

## Settler violence September-October

By Shazia Arshad

Illegal settlements continue to be built across the West Bank and bring with them even more problems, including increasing incidents of settler violence. The illegal settlers colonising the West Bank attack Palestinian people, land, schools, mosques and agriculture. A problem that has existed for some time is worsening, and the Israeli military generally turns a blind eye.

### Background

- 1967: Israel wins the Six-Day War and occupies the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Settlements begin to be built in defiance of international law.
- It is illegal to build settlements on occupied land or for the occupier to allow its own population to live on occupied land.
- Since 1967 illegal settlements have been built and expanded with the authority of the Israeli government in direct contravention of international law.
- Alongside the building of settlements, Israeli settlers have also built 'outposts'. These are unrecognised settlements which are illegal under both international and Israeli law.
- There are currently 121 settlements in the West Bank and 12 in East Jerusalem.
- There are around 500,000 settlers in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. These include Members of the Israeli Knesset, most significantly the Foreign Minister, Avigdor Lieberman.

### The development of settler violence

- Settler violence takes many forms, from physical attacks on Palestinian people to attacks on mosques and schools as well as farmland.
- The settlers hope that their violence and extremist behaviour will intimidate the Palestinian population and eventually push them to leave the area, allowing the settlers to occupy all of the land.
- Much of violence is instigated by settlers belonging or affiliated to Gush Emunim (block of the faithful). These are religious Zionists who hope to force all Palestinians from their land.
- As the olive harvest season approaches the attacks on agricultural land increase in number and ferocity.



### Mosque attacks

- Attacks on mosques in the West Bank have increased in number; while some are reported in the British media, most are ignored.
- In May 2010 a mosque in the village of Libban al Sharqiya, north of Ramallah, was attacked. The mosque was set on fire and most of the large prayer hall was destroyed, along with copies of the Qur'an and other texts.
- The village of Yasuf, near Nablus, also saw the destruction of a mosque some months ago when it was subject to an arson attack.
- A mosque in Beit Fajjar, near Bethlehem was also torched and had Hebrew graffiti scrawled on the walls.
- Many other mosques in the West Bank have been subject to attacks such as these.
- The Palestinian Authority Minister of Waqf (Religious Endowments) has said that these actions by settlers are provoked by the settlers' intention to spark-off a religious war.
- Although the Palestinian residents report these atrocities to the Israeli authorities, they have failed to apprehend and charge any of the criminals responsible.
- The Grand Mufti of Jerusalem told Reuters news agency that the settlers aim is to terrorise the Palestinians.

### School attacks

- Schools across the West Bank have also been attacked by settlers.
- Many schools have often been rebuilt only to be destroyed again.
- Most recently, a Palestinian secondary school near Nablus was attacked by settlers from the nearby settlement of Elli. The school's sports equipment store room was set on fire. Graffiti in Hebrew was scrawled across the walls.
- The Israeli military has not brought any perpetrators to account and did little to prevent repeat attacks on schools.
- These attacks destroy Palestinian lives in many ways; attacks on schools destroy the children's right to an education.



## Olive groves

- Yesh Din, an Israeli human rights organisation has reported a stark increase in the damage to Palestinian olive trees and crops as a result of settler-related incidents.
- Olive crops cover approximately 800,000 dunums across the West Bank.
- The increase in the number of attacks on olive groves is reported to be the result of the ten month moratorium on settlement construction in the West Bank, which caused uncertainty for the settlers.



- Oxfam has conducted a report into the potential benefit that the olive crops could provide to the Palestinian economy. It noted that the growing problem of settler violence and the destruction of the olive crops was a significant factor in the restriction of wealth that the olive crops could provide.
- It is estimated that 95% of the harvest is used to make olive oil which is worth 364m shekels (£64m).
- Incidents include the destruction of Mohammed Abu Najar's farm in Burin, near the settlement of Bracha. In a 2 week period in 2009, 400 of his olive trees were destroyed. In July this year a further 75 trees were cut down by settlers.
- Rasmia Awase, a resident of Libban al Sharqiya, found 40 of her olive trees chopped down and destroyed. Unfortunately, these trees were the best of the crop and had been left until last for harvesting.
- In the village of Tir, near Nablus it is reported that Israeli settlers set fire to approximately 100 dunums of agricultural land.
- In Beit Ummar, near Hebron, settlers pumped waste water onto large areas of agricultural land.
- Yesh Din has reported that the Israeli military has done little to enforce the law on Israeli settlers who destroy the olive harvest and, further, that the forces have actually stood aside and not tried to stop this aggression.



## Physical violence

- Settler violence is not limited to property destruction and there have been many reports of attacks on Palestinian citizens.
- The Alternative Information Centre reported at least 30 attacks on Palestinians in the period July-August 2010.
- A Palestinian farmer from the Al-Khadr village near Bethlehem was run down by a settler's car.
- A Palestinian child from Hebron was injured and taken to a local clinic after being run down by settlers driving a motorcycle. Another child from Hebron was taken to hospital when a group of settlers from the Ramot Yashai Outpost beat her with stones.
- Hebron has seen some of the most violent attacks, such as the four Palestinian workers who were injured when settlers attacked them with stakes. Hebron's mayor, Zahran Abu Qubaita, has reported that such attacks are increasing in Hebron.
- B'TSelem, an Israeli human rights organisation, collects testimonies from Palestinians who are subject to such violent attacks.
- Khaled Najar is a farmer who was attacked by a settler from the nearby illegal settlement of Mitzpeh Ya'ir. Najar was grazing his flock on his land near the village of Khawawis when he was set upon by the settler.



### Israeli military support for violence and settlers

- The Israeli military has done little to protect Palestinians from the aggression of the settlers. Under international law, the Israeli military and police have a duty of care to protect the civilians of the land the Israelis are occupying.
- Settler aggression has not been curbed by Israel's military presence; many attacks take place with Israeli soldiers looking on.



- When the village of Saffa near Ramallah was burnt down, it was in full sight of Israeli soldiers. Not only did the soldiers not prevent the atrocity but they prevented the residents and fire brigade from entering the village to tackle the blaze.



- Another report says that an Israeli soldier entered a village near Nablus with settlers to guard them and prevent the Palestinians from leaving the village.
- Israeli soldiers often guard religious processions that settlers undertake in the Palestinian areas of Hebron, closing the streets to the Palestinian residents. The Palestinians must wait until the settlers have left the area before they can continue to use their own streets or open their businesses.
- As Israeli soldiers work to protect and guard the settlers, there are no convictions of settlers who commit acts of violence.
- Harriet Sherwood reported in the Guardian (24<sup>th</sup> October 2010) that the Israeli police had received 27 complaints about settlers sabotaging Palestinian olive crops.
- Yesh Din's recent study reported that there was not a single case where Israeli authorities had taken action to bring settlers involved in violence to court.

### Recommendations

- All activities of the settlers are illegal; an investigation must be carried out to identify the activities and perpetrators, especially to see if any perpetrators are British citizens. Criminal proceedings must be brought against those settlers involved in the attacks.
- British organisations must be deterred from involvement in and with illegal settlements and their activities.
- Those involved in the production of settlement goods may be liable to prosecution in Britain and the EU, and the possibility of this should be investigated. The boycott of settlement products must be subject to tighter regulations in accordance with EU rulings.

