

# SETTLER VIOLENCE in the WEST BANK

## A Tool of Forced DISPLACEMENT



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# A Tool of Forced DISPLACEMENT

## Israel's Settlement Enterprise in the West Bank: *An Official State Policy*

Israeli settlements are “segregated housing units for Jewish Israelis built on Palestinian land (the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza Strip), occupied by the Israeli military in the June 1967 war”<sup>1</sup>. Israel’s settlement enterprise is intended to cement Israeli control over the Palestinian West Bank and East Jerusalem, and create permanent, irreversible facts on the ground to prevent the establishment of a Palestinian state as part of a “Two-State Solution” peace agreement that was signed in the Oslo Peace Process<sup>2</sup>. As such, consecutive Israeli governments have pursued settlement policies since the outset of Israel’s occupation, and multiple Israeli officials have clearly expressed this objective, including, most recently, the statements made by Israel’s Finance Minister, Smotrich, on the establishment of a new Israeli settlement, Nahal Heletz, in Al-Makhrour, Bethlehem’s last green area left due to Israel’s relentless settlement policy, and part of a UNESCO World Heritage Site, where he declared that: “No anti-Israelism or anti-Zionism will stop the continued development of the settlements. We will continue to fight the dangerous idea of a Palestinian state, and establish facts on the ground. This is my life’s mission.”<sup>3</sup> Despite being a stark violation of International law, as confirmed in the latest advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice, which ordered Israel to evacuate its illegal settlements from settlers and declared its unlawfulness on 19 July 2024,<sup>4</sup> Israel’s relentless settlement policy continues to expand, and is adopted as a ‘national value’ in Israel’s Nation-State Law, which enjoys the status of a quasi-constitutional law.<sup>5</sup>

One key component of Israeli settlements is the demographic aspect; the settlers. Israeli settlers live in these illegal settlements, and move from many places in the world to live in these settlements, built illegally in the occupied Palestinian territories (oPt) for a variety of reasons, which include religious or ideological reasons, and economic reasons, i.e. a relatively lower cost of living and financial incentives offered by the Israeli government<sup>6</sup>. Besides the deliberate demographic alteration of the oPt, Israeli settlers serve another objective: the forcible transfer of Palestinians. The practices of these settlers in many areas are often connected to violence; the Israeli settlers’ aggression practiced and enacted in the West Bank is not a new phenomenon, but has been present for as long as the first settlement was built on occupied Palestinian lands. To be able to properly understand settler violence, we must first understand multiple factors starting from the history of settler movement in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, the importance of their presence for the Israeli occupation and the ultimate vision driven from the attacks they enact against Palestinians. This report aims to shed light on the systematic violence of Israeli settlers in the West Bank, the ideological and political motives fueling this violence, and the profound impact these actions have on the daily lives of Palestinians through on-ground examples and testimonies.

The first official support to settlement construction came in June 1967, when 160 Arab houses were demolished in the Old City of Jerusalem in order to open a court in front of the Western Wall<sup>7</sup>. Immediately, 600 buildings were expropriated and approximately 6,500 Arabs, both tenants and landowners, were forcibly displaced and new buildings were occupied by Israeli settlers<sup>8</sup>. A floodgate of new settlements has opened ever since. Despite being illegal under International Law (IL) and International Humanitarian Law (IHL), Israel has been expanding its settlement construction project ever since 1967. The agreements under the Oslo Accords divided the oPt into so-called A, B, C Areas<sup>9</sup>, all classified as occupied territory, and therefore, it is prohibited for Israel to build settlements in. Between 1993 and 2000, following the signing of the Oslo Accords, the Palestinian people experienced some increased autonomy within areas allocated by the Accords such as Jericho, Areas A and B of the West Bank, Area H-1 of Hebron, and certain zones of the Gaza Strip. Despite this, the Israeli military maintained its presence in the oPt while Israeli land confiscation and settlement expansion continued intensively.

