

Exposing Israel's Use of Settler Aggression to Grab Palestinian Land

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B'Tselem, the Israeli human rights group, which dared to brand as "apartheid" Israel's regime for governing occupied Palestinians, has now exposed Israel's use of settler aggression to grab Palestinian land. In its report, "State Business: Israel's misappropriation of land in the West Bank through settler violence, B'Tselem says. "Israel has taken over some ..using official means: using military orders, declaring [an] area 'state land,' a 'firing zone' or a 'nature reserve,' and expropriating land. Other areas have been effectively taken over by settlers through daily acts of violence, including attacks on Palestinians and their property."

Although B'Tselem argues the "two tracks appear unrelated," in fact, they constitute a single track. Settler violence is an "informal tool in the hands of the state to take over more and more West Bank land. The state supports and assists these acts of violence and its agents sometimes participate in them directly. As such, settler violence in a form of government policy, aided and abetted by official state authorities with their active participation."

According to the report, Israeli settlers have taken over 11 square miles of farm and pasture land in the occupied West Bank during the past five years.

Settler violence includes stoning, threatening, burning fields, destroying trees and crops, damaging homes and vehicles, stealing crops, and, B'Tselem says, "in rare cases, homicide". Settlers most prone to violence are those dwelling on some of the 150 wildcat settlements, dubbed "farms", which are not officially recognised by the state but are provided with electricity, water, roads and protection by the state. The Israeli military does not respond to settler attacks on Palestinian persons or property.

B'Tselem states,

"The military avoids confronting violent settlers as a matter of policy, although soldiers

have the authority and duty to detain and arrest them. As a rule, the military prefers to remove Palestinians from their own farmland or pastureland rather than confront settlers, using various tactics such as issuing closed military zone orders that apply to Palestinians only, or firing tear gas, stun grenades, rubber-coated metal bullets and even live rounds at Palestinians not settlers.”

The olive harvest is an especially tense time for Palestinian farmers as settlers mount attacks on families picking the fruit, steal olives, uproot trees and threaten farmers trying to reach their trees.

According to B’Tselem,

“Complaints are difficult to file, and in the very few cases in which investigations are in fact opened, the system quickly whitewashes them. Indictments are hardly ever filed against settlers who harm Palestinians and when they do, usually cite minor offences, with token penalties to match in the rare instance of a conviction.”

B’Tselem argues that settler violence is “part and parcel of Israel’s apartheid regime, which aims to create a Jewish-only space between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. The regime treats land as a resource designed to serve the Jewish public, and accordingly uses it almost exclusively to develop and expand existing Jewish residential communities and to build new ones. At the same time, the regime fragments Palestinian space, dispossesses Palestinians of their land and relegates them to living in small, over-populated enclaves”.

B’Tselem’s January 2021 report on Israel’s practice of apartheid, has, in particular, encouraged international human rights groups and commentators to use this term, blackened by the South African white regime’s discrimination against repression of the native population. This development amounted to a major, even revolutionary, liberating change in how some view Israel and are prepared to speak about Israel’s treatment of Palestinians. This month’s report on settler violence as a tool of the apartheid regime is bound to have repercussions in the war of words between Israel and its critics and detractors. Palestinians began to use this term in the early 2000s when Israel began to build its “apartheid wall” across the West Bank, seizing wide tracts of Palestinian land and cutting Palestinian farmers off from their farms.

While B’Tselem contends that settler violence has become “part and parcel of life under the occupation in the West Bank,” Israeli colonising violence long predated 1967 and was practiced by early Israeli settlers with the encouragement and support of the British mandatory authority. A British officer who made his name in the World War II campaign against Japan, Orde Wingate launched his career in 1936 during the Palestinian revolt against Britain by training Jewish fighters to fight Palestinian irregulars defending their lands. Captain Wingate, a committed Christian Zionist, formed the Special Night Squads of British soldiers and Jewish militiamen to mount offensive operations against Palestinians rather than rely on simply defending Jewish colonies. This approach has been used by the Israeli state and military since then. Consequently, Wingate is seen by Israelis as the father of the Israeli Defence Force,” which, thanks to Wingate, has always been the “Israeli Offence Force”.

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