

While War Rages in Gaza, the West Bank Has Undergone a Metamorphosis

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Israel has seized the opportunity to intensify the occupation, with mass arrests of Palestinians, hundreds killed, a host of new illegal settler outposts and roads. Shepherds expelled from their homes, violent settlers rampaging in uniform. All under the aegis of the war



Property destroyed in the South Hebron Hills. Twenty-four communities have been expelled or otherwise forced to leave their homes and lands because of settler terror since October 7. Credit: Alex Levac

In the past six months, the occupied West Bank has undergone a metamorphosis. War broke out in the Gaza Strip, but the West Bank's "punishment" for the events of October 7 wasn't long in coming. You don't need a particularly sharp eye to notice the revolution on the ground. No special insight is necessary in order to understand that Israel and the settler communities have exploited the dark specter of war to alter reality in the West Bank: to intensify the occupation, extend the boundaries of the settlements, remove the last remaining constraints on interaction with the Palestinian population and to run wild - all far from the public eye.

It's impossible to overestimate the depth and breadth of the changes wrought in the West Bank in these months. Most of them, if not all, are probably irreversible. The combination of [a war being waged](#) against Palestinians, albeit at [a remove from the West Bank](#); an extremist, hard-right government in which settlers hold positions that give them critical power over the occupation; the rise of armed and uniformed settler militias; and widespread public indifference have led to a new situation. The forced helplessness of the Palestinians under these circumstances only adds fuel to the fire. That fire is large and raging, but everyone's gaze is directed far from it, to the killing fields between Gaza City and Rafah. Yet perhaps even more than in Gaza, the ramifications of the revolution transpiring in the West Bank will not be confined only to that territory: They will seep deep into every corner of Israel.

Some changes are immediately apparent to anyone who travels around the West Bank, others are less visible. The West Bank is shuttered and besieged. Practically all Palestinian cities and villages

have some, or even many, access roads that have been sealed off. Indeed, most of the locales' ubiquitous iron entry gates were locked by the Israel Defense Forces on October 8. With such a system of gates and other barriers, a total lockdown of the West Bank can be implemented within a short time. The result? Life has become intolerable for three million people. It's not only the time that is lost in prolonged travel from place to place; it's also the fact that one never knows if one will reach one's destination amid the galling wait and the indignities at the checkpoints.

Along with the locked gates have come dozens of ad hoc roadblocks erected by soldiers, which suddenly appear and then disappear; when they are in place, traffic becomes a nightmare for any Palestinian who encounters them. The West Bank has gone back in time almost a quarter of a century, to the period of the second intifada, but this time without the intifada.



A soldier guarding the entrance to the Palestinian town of Hawara. The West Bank has gone back in time almost a quarter of a century, to the period of the second intifada, but this time without the intifada. Credit: Alex Levac

A friend whose 105-year-old father died this week, and who lives in a village near Tul Karm, told family and friends not to bother with the custom of paying a condolence call, because traffic in and out of that city ranges from nightmarish to impossible due to the glut of local checkpoints. Instead, he went to Ramallah for one day to receive guests.

Some 150,000 West Bank Palestinians who were formerly legally permitted to work in Israel have been prohibited to do so since October 8. The consequences for the Palestinian (and the Israeli) economy are obvious. Likewise, the consequences of forced idleness among tens of thousands of people are equally clear and predictable. An alternative source of income for many Palestinians – the olive harvest – has also been stifled by the war. Groves abutting settlements are now totally inaccessible to Palestinians, not even by means of “coordination” with the Israeli authorities that was possible in past years. The result: About one-third of the harvest has remained on the trees at a time when most other income has disappeared.

What's the direct connection between harvesting olives in the West Bank and the war in Gaza? There is none, but the war has apparently presented a great opportunity for the settlers and their collaborators in the government. An opportunity West Bank settlers were just waiting for: to abuse the Palestinians with impunity, to make their lives intolerable, to dispossess and humiliate them until they flee or are driven out. Maybe that's why the settlers appeared to be particularly joyful this week during the Purim festival?

One of the most serious phenomena involves Israeli authorities preventing Palestinians from having access to and work on their lands, sometimes in advance of expulsion. Dror Etkes, from the nongovernmental Kerem Navot organization, which monitors Israel's land-related policies in the territories, estimates that Palestinians have been cut off from at least 100,000 dunams (25,000 acres) of pastures and farmland since October 7 – and that is a conservative estimate, he adds.

At the same time, [a quiet population transfer](#) continues, bit by bit but systematically, especially of the weakest residents – those of the pastoral communities, mostly – at both poles of the West Bank:

the Jordan Valley in the north and the South Hebron Hills on the other side. Etkes, who has unrivaled knowledge of settlements, notes that people living in 24 communities have been expelled or otherwise forced to leave their homes and lands because of settler terror since October 7. All the residents of 18 of them fled while in the other six, only some inhabitants felt compelled to leave. A population transfer, albeit clandestine.



In recent months, the “emergency security squads” created under the aegis of the war in virtually every settlement and outpost, have apparently given them license to ratchet up their rampages against the Palestinians. Credit: Alex Levac

This column reported several months ago about one of these forsaken enclaves: It was heartbreaking to see the local folk packing and loading their meager property onto a few old pickups, including their flocks, leaving, probably for all time, the land on which they and their forebears were born, heading into the unknown.

Another act of total effrontery was revealed when we documented troops impounding 700 sheep from their owners by order of the Jordan Valley Regional Council, which technically has no binding authority over local Palestinian residents. The group of wretched shepherds was compelled to pay 150,000 shekels (about \$41,000) immediately in order to get their flocks back - a huge sum that went straight into the settlers’ coffers. Just a few weeks later Haaretz’s Hagar Shezaf reported that the legal adviser of the Civil Administration - the local arm of the Israeli military government - declared the settlers’ mean-spirited and contemptible action illegal.