1 IMEU: <https://imeu.org/article/explainer-israels-settlement-enterprise-west-bank-east-jerusalem>

2 UN General Assembly: Oslo Accords”. [https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/IL%20PS\\_930913\\_DeclarationPrinciplesnterimSelf-Government%28Oslo%20Accords%29.pdf](https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/IL%20PS_930913_DeclarationPrinciplesnterimSelf-Government%28Oslo%20Accords%29.pdf)

3 The Times of Israel: “Municipal boundaries announced for first new West Bank settlement since 2017”, 14 August 2023, available at: [https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog\\_entry/government-okays-establishment-of-first-new-west-bank-settlement-since-2017/](https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/government-okays-establishment-of-first-new-west-bank-settlement-since-2017/)

4 ICJ Advisory Opinion 19 July 2024: Legal Consequences Arising From The Policies And Practices Of Israel In The Occupied Palestinian Territory, Including East Jerusalem

5 ADALAH: The Illegality of Article 7 of the Jewish Nation-State Law: Promoting Jewish Settlement as a National Value (2019), available at: [https://www.adalah.org/uploads/uploads/Position\\_Paper\\_on\\_Article\\_7\\_JNSL\\_28.03.19.pdf](https://www.adalah.org/uploads/uploads/Position_Paper_on_Article_7_JNSL_28.03.19.pdf)

6 Relief Web: <https://reliefweb.int/report/occupied-palestinian-territory/economics-heart-israeli-settlements>

7 UN: “Israeli settlements in Gaza and the West Bank (Part I)” (1982). <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/auto-insert-205221/#:~:text=The%20first%20official%20support%20to,and%20land%20owners%2C%20were%20removed.>

8 Ibid.

9 Area A: Around 18% of the West Bank Area and it designates Palestinian absolute autonomy over administrative and security issues and includes the main Palestinian cities.

Area B: Around 22% of the West Bank Area and it is under Palestinian Authority’s civil administration and Israel’s military administration.

Area C: Over 60% of the West Bank, and is under Israel’s civil and military administration.

Settlement expansion escalated post Oslo, and despite the various agreements and negotiations, Israel in total, built more than 280 settlements in the West Bank which are home to more than 700,000 (as of 2023) Israeli settlers living illegally on occupied Palestinian land, including more than 470,000 in the West Bank and more than 229,000 in East Jerusalem<sup>10</sup>. Of these settlements, 138 were officially established and recognized by the Israeli government (not including the 12 settlements Israel built in the areas it annexed to Jerusalem), and some 150 settlements, which Israel refers to as 'outposts', supposedly 'illegal' even under Israeli domestic law, but normally end up being retroactively normalized and recognized by Israeli authorities. About a third of the 'outposts' were built over the past decade; most of them referred to as "farms" and were confiscated for agricultural reasons<sup>11</sup>.

Illegal Israeli settlers often hold beliefs and ideologies rooted in anti-Arab racism, usually fed through extreme religious doctrines. As a result, attacks by settlers against Palestinians continue to occur at high levels, frequently causing casualties, destruction of the environment and severe property damage. Many of these violent acts are part of the 'price tag' strategy, which emerged in 2008<sup>12</sup>. This strategy involves indiscriminate violence against Palestinians, but often in retaliation for actions by Palestinians who try to protect their land or property, or any type of confrontations with settlers. Price tag attacks encompass a wide range of violent activities, including physical assaults on Palestinians, roadblocks, stone-throwing at houses, arson attacks on houses, and vehicles, tire slashing, graffiti, and vandalism of churches, mosques and schools<sup>13</sup>. These attacks also involve incursions into Palestinian villages and lands, torching fields, uprooting trees, and other forms of property damage. Racial motives are often evident, with anti-Arab or anti-Christian slogans sprayed or shouted during these attacks<sup>14</sup>.

## Forcible Transfer of Palestinians: Cooperation between Settlers and the Israeli Government

West Bank settlements span over hundreds of thousands of dunams [1 dunam = 1,000 square meters] to which Palestinians have no access at all. Using a distorted selection of laws from different eras to achieve this objective, from the Ottoman rule, to the British mandate, then Jordanian rule and Israeli military rule, Israel cherry-picks laws to deprive Palestinians from their lands, while allowing Israeli settlements built illegally on occupied Palestinian lands to continue to expand and enjoy the best infrastructure and services. Israel has used a number of 'legal' and bureaucratic procedures in order to appropriate West Bank lands, with the primary objective of establishing settlements and providing land reserves and infrastructure for them. Using primarily these five methods: seizure for military purposes; declaration of state lands; seizure of absentee property; confiscation for public needs; and initial registration. Yet, these arbitrary tools under 'legal' guise are often accompanied by other means by illegal Israeli settlers, effectively occupying and taking over lands through daily acts of violence, including different forms of violent attacks on Palestinians and their properties.

