

Indigenous Erasure

How the zionist movement is using state sanctioned violence to eliminate the Palestinian communities of the West Bank



Israel's program of indigenous erasure has continued, as planned, throughout the West Bank since October 7. Through the use of charitable donations from the US and Canada, and emboldened by additional state support, Zionist organizations and settler communities have been able to forcibly displace 16 pastoral communities across the West Bank, forcing some 1,000 Palestinians off of their lands.

Since October 7, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) documented 171 Israeli settler attacks on Palestinians, leaving community members murdered, injured or with damaged property. There have been at least 26 instances in which settler violence led to injuries in the community, and 115 where Palestinian property was damaged. The figures do not account for incidents of harassment, trespassing, or intimidation when they don't culminate in physical harm or property damage, though these actions also put pressure on indigenous Palestinians to leave their ancestral lands.

On October 12, threats from settlers led to the displacement of eight families, totaling 51 individuals, from the Shihda WaHamlan herding community in Nablus.¹ The settlers, brandishing firearms, threatened to kill them and burn their tents down during the night. A family member, 52-year-old Abu Ismail, expressed his desperation saying, "I had no choice but to leave everything behind to protect my children."

Khirbet Zanuta

In one instance, following threats from

armed Israeli settlers, 24 Palestinian families consisting of 141 individuals, half of them children, were forced to leave Khirbet Zanuta in the southern West Bank.^{2 3} The situation escalated on October 28, 2023, leading to the destruction of about 50 buildings used for housing and animal shelter, and the evacuation of the area along with the community's 5,000 livestock. The community endured three violent attacks just days apart on October 12, 21, and 26 leading up to this displacement. Two thirds of the families forming this community are now displaced. Calls to the Israeli state to intervene and prosecute the settlers who carried out these attacks have gone unanswered. Of course, the unwillingness or inability of the Israeli state to respond is not a glitch, but rather a built-in feature of the way systems of settler-colonialism operate: the state provides support to these settler militias in material ways to support the erasure of the indigenous community.

43-year-old Abu Khaled of Khirbet Zanuta recounted the harrowing attacks on October 26 when settlers wreaked havoc, demolishing homes, water storage, solar installations, and vehicles. The fear of death was palpable, forcing him into a dilemma between staying or abandoning the place he cherished. On October 28, faced with the grim reality, he chose to protect his family by leaving Zanuta and all its cherished memories behind.

"I felt the presence of death so tangibly as if I saw it with my own eyes. I was torn between staying on or leaving the place I love, where I belong, where I may die. On 28 October, I made the hardest decision in my life: to leave Zanuta and leave everything behind, as memories. I did

1. <https://electronicintifada.net/blogs/tamara-nassar/settlers-gunning-second-nakba-west-bank>

2. <https://english.wafa.ps/Pages/Details127913/>

3. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/oct/31/west-bank-palestinian-villages-israeli-army-settlers>



In Khirbet Zanuta, Palestinians load the remaining possessions of the village's residents onto this truck to transport it away. October 28, 2023.

this to protect my children,” he said according to an OCHA report.

Unfortunately, Khirbet Zanuta is not alone in facing such horrific circumstances. Since October 7, 15 other pastoral communities in the West Bank have been displaced. The Israeli Zionist movement's matrix of violence has pressured at least 98 families or 828 individuals to leave their lands, 313 among them children, either due to organized settler violence or heightened movement restrictions. Since October 7, Israeli attacks on isolated Palestinian communities have jumped from three to seven a day.

Armed Settler Militias

This comes after National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir delivered to the Israeli settler movement some 10,000 assault rifles⁴, apparently provided by the United States government.⁵ This supply of weapons was accompanied with additional supplies needed to invade Palestinians communities, such as helmets and flak jackets.

