025 for incitement to violence—declared that the Hilltop Youth are engaged in a "moral and precise struggle" and should be emulated. The article included testimony from one extremist who admitted to stealing property from Palestinians—an explicit example of how actors operating outside the law are being publicly legitimized. Similarly, ideological and political activists such as Meir Ettinger and Elisha Yered often shape radical narratives within the broader settler community, reinforcing a sense of mission among violent extremists without guiding their specific actions. (Though other leading figures in the settlements—including council heads and prominent rabbis such as Melamed Mehr Brachawho—have condemned acts of violence against Palestinians, pointing out that they are contrary to the Torah and harmful to the settlements.)

The spike in violence also aligns with the growing trend of Israeli territorial expansion in Area C, reflecting dynamics present in government policy. Since October 2023, Israeli ministries have taken a series of steps to increase the number of weapons and related equipment in the hands of settlers (particularly in farms and outposts) and strengthen their organizational capacity:

- **The Ministry of National Security, led by Itamar Ben-Gvir, has created civilian rapid-response teams equipped and authorized similarly to police units. Although these teams operate under IDF command during security incidents, their policing powers originate from Ben-Gvir's ministry.**
- **According to data from ACLED, the Ministry of Defense has recruited approximately 5,500 settlers into "regional defense" reserve units stationed near settlements.**
- **The Ministry of National Security has expanded citizens' eligibility for personal firearm licenses, while the Defense Ministry has facilitated wider distribution of weapons in West Bank settlements.**
- **The government has provided Polaris Ranger off-road vehicles to settlements for defensive purposes, but extremist elements have increasingly used them to reach friction points more quickly, harass Palestinian farmers and shepherds, and transfer weapons, equipment, and personnel between farms and outposts.**

Although these government efforts have strengthened defense capabilities in the settlements, they have also blurred the line between security activity and ideological/territorial activism. This is particularly evident in farms and outposts, where armed residents often simultaneously serve as defenders, reserve soldiers, and leading players in the struggle for land control. In some cases, this government assistance has become a force multiplier in displacing Palestinians.

Security and Political Risks for the Palestinian Authority

According to OCHA, forty-seven Palestinian communities totaling around 6,200 people were permanently displaced between 2023 and July 2026 due to extremist settler violence and Israeli government access restrictions. In response, local Palestinian defense groups ("guard committees") have emerged in some West Bank communities, particularly in Area B. These groups document settler activity, alert human rights organizations, and

sometimes engage in blocking roads, throwing stones, and confronting settlers.

These groups are currently unarmed, and there is no evidence that Palestinian Authority or Fatah personnel are encouraging the formation of armed committees. Yet the risk of armed escalation is real. For example, on July 24, during a "hike" (a frequent euphemism for organized patrols) by settlers in the Palestinian village of Tal near Nablus, a Palestinian seized one settler's weapon, killed the settler, and likely also killed an IDF officer who arrived at the scene. Four Palestinians were killed in the subsequent IDF response. And on September 7, a Palestinian was killed after attempting to stab a settler who was present in Qusra—part of a confrontation that included a group of settlers attempting to establish an illegal outpost atop a Palestinian home.

So far, the PA has sought to counter extremist settler violence with nonviolent measures such as providing financial and technical assistance to affected communities, documenting settler activity, filing complaints to international bodies, and supporting the establishment of "guard committees." Yet its inability to protect civilians risks further eroding its legitimacy and governance capacity—a scenario that could gradually produce a security vacuum, draw in Palestinian terrorist groups like Hamas, and/or spur local residents to take up weapons in their own defense. Alternatively, the PA may decide to turn a blind eye to terrorist activity or even confront settlers and IDF units itself. Either way, the resulting cycle of action and reaction could destabilize the West Bank's entire security and political order.

Israeli Political Context

Although the Israeli government does not officially support extremist settler violence, it is difficult to dismiss the perception among most perpetrators that their actions align with broader government policy in the West Bank. Jerusalem's restrained enforcement practices have only bolstered this perception.

To illustrate: according to Israel Police data reported in July, investigations related to "nationalist crimes" against Palestinians have increased sharply in recent years, from 139 cases in 2019 to 779 in 2025, with the most significant surge occurring since 2023. Despite this trend, however, the rate of prosecutions remains very low: only 52 indictments were filed in 2025, representing just 6.6 percent of all cases. Meanwhile, Defense Minister Israel Katz announced the cessation of administrative detention orders against Jewish suspects in the West Bank—a practice by which military authorities can hold individuals suspected of posing security threats without formally charging them—while maintaining that policy for Palestinians. He reaffirmed his refusal to sign such orders this year. Yet media reports indicate that his decision contradicted intelligence recommendations to resume such detentions for certain violent extremists, which ISA officials deemed a necessity in some cases due to the difficulty of converting intelligence into evidence that would be admissible in non-military courts.

