

Violence by Extremists in the Jewish Settler Movement: A Rising Challenge

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Brief Analysis

Thirteen years after the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, Israeli security officials are expressing heightened concern that a new wave of violent extremism among fringe elements in the Jewish settler movement threatens not only Palestinian civilians, but also Israeli national security and the future of any potential peace diplomacy.

Recent Trends in Violence by a Settler Fringe

The vast majority of the approximately 300,000 Israelis living in West Bank settlements are law-abiding citizens. An extremist fringe element within the settler movement, however, has been responsible for a substantial increase in violent incidents. According to a November 2008 report by Israeli daily Yediot Aharonot, security officials recorded 675 cases of violent activity perpetrated by Israeli settlers against Palestinians and Israeli security forces from January to November 2008. These incidents include assault, causing damage to property, trespassing, violating orders, using a weapon, and "causing death."

Prosecutors opened 515 of these criminal cases so far this year, an increase of 11 percent from 2007. Of these, 13 involved what the newspaper termed "left wing anarchists," while 502 involved "right wing radicals." The majority of alleged perpetrators were adults with no prior criminal record and were not, as widely assumed, teenagers. Of these, 197 people were jailed and 105 indictments filed, compared to 61 in 2007. Israeli officials are disturbed by the focus on Israel Defense Forces (IDF) personnel involved in dismantling settlement outposts; at times, they are being attacked or held at knifepoint.

This violence appears to be part of a deliberate campaign by a committed core of fringe settlers to prevent the dismantlement of settlements and outposts. They are using a strategy called the "price tag," which is a retaliation for government efforts challenging the settlement enterprise in the West Bank. Largely perpetrated by members of the "hilltop youth" -- a loosely organized group of belligerent young settlers -- this tactic attempts to pin down troops in various locations by blocking traffic, setting fields on fire, throwing rocks, and other acts of small-scale violence against local Palestinians and members of the Israeli security forces.

The price-tag strategy concerns Israeli authorities, since it encourages the radical fringe to take the law into its own

hands, as demonstrated by the reprisal on the Palestinian village of Asira al-Qibliya on September 13. Riled by the stabbing of a young boy during a botched robbery in their settlement, about 150 Jewish settlers from Yitzhar stormed the village, damaged and set fire to property, and shot Palestinian residents. The raid's violence and lawlessness shocked Israeli leaders; Prime Minister Ehud Olmert condemned the attack as a "pogrom." More ominously, Israeli Security Agency (ISA or Shin Bet) chief Yuval Diskin has warned the cabinet that the radical fringe perceives the price-tag policy as successful and that the group is threatening to expand the use of violence outside the West Bank.

Pipe Bomb Attack

The September 25 pipe bomb attack on Israeli professor and prominent peace activist Zeev Sternhell outside his Jerusalem home suggests that some extremists may already be engaging in price-tag attacks in Israel proper. Although Rabin's assassin was a lone gunman acting on the extremist ideology of unorganized fellow travelers, the Sternhell attack appears to have been the result of an organized group of right-wing extremists seeking to incite like-minded individuals to action.

According to Israeli public security minister Avi Dichter, the bombing was believed to be an ideologically motivated terrorist act perpetrated by radical Jewish extremists intent on killing Sternhell. In Sternhell's neighborhood, investigators found pamphlets, signed the "Army of Liberators," offering 1.1 million shekels (roughly \$320,000) to anyone who kills a member of Peace Now, a left-wing Israeli group. The pamphlet stated, "The State of Israel, our 2000-year-old dream, has become a nightmare. This country is ruled by a mob of wicked people, haters of the Torah who want to erase the laws of God. . . The state of Israel has become our enemy. . . The time has come to set up a state of Jewish law in Judea and Samaria. The time has come for the Kingdom of Judea."

The pamphlet echoes long-stated fringe propaganda, but Israeli security officials fear it represents an extremist threat that has evolved since the days of the Temple Mount Underground (a Jewish terrorist group that plotted to blow up the Dome of the Rock mosque in the early 1980s). Although the perpetrators of this attack have not been identified, security forces state that a new, organized Jewish underground may be responsible for the bombing and could be planning additional strikes.

A Rising Threat

The threat of violent extremism among the fringes of the settler movement tends to be cyclical, based closely on Israeli-Palestinian negotiations and unilateral Israeli government efforts to dismantle settlements and outposts. For example, the Yediot Aharonot article noted that the ISA recorded 300 strands of intelligence relating to extremist threats on people or public institutions during the July 2000 peace talks at Camp David, when Jerusalem was a centerpiece of negotiations. The number of such threats fell to 100 in the year after the Camp David talks, but in 2005, with the unilateral withdrawal from Gaza looming, the number rose again to 150. Authorities have not indicated how many possible threats they face today, but Diskin has assessed that the fringe elements are "preparing for war."

While violent extremism among the fringe of the settler movement is not a new phenomenon (see [PolicyWatch # 470 \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=2161\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=2161)), Israeli authorities state that the most recent threat represents a new dynamic. According to Maj. Gen. Gadi Shamni, head of the IDF Central Command, the number of settlers willing to use violence against the state has grown exponentially, from a handful to hundreds. According to General Shamni, "In the past, only a few dozen individuals were implicated in [attacks against Palestinians and Israeli soldiers]. Today, we are talking about several hundred people -- a very significant change." General Shamni warns that "an extreme incident could happen at any time. These people are conspiring against the Palestinians and against the [Israeli] security forces."

Following the experience of Israel's unilateral withdrawal from the Gaza Strip -- Hamas's subsequent electoral victory, its military takeover of Gaza, and its use of northern Gaza as a launchpad for mortar and rocket attacks against southern Israel -- Israeli officials fear that the lesson learned by these fringe extremists in the settler movement is that withdrawal from any West Bank hilltop or community must bear a significant cost, or price tag, for Israeli security forces, decisionmakers, and those, like Sternhell, who support such policies. Shamni, for example, cited recent cases in which the radicals sicced a dog on an Israeli reserve commander, broke a deputy battalion commander's arm, and slashed the tires of reservist vehicles.

The outgoing Israeli government has recently spoken out against the rising violence, with Olmert stating, "An evil wind of extremism, of hate, of maliciousness, of violence, of losing control, of lawbreaking, of contempt for the institutions of state, is passing through certain sections of the Israeli public." Although the extent to which this violence represents the beginning of a new Jewish extremist underground is uncertain, the Shin Bet found "a very high willingness [among radicals]. . . to use violence -- not just stones, but live weapons -- in order to prevent or halt a diplomatic process."

Conclusion

In relative terms, the violence perpetrated by radical elements among the Jewish settler movement pales in comparison to the well-orchestrated, highly public, popularly supported lethal attacks of radical Palestinian groups such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad. This fringe group of Jewish extremists has so far not carried out a fatal terrorist attack, while Islamist groups have killed hundreds of Israelis and Palestinians. Perhaps most importantly, the leaders of Israel's government and society repudiate these Jewish extremists, whereas Islamist groups are celebrated in popular media, supported by official institutions, and funded by governments throughout the Middle East.

This sense of proportionality, however, does not obscure the fact that Israeli security officials are increasingly concerned about the trajectory of recent events. This concern points to the substantial increase in the organization of the extremist elements within the settler movement and their willingness to use force to advance their goals. With the likelihood of Israeli-Palestinian reengagement in early 2009, Israeli security officials will surely devote additional attention and much-needed manpower to this potential threat.

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