Since October 7, over a third of the incidents involving settlers have seen the use of firearms to terrorize Palestinians, including instances of firing. In nearly half of these scenarios, Israeli forces either accompanied or actively

4. <https://www.reuters.com/world/israel-arming-volunteer-guards-border-communities-jewish-arab-towns/2023-10-10->

5. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2023/10/29/us-israel-itamar-ben-gvir-settlers-rifles-social-media/>

supported the aggressors. Many such incidents spiraled into confrontations between Israeli forces and Palestinians, leading to the deaths of three Palestinians and injuries to dozens more. By the end of October, Israeli settlers had killed eight Palestinians directly in this way. The violence resulted in damage or destruction to 24 residential structures, 40 farming structures, 67 vehicles, and over 400 trees and saplings.

The presence of West Bank settlements, illegal under international humanitarian law, along with settler violence, have perpetually escalated the frequency of violence against Palestinian communities. This is by design. The State of Israel supports settlers and their project of land and resource theft throughout the West Bank, legally, monetarily and, more recently, through the distribution of firearms to the settlers themselves.

The Israeli military forces and police, including border police, also support settler violence and militias either through explicit support and protection during these targeted community attacks, or through a failure to respond to community calls during the attacks, collect reports following attacks, and enforce the law by arresting and prosecuting settlers involved in these militias. Below are some examples of armed settler attacks and acts of forced displacement on communities across Area C of the West Bank.

Al Tuwani

On October 13, Israeli settler militias invaded the town of Al Tuwani, located in Masafer Yatta, south of Hebron. Attacking the houses in the village, an armed settler shot local resident

Zakariya al Adara, 28 years old, at point blank range in the stomach, causing a major injury. al Adara was rushed to the hospital and remains there in moderate to severe condition. al Adara was shot with a “dum dum” or explosive bullet, banned for use under international law according to the 1899 Hague Declaration concerning Expanding Bullets.⁶

This incident came exactly one day after another attack by settlers on the same village, in which armed settlers from the neighboring outpost of Havat Ma'on invaded Al Tuwani dressed in Israeli military uniforms. They fired live bullets at civilians in the village, targeting well-known activists in particular, including Hafez Huraini. Huraini was the target of another settler attack less than a year ago, in which armed settlers stormed his land and then attempted to frame him for the assault.⁷

Throughout October, armed settlers returned to agricultural land in Al Tuwani, using their own bulldozers to destroy farmland and crops in an attempt to force families' displacement, and firing live bullets at Palestinians in the village and international activists.

Mohammed Huraini, a young activist describing the ongoing attacks on his village, stated, “The Israeli settler militias benefited from this state of war. Now they are the ones ruling the area, as armed Israeli settlers wearing military uniforms. Since the first day of the war, they have bulldozed and closed all the entrances of the villages to stop traffic throughout the entire area. The village of At-Tuwani and the entire Masafer Yatta area are under siege... We are now living under the rule of terrorist settler militias. Our lives, my people, are threatened with grave danger.”

6. <https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/customary-ihl/v2/rule77>

7. <https://mondoweiss.net/2022/09/israeli-settlers-attacked-a-palestinian-man-breaking-both-his-arms-then-the-army-arrested-him/>



A Palestinian man in Ein Samiya inspects his tent, burnt by Israeli settlers, August 2015. Photo by Shadi Hatem/APA Images

Wadi al Seeq

On October 12, after months of harassment and threats of forced displacement by Israeli settlers supported by state forces, the entire 200 person village of Wadi al Seeq was displaced. Wadi al Seeq is a Bedouin village located about 10 kilometers east of Ramallah.⁸ The residents were told that they had an hour to leave, a threat enforced by both the settlers, and presumably, the Israeli forces present.⁹ Israeli settlers, known to the community as the ones heavily involved in the daily harassment and aggression against them, arrived in army

uniforms and accompanied by Israeli forces including army and police.

All 200 residents fled their village, forcibly displaced with the blessing of state forces, on foot to the nearby town of Taybeh with their livestock.

