



## SHUSHAN STREET: AS ISRAEL-HAMAS WAR RAGES, URGENT SITUATION IN THE WEST BANK ALSO REQUIRES US ACTION

*Dr. Debra Shushan, J Street Director of Policy*

*November 21, 2023*

The situation on the West Bank, already [dangerous and volatile](#) before Hamas' brutal attack on October 7, has grown substantially worse since the Israel-Hamas war began. While the world's attention is understandably fixed on Gaza, and to a lesser extent on the potential second front on Israel's northern border with Lebanon where [hostilities are escalating between Israel and Hizballah](#), the deteriorating conditions in the occupied West Bank could open a third front.

Those who care for Israel and are concerned about its future must recognize that extremist settlers and far-right ministers in the Netanyahu government are taking Israel down a very dangerous path in the West Bank. These settlers [declare](#) their intention to prevent the emergence of a peaceful Palestinian state, upon which – it should be clearer than ever – Israel's prospects for long-term security rest. Israel's security chiefs have referred to violence by settlers as "[nationalist terrorism](#)" and are [raising the alarm](#) that settlers' actions could prompt an eruption of violence. The US government [believes](#) escalation in the West Bank could lead Hizballah to intensify its campaign in the north. Some Jordanians [fear](#) mass transfer of Palestinians to their territory, and the Jordanian Foreign Minister has [warned](#), "If the West Bank explodes then you're looking at a broader conflict that is just going to affect everybody in the region."

### Key dynamics on the ground in the West Bank since Hamas' October 7 Attack:

- 1. Settler violence and harassment is forcibly displacing Palestinian communities.** Already an [urgent problem](#) before October 7, settler violence has worsened in frequency and intensity. Extremist settlers are seizing the opportunity to achieve their [goal](#) of driving Palestinians out of Area C, the 60 percent of the West Bank under full Israeli control. The average number of settler attacks has [skyrocketed](#) to an [unprecedented](#) rate of 7 per day – up from 2 per day in 2022 and 3 per day earlier in 2023 (before Hamas' attack). In the month following October 7, the UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) reports that settler violence forced the displacement of 900 Palestinians, bringing the total displaced since 2022 to over 2,000. Entire communities have been forced to uproot themselves. A notable change since October 7 is the increasing blurring of the line between settlers and soldiers. The IDF has enlisted settlers as reservist soldiers to bolster the settlements' after [redeploying](#) regular troops that were previously stationed in the West Bank to Gaza or Israel's northern border. Some of these settler reservists [threaten and attack](#) Palestinian communities.
- 2. Israeli forces are conducting recurrent operations in areas ostensibly under PA control, particularly in the northern West Bank and refugee camps.** While Israel has legitimate security concerns over the potential for militants to base themselves in these areas, Israeli forces' [use](#) of airstrikes, drone strikes, and shoulder-fired missiles in densely populated areas as part of its [counterterrorism activity](#), and the resulting damage to residential buildings, public infrastructure, and UNRWA facilities, are of serious concern. The number of Palestinians killed or arrested in the West Bank, some of whom may have been engaged in terror activities, has

soared. In the four weeks following the Hamas attack, OCHA reports that 150 Palestinians were killed in IDF operations in main cities and refugee camps, including 44 children, five times more than the monthly average in the first nine months of 2023. In the same period, Israeli forces arrested over 2,000 Palestinians in the West Bank. National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir, who oversees prisons, has [touted](#) especially harsh conditions for Palestinian prisoners, and the Israel Prison Service has [stated](#) that it is instituting tougher conditions “as part of the war effort.” In some cases, Israeli soldiers have filmed themselves [abusing](#) and humiliating Palestinian detainees. In addition to being morally abhorrent, this fans the flames of extremism and could further endanger Israeli, American, and other hostages kidnapped by Hamas terrorists.