The fact that [hoards of settlers have donned IDF uniforms](#) only seems to have augmented their violence. In recent months, the “emergency security squads” created under the aegis of the war in virtually every settlement and outpost, and the call-up of thousands of settler-reservists via emergency orders, have apparently given them license to ratchet up their rampages against the Palestinians as lords of the land, ostensible representatives of the law and the state. Many Palestinians described incidents in which settlers have launched veritable pogroms, suddenly arriving in their uniforms in all-terrain vehicles, sowing violence, making local inhabitants feel even more helpless. There is apparently no one to protect the pastoral communities except for a handful of Israeli volunteers who seek justice.

Etkes mentions at least 11 outposts that were established without permits in the last half year, two of them on land from which Palestinian shepherds fled or were expelled. This week he discovered yet another one. The anti-occupation Local Call news site reported that 10 days after starting to build an outpost nearby, settlers scared off frightened residents of one of these communities, who fled en masse.



The South Hebron Hills. At least 11 outposts were established without permits in the last half year, two of them on land from which Palestinian shepherds fled or were expelled. Credit: Alex Levac

An outpost of this kind is sometimes no more than a farm – a hut housing a few violent gangsters whose sole aim is to drive Palestinians away. Recently, their path has been made even easier. An interim report drawn up by Etkes to mark six months of warfare cites at least 10 roads, a number of huge fenced-off swaths of land and even roadblocks – all created by settlers without authorization. Plus the Israeli government has declared as state land 2,640 dunams near the urban settlement of Ma’aleh Adumim, and 8,160 dunams from the town of Aqraba, near Nablus.

Hundreds of Palestinians, mostly children and teenagers, have been killed, most for no apparent reason. Soldiers deployed in the West Bank seem to have become more trigger-happy than they were before. Maybe they are envious of their buddies in Gaza, who are now apparently allowed to kill people indiscriminately? Are those in the West Bank longing to behave like them, too – to take revenge on Palestinians as such because of the horrors of October 7? Are the IDF and the Border Police shutting their eyes tighter to the violent goings-on in the West Bank than before?

The data we present below speaks for itself. There’s a light hand on the trigger and IDF commanders and the Israeli public are apathetic. But anyone who thinks that this seemingly permissible mass violence and the deaths will remain within the boundaries of the West Bank is likely to be proved wrong.

When it comes to cases involving killings, many seem unprovoked and criminal. Already on October 8, soldiers killed 18-year-old Yasser Kasba, whom the army claimed had thrown a Molotov cocktail – no one was hurt, nor did he endanger anyone – at the Qalandiyah checkpoint near Jerusalem. The shooting was broadcast live by the American Arabic-language satellite TV channel Alhurra. Kasba was shot in the back as he fled.

That incident opened the floodgates. In the following two months, 31 people were killed in the Ramallah area, including a mother of seven, before the eyes of her husband and children; 42 people were killed in the Tul Karm area in the first six weeks, including a mentally challenged man of 63 and a 15-year-old teenager who was shot in the head twice. Up to the end of February, a total of 396 people were killed in the West Bank, among them 100 children and youths – the vast majority at the hands of soldiers – according to carefully checked data collected by the Israeli human rights organization B’Tselem. More than half the minors, B’Tselem notes, were killed in circumstances that did not justify the use of lethal weapons.



The Homesh settlement has a new sign and gate. Meanwhile young Palestinians are drawing up documents resembling a last will and testament. Credit: Alex Levac

Young West Bank residents are starting to draw up documents resembling a last will and testament. [We reported about one last month](#) - that of Abdel Rahman Hamad, almost 18, whose dream was to study medicine. He left detailed instructions about what to do should he be killed: "Do not place me in a freezer," he wrote. "Bury me immediately. Lay me on my bed, cover me with blankets and take me to burial. When you lower me into the grave, stand behind me. But don't be sad. Remember only the beautiful memories of me and don't mourn for me."

Then there were other incidents where two youths with U.S. citizenship were killed within the space of a few weeks; the youth who was knocked off his bike by a military jeep and shot to death at point-blank range; soldiers and settlers who, probably together, fired some 10 rounds at a vehicle carrying two young people on an outing, killing one; and the 32 rounds that slammed into a car carrying a family - during security forces' pursuit of a vehicle that had passed through a checkpoint without stopping - killing a 5-year-old girl, whose body the family received only 10 days later.

One missile killed seven young men, four of them brothers, outside Jenin, and another, fired into the center of the Nur Shams refugee camp, killed six and wounded seven, who were denied medical treatment for over an hour; two young people with special needs were also shot, one of them fatally; three brothers who were on the way back home after picking akoub, thistle-like edible plants, on the Israeli side of the separation barrier, fell victim to a manhunt in which soldiers killed two of the brothers, wounded the third, then arrested a fourth who arrived on the scene later. No less shocking was the incident of the 10-year-old boy who was shot in his father's pickup and fell into the arms of his 7-year-old brother, dead.

And a word about the mass arrests, whose exact scope isn't even known. In the first two months of the war, 4,785 people were arrested in the West Bank, according to the United Nations. One, Munther Amira, was an administrative detainee (incarcerated without trial), whose story - involving torture, beatings and humiliation at Ofer Prison, [Israel's "Guantanamo"](#) - was told here last week. Even that cruel prison had looked very different before the war broke out in Gaza.

Gideon Levy, Alex Levac

P.S.

- Haaretz. Mar 30, 2024:
<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/twilight-zone/2024-03-30/ty-article-magazine/.highlight/while-war-rages-in-gaza-the-west-bank-has-undergone-a-metamorphosis/0000018e-8d23-d9a4-a7bf-cd7b2c270000>