



Structural Apartheid: How Settler Violence Enforces Israeli Colonialism

Settler violence in the West Bank is not a spontaneous eruption of extremism but rather a key mechanism within the Israeli occupying state's settler-colonial apparatus. It functions to systematically displace Palestinians, securing land for Zionist Jewish-only settlements while reinforcing a regime of segregation and dispossession. By recognizing settler violence as integral to the architecture of Israeli apartheid, we gain a clearer understanding of its structural role in consolidating colonial rule (B'Tselem, 2023).

The dual legal system in place epitomises this apartheid framework. Israeli settlers in the West Bank live under the protection of Israeli civil law, enjoying legal and societal privileges. In stark contrast, Palestinians remain subject to military law, a system designed to oppress them through arbitrary detention, home demolitions, and collective punishment. This legal disparity institutionalises the dominance of settlers and the subjugation of the indigenous Palestinian population, ensuring the continuation of the colonial project (Human Rights Watch, 2021).

This structural violence extends into everyday life, particularly in rural areas where settler aggression is designed to dislodge Palestinians from their land. During the olive-picking season, settlers frequently attack Palestinian farmers, uprooting trees, stealing harvests, and violently preventing agricultural activity. This violence is economically crippling, targeting a crucial source of livelihood for thousands of Palestinian families. It aims to erode Palestinian connections to their land and heritage, facilitating Israeli expansion (OCHA, 2022).

Israeli settlements—illegal under international law—serve as the physical embodiment of this colonial project. The expropriation of land through both bureaucratic and violent means reinforces the segregation of Palestinians and the expansion of a Jewish settler presence. International discourse often frames settler violence as isolated acts of extremism, a narrative that obscures its function as state-sanctioned violence essential to maintaining apartheid (Human Rights Watch, 2021).

As international responses largely focus on peace-building without addressing the structural roots of settler violence, the critical question remains: How can peace be achieved under a system of institutionalised apartheid where violence is a central tool for maintaining control?

Reframing the Global Conversation: Recognizing Settler Violence as Structural Apartheid

The international discourse around settler violence frequently downplays its role as a tool of apartheid. Instead of recognizing settler aggression as an integral component of the Israeli state's colonial policies, it is often portrayed as a series of isolated actions by extremist individuals. This framing misrepresents the reality on the ground, where settler violence is systematically employed to displace Palestinians and secure land for the Israeli occupation settlements (Human Rights Watch, 2021).

The global response to settler violence, while critical of individual acts, largely fails to address the structural context that enables it. International bodies, including the United Nations, have condemned the Israeli occupying state's Zionist settlement expansion, but these condemnations rarely result in concrete action. This failure to act allows the Occupation state to continue its project of colonisation with impunity, entrenching apartheid across Palestinian territories (OCHA, 2022). By failing to address the structural underpinnings of settler violence, the international community contributes to the normalisation of apartheid in Palestine.

A critical shift is needed in how the international community understands and responds to settler violence. Instead of treating it as a fringe issue, global actors must recognize it as a state-sponsored mechanism to advance the settler-colonial project. This reframing would require international legal and political systems to hold the Israeli occupying state accountable for the systemic oppression inherent in its colonial policies. The focus should shift from isolated condemnations of violence to addressing the apartheid and colonial structures that perpetuate and legitimise settler aggression (B'Tselem, 2023).

The failure to recognize settler violence as a tool of apartheid also undermines efforts toward decolonization and justice. Current peace processes and diplomatic engagements often fail to confront the root causes of violence, focusing instead on short-term ceasefires and negotiations that leave the apartheid and colonial system intact. By reframing settler violence as a central component of Israel's colonial regime, international actors can begin to address the systemic inequalities that fuel the Palestinian struggle against the Israeli occupying state (Human Rights Watch, 2021).

Moreover, global movements for justice, including those advocating for Palestinian rights, must centre their efforts on dismantling the colonial regime. This includes holding the Israeli occupying state accountable for both direct acts of violence and the broader structures of colonial control. Without addressing the institutionalised violence of settler-colonialism, any attempt at peace will remain superficial and unsustainable.

The Economic Impact of Olive Picking Season: Sabotage as a Colonial Tool

The olive-picking season, a symbol of Palestinian economic resilience and cultural heritage, has become a flashpoint for settler violence. Thousands of Palestinian families depend on olive farming as a primary source of income, and the destruction of olive trees or theft of harvests represents not only a direct economic loss but an attack on the community's connection to the land. This violence is a deliberate strategy to economically displace Palestinians and undermine their ability to remain on their land (B'Tselem, 2023).

Israeli settlers, with implicit and often explicit support from the state, target Palestinian farmers during the harvest season. Settlers uproot olive trees, sabotage harvests, and violently attack farmers, particularly in areas near Israeli colonial settlements. The destruction of olive trees, some of which are hundreds of years old, symbolises a broader attempt to sever Palestinians' economic and cultural ties to their land, further entrenching the Israeli colonial project (OCHA, 2022), and annulling the Israeli occupation's claim of "Land ownership" which comes in contrast with the ecological destruction the Zionist settlers' actions reflect.

The economic toll of this violence is devastating. Olive oil production is a cornerstone of the Palestinian economy, contributing to the livelihoods of approximately 100,000 families. The systematic targeting of olive groves is part of an ongoing strategy to make rural Palestinian life unsustainable, forcing families to abandon their land and livelihoods (UN, 2023). This forced migration into urban centres erodes the social fabric of rural communities, further facilitating Israeli settlement expansion.

