

## Israel-Hamas war

# Israel's quiet war in the West Bank



A Palestinian village was forcibly emptied this week. Its former residents say more will follow

**James Shotter** in Mu'arrajat

Published JUL 6 2025

---

In the past two years, Jewish settlers have set fire to Mu'arrajat's mosque, attacked its school, and stolen livestock from its villagers.

But the final straw came on Thursday night, when dozens of settlers entered the remote Palestinian community in the occupied West Bank, after days of harassment during which they ransacked a property, set up an outpost next to the village, and told locals they had to leave.

By Friday afternoon, most of Mu'arrajat's 200 remaining inhabitants had done just that. The few who remained were slowly dismantling their wood and corrugated-iron houses, loading furniture, water tanks and window frames into trucks, as they faced up to the prospect of being displaced.

"It's an awful feeling to realise you are losing the place you were born, where you had a community with common values, where you made your living. I can't even describe it," said Sliman Mleihat, a 34-year-old villager.

"But the problem is that it is not just about this community . . . Today it is us. But many others will follow."

The repeated attacks on Mu'arrajat — an isolated collection of low-slung cabins and livestock pens on a stony hillside in the Jordan valley — are part of a surge in settler violence that has swept through the West Bank since October 7, 2023, when Hamas's attack on Israel ignited the war in Gaza.

As the world has focused on the devastation Israel has unleashed in Gaza, and its wars with Hizbollah and Iran, the West Bank has undergone a profound upheaval of its own. Violence from emboldened settlers has displaced more than two dozen rural

communities. And Benjamin Netanyahu's far-right government has accelerated Israel's decades-long campaign to tighten its grip on the Palestinian territory.



Israeli settlers throw stones at Palestinian villagers during an attack on the West Bank village of Turmusaya © Ilia Yefimovich/dpa

In May, the government approved the biggest expansion of settlements in a generation. This week, members of Netanyahu's Likud party called for Israel to annex the West Bank this month. Meanwhile, the army has sharply intensified its operations against militants in the north of the territory, displacing tens of thousands of people and sending the Palestinian death toll in the West Bank to its highest level in 20 years.

The deteriorating situation has sparked widespread condemnation. The UK and other countries have sanctioned two ultranationalist settlers in Netanyahu's cabinet, and French President Emmanuel Macron has sought to rally international support for recognising a Palestinian state.

But Netanyahu's government is undeterred. After Macron said in May that recognising Palestine was a "moral duty", Israel's defence minister, Israel Katz, pledged Israel would further tighten its grip on the West Bank, which it has occupied since 1967.

“They will recognise a Palestinian state on paper — and we will build the Jewish-Israeli state on the ground,” he said. “The paper will be thrown in the trash can of history and the State of Israel will flourish and prosper.”

Among the government’s most far-reaching moves is the approval of 22 new settlements — which are illegal under international law — on which it signed off in May. The expansion is the biggest since the 1990s and includes settlements in locations that analysts say will further carve up the already highly fragmented Palestinian territory.



Israeli settlers stand next to livestock, near the homes of Palestinian Bedouins, who are fleeing the area, near Jericho in the occupied West Bank © Ammar Awad/Reuters

“This [expansion] seems to be carefully tailored to cut up the West Bank, to isolate Jerusalem, and essentially to do away with the entire theme of the two-state solution,” said Ibrahim Dalalsha, director of the Horizon Center for Political Studies in Ramallah. “It is actual work on the ground with a specific purpose. It is strategic.”

The move has been accompanied by renewed calls from members of Netanyahu’s coalition for Israel to formally annex the West Bank — which Palestinians seek as the heart of a future state. On Wednesday, 15 ministers from the premier’s Likud party



called for him to do so before the current parliamentary session ends later this month.

Diplomats doubt Israel will annex the entire West Bank imminently, not least because it would complicate Netanyahu's ambitions of normalising relations with several Arab and Muslim states.

But they say a smaller move, such as formally annexing some of the large settlements close to Israel, cannot be ruled out.



Villagers dismantle their houses in Mu'arrajat, after Israeli right-wing settlers took control of the area © Ilia Yefimovich/dpa

“With Trump in the White House, anything is possible,” said an Arab diplomat. “It’s very concerning.”

But for Palestinians in isolated communities such as Mu'arrajat — many of whom have lived through multiple displacements, and watched Israel's creeping de facto annexation of the rural West Bank eat away at their lands for years — the violence is a more immediate problem.

In the past 21 months, according to the UN's humanitarian arm OCHA, settlers have carried out more than 2,500 attacks in the territory, beating up villagers, vandalising

property and destroying their crops. In June alone, settler attacks injured 95 Palestinians — more than in any month for two decades.

For those displaced, the attacks have brought trauma and the scramble to find a new place to live. But they have also upended the lives of those who have not lost their homes, compounding the economic pressures on rural communities in the West Bank by cutting them off from huge swaths of land they had used for grazing or growing crops. Meanwhile, the thefts of livestock have deprived villagers of a key source of income.

Even before this week's displacement, locals were no longer able to reach thousands of dunams — a measure equivalent to about 1,000 sq m — of land between Mu'arrajat

and the nearby community of Uja because of the threat of settler attacks, according to 'Aref Daraghmeh, a field researcher for the Israeli rights group B'Tselem.

"It became a closed area for them," he says.

Villagers say that what has made the surge in violence particularly unsettling is the near total impunity with which settlers operate.

"Before October 7 there were also attacks, but when we called the army and the police, they used to help us to stop these attacks," says Mleihat. "After October 7, the attacks started happening almost daily. And the role of police and army became not protecting us from the settlers, but supporting and protecting the settlers while they were attacking us."

The Israeli military said it had not identified "acts of violence or assault" when its soldiers were present in Mu'arrajat "in recent days", and that it took disciplinary action against soldiers who did not adhere to orders. The police said it had "zero tolerance for violence or vigilantism".



Palestinian Bedouin Alia Mleihat is trying to survive in Al-Muarrajat amid attacks by Israeli settlers © Khadija Toufik/Middle East Images/AFP/Getty Images

Mleihat has little hope that the mounting international pressure on Israel — including

Mleihat has little hope that the mounting international pressure on Israel — including fresh rounds of sanctions, and threats by the EU to review its trading arrangements with Israel — will have more impact.

Among the violent settlers sanctioned by the UK in its latest round of measures in May was Zohar Sabah, who lives in an outpost a couple of kilometres from Mu'arrajat, and whom the UK said in its designation had been involved “in threatening, perpetrating, promoting and supporting, acts of aggression and violence against Palestinian individuals”.

But locals say the sanctions have not led to any change in Sabah's behaviour. According to B'Tselem, he was among the group of settlers who entered Mu'arrajat this week.

The sanctions imposed by the international community “are just to clear their conscience, to be able to say that they did something. But in reality it doesn't stop anything,” says Mleihat.

“Part of the reason we are afraid is that [the pressure on us] is not just a settler issue. It's a project, it's a state enterprise: they want to displace us from these areas . . . and the settlers are one of the tools of our displacement.”

---

[Copyright](#) The Financial Times Limited 2025. All rights reserved.

---

### **Follow the topics in this article**

---

Israel-Hamas war

Palestinian territories

West Bank

Israel

James Shotter



