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Settler attacks in West Bank drive farmers to treetops

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Firas Yusef sits on the steps leading up to the hut he built in an olive tree to help him protect his land from settler vandalism. Photo: Taghreed Ali

Firas Yusef is taking all the precautions he can to fend off ever more aggressive settler attacks on his land west of Salfit in the occupied West Bank.

The farmer, 37, has already seen his land - 30,000 square meters outside the town of Az-Zawiya - divided in two by Israel's separation wall where it dips deep into the West Bank south-west of Nablus in the Salfit governorate.

Never peaceful, settlers from the nearby settlements of Ariel, Alei Zahav, Pduel and Barkan have been acting even more aggressively over the past several months.

Last year, [according to the UN](#), Palestinians in the West Bank had to endure the "highest recorded levels of [settler] violence" in recent years.

Fearing for his safety as well as his livelihood, Yusef has constructed a wooden hut on top of one of his bigger olive trees.

The hut is about five meter squared and is built on the tree trunk some three meters up. It is outfitted with plastic windows and boasts a sheet metal roof.

A single solar panel provides electricity.

Inside, there are chairs, covers and bedding, enabling Yusef to stay overnight on his land.

This serves two purposes. He can keep an eye on his land at night and he is not subject to the capricious moods of soldiers at checkpoints to reach his land in the mornings.

Yusef is by no means the only farmer to come up with this idea. He estimates that around 230 other local farmers have built huts on their lands for the same purpose.

He fears, however, that the Israeli military might come and destroy the hut, as has happened to others.

"I am near the wall and settlements. The Israeli occupation authorities have recently resorted to monitoring the construction of these huts with drones. I hope they don't

locate mine and make me destroy it."

Wreaking havoc

Settlers are wreaking havoc in small communities around the West Bank. Hardly a day goes by without some report of cars being [vandalized](#), civilians being [assaulted](#) or trees being [targeted](#).

There are more than [280 settlements](#) in the West Bank, outside of East Jerusalem. These are home to some 440,000 settlers, lured there by tax breaks and other financial incentives offered by the Israeli state.

Some 150 of these are so-called settlement outposts, attracting the more extreme elements among the settlers.

Some of these outposts are being "legalized" to become full settlements. A third of the outposts were established over the last decade.

All pose a threat to the security of Palestinians in the vicinity. And Israel's military is another source of danger for farmers and others.

At least 26 children [have been killed](#) by soldiers or settlers this year alone.

Most settler attacks take place in Area C, [some 60 percent](#) of the occupied West Bank which is under direct Israeli military and administrative control.

Yusef's farm is in Area C, where Israel's apartheid system is quite brazen: Israeli settlers are treated as civilians under Israeli law, while Palestinians like Yusef in the same area are subject to military rule.

There is little to no protection for Palestinians in Area C (or anywhere else). The military does not have the authority to intervene against settlers, since they are seen as civilians.

It is a fine distinction that B'Tselem, an Israeli human rights group, calls meaningless. Settler violence, the [group holds](#), “is a form of government policy.”

And soldiers almost never have to face any consequences for their actions. [According](#) to another Israeli rights group, Yesh Din, in the years 2019 and 2020, the Israeli military received a total of 273 complaints related to violations committed by soldiers against Palestinian civilians.

Of these complaints, just 56 investigations were opened, or about a fifth of all complaints submitted. Yesh DIN attributed the small number of opened investigations – a number that is decreasing year on year – to a “deliberate policy to raise the threshold for opening criminal investigations.”

Ultimately, the group found, only 2 percent of complaints resulted in prosecution.

Neverending expansion

Ahmad al-Mahmoud, 66, from [Kafr al-Deek](#)  , further west from Salfit, suffers constant vandalism by settlers from the nearby Alei Zahav settlement, to which he has already lost 6,000 square meters of his 13,000 square meters of land, now surrounded by a metal fence and off limits to him.

Murad Shtewi, head of the Colonization and Wall Resistance Commission of the Northern West Bank and a coordinator for unarmed resistance marches, told The Electronic Intifada that “settlements have led to the confiscation of thousands of *dunums* of agricultural land” in the Salfit governorate.

The entire area of the governorate is about 26,000 *dunums*, Shtewi said, with 11,000 located in Area A, and under the Palestinian Authority, and 15,000 *dunums* are in Area C. A *dunum* is the equivalent of 1,000 square meters.

Salfit governorate contains 25 Israeli settlements, Shtewi added, the largest of

which is Ariel, which is built on land belonging to the villages of the area, including Kafr al-Deek and Az-Zawiya.

“The most dangerous settlement project in Salfit is the occupation’s attempt to expand the Ariel settlement, by establishing an industrial zone there and linking it to a settlement that is being planned in the Ras area and Khallet Hassan area west of Salfit.”

Ahmad al-Mahmoud also built a hut on his land. In fact, it was built several times, because the military kept demolishing it.

The latest demolition was in September 2020. He rebuilt it less than two months later.

Today, the hut is multi-functional, including as a recreational place for his family and grandchildren.

“Settler attacks increase more during the harvest seasons,” al-Mahmoud told The Electronic Intifada, “especially the olive harvest. Settler gangs prepare themselves for the September-November harvest, by cutting down olive trees and stealing their fruits.”

And it is not just Palestinians who are targets. Settlers have been known to target [foreign](#) and [Israeli activists](#) when these have turned up to protect farmers for the harvest, pelting them with stones or assaulting them with clubs.

Al-Mahmoud does not only have to contend with direct assaults, he told The Electronic Intifada.

With Israel in administrative control over the area, he has yet to receive permission to dig a water well for irrigation purposes. He still has to rely on trucks carrying water tanks to irrigate his trees once a week.

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Source: [Electronic Intifada](#)

