

NO SAFE ROAD

Israeli settlers are unleashing a campaign of fear in the West Bank. Mariam Barghouti reflects on how this violence is reshaping everyday life.

There is no map that tells you where settler violence in the West Bank begins or ends.

One morning it arrives as a WhatsApp message warning that Israeli settlers have gathered at an entrance to a village, throwing stones at passing Palestinian cars. Another day it's a settler dousing a 92-year-old man in gasoline on his way home from a local mosque near Ramallah.

Living in the West Bank today, even the most ordinary decisions are shaped by the threat of a possible settler attack. Going to school. Picking olives. When or if to take a nap. You never know when a road will be blocked, an olive grove torched or an armed settler will appear around the corner.

The language of 'settler-violence', which inundates policy briefs and UN documents, suggests isolated attacks, despite the fact that they are now constant.

To understand the Palestinian experience, such depraved violence cannot be reduced to individual events or 'acts of extremism'. It's better understood as an atmosphere: unpredictable enough to produce fear, and habitual enough to reshape daily life.

Distance is no longer measured in kilometres but in risk. Which roads are closed? Which lands are the target for the next outpost expansion? Which checkpoint, like those erected at every village entrance, is likely to be blocked off?

More times than I can count, I have turned my car around after hearing settlers are gathered around a street or field. I find myself going through the scenarios in my head of whether I'm skilled enough as a driver to speed through certain roads in case of settler presence.

I'm not.

What is crucial to understand is that settlers rarely attack alone. They come in groups, carrying military-grade weapons such as M-16s, pistols and even drones. In contrast, Palestinians are denied any form of self-protection; even a sling shot can get you locked up, or killed. Since 2023, Israeli settlers and soldiers have killed more than



1,179 Palestinians in the West Bank.

The effects ripple far beyond the attacks themselves. I have friends who no longer go out to their balconies or rooftops because Israelis in adjacent outposts would shoot at them.

Increasingly, we see shepherds forced to change grazing routes and farmers delaying harvests until international or Israeli solidarity activists can accompany them. Palestinians are abandoning plots of land because they're too dangerous to reach.

This is intentional. Lands that aren't cultivated become easier to claim as Israeli 'state land', further absorbing what remains of the West Bank into an expanding Israel. This is precisely why Israeli 'settler-violence' is not merely the episodes of direct and clear attack. It is the shrinking of spaces where ordinary life remains possible for Palestinians.

Burned homes and uprooted olive trees can be photographed. Broken bones can be counted. Fear, however, leaves quieter traces. It's in the constant checking of our phones before we leave our homes or move from one place to another. We no longer worry about being late, we fear whether we'll make it there at all.

It is not accidental that there is a growing pattern of Palestinian youth searching for opportunities outside their villages, concentrating in cities like Ramallah or Nablus, where there are no settlers – for now. Or even outside of Palestine entirely. Recently, several people have told me, almost apologetically, 'we haven't been to our lands/homes in weeks'. They speak as though it's a temporary separation and will be able to return next week. But next week becomes next month, and by then a new settler outpost has appeared, making return all but impossible.

Under rising state-sponsored organized Israeli settler crimes, children are growing up not knowing where home is, but also not knowing where to go. Conversations become concentrated around who made it home safely – if home is still accessible.

When daily life is defined by immediate questions of safety, the future begins to contract. The violence has become more than the attacks – it is everything that happens between them. ●

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