

It's Not Just the Settlers - or Israel - Responsible for the Torching of Huwwara

Endless indulgence from Israel's supporters in the West has cleared a path to a fascist government intent on 'wiping out' Palestinian communities

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A sustained [violent attack](#) by hundreds of Jewish settlers on the [Palestinian](#) town of Huwwara last week – as well as the response of Israel's new far-right government – has divided Jewish opinion in [Israel](#) and deeply discomfited Jews abroad.

The Board of Deputies, which claims to represent [Britain's](#) Jewish community and is usually a reliable defender of Israel, felt compelled last week to issue a short statement [condemning comments](#) by a senior Israeli government minister, Bezalel Smotrich, after he [called for](#) Huwwara to be "[wiped out](#)".

At the weekend, the distinguished British historian Simon Schama described the events in Huwwara as "[absolutely, utterly horrifying](#)" and urged fellow Jews to speak up.

He was joined by Margaret Hodge, a veteran Labour MP who was at the forefront of attacks on the party's previous leader, Jeremy Corbyn, over his activism in solidarity with Palestinians. She said Israel was at a "[dangerous moment](#)" and British Jews could not just "stand by".

Even Yehuda Fuchs, the Israeli army commander whose soldiers allowed the settlers to rampage, described the attack [as a "pogrom"](#), a word with especially troubling connotations for Jews. It is historically associated with massacres and the ethnic cleansing of Jewish communities in eastern Europe that served as a prelude to the Nazi Holocaust.

But Palestinians don't need very belated sympathy from Israel or its supporters, least of all from the Israeli army, any more than they need empty calls for "restraint" and "calm" from western capitals.

What they need is genuine solidarity and real international protections, all the more so as

the appeal of overt religious fascism sweeps across Israel. Instead, much of the rhetoric in the wake of the attack, even if it is well-meant, misleads far more than it clarifies.

Reign of terror

On 26 February, a mob of several hundred settlers stormed Huwwara and spent several hours terrorising the local inhabitants, looting and burning homes and cars.

A Palestinian man was shot dead during the events, and some 100 other Palestinians were injured. Videos show that Israeli soldiers and armed police either [stood by or assisted](#) in the settlers' attack.

The rampage followed the shooting of two settlers by a Palestinian gunman earlier that day. For many months, there has been growing unrest among Palestinians – both at the continuing failure of their leaders to secure any kind of diplomatic achievement, and at the steady rise in Israeli state and settler violence. Last year was the most [deadly for Palestinians](#) in the West Bank for nearly two decades.

Huwwara is especially vulnerable. It sits on a major intersection close to the large Palestinian city of Nablus. It is a critical artery for settlers because most traffic, whether Palestinian or Jewish, needs to pass through Huwwara to move between the southern and northern parts of the occupied West Bank.

It was close to this intersection, hours before the attack, that the [two settler brothers](#) were killed.

The settlers in this area are among the most extreme and violent in the occupied territories, the kind who vote solidly for the religious fascists who are now key partners in Benjamin Netanyahu's government. The Religious Zionism faction, led by Smotrich and [Itamar Ben-Gvir](#), emerged from last year's general election as the third largest in the parliament.

Nearly 30 years on from the signing of the Oslo Accords, with Israel still refusing to honour a process that was expected to lead to the dismantling of the settlements and Palestinian self-rule, Huwwara has found itself permanently trapped under Israeli military control.

Israeli soldiers are supposed to guarantee the security of the town's Palestinian inhabitants. Instead, like so many other Palestinians in the West Bank, those inhabitants live under a reign of terror from unwelcome Jewish settler "neighbours" endlessly indulged by the Israeli army.

At the weekend, the United Nation's rapporteur for the occupied territories, Francesca Albanese, told the BBC that [Israel should be investigated](#) for crimes against the Palestinian people.

'Merciless attacks'

Smotrich, Israel's finance minister, who has also been awarded unprecedented powers by Netanyahu to run the occupation, responded to the Huwwara attack by urging greater violence. He called for the town to be "wiped out".

But he qualified his statement by arguing that it was important the Israeli state organise the

violence rather than that it be left to the settler movement he represents.