In addition to direct attacks, the Israeli military imposes severe restrictions on access to farmland, specifically during the olive-picking season. Checkpoints, road closures, and military zones prevent farmers from reaching their lands, exacerbating the economic pressure and contributing to the broader colonial strategy of land appropriation (ARIJ, 2023). The complicity of the Israeli state in this economic warfare is clear, as these policies work in tandem with settler violence to marginalise Palestinians economically and socially.

This orchestrated violence raises critical questions about the international community's role in holding Israel accountable for what amounts to economic sabotage. How can sustainable peace and justice be achieved when one side is systematically stripping the other of its economic lifelines?

Pastoral Settlement: Land Appropriation.

A lesser-known but equally destructive aspect of Israel's settler-colonial expansion is the establishment of pastoral settlements. These settlements, often located in remote areas designated for grazing or agriculture, are used as a colonial strategic tool to appropriate vast tracts of Palestinian land. They serve not only to block Palestinian access to essential agricultural and water resources but also to expand Israeli control over key geographic areas, particularly in the Jordan Valley and the South Hebron Hills (ARIJ, 2023).

Under the claim of agricultural development or environmental conservation, the Israeli occupying authorities allocate large areas of land to settlers for pastoral use. In reality, these lands are confiscated from Palestinian communities that depend on them for grazing livestock and farming. The construction of these pastoral settlements and the checkpoints surrounding them only prevents Palestinian access to these resources, further attacking rural Palestinian populations and force-displacing them into urban enclaves where they can be more "easily controlled" (B'Tselem, 2023).

Pastoral settlers, like their urban counterparts, frequently use violence and intimidation to assert control over these lands. Palestinian Bedouin communities, in particular, are targeted in these areas, as their traditional nomadic way of life is increasingly under threat from both the Occupation state policies and settler violence. Bedouin communities are often displaced from their ancestral lands under the guise of the Occupation's "state land" declarations or Israeli occupying military training zones, further deepening their struggle (UN, 2023).

The Israeli occupying state provides direct and indirect support for pastoral settlement, offering subsidies, legal cover, and security protection for settlers while simultaneously demolishing Palestinian structures and denying building permits in these areas, often referred to as "Area C" (Anera, 2024). This strategic use of pastoral settlements contributes to the broader goals of territorial fragmentation and the isolation of Palestinian communities, which are key elements of the settler-colonial project (Human Rights Watch, 2021).

This form of agricultural colonisation is less visible but no less damaging than urban settlements. It highlights how control over land and resources is central to Israel's colonial strategy. The question remains: how can resistance to this form of land appropriation be sustained, and what role can the international community play in confronting this expanding frontier of Israeli colonisation?



Israeli Security Forces: Enabling Settler Violence

The role of the Israeli occupying forces in the West Bank extends far beyond maintaining “security” as often portrayed in the Occupation state narratives. In practice, these forces are deeply complicit in the perpetuation of settler violence. Numerous reports by organisations, such as B’Tselem and Human Rights Watch, document instances where Israeli occupying soldiers either stood by or directly aided settlers during violent attacks against Palestinians. This complicity underscores the central role the occupation forces play in maintaining Israel’s colonial control over the West Bank (B’Tselem, 2023).

Israeli occupying soldiers and police frequently act as enablers of settler violence, often intervening only to arrest or detain Palestinians defending their homes or land, while Zionist settlers who commit acts of violence, aggression, and dehumanisation go unpunished. The legal framework governing the West Bank exacerbates this situation: while settlers are subject to the Israeli occupation civil law, which affords them significant protections, Palestinians remain under military jurisdiction, which subjects them to arbitrary and discriminatory enforcement (Human Rights Watch, 2021).

In addition to this legal bias, the physical infrastructure established by Israeli occupying forces—checkpoints, roadblocks, and restricted military zones—directly supports settler expansion. These measures severely limit Palestinian movement, isolating communities and facilitating the unchecked growth of settlements. (OCHA, 2022).

This system of military and settler cooperation is not incidental but a deliberate strategy to maintain control over Palestinian land and suppress resistance. It reveals the deeply intertwined nature of Israeli occupying state power and settler violence, highlighting the impossibility of achieving justice or peace while this system remains intact. The international focus on isolated incidents of violence ignores the structural role that the Israeli occupation military plays in upholding the colonial project. Which raises a question: How does the relationship between Israeli security forces and settler violence shape the nature of the occupation, and what does this imply for future peace efforts?

References

- Anera. (n.d.). What are Area A, Area B, and Area C in the West Bank? Anera. Retrieved October 15, 2024, from <https://www.anera.org/what-are-area-a-area-b-and-area-c-in-the-west-bank/>
- B’Tselem. (2023). State business: Israel’s misappropriation of land in the West Bank through settler violence. B’Tselem. <https://www.btselem.org/publication>
- Human Rights Watch. (2021). A threshold crossed: Israeli authorities and the crimes of apartheid and persecution. Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/04/27/threshold-crossed/israeli-authorities-and-crimes-apartheid-and-persecution>
- Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). (2022). Humanitarian impact of settlements in the West Bank. United Nations OCHA. <https://www.ochaopt.org/content/humanitarian-impact-settlements-west-ban>
- Applied Research Institute – Jerusalem (ARIJ). (2023). Israeli settlements and the economic exploitation of Palestine. ARIJ. <https://www.arij.org/research>
- United Nations (UN). (2023). Settler violence and the impact on Palestinian rural communities. United Nations. <https://www.un.org/press>

