

Civilians or Soldiers? **SETTLER VIOLENCE** in the West Bank





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CIVILIANS OR SOLDIERS? SETTLER VIOLENCE IN THE WEST BANK

Since February 2024, the United States has imposed a series of unprecedented sanctions linked to Israeli settlers in the West Bank for human rights violations. This includes two rounds of sanctions targeting a close associate of Israel's far-right national security minister, two entities that raised money for violent settlers, five settlers, and two illegal outposts.¹ President Joe Biden's administration is also reportedly considering imposing sanctions on an Israel Defense Forces (IDF) unit consisting of ultra-Orthodox and national religious soldiers, including 'hilltop youth' settlers, which the US has determined to have committed human rights abuses in the West Bank.² The United Kingdom, European Union,³ and Canada⁴ have also sanctioned a number of individual settlers and groups in recent months.

While violence in the West Bank is far from a new phenomenon, a sharp rise in settler violence in recent years turned into a tsunami following Hamas's attack on Israel on 7 October 2023. Emboldened by the Israeli far-right government,⁵ settlers see the ongoing war in Gaza as an opportunity to push forward their agenda of forcing Palestinians to leave their villages. According to B'Tselem, an Israel-based observatory of settler violence, settlers have forced at least 18 Palestinian communities — over 1,000 people — to flee their homes since October.⁶ ACLED records a notable increase in settler violence, including incidents involving armed settlers in recent months. A significant number of Israeli settlers have been armed over the past decades, reputedly for self-defense.⁷ Yet, the use of firearms by individual settlers remained sporadic in recent years. But since 7 October, there has been a significant increase in the number of settler violence involving firearms. Nine unarmed Palestinians have been killed by Israeli settlers during this period, while a further five have been killed either by settlers or IDF forces present on the scene.

¹ Simon Lewis, 'U.S. sanctions ally of Israeli minister, fundraisers over settlers,' Reuters, 19 April 2024

² Times of Israel, 'US holding off on penalties for IDF's Netzah Yehuda unit over West Bank rights abuses,' 26 April 2024

³ Jacob Magid, 'UK joins European Union in sanctioning supremacist Lehava group and extremist settlers,' Times of Israel, 3 May 2024

⁴ Al Jazeera, 'Canada sanctions Israeli settlers as attacks on Palestinians skyrocket,' 16 May 2024

⁵ Yolande Knell, 'Palestinian fears grow amid rising Israeli settler attacks,' BBC News, 28 August 2023

⁶ B'Tselem, 'Forcible transfer of isolated Palestinian communities and families in Area C under cover of Gaza fighting,' 17 April 2024

⁷ Amnesty International, 'Amnesty International Report Calls on Palestinian Armed Groups to Stop Civilian Killings,' 11 July 2002



Armed settlers operate in different capacities, ranging from private civilians owning handguns to settlement residents acting as part of civilian security squads and settler soldiers either as part of the regional defense battalions or as rank-and-file soldiers. This study assesses each of the different armed settler groups that have engaged in violence against Palestinians, with a focus on their activity since 7 October. ACLED data suggest the security situation in the West Bank is increasingly perilous as more settlers are armed, and the line between settlers and the army blurring. Over the past several decades, the settler movement has evolved from a small faction to a significant presence within the Israeli mainstream. Its members now hold key positions in government and the military, and their considerable political sway presents a serious obstacle to future peace efforts with Palestinians.

IDEOLOGICALLY MOTIVATED AND HEAVILY ARMED SETTLERS

Israeli settlements were initially established in the Jordan Valley by the Labor-led Israeli government following the 1967 occupation of the West Bank to serve as Israel's eastern security buffer.⁸ The settlements created during the initial 10 years of the occupation were agricultural communities predominantly inhabited by secular Zionists. Throughout the Likud government's tenure from 1977 to 1984, Israel intensified its expansionist policy, establishing over 80 new settlements in the West Bank. Many of these settlements were established along the central mountain ridge area that runs north to south and is heavily populated by Palestinians. Largely inhabited by religious Zionists driven by the ideology that settling the land is a religious duty, Israel explicitly pursued the objective of interrupting the demographic contiguity of Palestinians and solidifying its presence across the entire West Bank.⁹ While the pace of settlement establishment slowed in the subsequent years — especially after the signing of the 1992 peace accord — over 100 illegal outposts inhabited by religious Zionists have emerged across the West Bank since 1996.¹⁰ Today, an estimated 500,000 Israelis¹¹ reside in 147 settlements and 191 illegal outposts in Area C of the West Bank.¹² Moreover, 10% of the West Bank is located within the municipal boundaries of

⁸ Times of Israel, 'Labor chief: Jordan Valley settlements ensure security,' 19 October 2017

⁹ Shaul Arieli, 'West Bank Settlements,' Israel Policy Forum, 2022

¹⁰ Peace Now Settlements database, shared with ACLED in January 2021, see Peace Now, 'Settlements List,' 2023

¹¹ Associated Press, 'West Bank settler population grew by nearly 3% in 2023 — report,' 12 February 2024