“Heaven forbid it should be done by private individuals,” [he said](#). “I think the village of Huwwara should be wiped out, but I think the State of Israel should do it.”

His comment did not come out of the blue. Hours before the settlers’ invasion of Huwwara, Smotrich had called on his own government to abandon discussions with Palestinian officials in Jordan to ease tensions. He demanded instead that Israel attack Palestinian cities “[mercilessly with tanks and helicopters](#)”.

Other legislators in his faction have echoed him. Zvika Fogel, a retired general who was once in charge of Gaza, [said in response](#) to the settlers’ rampage: “Huwwara closed and burned down – that’s what I want to see.” Last December, [he told](#) the UK’s Channel 4 News that Israel was “too merciful” towards Palestinians and it was “time for us to stop being so”.

Both were giving succour to a familiar slogan against Palestinians shouted out at demonstrations by Israel’s fascist right: “[May your village burn](#).”

In any other context, calls by a senior government minister for state-organised violence against civilians because of their ethnic or national status would be clearly understood as [genocidal](#). But, of course, other standards apply to Israel, a key partner for the [United States](#) and Europe in projecting western power into the oil-rich Middle East.

Instead, the full significance of Smotrich’s threat – given that he and his partner, Ben-Gvir, the police minister, control the means by which such [genocidal actions](#) can be undertaken – is [not being addressed](#).

The Biden administration [called his remarks](#) “irresponsible” and “repugnant”.

The liberal [Haaretz newspaper](#) warned only that Smotrich was urging “collective punishment” of Palestinians, in violation of international law. But [collective punishment](#) has been the stock-in-trade of Israeli policy towards Palestinians for decades.

Genocidal project

In my view, something far more sinister is going on. Smotrich’s comment that it should not fall to individuals to “wipe out” Palestinian communities – that it was the duty of the state – was directed at his supporters among the fanatical settlers. He was intimating two things to them.

First, he was reminding these religious fascists, the constituency that propelled him into government, that he and Ben-Gvir [are now the state](#) – thanks to them. He was not seeking to dissuade the settlers from perpetrating genocidal violence against Palestinians. He was reassuring them that he is there to help.

He and Ben-Gvir now effectively run the occupation. He was telling the settlers they have allies for their genocidal project in the highest places.

But, in my opinion, he was doing something more. He was also reminding them that he and Ben-Gvir are fighting their corner but cannot win the battle alone. They need the settlers to aid them in their struggle against wavering ministerial colleagues, or those in government who might hold back from fear of the international reaction.

Smotrich's remarks were intended not to curb the settlers' excesses. He wants them to exert even more pressure on the government to strengthen his hand.

The more effective he is in forcing the state to "wipe out" places like Huwwara – or help the settlers to do so – the larger his support base will grow, the more he will become a central figure in Israeli politics, and the more his and settlers' agenda will become normalised.

And Smotrich knows too that opposition to the settlers' genocidal violence may be only skin deep among much of the wider Israeli Jewish public. The dehumanisation of Palestinians and incitement towards violence is standard fare, on both the right and the supposed left.

Singling him out pretends that more respectable government ministers, even prime ministers, have not been talking and thinking this way for decades.

Generals, senior politicians and rabbis regularly compare Palestinians to [cockroaches](#), [snakes](#), [lice](#) and [cancer](#). Settler rabbis have even called for Jews to [kill Palestinian babies](#).

In 2008, Matan Vilnai, an army general who at the time was a Labor deputy defence minister, [called for a "shoah"](#) – the Hebrew word for the Holocaust – against the Palestinians of Gaza.

Ehud Barak, a former Labor prime minister, famously compared Israel to a "[villa in the jungle](#)", implying that the dangerous creatures outside needed exterminating.

And Netanyahu himself suggested in the 2019 general election that the parties representing Israel's large, much-oppressed minority of Palestinians, "[want to annihilate us all](#) – women, children and men". The implication was clear: Israel had a right to pre-empt such annihilation.

Smotrich knows that most Israeli Jews understand, at least subconsciously, that their self-declared Jewish state was founded [by wiping out](#) – literally blowing up and demolishing – many hundreds of communities like Huwwara in 1948. So why not continue that process in the occupied territories? Why not make explicit in the areas occupied in 1967 what was entirely routine in the areas seized in 1948?