The two approaches may seem disconnected: the Israeli government openly annexes land through a variety of methods endorsed by Israel's official bodies, while settlers pursue their own agenda of illegal land grab through several forms of violent aggressions against Palestinians. However, the reality is that these actions are intertwined and a part of a single strategy: settler violence against Palestinians acts as a key informal mechanism for the Israeli government to forcibly displace Palestinians from their lands, eventually *de facto* annexing them, particularly in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. The government not only fully supports and assists these violent acts, but its agents, most of the time, participate directly, and settler perpetrators are either accompanied or protected by the Israeli army. The Israeli government legitimizes this situation in two complementary methods<sup>15</sup>:

### A. 'Legalizing' the illegal land grab

The Israeli government legalizes the occupation of land in the form of settlement construction using multiple forms of pretexts. It allows settlers to live, farm and graze livestock on land violently taken from Palestinians. Whether with formal authorization from the government or without, dozens of outposts 'farms' are used and inhabited by settlers on Palestinian lands. Even without authorization from the government, these settlers and outposts receive unlimited support from the Israeli authorities to remain standing and functional. "Israel has ordered the military to defend the outposts or paid for their security, as well as paved roads and laid down water and electricity infrastructure for most of them"<sup>16</sup>. Israel's occupation treats the entirety of the Palestinian land primarily as a resource for the Jewish population, focusing entirely on the development and expansion of illegal Israeli settlements. At the same time, it systematically fragments Palestinian territories, occupies Palestinian land, and forces Palestinians to live in small,

10 UN: "The Question of Palestine". <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/human-rights-council-hears-that-700000-israeli-settlers-are-living-illegally-in-the-occupied-west-bank-meeting-summary-excerpts/>

11 B'tselem: "Settler Violence = State Violence" (2021). [https://www.btselem.org/settler\\_violence](https://www.btselem.org/settler_violence)

12 Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies: "The 'Price Tag' Organization and the Price Tag Paid by Palestinians". [https://www.dohainstitute.org/en/lists/ACRPS-PDFDocumentLibrary/The\\_price\\_tag\\_organization\\_and\\_the\\_price\\_tag\\_paid\\_by\\_Palestinians.pdf](https://www.dohainstitute.org/en/lists/ACRPS-PDFDocumentLibrary/The_price_tag_organization_and_the_price_tag_paid_by_Palestinians.pdf)

13 B'tselem: "Settler Violence = State Violence" (2021). [https://www.btselem.org/settler\\_violence](https://www.btselem.org/settler_violence)

14 NRC: "Settler Violence: International Investigative and Policing Standards" (2015). <https://www.nrc.no/globalassets/pdf/reports/settler-violence---international-investigative-and-policing-standards.pdf>

15 B'tselem: "Settler Violence = State Violence" (2021). [https://www.btselem.org/settler\\_violence](https://www.btselem.org/settler_violence)

16 *ibid.*



overcrowded enclaves<sup>17</sup>. These ambitions would not be achievable if there were not a population that would serve this purpose, adopt this ideology, and settle in the occupied lands to impose this in reality.

## B. Legitimizing all forms of physical violence against Palestinians

Settler violence against Palestinians is a deeply rooted issue, not a new trend or a recent phenomenon. Historical records and countless documents have chronicled these acts since the beginning of the occupation. Thousands of testimonies from Palestinians, along with accounts from Israeli soldiers, have been documented by Palestinian, Israeli and international human rights organizations<sup>18</sup>. Despite this extensive and consistent evidence, which has also been covered extensively in the media, the violence has persisted unabated, and even witnessed alarming surges well before the events of October 7th, 2023. It has become an ingrained and accepted part of daily life under occupation in the West Bank, carried out without effective accountability, reflecting a broader systemic issue that seeks to annex occupied Palestinian lands. With the aim of creating a very coercive environment to forcibly displace Palestinians, Israeli settlers have no limits in the number or the nature of their crimes. These include beating, throwing stones, issuing threats, torching fields, destroying trees and crops, stealing crops, poisoning animals and fields, using live fire, damaging homes and cars, and, in some cases, homicide<sup>19</sup>. In the past years, settlers in these so-called farms have violently displaced Palestinian farmers and shepherds away from fields, pasturelands, and water sources that have been used for generations. They provoke violent altercations daily, using intimidation tactics to scatter Palestinian flocks<sup>20</sup>.

