

07.02.2021

More violent attacks by Israeli settlers and their supporters

The past few months have seen a significant increase in attacks on Palestinians by Israeli settlers and their supporters.

- On the 1st January, during disturbances in Jerusalem, a group of ultra-Orthodox men were filmed attacking a car with an Arab driver and passengers, opening the car door and trying to drag the passengers out.
- On Sunday 17th January, Israeli settlers attacked an 11-year-old Palestinian girl, Hala Alkut, from the West Bank village of Madama south of Nablus, throwing stones and injuring her head and face.
- On Thursday 21st January, Israeli settlers hurled Molotov cocktails toward two Palestinian houses in the village of Burin, south of Nablus. The attack came shortly after groups of settlers sealed off several roads and junctions and attacked Palestinian vehicles with stones and empty bottles.
- On the same evening, Jad Alaa Sawfta, a 5-year-old from Tubas city was injured at the Givat Asaf junction near the city of Ramallah.
- On Monday 1st February Israeli settlers attacked Palestinian vehicles traveling on a road near the town of Huwwara, near Nablus. A group of settlers hurled stones toward vehicles with Palestinian registration plates at the junction leading to the Nablus-Qalqilya road, causing damage to a number of cars. The assailants came from the Yitzhar settlement, a centre of the hardcore settler movement.



This latest spike in attacks follows the death on the 21st December of a 16-year-old settler, Ahuvia Sandak, who was killed in a car chase with Israeli police after he and his friends were identified as throwing stones at Palestinians in the West Bank. Sandak, a resident of Bat Ayin in the Gush Etzion settlement bloc, was a member of *No'ar HaGva'ot*, the so-called *Hilltop Youth*, some of whom were responsible for the murder in 2015 of three members of the Dawabshe family in Duma.

In the car chase, Israeli police crashed into Sandak's car from behind, causing it to overturn. Sandak was killed and his three accomplices were injured. In the two weeks that followed there were 21 'revenge' attacks on Palestinian individuals and property.

By the 21st January, one month after Sandak's death, Israeli settlers and their supporters had committed 52 violent acts against Palestinians. In 37 of those cases, the settlers blocked central junctions along Route 60 — one of the West Bank's central highways — and threw rocks at Palestinian cars. Yesh Din reported that 14 Palestinians, including two children, have been wounded in the rock-throwing attacks. In 11 cases, settlers have invaded Palestinian towns and thrown rocks at civilians and homes. In three incidents, groups of settlers attacked Palestinian farmers who were working their land.



At the time of his death, Ahuvia Sandak was living in Maoz Esther, an 'outpost' of which his parents were founder members, although they now live in the settlement of Bat Ayin. Like other illegal outposts, Maoz Esther was built on private Palestinian land.

The *Hilltop Youth* are a loosely organised group numbering around 1,000 'activists', with as many as 5,000 others sharing their ideological outlook. Their name is something of a misnomer since the majority are in their twenties, and many are married. They claim to completely dissociate themselves from Israeli institutions, and identify themselves only with the Land of Israel. 'The path of the hilltop youths is one of faith and a sense of mission to settle the land, because that's what God wants.' Their activities include vandalising Palestinian schools and mosques, rustling sheep from Palestinian flocks, destroying centuries-old olive groves or stealing their olive harvests. They also carry out so-called 'price tag' revenge attacks.

'In 2020, B'Tselem's field researchers documented 248 incidents of settler violence against Palestinians in the West Bank, including: 86 bodily assaults, in which 75 Palestinians were injured; 27 cases of stone-throwing at homes; 17 attacks on moving vehicles; 147 of the attacks were aimed at Palestinian farmers or their property, including 80 cases of damage to trees and crops owned by Palestinians, resulting in more than 3,000 trees vandalized. In 39 cases, the violent acts took place in the olive harvest season, which lasted this year from early October through late November.

Of these incidents, 72 took place in the presence of soldiers, police officers or DCO personnel, who did not intervene to stop the assault on the Palestinians or their property. In 28 cases, soldiers dispersed the Palestinian residents by firing tear gas, stun grenades and rubber-coated metal bullets, and in at least five cases, even live fire. Israeli authorities arrested at least 12 Palestinians during these altercations.

These violent acts could not take place without the sweeping support provided by the state. While security forces back the perpetrators in real time, the law enforcement system releases them from accountability: in almost all cases, no investigation is launched, and no one is held accountable for causing harm to Palestinians. The rare investigations that are launched usually end with no further measures taken. In the even rarer instance of an indictment – the charges fall far short of reflecting the gravity of the acts, and the sentences are ludicrous.'