



SHUSHAN STREET: WAVE OF PALESTINIAN DISPLACEMENT AMID SETTLER VIOLENCE DEMANDS URGENT ACTION

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In his recent speech to the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu brought props to illustrate his vision of the “New Middle East.” In [the maps](#) he brandished, Israel is depicted as encompassing the land from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea, including the [occupied](#) West Bank and Gaza Strip. The map reflects both the Netanyahu government’s [guiding principle](#) that “the Jewish people have an exclusive and indisputable right to all parts of the Land of Israel” and the one-state reality it is implementing on the ground. A consequential development related to the Netanyahu government’s effective annexation of much of the West Bank is the mass displacement of Palestinian herding communities and the clearing of a large swath of the West Bank of Palestinians through settler violence.

[Over 1,100 Palestinians](#) have been displaced from herding communities since 2022, as daily incidents of settler violence against Palestinians have [tripled](#) since 2021. While herding communities have been displaced in many parts of Area C – the 60 percent of the West Bank temporarily designated for full Israeli control under the Oslo Accords, where all of Israel’s settlements and most of the territory’s agricultural land are located – one region has been dramatically affected. In the large area extending east of Ramallah to the outer limits of Jericho, four herding communities – Ras a-Tin, Ein Samiya, al-Baq’ah, and al-Qabun – have already been forced to [uproot](#) themselves. The remaining communities in the region will likely be similarly [forced](#) to abandon their homes, absent international pressure.

This is occurring on the Biden Administration’s watch. According to the White House’s [readout](#) of their recent meeting on the sidelines of the UNGA, President Biden and Prime Minister Netanyahu spoke about the “ongoing tension and violence in the West Bank” and “the President emphasized the need to take immediate measures to improve the security and economic situation, maintain the viability of a two-state solution, and promote a just and lasting peace between Israelis and Palestinians.” That’s a far cry from naming the mass displacement of Palestinians from a large area in the West Bank and pushing for Israeli action to stop it. As expected, a key focus of the meeting was the normalization talks now under way between the US, Israel, and Saudi Arabia. These discussions provide the best and perhaps only opportunity in the near term for the US to affect a major shift in Israel’s policy and behavior on the West Bank that could save Palestinian communities.

There are additional [steps](#) that the Biden Administration can and should take, at a minimum, concerning settler violence. These include: reinforcing American opposition to settlements and the harm they do in general by revoking the “Pompeo Doctrine”; denying US entry visas to those who have engaged in, or incited settler violence against, Palestinian civilians (which is all the more urgent following Israel’s [admission](#) into the US Visa Waiver Program); investigating whether any US-origin military equipment has been used in connection with acts of settler violence in violation of US arms export control and/or foreign aid law; and making clear that the United States will not block accurate, appropriate actions in international fora regarding settler violence.

On a trip to Israel and the West Bank this summer, I witnessed the alarming developments on the ground. While visiting a Bedouin herding community on the southern edge of the area that is most impacted, I heard about the increasing boldness of settlers who invade the Palestinians' homes, block them from grazing their livestock, and sabotage their water supply. In the Jordan Valley, my Israeli guides showed me a spring from which cows belonging to Bedouin herders used to drink – until settlers fenced it off to prevent animals from entering and turned the spring into a recreation site for their own use. They put up a sign depicting the Israeli flag and dubbed the site “[Ma’ayan HaDegel](#)” (“Flag Spring”). I saw outposts that are especially notorious for settler violence in the Jordan Valley, including one named [Malachei HaShalom](#) (“Angels of Peace”). The name perversely evokes “[Shalom Aleichem](#),” the traditional Jewish song welcoming Shabbat.

As we drove on rugged roads, my Israeli guides shared details about the dire conditions faced by various small communities at the hands of the settlers working to drive them out, lamenting that within months the remaining Palestinians would likely be gone.

As [international observers](#) and [Israeli human rights organizations](#) have documented, radical settlers use a range of tactics in their efforts to displace Palestinians from Area C. They include preventing access to and taking over pastureland, including by grazing their animals on it or fencing it off; using physical violence, threats, and intimidation; and damaging water sources and property. Israeli farming and shepherding outposts have become the “most significant mechanism for dispossessing Palestinian communities,” according to Israeli monitoring organization Kerem Navot, which [reported](#) that 77 outposts for sheep and cattle grazing had been established as of 2022 and taken over around 60,000 acres (almost 7 percent of Area C). Requiring fewer people and much smaller investment than settlement construction, farm outposts utilize grazing as a highly efficient means of taking over land. Ze’ev Hever, the CEO of settler organization Amana, [touted](#) this himself in 2021 when he boasted that in only three years shepherd farms took over almost twice as much land as the built area of the settlements since “one farm guards thousands of dunams of land.”

While a military spokesman in August [referred](#) to settler violence as “nationalist crime and nationalist terror” and warned that it pushes more Palestinians to carry out terrorist acts, the Israeli military plays a significant role in effectively enabling settler violence. Soldiers are tasked by the Israeli government with protecting settlers, [even when](#) settlers are engaging in violence. In numerous cases, soldiers [have stood by](#) while settlers attacked Palestinians. In some instances, soldiers [have aided](#) settler attacks. The State Department has [reported](#) that Israel has “rarely detained or charged perpetrators of settler violence.” All of this practice is in direct contradiction of Israel’s obligations under international law, which requires Israel as the occupying power to protect Palestinians and their property.

In June, Ein al-Rashash – one of the few Palestinian herding communities remaining between Ramallah and Jericho – [was attacked by settlers](#) from Malachei HaShalom. The settlers burned a tent, smashed windows, threw rocks at villagers, and fired shots in the air. When Israeli soldiers arrived, they arrested three young Palestinian men who had thrown rocks back at the settlers. More recently, the Israeli military [declared](#) a closed military zone around Ein al-Rashash for a day to prevent Israeli human rights activists from visiting the embattled community. As for Malachei HaShalom, it is one of [ten unauthorized outposts](#) the Netanyahu government decided in February to retroactively recognize and convert into a settlement.

State policies play a significant role in Palestinian displacement. Since it is [nearly impossible](#) for Palestinians in Area C to obtain building permits from the Israeli Civil Administration (ICA), they build without permits and their illegal construction receives demolition orders. Israeli authorities [demolished](#) 2,123 homes and 3,387 non-residential structures between 2006 and July 2023. After settler violence and the inability to access their grazing lands [forced](#) the residents of Ein Samiya to leave their homes in May, Israeli authorities sought to prevent the herding community from returning by [executing](#) the demolition order against their elementary school. The ICA puts additional pressure on Palestinian herding communities by [confiscating](#) water tanks and destroying water networks, reservoirs, and cisterns. B'Tselem [notes](#) that daily personal water consumption in these communities is about a quarter of the minimum recommended by the World Health Organization – on par with water consumption in disaster zones.

Preventing the complete displacement of Palestinians from the region between Ramallah and Jericho, and the replication of processes in place there from driving out communities elsewhere in the West Bank, should be a priority for the Biden Administration and the international community. There are unilateral actions the Administration can and should take, as outlined above. In addition, conditions of Palestinian life in Area C of the West Bank should be at the top of the list of items the US is pursuing in the context of normalization talks.

Taking resolute action is a moral imperative. It's vital to preserving the potential for a viable Palestinian state. It's necessary if we take seriously the prohibition of forcible transfer in international law. What's the alternative? As Rabbi Arik Ascherman, the Executive Director of Torat Tzedek, has [warned](#): "If we don't do anything, more and more communities will leave."