



Palestinian territories

'Nowhere in Palestine is free': West Bank villagers defenceless against rising settler violence

The killing of a young father during a rampage through his quiet village underlines the impossible options for Palestinians in the occupied territories

Bethan McKernan and Sufian Taha in Turmus Ayya, West Bank

Sat 1 Jul 2023 00.00 EDT

Although it was the second day of Eid al-Adha, there were no celebrations at the family home of Omar Abu Qattin in the occupied West Bank village of Turmus Ayya.

The week before, after rescuing several children from houses being attacked by Israeli settlers during an **unprecedented rampage through the area**, the 27-year-old was shot and killed - most likely by an Israeli soldier. The army said it arrived to extinguish the fires and opened fire after Palestinians threw rocks, although the exact circumstances remain unclear.

On Thursday, the father of two's family was still receiving condolence visits, men and women sitting in separate areas in the shade of the garden. "I am sad but very proud of how brave he was," said Omar's mother, Hanan, 50. "If he did not go to help, the situation could have been much worse."

About 4,000 people living in Turmus Ayya - as well as those in several other surrounding villages - are still reeling from the violence last Tuesday in which Qattin was killed. At least 12 other Palestinians were injured by live fire and about 30 houses and 60 cars set alight.

The rioting by hundreds of young Israeli men, many wearing masks and carrying guns, was triggered by the **killing by Hamas gunmen of four Israelis** at a petrol station outside the nearby settlement of Eli - which, in turn, was retaliation for a huge Israel Defence Forces (IDF) operation in the restive West Bank city of Jenin a day before, in which **five Palestinians were killed and 91 injured**.





Fahmiyh Shelaby, 79, and her husband, Numan, 74, seen through a window in their home broken during the attack on Turmus Ayya. Photograph: Quique Kierszenbaum

“People always talk about ‘both sides’ violence, but that is not the case in Turmus Ayya. This is a quiet village,” said Qattin’s father, Hisham, 60. “They have guns, but we are not allowed to have guns. We are not even allowed to throw rocks. We have nothing to protect ourselves with.”

In the past 18 months, Israel and the West Bank have suffered increasingly frequent and intense episodes of violence as Israeli settlement building has continued apace and the corrupt and weak Palestinian Authority has lost control of some areas to newly formed militias.

Many fear a new chapter of full-scale fighting is on the horizon. Last year was the bloodiest on record in the two areas since the second intifada, or Palestinian uprising, of the 2000s, and this year is on track to be even worse: at least 137 Palestinians and 24 Israelis have been killed so far, mostly in IDF raids and Palestinian terrorist attacks. Two surprise Israeli operations in the blockaded Gaza Strip over the last year led to the deaths of another 83 Palestinians, and one Israeli.

Settler violence is not a new phenomenon, but it is growing. Around a third of the 700,000 or so Israelis now living in East Jerusalem and the West Bank are religious-nationalists, motivated by what they see as a divine mission to restore the biblical land of Israel to the Jewish people.





Burned cars in Turmus Ayya, after Israeli settlers attacked the village. Photograph: Quique Kierszenbaum

Shootings, knife attacks, burning crops, vandalism and the theft of land and livestock in the 60% of the West Bank under full Israeli control are supposed to make life for Palestinians so unbearable they have no choice but to leave for areas administered by the Palestinian Authority.

Settlement communities are viewed as illegal under international law, and their accelerating growth has rendered a two-state solution to the conflict all but impossible. On many occasions, the Israeli army has been documented failing to stop settler attacks, or even [joining in](#).

The movement has been boosted by the return to office of Israel's longtime prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, at the end of last year, alongside [new far-right coalition partners](#) promising annexation of the West Bank, relaxing the rules of engagement for Israel's police and soldiers, and harsher punishments for Palestinians who commit terror attacks.

The elevation of the religious-nationalists to important cabinet minister posts has emboldened their base: according to the UN, there has been an average of three settler violence incidents a day so far in 2023, up from two a day in 2022.

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In February, [400 settlers descended on the Palestinian village of Huwara](#) in revenge

for the murders of two brothers by a Palestinian gunman, torching dozens of businesses and cars, and killing a local blacksmith. The settler attack - on a scale never seen before - and the IDF's inability or unwillingness to curb the violence shocked people on both sides of the Green Line and drew international condemnation.



Israeli settlers burn Palestinian homes after brothers shot dead - video

“Huwara was very bad, but I think Turmus Ayya was worse. It seemed more organised,” said Emam Shalaby, a 37-year-old Palestinian-American visiting relatives for the summer.

She was not at home when the attack happened, but her five children and 79-year-old mother were. The rioters tried to enter the house but could not break down the front door, instead setting the garden, cars and garage outside alight and smashing windows. The Shalaby family were some of the people rescued through the back of the house by Omar Abu Qattin before he was killed.

“The settlers come to the fields at the northern end of the village and attack people there, but they’ve never come directly inside before. They split into groups of about 10 men, and they were targeting houses with people in them. The empty houses with the shutters down and no cars outside, they didn’t burn them, they ignored them,” she said.

“My whole life I have never seen anything like this.” said Shalaby’s mother.

...my mother-in-law has never seen anything like this, said Shady's mother, Fahmieh. "The children don't want me and my husband to live here by ourselves any more."

In a statement, Netanyahu called last week's settler attacks unacceptable, saying: "The state of Israel is a state of law. The citizens of Israel are all obligated to respect the law," while also announcing the acceleration of plans for 1,000 new homes in Eli, next to the petrol station the four Israelis were killed at.

"We have a choice between staying, enduring more violence and letting our children grow up traumatised, or leaving, but nowhere in Palestine is free," said one mourner at the Qattin house. "It is an impossible choice."

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That should come as no surprise: a far-right movement has helped seat justices who have redefined public life through precedent-shattering decisions that most Americans do not support. In addition to taking away the right to abortion from half the country and ending affirmative action, the supreme court has enabled a deluge of money into politics, the proliferation of guns in public spaces, the gutting of environmental protections and more.

As recent revelations have made clear, some supreme court justices do not follow basic ethical standards, and an absence of limits on their power means they can operate, in many ways, above the law.

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