

## The Wild, Wild West Bank: Settler Violence

By Liza Burr

While the eyes of the world are riveted on Syria, settlers continue to colonize Palestinian land. Violence is perpetrated against Palestinians as a form of ethnic cleansing as the U.S., Israel's biggest supporter, turns a blind eye.

In an article published in the June/July 2013 issue of the Washington Report on Middle East Affairs, news editor Delinda Hanley states that "Israeli society as a whole is becoming more racist," and that "it should come as no surprise that a settler state based on the rule of one ethnic group would be steeped in racist, religiously exclusive public policies." Hanley's cogent words summarize the national context for the phenomenon of Israeli settler violence against Palestinians in the occupied West Bank; since late 2011, settlers have also attacked Palestinian targets inside Israel. The international context is provided by international law, specifically the Fourth Geneva Convention, which is violated simply by the existence of any and all Israeli settlements – a euphemism for "colonies" – in the West Bank. Thus a fact sheet issued by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) in November 2011 notes that "the root cause of the settler violence phenomenon is Israel's decades-long policy of illegally facilitating the settling of its citizens inside occupied Palestinian territory."



Palestinians attempt to put out fire in an olive grove near the West Bank village of Burin, near Nablus, 3 June. Palestinian witnesses said settlers from Yitzhar settlement set fire to an olive grove, scorching several acres of trees. (Nedal Eshtayah /APA images)

The trend is toward greater settler violence. Yousef Munayyer of the Palestine Center reports a "noticeable increase in settler violence" since 2006. The Palestine Center published a paper on Israeli settler violence on February 14, 2012, entitled, "When Settlers Attack," which calculates more than 3,700 violent incidents between

2004 and 2011. Incidents are said to occur on an almost daily basis. According to the UN OCHA fact sheet cited above, “The number of settler attacks resulting in Palestinian casualties and property damage increased...by over 144%” from 2009 to 2011. Among violent actions by settlers, it lists “physical assaults, harassment, takeover of and damage to private property, [blocking] access to grazing and agricultural land,” as well as injuring animals and land. Settlers poison wells, send their waste down onto lower-lying Palestinian villages, uproot olive trees, burn fields and structures, and stone children. The OCHA warns that “nearly 250,000 Palestinians” located in “80 communities [are] vulnerable to settler violence”; 76,000 of these “are at high-risk.”

As part of their strategy, settlers who practice violence toward Palestinians have adopted what they call a “price tag” policy. As explained by the Israeli human rights organization B’Tselem, this policy (implemented “in recent years”) uses the “price tag” label to justify settler aggression by presenting such aggression as retaliation for “actions by Israeli authorities that are perceived [to harm] the settlement enterprise.” In other words, any Israeli government action construed as opposing settlements will produce more settler violence. B’Tselem remarks that another motive for “price tag” attacks can be “Palestinian violence against settlers,” and that the settler attacks may target “Israeli security forces” in addition to Palestinians.

In that regard, it bears mentioning that the Israeli organization Yesh Din, Volunteers for Human Rights, published a report on July 24, 2013, accusing the “Israeli authorities” of enabling “Jewish terrorism” on the West Bank by not prosecuting it. Less than 10% of cases known to Yesh Din lead to indictments under the jurisdiction of the Israeli Judea and Samaria/West Bank District Police. However, Yesh Din holds the Israeli military (IDF), rather than the police, ultimately responsible for failing “to defend the Palestinian population from Jewish marauders.” They emphasize that such protection by the IDF of the occupied population is obligatory not only under international law but also as a result of Israeli High Court of Justice decisions. However, if the lawless behavior of Israeli settlers toward Palestinians is understood as a component of the Israeli government’s actual long-term ethnic cleansing program vis-à-vis the Palestinians, this helps to account for the overall complicity by Israeli authorities (both police and army) with Israeli settler violence. [The well-known series of four postcards showing Palestinian loss of land since 1947 is the most concise and persuasive evidence for the state of Israel’s ethnic cleansing agenda.]