¹² Peace Now, 'Population,' 2024, accessed on 27 May 2024

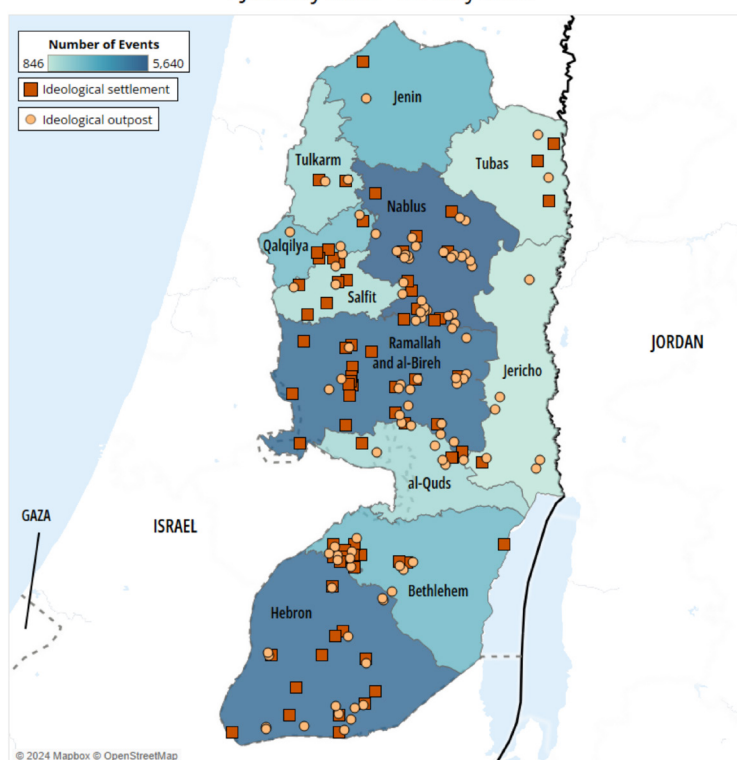


Israeli settlements, which, alongside vast open areas controlled by the settlements' regional councils, comprise approximately 40% of the total area in the West Bank.¹³ The presence and expansion of settlements in the West Bank continue to be a main source of tension and conflict and a flashpoint for violence.

Settlements scattered around densely populated Palestinian areas amplify security concerns as they can become potential targets for attacks by Palestinian armed groups or individual armed actors (*for more, see ACLED's study on [the activity of Palestinian armed groups in the West Bank](#)*). ACLED records nearly 45 civilian settler fatalities in the West Bank since the start of data collection in 2016, three of them since 7 October 2023. Furthermore, the existence of settlements deep within the West Bank requires a substantial presence by Israel's security forces for their protection, resulting in heightened tensions and clashes with the Palestinian population. Importantly, settlers are also often the perpetrators of violence against Palestinians, particularly those living in religious Zionist ideological settlements deep in the West Bank. The governorates of Ramallah, Nablus, and Hebron – which have the highest number of ideological Israeli settlements and unauthorized outposts¹⁴ – have also been consistently the scene of the highest total violence collected by ACLED in the West Bank (*see map below*).

Political Violence in the West Bank

1 January 2016 - 24 May 2024



Source for data on outposts and settlements: Peace Now

¹³ B'Tselem, 'Settlements,' 16 January 2019

¹⁴ Peace Now Settlements database, shared with ACLED in January 2021, see [Peace Now, 'Settlements List,' 2023](#)

¹⁵ Excluding al-Quds in East Jerusalem, which Israel has officially annexed and is not subject to military law.

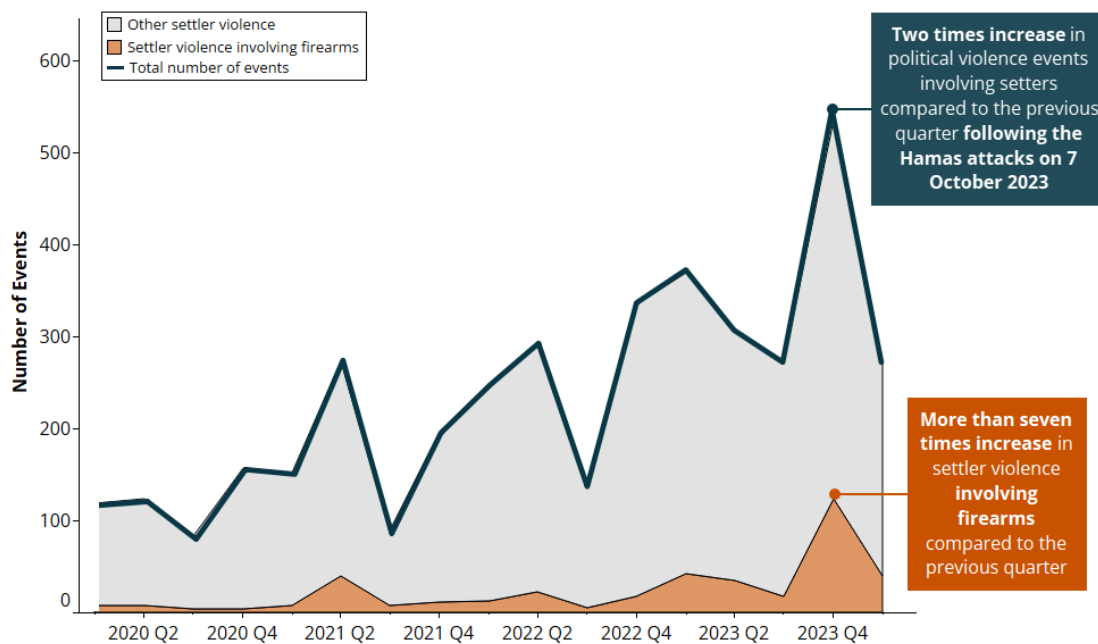


CIVILIANS OR SOLDIERS? SETTLER VIOLENCE IN THE WEST BANK

ACLED records over 5,350 violent incidents in the West Bank involving settlers since data collection began in 2016. Over the years, settlers targeted both Palestinians and their properties in various forms. These have ranged from throwing stones at Palestinians, their homes, and cars to setting fire to homes, businesses, farms, and other private properties. Palestinians are also subject to other abuses, which include settlers cutting down olive trees, damaging water infrastructure, and stealing, killing, and driving livestock off using various means, such as drones. Settler violence also includes the beating and, in the most extreme scenarios, shooting and killing of Palestinian civilians. The everyday violence that Palestinians in the West Bank encounter reached new record highs since the 7 October attacks.¹⁶ In the last quarter of 2023, over 535 violent incidents involved settlers in the West Bank – the highest quarterly total in the area recorded by ACLED (*see graph below*). According to the United Nations, in nearly half of all settler attacks documented in 2023, Israeli forces were either accompanying or actively supporting the settler perpetrators.¹⁷