In addition, Katz **announced (https://www.timesofisrael.com/katz-idf-has-2-weeks-to-draft-plan-to-hand-west-bank-civilian-enforcement-to-police/)** in August that responsibility for law enforcement action against West Bank settlers would be transferred from the IDF to the Israel Police, an agency subordinate to Ben-Gvir. Although this was presented as a necessary professional shift, the practical effect will likely be a significant enforcement gap given Ben-Gvir's policy preferences and the chronic manpower shortages in the West Bank police district. The transfer will also deepen the use of Israeli civil institutions to exercise governmental powers in the West Bank, thereby narrowing the practical distinction between the settlements and Israel.

More broadly, Bezalel Smotrich—who heads the Finance Ministry and also holds key settlements-related authorities inside the Defense Ministry—used the occasion of the upcoming parliamentary election to present **a four-year plan (https://www.timesofisrael.com/smotrich-takes-steps-to-make-his-major-settlement-policy-shift-harder-to-reverse/)** aimed at establishing irreversible Israeli control in the West Bank. A central component of this plan is increasing state land takeovers and control of open areas through the expansion of farms and outposts, while

simultaneously eroding the PA's powers in these areas. Hence, even though the state does not directly orchestrate extremist settler violence, these incidents often produce outcomes that align with the current government's goals.

Policy Recommendations: Four Parallel Tracks

Taken together, the troubling dynamics described above pose multiple systemic risks, including the accelerated erosion of the PA's legitimacy and governance capacity, the proliferation of Palestinian "guard committees" that could morph into armed militias, and more frequent cycles of Israeli-Palestinian escalation. Internationally, the sharp rise in extremist settler violence is increasingly viewed not as a domestic law and order issue, but as part of what some call Israel's de facto annexation policy. This raises the likelihood of expanded foreign sanctions against Israeli settlements (e.g., witness the new **European trade ban (https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/settlements-trade-ban-europe-and-israel-collision-course-over-west-bank)**), construction firms, surveillance technologies, and even arms exports. Unless Jerusalem shifts its strategy, these trends could destabilize the West Bank and severely damage Israel's strategic standing. Four lines of action are especially crucial:

Rebuild law enforcement in the West Bank. A fundamental restructuring of the West Bank enforcement system to address this phenomenon should include:

- fully reactivating all criminal and administrative enforcement tools required to confront extremist violence;
- dismantling illegal outposts and removing unauthorized farms that serve as hubs for territorial expansion and violent activity;
- confiscating weapons and equipment from individuals who use them unlawfully;
- implementing strict oversight mechanisms for civilian possession of firearms in the West Bank, and limiting access to these weapons in sensitive areas;
- restoring the ISA's administrative and intelligence enforcement capabilities in the West Bank, which could enable effective, timely action against violent networks and incitement;
- returning enforcement authority to the IDF in Area C until police capabilities are significantly strengthened, which could facilitate more rapid and effective responses to incidents.

Establish a dedicated counterterrorism task force. Addressing ideologically driven violence requires long-term, coordinated efforts along multiple fronts, so Israel should establish a permanent interagency task force on extremist settler violence, pulling together the IDF, ISA, the West Bank district of the Israel Police, and the Civil Administration. Officials should also formulate a multiyear plan to neutralize extremist violence through intelligence collection, monitoring of friction points, and other preventive action, while simultaneously building tight intelligence coordination and rapid-response mechanisms for severe incidents. This approach would enable authorities to tackle the problem systematically rather than simply reacting to individual events.

Help stabilize the Palestinian arena. Despite its weaknesses, the PA remains a critical stabilizing actor in the West Bank: it reduces daily friction, limits the local expansion of Palestinian terrorist organizations, and enables Israel to reduce its own direct security involvement. As such, further weakening the PA would create a dangerous governance vacuum. Israel has several means to help prevent that scenario, such as resuming the transfer of PA clearance revenues after fully suspending them last year; bolstering Palestinian security forces (e.g., by easing their movement, improving tactical intelligence coordination, authorizing nonlethal equipment, and refraining from IDF incursions in areas where PA forces are capable of operating independently); expanding joint economic activity under security screening; and reducing opportunities for daily friction between Palestinian civilians and Israeli security forces.

Adopt a firm public stand against the actions of extremist settlers. Extremist settler violence is accelerating the erosion of Israel's legitimacy abroad and intensifying criticism from key allies. To halt this trend, senior government

officials should issue unequivocal condemnations of such violence; maintain continuous dialogue with allies (including in Europe) on law enforcement reforms in order to demonstrate Israel's commitment to good governance and the rule of law; and take visible enforcement actions that show authorities are consistently addressing ideological violence regardless of the perpetrators' identity.

In considering these and other urgent changes in the coming months, officials should not discount the extent to which extremist settler violence damages the state of Israel itself—whether by weakening the rule of law, undermining governance, providing ammunition to Israel's harshest critics, narrowing its strategic room for maneuver, or all of the above. The security establishment and Israeli research institutes have provided **frequent warnings (https://www.inss.org.il/publication/jewish-terror-alert/)** about the dangers of this threat, but the state's ability to confront it has eroded due to weak enforcement, lack of deterrence, and government policies that constrain security agencies' authority to act. Across the West Bank, rapidly multiplying networks of farms and outposts have become centers of violence, with some government ministers supporting the infrastructure from which this violence emerges.

In short, the problem is much more serious than an enforcement failure. It has become a systemic failure—a solution to which requires a determined and systematic response.

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