Israeli settlers

Photo: International Middle East Media Center

While recognition of the government-military endorsement of settler violence is essential, to me the heart of the matter is the physical and psychological impact on West Bank Palestinians of this warrior behavior from their more fanatical, outlaw settler neighbors, whose campaign to remove them from their land is motivated by ideological extremism, racism, and exclusivism. These Palestinians have already endured more than 46 years of oppressive, illegal Israeli military occupation. Accounts by two Palestinian women of their personal experience of settler violence published in the Spring 2013 issue of *Cornerstone*, a Sabeel publication, left a deep impression.

The first account is by Fatima (38), who drove with her husband and three children on a Saturday in late February 2013 to plant almond trees and tend their land outside of Qusra, the village where they live not far from the city of Nablus north of Ramallah. After working all morning they were drinking tea in their shed, when five Israeli settlers from the settlement of Esh Kodesh appeared with guns, shouting and swearing. After she and her husband left the shed to try to deal with the intrusion, before they could return to their children, one of the settlers positioned “about 50 meters away...started shooting in our direction.” She writes, “I was terrified and thought I was going to be killed on the spot.” No Israeli soldiers were anywhere to be seen. Fatima and her husband managed to reach their car, “parked...a few meters away,” without being shot; the settlers threw stones at close range as they drove away. Their children “miraculously...escaped” from the shed on their own, and there were no physical injuries; yet Fatima has clearly suffered from PTSD. It was later discovered that the settlers had uprooted trees and damaged the shed. This was not an isolated incident, she says: indeed, “it happens all the time.”

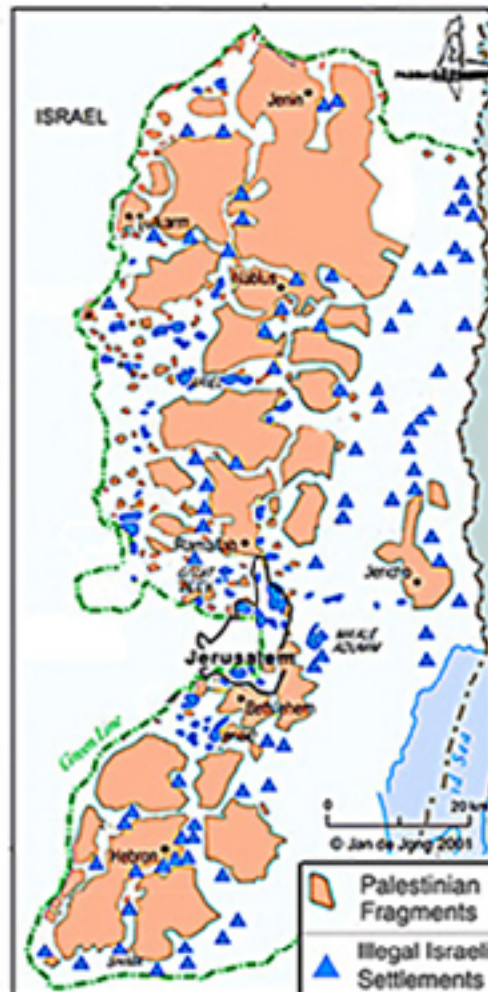
## Fragmentation of Land on the West Bank Blocks Creation of a Viable Palestinian State

"Everybody has to move, run and grab as many hilltops as they can ... Everything we don't grab will go to them."

Ariel Sharon, 1998

"We'll make a pastrami sandwich of them. We'll insert a strip of Jewish settlement, in between the Palestinians, and then another strip of Jewish settlement, right across the West Bank, so that in 25 years time, neither the United Nations, nor the United States, nobody, will be able to tear it apart."

Ariel Sharon, 1973  
to Winston Churchill III



INFORMATION: [IfAmericansKnew.org](http://IfAmericansKnew.org); Foundation for ME Peace: [FMER.org](http://FMER.org)  
Israelis for Human Rights: [BTSELEM.org](http://BTSELEM.org); PalestinianInitiative: [MIFTAH.org](http://MIFTAH.org)

Mapcard with quotes: Friends of Sabeel  
[fosna.org](http://fosna.org)

The second account, by Khadra (43), narrates an incident during which a Palestinian youth was shot in the head by a settler from the hilltop settlement of Yitzhar at the village of Asira Al-Qibliyeh also in the Nablus area. This incident likewise took place on a Saturday (May 19, 2012), the Jewish Sabbath. Attacks by "radical settlers" from Yitzhar on the villagers are frequent, according to Khadra. This time a group of armed settlers walked toward the village, unarmed village men walked out to stop the settlers, stones were thrown back and forth, and then several settlers began shooting with their weapons. This "very tense," unequal confrontation lasted for two hours. When they appeared, the Israeli soldiers "did almost nothing. Then [the soldiers] shot tear gas and everybody started to clear the area." Khadra concludes, "I

could not sleep that night. It is a disturbing feeling to know we are completely on our own; nobody is there to help or protect us.”