Political Violence Involving Settlers in the West Bank

January 2020 - March 2024



¹⁶ Times of Israel, '2023 'most violent' year for West Bank settler attacks, watchdog says,' 1 January 2024

¹⁷ United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 'Human rights situation in Palestine and other occupied Arab territories,' 1 February 2024



Firearm violence by settlers without reported or visible link to either the settlement emergency squads or the IDF also spiked by more than seven times during this period compared to the preceding quarter.¹⁸ Since 7 October, Israeli settlers have carried out nearly 200 acts of violence using firearms. In another nearly 50 instances, settlers carrying arms have threatened and harassed Palestinians in other forms during this period.

In one of the deadliest attacks, a group of armed settlers — most of whom¹⁹ were neither part of settlement emergency squads nor were IDF reservist soldiers, according to Israeli officials²⁰ — attacked the Qusra village on 11 October, two days after threatening Palestinians with revenge on social media following the Hamas attack. After attempting to break into a home where a family — including small children — sheltered, settlers shot and killed three neighbors who arrived at the scene to help.²¹ Although the number of settler attacks subsided between January and May 2024 compared to its peak in the last quarter of 2023, settler violence has continued unabated. In mid-April, settlers killed at least three Palestinians over four days and injured dozens with firearms as they simultaneously attacked some 10 villages between Ramallah and Nablus after a teenage Israeli settler went missing and was later found dead following an attack by a Palestinian.²²

Before 7 October, about 150,000 Israelis, including settlers, had a license to own a gun, according to the National Security Ministry.²³ Private gun ownership in Israeli settlements is significantly higher than inside Israel, and 86 out of 100 towns with the largest percentage of gun license holders are settlements in the West Bank. For example, about one-third of all adults in the settlements of Adora northwest of Hebron have a gun license.²⁴ Even prior to the 7 October attack, the Israeli government considered that settlers were living in a ‘danger’ zone and had granted them preferred access to guns.²⁵ But the Hamas attack reportedly promoted fresh interest among even more settlers to acquire guns, with shooting ranges and training centers in settlements offering twice-daily training sessions.²⁶ Minister of National Security Itamar Ben-Gvir — who himself is a settler — has significantly eased regulations for firearm acquisition, including enabling telephone interviews as a substitute

¹⁸ However, it cannot be ruled out that the individual settlers may have links to emergency squads or the IDF that have not been reported

¹⁹ Yet, at least one member of the settlement emergency squad reportedly joined the crowd and fired shots that injured a 28-year old man; [United Nations Human Rights Council, ‘Israeli settlements in the occupied territory, including East Jerusalem, and in the Occupied Syrian Golan,’ 1 February 2024](#)

²⁰ Nilo Tabrizy, et al, ‘Settlers killed a Palestinian teen. Israeli forces didn’t stop it,’ [Washington Post](#), 9 January 2024

²¹ Zeena Saifi, Becky Anderson, and Kareem Khadder, ‘Gaza conflict spills into the West Bank as settler attacks and clashes leave dozens of Palestinians dead,’ [CNN](#), 19 October 2023

²² [BBC News](#), ‘Palestinian arrested over Israeli boy’s killing which sparked settler rampage,’ 22 April 2024

²³ Aaron Boxerman and Talya Minsberg, ‘Private Gun Ownership in Israel Spikes After Hamas Attacks,’ [New York Times](#), 15 December 2023

²⁴ Josh Breiner, ‘West Bank Settlements Have Highest Percentage of Gun Owners, New Data Shows,’ [Haaretz](#), 30 January 2024

²⁵ Gili Cohen, ‘Israel to Grant Preference to Settlers in Gun Licensing Procedure,’ [Haaretz](#), 14 April 2011

²⁶ Claire Parker, et al, ‘Israel wants civilians to arm up. Gun permit applications are soaring,’ [Washington Post](#), 9 December 2024



for in-person evaluations for eligible applicants.²⁷ By March 2024, Ben-Gvir announced that 100,000 new gun licenses had already been issued since 7 October.²⁸ While it is not clear how many of these licenses were issued to settlers in the West Bank, the number of civilian settlers owning guns is expected to have increased in recent months.

