

Israel's army and settlers fall out

The souring of a West Bank romance

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The Israeli army officer in charge of the occupation of the West Bank, Gen Gadi Shamni, has lambasted extremist Jewish settlers, blaming rising levels of violence on the encouragement of their leadership and right-wing rabbis.

It is rare for a senior commander to speak so critically of the settlers, many of whom themselves serve in senior positions in the army.

In a lengthy interview with the Haaretz newspaper running today, marking the Jewish new year, Gen Shamni said: "In the past, only a few dozen individuals took part in such activity [settler violence], but today that number has grown into the hundreds.

"That's a very significant change. These hundreds are engaged in conspiratorial actions against Palestinians and the security forces. It's a very grave phenomenon."

He said the extremists were "enjoying a tailwind and the backing of part of the leadership, both rabbinical and public, whether in explicit statements or tacitly".

The timing of Gen Shamni's comments is not accidental. In recent weeks, there has been a spate of settler attacks on soldiers in the West Bank. One had a dog set on him, another's hand was broken, and a soldier in Hebron was beaten while trying to prevent settler children from throwing stones at Palestinians.

Soldiers were also set upon last month when settlers were tipped off that the army was planning to remove a single family from its makeshift camp at Yad Yair, west of Ramallah. The tyres of 10 military vehicles were slashed.

The contempt shown by some settlers for the army contrasts with the veneration with which it is regarded by much of the wider Israeli public.

Aryeh King, a settler leader in Jerusalem, dismissed Gen Shamni as a "political appointee" of former prime minister Ariel Sharon whose opinions did not reflect the reality on the ground. He said: "If the settlers are using violence, it is because they see that Palestinians do what they want, attack the settlements and burn our fields, and there is no response from the army."

The general may have been emboldened to make his remarks by widespread outrage among Israelis at a pipe-bomb explosion last week at the home of Zeev Sternhell, a politics professor and outspoken opponent of the settler movement. Prof Sternhell was lightly

injured in the blast. Jewish leaders in Hebron, among the most militant settlers, refused to condemn the attack.

In an example of the kind of support for violence among the settler leadership highlighted by Gen Shamni, Yisrael Rozen, a senior rabbi in the Gush Etzion settlements south of Jerusalem, published a pamphlet last month in which he said activists in the Peace Now organisation deserved the death penalty. He said the group's members were worse than heretics and apostates.

Other right-wing rabbis have been quoted in the local media referring to Palestinians as subhuman or as animals, arguing that as non-Jews their lives are of inferior value.

Lawlessness among the settlers is on the rise, according to the Israeli security forces. Recorded attacks in the first half of this year – at 429 – are up 75 per cent on the previous two years.

Even then, a recent editorial in Haaretz noted, the vast majority of attacks on Palestinians go unrecorded. The paper attributed this in part to the fact that few Palestinians bother to report violence when they know that the Israeli police, army and courts rarely enforce the law on the settlers.

According to the human rights group Yesh Din, less than one in 10 reported attacks on Palestinians leads to an indictment. Most such cases end later in acquittal.

“For all practical purposes, the law is not the law, the settlers are the sovereign, and matters are handled as they decide,” the Haaretz editorial said.

The peak season for settler violence is about to arrive: the olive harvest, when Palestinian farmers venture out to pick their crops.

The rapid expansion of the settlements' municipal jurisdiction in recent years means that most Palestinian olive groves are close to a settlement's boundaries. According to Peace Now, the half a million settlers in the West Bank and East Jerusalem have official control over more than 40 per cent of the territory.

In addition, the human rights group B'Tselem pointed out last month that the army had supported the annexation of large swathes of land by settlements east of Israel's separation wall – that is, the settlements most likely to be given up in a deal with the Palestinians. These settlements are among the most militant. The confiscated lands have been formally classified as “special security areas”.

Sarit Michaeli, a spokesman for B'Tselem, said it was possible Gen Shamni found it easier to raise the issue of settler violence when soldiers as well as Palestinians were becoming the target of attacks.

“The problem traditionally has been that the army often washes its hands of law enforcement with the settlers, or even assists them. We hear commanders say that it is their job to fight Palestinian terror, not to deal with settler violence. That understanding of their responsibilities contradicts international law. As an occupying force, they must protect the safety and welfare of the Palestinian population.”

Ms Michaeli said B'Tselem was stepping up its campaign to bring settler violence to the attention of the Israeli and international public with its campaign, "Shooting Back", in which video cameras are handed out to Palestinians in "hot spots" of the West Bank. About 50 extra cameras are being distributed to Palestinian farmers before the olive harvest.

"Several videos shot by Palestinians with our cameras have shown not only shocking images of settlers attacking Palestinians but also of the armed forces standing by and watching as it happens."

One video, shot last month, shows Jews from the militant settlement of Yitzhar near Nablus in the central West Bank rampaging through the Palestinian village of Asira al Qabiliya. Soldiers are heard being ordered around by the settlers as they fire live ammunition into the village, smash up homes and shoot tear gas at Palestinians.

Akiva Eldar and Idit Zertal, two Israeli analysts, recently documented in their book *Lords of the Land* the close ties between the settlers and the army over many decades. They note that most of the settlements were originally set up as military posts; that army units are used to defend the settlements, even those unlicensed by the government; and that the settlers are given weapons by the army.

In addition, the army has established special units composed entirely of settlers and allowed them to serve in the occupied territories close to their settlements. Today, about one-third of the army's company commanders are religious men, likely to have strong sympathies with the aims of the settlers.

Last year, Haggai Alon, a senior official in the ministry of defence, accused the army of furthering the settlers' goals. He said it was co-operating with the settlers to implement "an apartheid policy" in which Palestinians were being ethnically cleansed from parts of the West Bank.

Despite the traditional close relations between the settlers and the army, Lior Yavne, of Yesh Din, said Gen Shamni's comments "were not so brave". The general had been careful to restrict his remarks only to a tiny minority of the settlers who were using violence, especially those targeting soldiers, Mr Yavne said.

Yesh Din suspects the rise in such attacks is part of a new policy by extremist groups among the settlers to attach a "price tag" to any actions, however small, taken by the army against the settlements.

According to the US-sponsored Road Map, a diplomatic plan to advance a Palestinian state, Israel is supposed to begin evacuating dozens of small settlements scattered across the West Bank.

"The hardline settlers want the army to see that whenever they move an empty caravan or bus from a hilltop or try to stop attacks on Palestinians, soldiers elsewhere in the West Bank will suffer retaliation," said Mr Yavne.

In the Haaretz interview, Gen Shamni appears to be concerned that such "retaliation" is tarnishing the army's image and hampering its effectiveness. "This is harming our ability to

carry out security missions in the territories. We have to divert our efforts to there from other issues," he said.

Amos Harel, a leading military correspondent in Israel, said the "weakness" of the army in curbing settler violence had become "particularly visible" in recent weeks.

Jonathan Cook is a writer and journalist based in Nazareth, Israel. His latest books are "Israel and the Clash of Civilisations: Iraq, Iran and the Plan to Remake the Middle East" (Pluto Press) and "Disappearing Palestine: Israel's Experiments in Human Despair" (Zed Books). His website is www.jkcook.net.

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