'Zero tolerance'

While criticism is focused on Smotrich, wider patterns are being ignored. The settlers and army – and behind both, the Israeli state – have been working hand in glove to [drive out Palestinians](#) from swaths of the occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem for more than half a century.

Even the US State Department noted in 2021 that Israeli security forces often failed to prevent settler attacks against Palestinians and that violent settlers were almost [never held to account](#).

It was the army and police that allowed the [settlers free reign](#) for their rampage in Huwwara. Those same security forces arrested almost none of the hundreds of pogromists, and released the half a dozen who were arrested almost immediately.

It is not as though the Israeli state is incapable of dealing with Israeli Jews – let alone

Palestinians asserting their rights – when it wishes to.

The same army and police that stood by, or assisted, as the settlers attacked Huwwara proved quite capable on Friday last week of sealing off the town from a convoy of Israeli human rights activists trying to pay a solidarity visit. It did so even as settlers continued to drive through the Palestinian community.

And unlike their hands-off approach with the settlers, the army was ready to [beat and fire stun grenades](#) at the solidarity activists.

Similarly, the security forces [presented an iron fist](#) at the weekend towards Israelis who protested against the settler takeover of Palestinian homes in the Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood of Jerusalem, and peaceful anti-government protesters in Tel Aviv, who were charged by police on horseback and had water cannon used against them.

Ben-Gvir ordered the police to show “[zero tolerance](#)” in Tel Aviv, as he turned a blind eye in Huwwara. The minister whose police force could not foresee an entirely predictable pogrom by the settlers warned darkly on Monday that the Israeli left was “[planning the next murder](#)”, supposedly of Netanyahu and his wife, Sara.

The difference in treatment was not lost on the demonstrators in Tel Aviv, who called out to the security forces: “[Where were you in Huwwara?](#)”

Comfort blanket

The reality is that Smotrich’s comment was reckless, coarse and undiplomatic. But outrage at his and Ben-Gvir’s rhetoric is now serving chiefly as a comfort blanket for those who have always supported Israel as a Jewish supremacist state.

Smotrich’s biggest offence is not that he called for the destruction of Huwwara, or even that he fuels the crimes committed by his fascist settlers’ allies. It is that he highlights a little too clearly what has been going on for more than five decades in the occupied territories – and before it, inside Israel.

His crime is [offering the unvarnished truth](#). His transgression is to be seeking to intensify and speed up a state policy of violence and ethnic cleansing that has until now been conducted a little more discreetly and incrementally – a policy of “[creeping annexation](#)” that [dates back](#) to the Labor politicians and generals Moshe Dayan and Yigal Allon.

Before the Board of Deputies issued its denunciation of Smotrich’s remarks, it issued a much more typical statement as the settlers unleashed their violence on Huwwara. This earlier statement not only tied the rampage against the Palestinian community, backed by the Israeli security forces, with the earlier killing of the two settler brothers, it implied that the attack was [a form of retaliation](#) – or, in the settlers’ parlance, “a price tag”.

Had a critic of Israel done something similar but the other way around, the board would have lost no time in suggesting that such linkage served to minimise or excuse Palestinian violence.

But has this not been the strategy of Israel’s apologists from the outset. Any crime, any outrage by Israel can be justified because the Palestinians started it, or because they don’t listen to reason, or because they want to drive Jews into the sea.

The excuses have been interminable. And now, with religious fascism at the heart of the Netanyahu government, still they come. Smotrich and Ben-Gvir have become the excuse. They are the problem. They are the cause of Israel's woes. It is yet more self-delusion and misdirection.

Israel was founded as a Jewish supremacist state and it continues along that path, growing more confident, and less ready to compromise, with every passing year.

All the signs are that Israel's defenders in the West will continue to stand by as Palestinians suffer, as they are denied statehood and stripped of their dignity. The clamour will grow, but only for Smotrich and Ben-Gvir to stop disturbing these apologists' slumber as the embers burn.

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Featured image: Palestinian residents of Huwara walk among their burned homes, cars, and businesses the morning after Israeli settlers rampaged through their town in the West Bank, Feb. 27, 2023. (Oren Ziv) Source: [+972 Magazine](#)

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