The war on Gaza waged by Israel's far-right government has enabled armed settlers to escalate violence against Palestinians, threatening them at gunpoint and shooting at them in dozens of instances.²⁹ Many of these incidents, including fatal shootings, have occurred in the presence of IDF soldiers. In one of the most dramatic events, settlers fatally shot at least one Palestinian on the way to a funeral south of Nablus while Israeli soldiers patrolled the street on 17 October.³⁰

QUASI-MILITARY 'SETTLEMENT EMERGENCY SQUADS' WITH REGIONAL AUTHORITY

On top of armed settlers operating on their own, there has been a reported rise in violence by armed settlers who are often in military fatigue since 7 October. Settlement emergency squads³¹ — known in Israel as *kitat konenut*³² — are quasi-military forces composed of civilian residents of the settlements and outposts, trained and equipped with IDF weapons but appointed by settlements.³³ Civilian security squads are empowered to use force and perform other policing tasks such as search and arrests. Before October 2023, at least 2,600 military weapons were issued to settlements by the IDF, though true numbers are believed to be higher.³⁴ These quasi-military squads, which were initially established in the settlements in 1971, have been reinforced since 7 October. Since then, the army

²⁷ Aaron Boxerman and Talya Minsberg, 'Private Gun Ownership in Israel Spikes After Hamas Attacks,' *New York Times*, 15 December 2023

²⁸ Rachel Fink, 'Israel's Far-right National Security Minister Celebrates Handing Out 100k Gun Permits Since Oct. 7,' *Haaretz*, 19 March 2024

²⁹ Peter Beaumont, 'UN demands end to Israeli forces' support of settler attacks on West Bank Palestinians,' *The Guardian*, 16 April 2024

³⁰ Zeena Saifi, Becky Anderson and Kareem Khadder, 'Gaza conflict spills into the West Bank as settler attacks and clashes leave dozens of Palestinians dead,' *CNN*, 19 October 2023

³¹ Also known as rapid response squad/team, civilian security squad/team, first response squad/team, and community defense squad/team.

³² Anas Ambri, 'Settler in Armenian Quarter linked to group behind evictions of Palestinians,' *The New Arab*, 8 December 2023

³³ Yesh Din, 'The Lawless Zone: The transfer of policing and security to the civilian security coordinators in the settlements and outposts,' 17 September 2014

³⁴ Yaniv Kubovich, 'The IDF Took Away Weapons From Gaza Border Communities in Recent Years, and Armed West Bank Settlers in the Thousands,' *Haaretz*, 20 October 2023



has distributed a considerable amount of additional weapons and munitions, including thousands of pistols, M-16 semi-automatic rifles, and machine guns to the squads.³⁵ Additionally, in coordination with the IDF and the National Security Ministry, Regional Councils have purchased hundreds of additional rifles for civilian security squads through fundraising from donors around the world.³⁶

While civilian security squads operate under the IDF's Central Command and are supposed to only act in a defensive capacity in life-threatening situations, the IDF does not have full oversight over their activities.³⁷ There have been documented cases of violence by members of emergency squads in previous years. For instance, Bar Yosef — a settler sanctioned by the US and who has been behind repeated acts of violence against Palestinians in recent years³⁸ — has been in possession of an M16 rifle from the IDF as he is a member of the Neveh Tzuf's on-call emergency squad.³⁹

Following 7 October, members of emergency squads have increasingly exploited the situation and have engaged in violence against Palestinians with much less restraint.⁴⁰ They have been increasingly wearing IDF military uniforms,⁴¹ oftentimes making it difficult to identify the perpetrators of violence. Human rights group Yesh Din suggests that security squads wearing partial military uniforms are often not wearing military boots,⁴² while some published videos show these squads wearing military-style uniforms somewhat different from those of the IDF.⁴³ Still, other times, emergency squads are dressed as civilians but carry military-grade weapons,⁴⁴ such as M16 rifles that are issued by the IDF and cannot be purchased by civilians.⁴⁵ Emergency squads often drive cars with yellow flasher lights.⁴⁶ Since 7 October, ACLED records several dozen events that have involved violence perpetrated by settlers in uniform who may be part of the civilian security squads.

³⁵ Yaniv Kubovich, 'Israeli Army Weighs Plan to Arm West Bank Settlements With Anti-tank Missiles,' Haaretz, 24 January 2024

³⁶ Jeremy Sharon, 'Distribution of 300 assault rifles to West Bank civilian security squads underway,' Times of Israel, 24 October 2024

³⁷ Yaniv Kubovich, 'As Gaza War Wages On, Israeli Settlers Attack Palestinians and Create a New Reality in the West Bank,' Haaretz, 13 November 2023

³⁸ Times of Israel, 'Settlers sanctioned by US behind repeated attacks on Palestinians, expelling many from their lands,' 14 March 2024

³⁹ Hagar Shezaf, 'Armed With an M16 and Jewish Privilege, This Settler Makes Palestinians' Lives Hell,' Haaretz, 7 August 2023

⁴⁰ Gideon Levy and Alex Levac, '18 Palestinian Shepherd Communities Have Been Recently Erased in the West Bank. This One Might Be Next,' Haaretz, 18 May 2024

⁴¹ Gideon Levy and Alex Levac, 'A Population Transfer Under the Cover of War: A Visit to the Forsaken Land of Settler Militias,' Haaretz, 18 November 2023

⁴² Yesh Din, 'Summary of the 2023 Olive Harvest Season,' 1 February 2024

⁴³ X, @basel_adra28 January 2024

⁴⁴ Youtube, @Migdal Oz donations, 'The Migdal Oz emergency rapid response unit,' 19 December 2023;

YouTube @Rescuers without Borders, 'Givat Ze'ev's Kitat Konenut,' YouTube, 19 December 2023