The blend of 'official' governmental actions and 'unofficial' individual violence enables Israel to legitimize such state-gear violence through 'official' justifications, while conveniently attributing the violence to settlers as isolated incidents. When settlers attack Palestinians, they are often provided with full impunity and even assisted by the Israeli army. Therefore, it is clear that illegal Israeli settlers are not acting in defiance of the Israeli government; they are, in fact, executing its agenda.

## Settler Violence Witnesses New Peaks: Notably Post October 7, 2023

Long before the events of October 7th, 2023, Palestinians faced continuous waves of terror orchestrated by Israeli settlers and accompanied, or even protected, by the Israeli government. In 2023, this violence reached unprecedented levels, marking a record year<sup>21</sup>.

Following October 7th, 2023, settler aggression and terrorism escalated, with new directives from Israeli Minister of National Security, Ben Gvir, making the aggression even more blatant and severe. Besides the direct incitement by major Israeli officials, the Israeli authorities transferred about 150,000 guns and weapons to Israeli settlers in the West Bank since October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2023.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, and after having relaxed gun license requirements, Israel's Ministry for National Security approved 100,000 new gun licenses after October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2023, added to the 150,000 already existing gun licenses prior to that, and 800 new settler militias were formed in the settlements in occupied West Bank since October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2024, adding to the existing 89 militias.<sup>23</sup>

The staggering numbers of excess, state-sponsored arming of Israeli settlers clearly reflects how the Israeli government strategically fuels and operates violence in the West Bank to direct forced displacement serving land grab. According to OCHA and through (October 7th – December 14th) 262 Palestinians have been killed, including 67 children (11 people, including 3 children, were killed by settlers and the remainder killed by the Israeli military)<sup>24</sup>. This figure is more than half of the fatalities reported in 2023, as per OCHA. This is in addition to the 3,512 Palestinians, including 542 children, who have been injured (83 Palestinians were injured by settlers and the remainder by the Israeli military)<sup>25</sup>.

Moreover, Israeli settlers have forced at least 18 Palestinian communities— over 1,000 people — to flee their homes since October<sup>26</sup>. A notable increase in settler violence has been recorded, including incidents involving armed settlers in recent months<sup>27</sup>. In July 2024 alone, 1110 Attacks were perpetrated by the Israeli army along with the settlers<sup>28</sup>.

17 Al-Haq: "Israeli Apartheid: Tool of Zionist Settler Colonialism". (2022). [https://www.alhaq.org/cached\\_uploads/download/2022/12/22/israeli-apartheid-web-final-1-page-view-1671712165.pdf](https://www.alhaq.org/cached_uploads/download/2022/12/22/israeli-apartheid-web-final-1-page-view-1671712165.pdf)

18 *ibid*.

19 The Guardian: "Nowhere is Safe" (2024). <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/apr/20/nowhere-is-safe-fear-and-mourning-inside-the-west-bank-villages-where-israeli-settlers-went-on-the-rampage>

20 B'tselem: "Settler Violence = State Violence" (2021). [https://www.btselem.org/settler\\_violence](https://www.btselem.org/settler_violence)

21 Euro Med Monitor, 2023. <https://euromedmonitor.org/en/article/5523/Pulling-the-trigger-is-the-first-resort-Palestinians-killed-by-Israeli-army-and-settlers-in-2022>

22 Visualizing Palestine: "How Israel is Arming Israeli Settlers", 20 August 2024, available at:

<https://visualizingpalestine.org/visual/how-israel-is-arming-israeli-settlers/>

23 *ibid*

24 Relief Web: "Alarming and urgent": The escalation of settler violence and forced displacement in the West Bank". (Dec, 2023). <https://reliefweb.int/report/occupied-palestinian-territory/factsheet-alarming-and-urgent-escalation-settler-violence-and-forced-displacement-west-bank-december-2023>

25 *ibid*.

26 ACLED: "Civilians or Soldiers? Settler violence in the West Bank" (2024). <https://acleddata.com/2024/06/10/civilians-or-soldiers-settler-violence-in-the-west-bank/>

27 *ibid*

28 Colonization & Wall Resistance Commission (July, 2024): <https://cwrc.ps/page-2064-en.html>

This systematic aggression is designed to occupy and rob Palestinians of their properties, terrorize and deprive them of their basic human rights, such as the right to life, adequate housing, development, ownership and movement, and ultimately displace them from their lands. This policy takes advantage of two factors; the global attention fixated on Israel's war on the Gaza Strip, and an ultranationalist right wing Israeli government that has encouraged and emboldened Israeli settlers to increase the level of their crimes and impose facts on the ground.