Sair al-Ganoub

On October 9, the pastoral community of Sair al-Ganoub witnessed the displacement of 40 individuals when an Israeli settler militia stormed the area, holding them at gunpoint with death threats unless they vacated within

8. <https://english.almayadeen.net/news/politics/israelis-forcing-palestinians-out-of-west-bank-villages>

9. <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news-20231029/palestinians-expelled-from-w-bank-village-as-gaza-war-rages>

an hour.¹⁰ Among those displaced was 75-year-old Abu Jamal, who shared his devastating experience of settlers torching his tent and stealing his goats. He lamented, “They obliterated everything that anchored me here.” During this unsettling event, another dwelling was also set ablaze.¹¹

Tuba and Isfay

With regards to the attacks on Tuba and Isfay, we are unable to give specific dates unlike in many of the other examples above. This is because while there is documentation of these incidents, activists and other residents regularly have to purge their phones of evidence, as Israeli forces and settlers alike steal their phones and search them for reasons to attack or imprison individuals and punish their communities. This makes it more difficult to keep track of exactly when each event occurred, especially as attacks on the village of Tuba happen on an almost nightly basis.

Tuba and Isfay are two small and relatively isolated villages located in Masafer Yatta, south of Hebron. Both are located within what has been known as the 918 Firing Zone, and therefore are at higher risk of immediate forced displacement by the State of Israel itself. Israeli settlers are very active in their armed attacks on these communities.

Since October 7, Tuba has been the target of multiple attacks by armed Israeli settlers. According to residents there, the primary objective of Israeli settlers carrying out these attacks is to destroy their access to essential resources, such as water. Early in the morning on October 11, three Israeli settlers arrived,

masked and armed, to Tuba and began to attack the hay bales stored for feeding community livestock. They then targeted water tanks next to homes in the community, drinking from them and leaving the taps open to drain the water tanks completely.

Days later, armed settlers arrived once again and moved between the houses in the village, destroying all of the water tanks to ensure that the village was without water and could not easily replace the water. Furthermore, they destroyed the wheels of the vehicle used to transport water to the village.

Local residents also reported attacks by settlers from Havat Ma'on against a 23 year old young Palestinian man with special needs, including cognitive disabilities, deafness and muteness. According to eyewitnesses in the area, armed settlers chased the young man, eventually reaching him and attacking him, tearing off his clothes, stepping on his head, binding his body with a rope while he was naked and beating him for about an hour until the Israeli military forces arrived. The young man was then thrown into a military vehicle, still bound. He was detained for at least three hours before he was left on the side of the highway, injured and in need of medical care. He was only able to reach his family after passersby stopped to help him and give him a phone to contact them. He was then rushed to the hospital by his family.

Relating to another recent event in Tuba, one resident recounted an event during which armed settlers stole a widow's livelihood at gunpoint in the middle of the night. They said,

“Settlers stormed my old widow neighbor's

10. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/10/20/silent-annexation-settlers-dispossess-west-bank-bedouins-amid-israel-war>

11. https://ochaopt.org/content/other-mass-displacement-while-eyes-are-gaza-settlers-advance-west-bank-herders?_gl=1*6uftbe*_ga*NzQwNzA5MzA4LjE2OTg5NDIxNTI.*_ga_E6oZNX2F68*MTY5ODkoMjE1MS4xLjAuMTY5ODkoMjE1MS42MC4wLjA.



Armed Israeli settlers set fire to a home in Isfay, October 31, 2023.

house after midnight. She makes a living by raising livestock. She has about 30 sheep and goats. She and her children live in a cave for them and a cave for her sheep, and a small shack room. The occupying government does not allow us to build in our village. The settlers threatened the family with weapons, after they woke up the old woman and her children. One of the settlers pointed the weapon at them, and the others put some sheep and goats in the truck, and then they left for the settlement.”