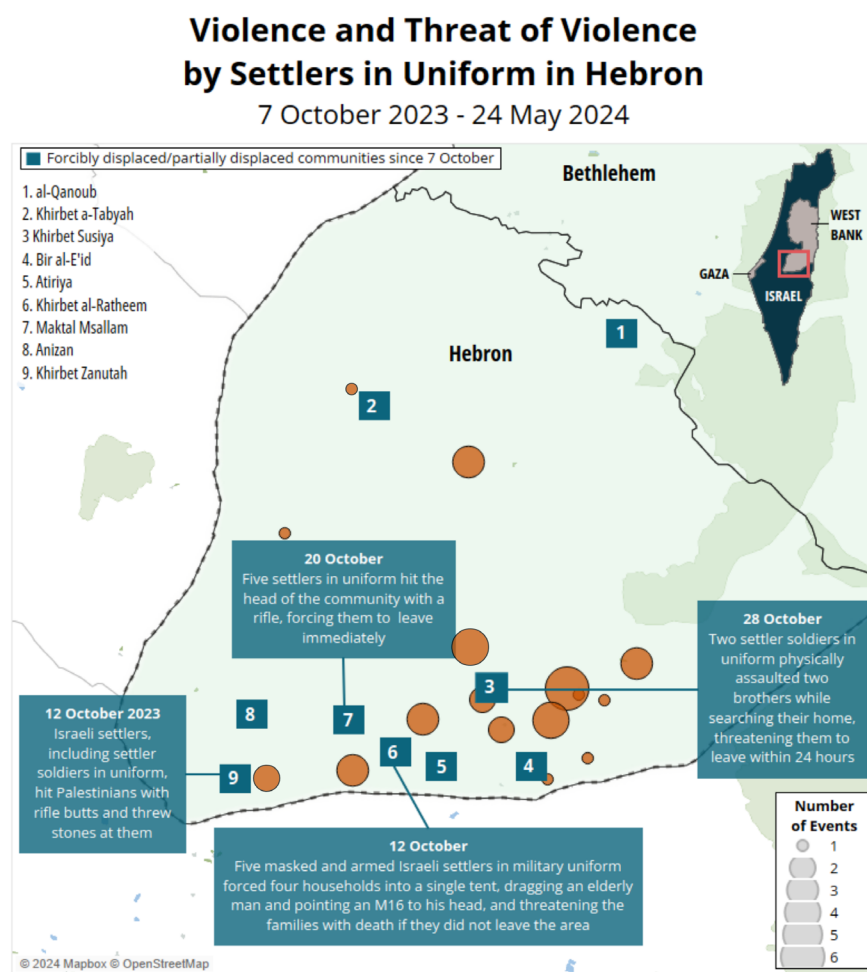
⁴⁵ Jeremy Sharon, 'Distribution of 300 assault rifles to West Bank civilian security squads underway,' Times of Israel, 24 October 2023

⁴⁶ Gideon Levy and Alex Levac, 'A Population Transfer Under the Cover of War: A Visit to the Forsaken Land of Settler Militias,' Haaretz, 18 November 2023



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Some of these events occurred around the areas where the herding communities have been displaced or partially displaced since 7 October. In Hebron, long an epicenter of settler violence and where eight out of 18 displaced communities are located, journalists reporting from the area suggest that the emergency defense squads are de facto ruling the area.⁴⁷ Residents of these small communities have been forced to leave after repeated acts of violence, with settlers showing up at night, often armed and at times in uniform, harassing and threatening to kill them if they would not leave. Over half of the violence or the threat of violence likely committed by emergency security areas collected by ACLED has been recorded in Hebron, where residents have also been subject to violence by settler soldiers in uniform (see map below).



Source for data on forcible displacements of Palestinian communities: B'TSELEM

⁴⁷ Gideon Levy and Alex Levac, 'A Population Transfer Under the Cover of War: A Visit to the Forsaken Land of Settler Militias,' Haaretz, 18 November 2023



For instance, 50 people in Khirbet al-Ratheem were displaced due to repeated attacks by armed settlers, at times in military uniforms. On another occasion, five armed settlers in military uniform and with masks forced four households into a single tent, dragging an elderly man who could not walk and threatening to kill them at gunpoint if they did not leave the area.⁴⁸ In Maktal Msalam, a family of 8 was displaced after five settlers in military uniform hit the father of the family in the head and face with a rifle, forcing the family to leave on the same day.⁴⁹ Several other communities in the area that are also reportedly at risk of displacement due to settler violence have also been the scene of violence by emergency security squads. On 12 November, at least seven masked men, some in uniform, vandalized cars using clubs, emptied the community's village tank in Khirbet al-Tiran, and ordered all residents to gather in one tent, threatening to kill them if they did not leave within 24 hours.⁵⁰

THE IDF'S MOST EXTREME BATTALIONS

In the aftermath of the Hamas attack, the IDF mobilized the so-called regional defense battalions in the West Bank on a large scale by expediting the drafting of over 5,500 reservist settlers.⁵¹ The idea of establishing local or community-based reserve units — which are known as *Hagmar* in Hebrew — reflects a long-standing Israeli security strategy. Since its establishment, Israel has operated under the notion of lacking 'strategic depth,' as it has a small population size and limited resources while being surrounded by hostile forces. Given these conditions, the mobilization of settlement residents into these regional battalions is deemed essential for Israel to face current security challenges, allowing regular combat forces to concentrate on addressing broader security challenges. After the start of the war in Gaza, the regional defense battalions in the West Bank grew five times.⁵² The primary objective of these units is to protect settlements and towns while many of the IDF Central Command's combat brigades have been redeployed to Israel's southern and northern fronts. But with the ranks of the regional defense battalions having been filled in many cases by the far-right settlers, there was a noticeable uptick in violence and harassment against Palestinians in the first few months after 7 October.⁵³

⁴⁸ Human Rights Watch, 'West Bank: Israel Responsible for Rising Settler Violence,' 17 April 2024

⁴⁹ B'Tselem, 'Forcible transfer of isolated Palestinian communities and families in Area C under cover of Gaza fighting,' 17 April 2024