## On-Ground Testimonies:

### *A Special Lens on the Bethlehem Governorate*

Israel's war on Gaza following the events of October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2023 and its ramifications on Bethlehem Governorate are indeed of grave concerns. With an Israeli ideology that perceives Bethlehem as an integral part of 'Greater Jerusalem', the emergence of new and/or harsher forms of grave violations of fundamental rights, includes forcible displacement, movement restrictions, settler violence and terrorism and settlement expansion.

This expansion, coupled with public incitement and hate speech against Palestinians by top Israeli officials, serves to increase the aggression and violence committed by settlers against Palestinians residing near the settlements and beyond. Settlers not only get away with such violent aggressions but are also provided with full impunity, accompaniment and protection by the Israeli army. The escalation of settler violence and aggression against Palestinians, notably post October 7<sup>th</sup>, is evident through multiple testimonies that highlight the ways in which such aggressions have been carried out, in particular in the rural areas of Bethlehem, as shown below:<sup>29</sup>

#### Testimony #1

##### **Place of Residence: Sa'eer - Alqanub - South East of Bethlehem**

Testimony: "Post October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2023, Israeli settlers have started attacking the area on a daily basis, even though we have been here since way before Israel's occupation in 1967. Our piece of land in this area was raided and we were expelled from it on Wednesday, November 1<sup>st</sup>, 2023, despite being a private property and not under any Israeli jurisdiction."

#### Testimony #2

##### **Place of Residence: Sa'eer - Alqanub - South East of Bethlehem**

Testimony: "I'm a resident of Al Qanub, south east of Bethlehem. I own more than 100 dunams. I have a cavern and a water well. I also have multiple tents, horses and caravans. We have always been there, even before (Israel's occupation in) 1967. We were attacked by Israeli settlers on Wednesday, November 1<sup>st</sup>, 2023, they stole the cattle, solar panels, barley, the water tanks and literally everything."

#### Testimony #3. Date: 02.12.2023

##### **Place of Residence: Sa'eer - Alqanub - South East of Bethlehem**

Testimony: "I'm a resident of Al Qanub, which is a private property. I have inherited this land from my father's father. My family, father, siblings and myself have continuously and regularly been living there since before 1967. I own private land containing 200 cattle, houses, tents, caravans, and solar panels. We were forcibly kicked out of this land by Israeli settlers on November 1<sup>st</sup>, 2023, because they went completely rabid after the events of October the 7<sup>th</sup>".

#### Testimony #4

##### **Place of Residence: Tqou - Masabeeh - South of Bethlehem**

Testimony: "My family owns land in Habahib valley spanning 100 dunams. Every year, I plant the land with seeds. During this period (after October 7<sup>th</sup>), settlers prevented us from planting and blocked the roads that lead to our land. The land also has a building spanning an area of 60 square meters, which the settlers had destroyed and stole its contents. They stole: A house with an area of 60 square meters. The house which is fully prepared with Aluminum, flooring, doors, windows was entirely destroyed and after kicking me out, settlers now live in it, and they put Israeli flags all over it. A truck, a huge tank of water, and multiple canopies. Electric motor with 7 KW of power. Solar panel worth 5000 NIS."

#### Testimony #5

##### **Place of Residence: Thahrit Al Nada**

Testimony: "I own 70 sheep and am always present in the Osh Ghorab area, where I and my cattle were forcibly kicked out after the 7<sup>th</sup> of October, 2023. I was kicked out even though I have been there regularly and continuously for 70 years, generation after generation."

<sup>29</sup> Testimonies were gathered by the "Colonization & Wall Resistance Commission" during the period following October 7<sup>th</sup> 2023.

**Testimony #6****Place of Residence: Keesan**

Testimony: “I own a piece of land in Keesan next to Ma’ale Amus settlement. On Tuesday, January 9th, 2024, we went to the land at 9:00 a.m. and we found around 15 settlers hiding behind the olive trees. They attacked me and hit me very brutally. As a result of this attack, my head was injured and I was sutured with 11 stitches all over my head and stayed at the hospital for two days. They also attacked my car and completely destroyed it.”