According to accounts from Tuba, these attacks on the community have become an

almost nightly program. On October 31, another attack by Israeli settlers from Havat Ma'on resulted in the destruction of the village's electricity network, when the armed settlers cut cables, including those connected to the home of the widow described in the paragraph above. This resulted in the electricity being cut off from all of the houses in the village. The settlers then destroyed the home and furniture belonging to this woman and her children. That same night, settlers from Havat Ma'on set fire to a house in the neighboring village of Isfay.

These attacks show the depth of terror being



Images of Israeli military stripping Palestinians naked and beating them.

carried out against vulnerable and isolated communities throughout the West Bank, particularly in Area C, and illuminate the conditions behind mass forced displacement which we are seeing on a daily basis. The intentions of settler militias and the state forces who support them is to destroy all infrastructure supporting Palestinian life in these areas, and they are willing to commit heinous acts, repeatedly, in order to see this carried out.

Community Closures and Movement Disruption

Since October 7, the Israeli state has ramped-up movement and access restrictions in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem. These restrictions are notably stringent in vicinities near Israeli settlements and in the “Seam Zone,” a Palestinian region segregated by Israel’s 712-kilometer-long Apartheid Wall.

These movement restrictions also target Palestinian cities, towns and villages across the West Bank, with settlers and Israeli forces alike reported imposing closures. These closures are both patrolled and unguarded, and are enforced by gate closures controlled by the military, cement blocks, piles of earth or rubble, parked cars, and more. This disproportionately impacts rural communities in Area C, which generally have to travel outside of their villages in order to access grocery stores, vegetable markets, pharmacies, healthcare facilities, and other essential services. It also impacts Palestinian activists, journalists, and medics in their abilities to reach communities under attack by Israeli military forces or settler militias, hindering inter-communal support as well as documentation. Those who are able to travel between Palestinian communities report a heavy presence of not only Israeli forces, including military forces and police, but also armed Israeli settlers.

Additionally, Israeli settlers, supported by Israeli forces, have imposed movement restrictions by barricading access roads leading to Palestinian communities. Such actions have curtailed Palestinians’ access to crucial services and livelihoods. In certain instances, settlers have vandalized water sources that herding communities depend on, stripping them of a basic human necessity.

Palestinian herding and Bedouin communities are often heavily reliant on humanitarian aid, encompassing health, educational services and international observers to document and deter settler violence. However, with the escalation in restrictions, many of these services have been halted.

Memories of Abu Ghraib Torture

These closures create additional checkpoints and patrols, which have made movement in general increasingly dangerous to Palestinians. This is compounded by disturbing trends that Israeli soldiers have increasingly turned to during their abduction and detainment of prisoners, including the documentation by soldiers themselves of their harassing, humiliating and torturing Palestinians.

Videos published online over the last few weeks, clearly documented by soldiers engaged in these activities, show Palestinian detainees blindfolded, bound, stripped (sometimes entirely naked), left on the floor and subject to subjugation, humiliation and harassment by the soldiers. Videos show the soldiers placing their boots on the faces of bound and blindfolded Palestinian detainees, for example. Israeli soldiers lift and move detainees to place them in a pile with no apparent regard for their comfort. In other cases, they drag them on the ground by their bound feet.

In another video, though we do not see the violence enacted on the Palestinian detainees, the evidence of brutality is illustrated on their naked or semi-naked bodies, as they lie bound and blind folded on the ground.

Other videos, also clearly documented by Israeli forces themselves, show Palestinian detainees bound and sometimes blindfolded, forced into acts of humiliation and degradation. This includes one video in which a Palestinian man, surrounded by armed Israeli soldiers as well as Israeli flags, is forced to shout, “Am Yisrael Chai”, or “The nation of Israel lives”. Another video portrays

two Israeli soldiers transporting two detained, bound, and blindfolded young Palestinian men in a car. The soldiers, loudly playing “HaTikvah”, the national anthem of the State of Israel, and sing along as one soldier, holding the camera in a selfie view, states, “Am Yisrael Chai” (“The nation of Israel lives”) and then pans to zoom in on the Palestinian detainees. He continues this panning throughout the song.