⁵⁰ Gideon Levy and Alex Levac, 'A Population Transfer Under the Cover of War: A Visit to the Forsaken Land of Settler Militias,' Haaretz, 18 November 2023

⁵¹ Hagar Shezaf, 'Israel's Army Drafted and Armed Thousands of Settlers. Accounts of Their Violence Are Piling Up,' Haaretz, 17 January 2024

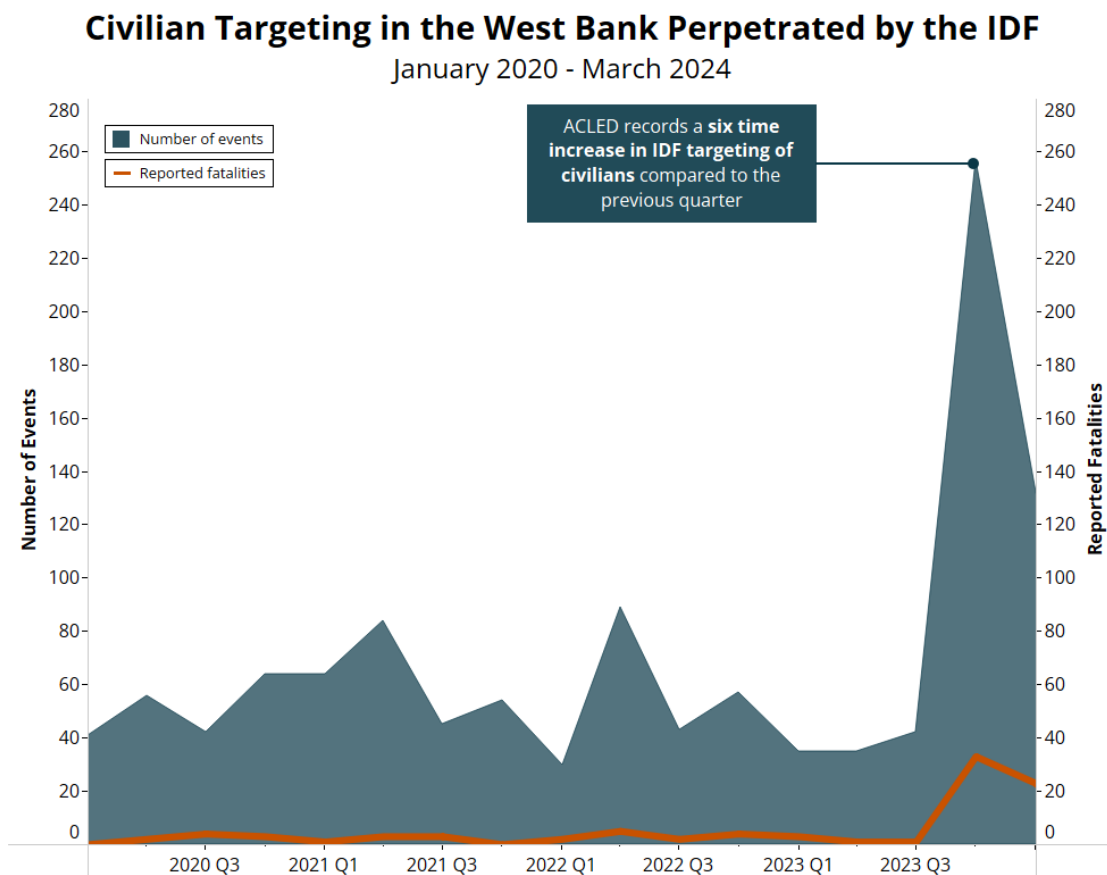
⁵² Hagar Shezaf, 'Israel's Army Drafted and Armed Thousands of Settlers. Accounts of Their Violence Are Piling Up,' Haaretz, 17 January 2024

⁵³ Geoff Brumfiel, 'Israeli settlers are guarding the West Bank. Palestinians say it's worsening violence,' NPR, 19 February 2024



Accounts on the ground suggest that settler soldiers on reserve duty in the West Bank are more inclined to use violence than other reservists and regular soldiers. They have often been involved in threats and violence against Palestinians and the destruction of their property, at times operating without prior approval from the IDF.⁵⁴ With many reservist settler soldiers guarding the increasing number of checkpoints after 7 October instead of regular soldiers from different parts of Israel, the daily lives of Palestinians who live close to settlements and outposts became more difficult, particularly in the immediate aftermath of Hamas' attack.⁵⁵

Due to the limitations in reporting, it is not always possible to distinguish which units of the IDF have engaged in a particular incident. However, the overall number of violence involving Israeli soldiers targeting civilians reached an all-time high in ACLED data in the last quarter of 2023 – a six times increase compared to the previous quarter (*see graph below*). Furthermore, the number of events involving the Israeli military using lethal force and killing unarmed Palestinians during rioting events reached record levels, with over 90 incidents resulting in nearly 110 fatalities between October and December 2023.