**Testimony #7****Place of Residence: Janata**

Testimony: “I own a piece of land in the area of ‘Qanan Saghir’ that is 32 dunams, filled with olive trees. I cannot enter the land without the coordination of a permit (from Israeli authorities). A request has been sent out to open up a new Israeli road in the land to which I have not been allowed to visit since the beginning of the war. “

**Testimony #8****Place of Residence: ‘Asakreh**

Testimony: “I own a piece of land in the area of “Tqou” that spans 33 dunams. The land is cultivated with olive trees and I cannot enter the land except with special coordination. They settled in the land and accordingly, I raised a case against them. I have not been able to enter my land for five years, and even when they allowed us to enter, settlers released dogs towards us, and they attacked us.”

**Testimony #9****Place of Residence: Janata**

Testimony: “I own a piece of land in the area of “Qanan Saghir» which spans 50 dunams of land. This land is cultivated by olive trees approximately 50 years old. I cannot access the land except with previous coordination. The land has been marked with signs and dredged.”

**Testimony #10****Place of Residence: Janata**

Testimony: “I own a piece of land in the area of “Qanan Saghir” which spans 50 dunams and I own another piece of land that spans 90 dunams, called ‘Ghazlan’. The first land is planted with olive trees, which are about 40 years old. I always enter the land to tillage it, but only with previous permission<sup>30</sup>. On October 9th, they started building a street and a wall fence within our land”. We have always entered the second piece of land “Ghazlan” to plant barley there.

We tried planting it twice, but the crops didn’t succeed/grow, so we only entered the land to tillage it. However, after October 7th, we were completely banned from entering our land”.

**Testimony #11****Place of Residence: Janata/Asakreh**

Testimony: “We own a piece of land in ‘Tqou’ located in ‘Qanan Saghir’ that spans 18 dunams and is cultivated by olive trees. There are approximately 300 olive trees, (some) of which are 50 years old. We consistently work and maintain the land by plowing, harvesting/picking olives, and taking care of the land, knowing that we own all official documents that prove our ownership of the land. One day, we were shocked when we saw the settlers had attacked the land with machin-

ery and heavy vehicles, dredged a part of the land and uprooted a number of the olive trees. They have started digging the land to build something similar to a wall fence at the land’s edge”.

**Testimony #12****Place of Residence: Tqou’**

Testimony: “I own a piece of land called ‘Naseeb Abu Za’arour” (Khallit Riyah) in Tqou’. We were shocked yesterday when we saw a caravan that was put on the land by settlers. The area spans 60 dunams. All of it belongs to a local family. It is a fenced land, planted with forest trees, and it is a part of an agricultural project and a natural habitat”.

**Testimony #13****Place of Residence: Jannata**

Testimony: “(Ein Hamda) or (Hamda underwater spring) is a historic Turkish site. Israeli settlers settled in the place and started renovating it (Settler Tourism). This is near Tqou’ settlement. This is a clearly violent attack against historic remnants in Palestine”.

These testimonies are focused on the Bethlehem Governorate, illustrating the relentless emboldened crimes of Israeli settlers. Armed and unrestrained, they have the liberty to attack, rob, and, in some cases, kill Palestinians, creating severe instability due to the stark power imbalance. Palestinians, living in dire economic conditions near the settlements, struggle to survive, while settlers, hailing from various parts of the world, enjoy luxurious and secure living conditions for free. When Israeli settlers are both physically armed and ideologically racist, violence is inevitable – a reality the Israeli government deliberately fosters.

These accounts are just a glimpse into the broader, undocumented aggressions occurring not only in Bethlehem, but also throughout the West Bank, affecting all Palestinian villages, towns, and cities. They expose the harsh daily realities faced by Palestinians, highlighting severe human rights violations and systemic violence by Israeli settlers and soldiers. The intentional displacement of Palestinians and confiscation of their property flagrantly violate international law, creating a pervasive climate of fear and instability

## Case of Al-Makhrour: A Recent Example of Settler and State Violence

One poignant example of settler violence is the recent incident in Al-Makhrour Valley, located in Beit Jala, Northwest of Bethlehem. Al-Makhrour Valley is part of a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and is the last green area left for Palestinians in Bethlehem Governorate, due to Israel's relentless settlement policy, which seized all vast green areas of Bethlehem Governorate for the benefit of the illegal settlement enterprise.

Al-Makhrour Valley has been the subject of Israel's annexation policies for decades for its strategic location, connecting Bethlehem to Jerusalem. Several illegal Israeli settlements surround Al-Makhrour, and in 2019, a new settlement was established in the heart of the Valley over the ruins of a demolished Palestinian house and restaurant.