- 3. The Palestinian economy in the West Bank is suffering as Palestinians lose their incomes due to closures and settler attacks on the olive harvest.** Following the Hamas attack, Israeli authorities indefinitely [suspended work permits](#) for the 110,000 Palestinian workers authorized to work in Israel and Israeli settlements, due to security concerns. The salaries of these laborers [constitute](#) 35 percent of the GDP of the Palestinian Authority. In addition, OCHA reports that the olive harvest season (between October and November) has been “severely affected” by a halt to the coordination mechanism with the Israeli Civil Administration by which Palestinians access their olive groves near Israeli settlements or behind the separation barrier. Meanwhile, settlers have [stepped up](#) attacks on Palestinian [harvesters](#) and their [trees](#), while Minister Bezalel Smotrich called for a [security zone](#) around settlements that would prevent Palestinians from accessing their crops.
- 4. The Netanyahu government is continuing its [previous efforts](#) to [weaken](#) the PA, refusing to turn over a portion of the tax revenue it collects and is obligated to transfer.** Despite the objection of Defense Minister Yoav Gallant, Israel’s security cabinet [announced](#) it will withhold funds that the PA would normally allocate for the Gaza Strip – roughly 30 percent of the PA’s budget. The [cash-strapped](#) PA needs the funds in order to pay members of its security forces, who help to prevent militant attacks on Israelis. The Israeli defense establishment fears an economic downturn will prompt escalating violence.

### **The need for urgent action – and what the US government should do:**

On November 18, President Biden [published an op-ed](#) stating that he has “been emphatic with Israel’s leaders that extremist violence against Palestinians in the West Bank must stop and that those committing the violence must be held accountable.” Recently, Members of Congress have [released multiple letters](#) calling on the administration to push the Israeli government to end settler violence, protect Palestinian civilians, and prevent a major escalation in the West Bank. In a welcome development, the President announced: “The United States is prepared to take our own steps, including issuing visa bans against [settler] extremists attacking civilians in the West Bank.” J Street had [called upon](#) the Biden Administration to take this important step, among others, and it should be swiftly implemented. Reportedly, a Cabinet memo [directs](#) Secretary of State Antony Blinken, Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen, and potentially other Cabinet members to develop policy options to take “expeditious action against those responsible” for settler violence, including through imposing sanctions.

*The Biden Administration and Congress should enact the following measures:*

1. Investigate whether any US-origin military equipment has been used in connection with acts of settler violence or other purposes that may constitute violations of US arms export control and/or foreign aid law;
2. Ensure that US-origin weapons, including rifles, are not transferred to those implicated in settler violence;
3. Impose asset freezes and financial restrictions on individuals and companies that promote, fund, and engage in settler violence, and designate organizations that do the same as Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs);
4. Push for the Israeli government to uphold the rule of law by evacuating illegal settlement outposts, which are often used as bases from which to attack Palestinian communities, and imposing accountability for perpetrators of settler violence;
5. Call on the IDF to discharge any settlers with violent records toward Palestinians and to bar key instigators of settler violence from entering or residing in the West Bank;
6. Take steps to strengthen the Palestinian Authority and urge the Israeli government to re-engage in good faith with it, including by transferring Palestinian funds as set out in bilateral agreements and enhancing security coordination;
7. Adopt measures to strengthen the work of the US Security Coordinator (USSC) in Jerusalem – which plays a key role in leading international coalition efforts supporting peace and stability in the West Bank – including emergency supplemental funding, as recently [requested](#) by Senators on a bipartisan basis;
8. Call on the Israeli government to protect the livelihoods of Palestinians in the West Bank by ending the imposition of blanket West Bank closures and issuing an order to forbid interference with the olive harvest;
9. Insist that Israeli authorities accept and adhere to guardrails set by the US government for Israel’s conduct in both the West Bank and Gaza, and pledge meaningful post-war moves toward lasting conflict resolution, as part of their receipt and use of supplemental military aid;
10. Reinforce American opposition to settlements and the harm they do in general by revoking the “Pompeo Doctrine” – and thus publicly restoring the long standing, bipartisan US position that settlements are inconsistent with international law.

As Senator Cory Booker and Congressman Dan Goldman recently [wrote](#), “[S]ettler violence against Palestinian civilians destroys the very seeds of trust and cooperation needed to make progress toward a two-state outcome and an enduring peace in the region.” Effective action to address settler violence and other dangerous trends in the West Bank is essential to preventing the opening of a dangerous third front – and to preserving a path to a peaceful, secure future for Israelis and Palestinians.