⁵⁴ Hagar Shezaf, 'Israel's Army Drafted and Armed Thousands of Settlers. Accounts of Their Violence Are Piling Up,' Haaretz, 17 January 2024

⁵⁵ Eleanor Beardsley, 'Israeli settlers step up attacks on Palestinian farms, expanding West Bank outposts,' NCP, 23 March 2024



While these figures are also representative of the overall tense security situation in the wake of Hamas's attack, there are a number of accounts that have documented the direct involvement of regional defense battalions in violence. For example, on 16 October 2023, settlers from a regional defense battalion carried out an unauthorized operation in Khirbet Susya south of Hebron, where they destroyed Palestinian-owned structures and crops.⁵⁶ In the same location, armed settlers in uniform beat up two men on 28 October after they raided their family home, threatening to kill them if they did not leave. Witnesses suggest that the men in uniform were members of regional defense battalions.⁵⁷ In another deadly incident, a soldier serving in a regional defense battalion operating near the Elazar settlement south of Jerusalem shot dead an elderly Palestinian man who posed no threat as he passed a checkpoint.⁵⁸ On 12 November, two reservist soldiers from the regional defense battalions entered a school in al-Tuwani without any apparent reason, tearing down a flag and intimidating locals.⁵⁹ On 8 December, 21 reservist settler soldiers belonging to the regional defense battalion ransacked and damaged many homes and the village school in Khallat al-Dabaa, violently assaulting five Palestinians⁶⁰ and looting money and other valuables.⁶¹

Following increasing violent incidents committed by soldiers from the regional defense battalions, the IDF conducted several investigations that led to restricting the battalions' area of operation exclusively to settlements. By May 2024, the number of soldiers in the regional defense battalions had gradually decreased to 1,000.⁶² But given that the problematic relationship between settlers and the IDF in the West Bank began several decades before the current crisis and the violence conducted by settler soldiers is likely to continue in one way or another.

Before the current crisis, the deployment of six infantry battalions in the West Bank that were united in the framework of the Kfir Brigade in 2005 was long thought to represent the blurred boundaries between settlers and soldiers. Specialized in counter-insurgency operations and urban warfare, many of the soldiers in these battalions are former students of religious schools or settlers. One battalion, Netzah Yehuda (previously Haredi Nahal), was established to accommodate ultra-Orthodox Jewish soldiers and operates based on strict religious rabbinic laws. The battalion also absorbed many settlers from the national religious camp who preferred to serve in this religious environment. This has included the

⁵⁶ Hagar Shezaf, 'Israel's Army Drafted and Armed Thousands of Settlers. Accounts of Their Violence Are Piling Up,' Haaretz, 17 January 2024

⁵⁷ Jeremy Sharon, 'Facing violence and harassment, hundreds of Palestinians flee West Bank villages,' Times of Israel, 16 November 2024

⁵⁸ Hagar Shezaf and Jack Khoury, 'Israeli Reserve Soldier Kills 62-year-old Palestinian Man Who Posed No Threat,' Haaretz, 21 March 2024

⁵⁹ Gianluca Pacchiani, 'Two IDF reservists booted out of the army for entering Palestinian school,' Times of Israel, 13 November 2023

⁶⁰ International Solidarity Movement, 'Israeli settlers/soldiers abduct a Palestinian, destroy and steal property in Khallet Al-Dabaa,' 8 December 2023

⁶¹ Hagar Shezaf, 'Israel's Army Drafted and Armed Thousands of Settlers. Accounts of Their Violence Are Piling Up,' Haaretz, 17 January 2024

⁶² Bar Peleg, 'Israeli Army Slashes Number of Soldiers Guarding West Bank Settlements,' Haaretz, 1 May 2024



hilltop youths – the most extreme combative fringe of the settler movement.⁶³ Since the Kfir Brigade was established, it has faced various accusations of human rights violations against Palestinians. Most prominently, soldiers of the Netzah Yehuda Battalion were responsible for the death of 78-year-old Palestinian-American Omar Assad, who died after being left handcuffed in the cold in the village of Jilijliya north of Ramallah in January 2022.⁶⁴ In January 2023, the battalion was redeployed to the Golan Heights, which was seen as a step to relax rising criticism against the IDF conduct, and has since been also deployed to the Gaza Strip.⁶⁵

Another example of the IDF recruiting extremist hilltop youth settlers in recent years is the Desert Frontier (*Sfar Hamidbar* in Hebrew). The IDF reportedly recruited these settler youths, some of whom have criminal records, in a coordinated effort with settlement leaders “to direct their energies in a more disciplined and lawful manner.”⁶⁶ Some of these youths are from illegal shepherding outposts that have been at the forefront of violence in recent years.⁶⁷ The battalion has been mired in several documented cases of violence against Palestinians since its establishment in 2020.⁶⁸ In the latest incident on 12 October, soldiers from the Desert Frontier Unit abused Palestinians and Israeli activists by stripping, severely beating, urinating on, extinguishing cigarettes on their bodies, and attempting to sexually abuse one of the victims.⁶⁹ Palestinian witnesses from nearby outposts identified some of the soldiers as hilltop youths. The IDF halted the operation of the unit following this incident.

⁶³ Anshel Pfeffer, ‘This Is One of Israel’s Most Miserable, Self-defeating and Cruel Failures,’ Haaretz, 17 February 2022

⁶⁴ Al Jazeera, ‘Israeli forces face no charges over death of Palestinian-American,’ 14 June 2023

⁶⁵ Adela Suliman and Niha Masih, ‘What is Israel’s Netzah Yehuda battalion, and why could it face U.S. aid cuts?,’ Washington Post, 22 April 2024

⁶⁶ Jeremy Sharon, ‘IDF freezes operations of ‘hilltop youth’ unit linked to anti-Palestinian violence,’ Times of Israel, 20 December 2023

⁶⁷ Jeremy Sharon, ‘IDF freezes operations of ‘hilltop youth’ unit linked to anti-Palestinian violence,’ Times of Israel, 20 December 2023

⁶⁸ Thore Schröder and Lucas Barioulet, ‘How Radical West Bank Settlers Are Driving Palestinians Out,’ Spiegel, 1 November 2023

⁶⁹ Hagar Shezaf, ‘Cigarette Burns, Beatings, Attempted Sexual Assault: Settlers and Soldiers Abused Palestinians,’ Haaretz, 21 October 2023