On July 31, 2024, a group of armed Israeli settlers, accompanied by representatives of the Israeli Civil Administration, attacked and forcibly evicted the Kissieh family, a Palestinian Christian family from Beit Jala, from their land in Al-Makhrour Valley. Despite the landowner's attempt to seek assistance from the Israeli police, the Israeli authorities arrested his son and compelled the family to vacate their property, allowing the settlers to remain without any 'legal' claims or court eviction notices.

This incident, like many others, underscores the systemic efforts to consolidate Israeli annexation of the western Bethlehem area, referred to by settlers as "Gush Etzion." Al-Makhrour recently saw the approval of another new illegal settlement, 'Nahal Heletz', by the Israeli government to further enforce the Israeli occupation of Palestinian privately-owned lands<sup>1</sup>. The Israeli government's involvement in this attack against Al-Makhrour is not solitary. The illegal council of "Gush Etzion" facilitated settler presence, the Jewish National Fund (with offices worldwide) claimed the land, and a Spanish company (OSSA) built infrastructure to ease settler access. OSSA's construction expanded a tunnel to increase the capacity of Road 60, a bypass road for settlers built after the signing of the Oslo Accords, crucial for expanding settler presence and fragmenting the Bethlehem Governorate east to west. Standing over these tunnels, one can observe the stark contrast between the overcrowded City of Bethlehem on one side and the empty green areas on the other, highlighting the discriminatory Israeli planning aimed at preventing Palestinian presence and development across most of the occupied territory.

Such attacks demand immediate alarm and action as they target Bethlehem Governorate's last green and open space, part of a UNESCO World Heritage site, and are part of long-term Israeli plans to annex the area. Israel's accelerated strategy of illegal land grabs, executed by illegal settlers and supported by the Israeli police and civil administration, represents blatant violations of international law and humanitarian principles. These attacks encapsulated with Israeli aggression and violent acts are fueled by the extremist rhetoric of Israeli right-wing minister Smotrich, who openly endorses and incites such acts. In the absence of effective accountability, and under the guise of October 7th, the Israeli government exploits the attention on the Gaza Strip to intensify land theft and settlement expansion in the West Bank. Such policies, involving land grabs and forcible displacement, profoundly impact Palestinians in the West Bank, with particularly severe effects in Al-Makhrour. The displacement of Palestinian Christian families from their lands contributes directly to the declining numbers of Palestinian Christians, exacerbated by such policies. In this example, as in many others, Israel uses its illegal settlers as a violent tool to threaten Palestinians and replace their presence with Israeli settlers. This systematic approach serves the broader objectives of illegal occupation, and forcible dispossession and transfer, furthering Israel's prolonged annexation ambitions<sup>2</sup>.

The escalation of settler violence and terrorism since October 7th underscores the urgent need for international attention and intervention to end the oppression and deprivation of Palestinian human rights. Thus, it is crucial to emphasize the necessity of international recognition and mobility to address and alter this grave situation. As the world rightfully sets its eyes and attention to Israel's brutal war on the Gaza Strip, mounting to a plausible case of genocide<sup>3</sup>, the occupied West Bank faces similar atrocities through a slow, methodically engineered, silent war, and despite the manifest illegality of all Israeli policies under international law (International Humanitarian Law, International Human Rights Law, and International Criminal law), Israel continues to expand its settlements and bring more settlers to solidify its forcible transfer and annexation policies in the West Bank.

1 BIHR: "New Israeli Settlement Poses Imminent Threats on Bethlehem's Last Remaining Green Areas" (July, 2024). <https://balasan.org/new-israeli-settlement-poses-imminent-threats-on-bethlehems-last-remaining-green-areas/>

2 BIHR: "Urgent: Israeli Settlers Forcefully Evict Palestinians from their Lands in Al-Makhrour, the Last Green Area left in Bethlehem and a UNESCO World Heritage Site" (July, 2024). <https://balasan.org/urgent-israeli-settlers-forcefully-evict-palestinians-from-their-lands-in-al-makhrour-the-last-green-area-left-in-bethlehem-and-a-unesco-world-heritage-site/>

3 International Court of Justice (ICJ), Case 192 - Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in the Gaza Strip (South Africa v. Israel), Order of 26 January 2024



Scan to watch BIHR's short movie on escalating settler violence and aggression in the West Bank