These acts of violence, intimidation, humiliation and degradation are increasingly concerning as Palestinians in Area C especially are vulnerable to attacks by settlers and arbitrary arrests by Israeli forces. This spike in the distribution of materials displaying these acts also comes at a time when Palestinian prisoners held in “security” prisons are being subjected to retaliatory measures.

Addameer has reported that since October 7, Palestinian prisoners in Israel are being denied electricity in several prisons, receive water only one hour per day, television sets have been confiscated, prisoners are deprived of prison visits, have no access to the canteens, are only provided with two “very poor-quality meals” per day, and are being systematically denied access to medical treatment, including numerous cancer patients who require continuous treatment.¹² There are also reports of increased use of torture, with direct testimony from prisoners held in Gilboa prison and the recent deaths of at least two Palestinian inmates shortly after their detention and imprisonment.¹³ These are extremely concerning acts of punishment against a population which has no real tools to advocate for themselves, particularly in the context of extremely limited contact with the outside world.

12. <https://www.addameer.org/news5164/>

13. <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2023/11/1/he-threw-up-blood-palestinian-detainees-face-abuse-in-israeli-custody>

Conclusion

The spike in settler-induced displacements wasn't triggered by the events of October 7. Per OCHA's September disclosure, since 2022, settler hostility and access denial to Palestinian grazing lands resulted in the displacement of 1,105 individuals from 28 communities, about 12% of the populace of these villages. Four communities were entirely displaced and remain vacant. Over half of the residents have been displaced from six communities since 2022. In seven other communities, more than a quarter of the residents have been expelled.

The plight continues for the many families who have stayed, facing relentless settler attacks. Mohamad Abu Seif (Abu Khalid), 90, residing in the herding community of Ein Shibli for over 40 years with his family, narrated the ceaseless threats and harassment from settlers preventing them from grazing their sheep.¹⁴

His family, along with four other households comprising 33 individuals, remains in Ein Shibli, all facing potential displacement as grazing lands shrink due to settler actions. 8 families, totaling 51 people, have already exited this area since October 7. While Abu Khalid holds on, the uncertainty looms large for him and his family regarding their ability to stay much longer.

With the recent numbers, the total number of Palestinians displaced as a result of settler violence since 2022 stands at 1,933. Before the current escalation and genocide enacted in Gaza by the Israeli government and its military, OCHA and others reported in early October about the displacement of 13 families or 84 individuals from Masafer Yatta, primarily due to heightened movement restrictions by

Israeli forces and the settler movement. Israeli authorities' home demolitions further displaced 1,032 Palestinians in 2022 and 1,352 so far in 2023.

Third states are under an obligation to protect human rights and ensure the implementation of humanitarian protections even beyond their borders. The United States specifically—through the delivery of arms, expertise, and boots on the ground—but also the United Kingdom, much of Europe, and many other countries are implicated in these crimes against the Palestinian people. Furthermore, they are implicated through the delivery of tax-deductible donations to settler militias and Zionist organizations through these countries' charitable systems. This must be addressed immediately through the revocation of tax-deductible status of all organizations funding crimes against the Palestinian people. Go to defundracism.org to learn about dismantling the charitable organizations funding the Zionist movement.

Responsible leadership also requires an immediate demand for a ceasefire in Gaza, which will no doubt impact the situation in the West Bank, and the protection of Palestinian communities across all of the West Bank, Jerusalem, and within the 1948 borders. Palestinians in Gaza and those throughout the rest of the land, including Palestinian prisoners, must have secure access to all of their needs, including water, food, electricity, etc, as well as their rights. This includes the right of self-determination.

We call for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza, an end to the siege, the immediate implementation of the right of return, and decolonization of Palestine.

14. <https://www.haaretz.com/opinion/editorial/2023-10-17/ty-article-opinion/palestinian-expulsion-amid-the-fog-of-war000018/b-39f9-d5b8-a78b-f9f92b720000>



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