Perhaps the most concentrated and shocking example of settler violence toward Palestinians under occupation is the situation in the Palestinian city of Hebron on the West Bank south of Bethlehem. In the 1990s, after the Oslo agreement (1993), Israel divided Hebron into two parts: H1 under the Palestinian Authority, and H2 under the IDF. In addition to “approximately 30,000 Palestinians,” H2 houses from 400 to 800 Israeli settlers, guarded by about 1,500 Israeli soldiers. The settlers aggress against their Palestinian neighbors by harassing children on their way to or from school, throwing objects such as rocks, breaking into homes, writing graffiti on house walls (“kill all Arabs,” “gas the Arabs,” “exterminate the Muslims,” etc.), and more: in one incident “settlers brought dogs to attack children playing in a field,” and in another “a settler attempted to run over” a boy of 15 “with a minibus.” Instead of stopping these horrific attacks and arresting the perpetrators, the IDF soldiers impose curfews on the Palestinians and otherwise restrict their movement, arrest and detain Palestinian youth (even children), and unleash violence themselves with such weapons as M4 rifles and grenades. Journalist Sarah Lazare writes that Hebron “has become ground zero for an ethnic cleansing campaign waged by settlers with the complicity of the Israeli army.”

From a safe distance, settler violence could be considered “the icing on the cake” of the deeply entrenched structural violence represented by Israel’s colonial settlements, now home to at least 600,000 Israelis, the majority of them enticed by government subsidies. As Israeli-Palestinian “peace talks” resumed in the middle of August, Israel announced the phased release of 104 Palestinian prisoners (from a total of around 4,500 prisoners) along with the addition of approximately 2,000 new “housing units” to seven settlements: three of them in illegally annexed East Jerusalem, and four in the occupied West Bank. Needless to say, colonies and peace do not go together. The Palestinian position preceding the talks had been that no negotiations could proceed if Israeli settlement expansion continued. Given the extreme power differential between the two parties and the U.S. government’s unqualified support for the stronger party, the Israeli government knew that it could impose its will with impunity regardless of Palestinian wishes.

One recommended step for readers to take is to tell Congress and Secretary of State John Kerry by letter, email, and phone that Americans firmly oppose Israeli settlement construction, settler violence, and ethnic cleansing, and that the U.S. government must stop its billions of dollars of aid paid annually to Israel if these egregious actions – which completely contradict a just peace – continue.

Liza Burr has visited Palestine/Israel a number of times since 1970, and is a member of the WAMM Middle East Committee.

1. p. 39.
2. See the article by Jonathan Cook in the December 2011 issue of WRMEA.
3. Sr. Florence Steichen, past president of Middle East Peace Now, in a talk given on August 8, 2013, at St. Catherine University's Summer Chautauqua.
4. Sabeel identifies itself as "an ecumenical grassroots liberation theology movement among Palestinian Christians."
5. Most of this paragraph is indebted to Lazare's article, "Palestinians in Hebron: 'To Be Here Is a Form of Resistance,'" published on April 27, 2013, by Truthout.
6. Just Foreign Policy (in an email dated August 17, 2013) highlighted the ongoing eviction movement by Israeli settlers against Palestinian residents of Sheikh Jarrah in East Jerusalem. And on July 14, 2013, the website of ICAHD (the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions) reported on continuing settler persecution of the Jaber family in the Hebron area since at least 2000: "In short, settler violence is NEVER investigated and settlers are NEVER arrested, even if the police are on the scene of the crime. The goal: to terrorize the Palestinians to leave their land, which would then be grabbed up by settlers in the name of the state of Israel. If anyone tries to tell you that Israel does not engage in ethnic cleansing or that what it does is for reasons of 'security,' take them to the Jaber family."