HOPES FOR PEACE FADE IN THE FACE OF INCREASINGLY AGGRESSIVE TACTICS

With a combination of violence committed by armed individual settlers operating on their own yet often in the presence of soldiers, settlement security squads frequently in partial military uniform, as well as settler soldiers, it has become increasingly unclear who is who. The lines between settlers and the military are increasingly blurring, and the difference between civilian aggressors and the Israeli state apparatus is fading even further. Besides the physical blurring of boundaries between settlers and soldiers, there is also a cultural blurring of boundaries between the IDF and the settlers.⁷⁰ Based on interviews with over 1,000 soldiers, *Breaking the Silence* — an Israeli NGO established by IDF veterans — highlights the “extremely close relations” between the IDF and settlers.⁷¹ With many IDF units stationed inside or next to settlements, settlers regularly host soldiers at their homes, provide them with food, snacks, and hot drinks, and celebrate the Shabbat together, in many instances becoming like family to soldiers.⁷² Testimonies of many IDF veterans indicate that settlers use personal contacts to promote their political ideology, encourage soldiers to deal with Palestinians in harsher ways and be more lenient toward settlers who break the law. Furthermore, through Civilian Security Coordinators in the settlements, settlers actively shape the IDF’s operational policy by providing guidelines for settlements, such as defining settlement territory. They also determine areas prohibited for Palestinians to access, take part in the decision-making processes, and occasionally even command soldiers.⁷³

In addition to the impact of an expanding militarization of settlers, the current Israeli government — formed by a coalition that includes settler figures such as Ben-Gvir and Smotrich — has initiated policies to alter the West Bank’s security apparatus. One of the fundamental changes involves transferring authority over the Civil Administration from the IDF Central Command to the Ministry of Finance under Smotrich’s authority. This shift would reduce the Civil Administration’s ability to serve as an effective instrument of soft power, which has traditionally been instrumental in coordinating with the Palestinian Authority in all administrative aspects of the Palestinians within Area C and B, where the

⁷⁰ Yagil Levy, ‘The Israeli Military: Imprisoned by the Religious Community,’ *Middle East Policy*, 2011

⁷¹ *Breaking the Silence*, ‘Position Paper The impact of relations between settlers and IDF soldiers in the West Bank,’ 2016

⁷² Jonathan Cook, ‘Breaking the Silence about Israel’s occupation of Hebron,’ *The National*, 8 October 2018

⁷³ *Breaking the Silence*, ‘The High Command: Settler influence on IDF conduct in the West Bank,’ 2017



Palestinian Authority lacks administrative or security power. This approach contradicts the long-standing unity of command that the Central Command has enjoyed so far in the West Bank.

Furthermore, the current Israeli government coalition has been planning to subordinate the West Bank Border Police to the Ministry of National Security headed by Ben-Gvir. Such a move would break the Border Police's operational linkage with the Central Command and disrupt the unified command structure crucial for cohesive security operations in the West Bank. The long-term implications would potentially impact the recruitment, doctrine, and overall operational activities of the Border Police units dedicated to the West Bank. These moves threaten to further undermine established security mechanisms that have been crucial in managing tensions and maintaining the status quo in the West Bank since 1967.

For more than a decade, many observers viewed the two-state solution as unrealistic due to the facts created on the ground by the expansion of the settlements. However, the unprecedented scale of the ongoing violence has convinced many analysts and governments that reviving the vision is necessary.⁷⁴ The idea of a two-state solution has, therefore, made a comeback at least in international discourse, and holds a key position in all international discussions regarding the 'day after' the war in Gaza comes to an end. However, with Netanyahu's government depending heavily on right-wing and religious extremists for its survival, and with the public mood in Israel not favoring Palestinian statehood,⁷⁵ transitioning from the current state of hostilities to a viable plan for the revival of peace talks may not be feasible in the near future.

Yet, the Hamas attack has shown that the 'conflict management' will not ensure the security of Israeli citizens, and there may be a realization in the future that the current situation of occupation is not sustainable.⁷⁶ Political change, new leadership on both sides and extreme external pressure from the US will likely be needed in order to reach any form of compromise in the future. But even in the optimistic scenario that would see the revival of peace talks at some unknown point in the future, current developments suggest that the Israeli government would face serious challenges in disengaging and evacuating at least 200,000 ideological settlers who live deep inside the West Bank. An increasingly powerful and well-armed settler movement will, in all likelihood, resist the government, and even the prospect of a civil war cannot be ruled out.⁷⁷ But for now, Palestinians in the West Bank will continue to bear the brunt of violence carried out by increasingly emboldened settlers with close ties to politics and the military.

⁷⁴ European Council, 'European Council conclusions on Middle East, 26 October 2023,' 26 October 2023; Christina Paschyn, 'The Gulf states have the power to revive two-state solution,' Chatham House, 21 March 2024; Martin Indyk, 'The Strange Resurrection of the Two-State Solution,' Foreign Affairs, 20 February 2024; Léonie Chao-Fong, 'Two-state solution: Biden's fresh push to solve the Israel-Gaza conflict,' The Guardian, 10 February 2024

⁷⁵ Ian Parmeter, 'Israel-Palestinian conflict: is the two-state solution now dead?', The Conversation, 28 January 2024

⁷⁶ Alon Pinkas, 'A Two-state Solution to the Israel-Palestine Conflict Is Currently Unviable,' Haaretz, 16 November 2023

⁷⁷ David Ignatius, 'In the West Bank, I saw how peace will require confrontation with Israel,' Washington Post, 16 December 2023

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