

Displaced Communities, Forgotten People

Israel's Forcible Transfer of Palestinians in the West Bank

- Executive Summary -

Displaced Communities, Forgotten People is the product of a joint project launched by Yesh Din and Physicians for Human Rights Israel (PHRI). The report addresses the events leading to the forced displacement of hundreds of Palestinian families from their homes. In less than two years, about 100,000 dunams of land east of Allon Road have been almost completely emptied of the Palestinians who lived on it for decades.

This was not a voluntary departure, but a forcible transfer effected by a combination of factors: years of institutional oppression, daily physical violence, invasive psychological terror, and catastrophic economic harm. All of these led to a loss of personal security, an ongoing erosion of community resilience, and a breakdown of the social cohesion of seven shepherding communities, which were forced out of the lands that were their home.

The Israeli authorities do not recognize these communities and have, for years, harassed and abused their residents. However, the turning point came after settlers began establishing shepherding outposts near them. The escalation of violence originating from these outposts over the past two years has created an environment unconducive to life for Palestinian shepherding communities, effectively forcing them out of their homes.

While the State of Israel formally washes its hands of the settlers' acts, claiming the outposts are illegal, in practice, it supports them and reaps the benefits of their aggression towards Palestinians, which helps achieve the state's goals. In this way, Israel consistently and systematically violates the human rights of Palestinian shepherding communities in the West Bank, including the rights to life, personal security, health, freedom of movement, property, livelihood, and dignity.

The main conclusion of Displaced Communities, Forgotten People is that Israel is responsible for the commission of the war crime of forcible transfer of Palestinians in the West Bank. This crime is committed with the state's support, by its agents or citizens. Moreover, the state's deep involvement in the commission of these crimes, its practices, their systemic nature and their replication in various locations, lead to the grim conclusion that, in certain parts of the West Bank, the State of Israel is implementing practices of ethnic cleansing.

Palestinian Shepherding Communities

Palestinian shepherding communities maintain distinctive social, economic, and cultural structures, striving to preserve their traditional way of life. Their livelihood is rooted in livestock husbandry and relies heavily on access to pastureland and natural water sources, which are fundamental to their survival.

The area on which the project focuses was home to seven Palestinian shepherding communities, Ras a-Tin, al-Qabun, 'Ein Samia, 'Ein a-Rashash, Khirbet Jib'it, al-Mu'arrajat and Wadi a-Seeq. Most of these communities came to the West Bank after Israel expelled them from the Negev Desert in 1948. They suffered further displacements on pretexts such as closing off firing zones and the construction of military bases, before permanently settling on privately owned Palestinian lands, with the owners' consent.

For decades, community members withstood pressure from the Israeli authorities, but the emergence of shepherding outposts has changed their lives beyond recognition. Israelis coming from the direction of the outposts began to systematically harass the communities' residents, first in the pasturelands, and later, in the residential tents themselves. The aggression included physical assaults, harm to livestock, property damage, threats, and harassment. Some of the settlers were armed, and at times, they were escorted by soldiers.

The settlers systematically took control of most of the natural water sources in the area, forcing members of the communities to rely almost exclusively on purchased animal feed and water. Members of the community suffered grave financial harm as a result, with many forced to sell some of their livestock and seek work as laborers in Israeli settlements. Some families in the al-Mu'arrajat community were forced out back in 2020. In July 2022, the entire community of Ras a-Tin was forced off the land they had called home for 30 years.

The situation escalated with time, and in 2020, when another outpost was established, it became intolerable. Violence against our shepherds became a daily occurrence and very dangerous. They scattered their flocks all over our pastures and damaged our water pipes.

They said: "The lands are ours. We'll kill you if you bring your flocks to our lands." These altercations didn't always end with just verbal threats. There was physical harm too. I myself was threatened: "We will slaughter you; we will kill you." Life has become a nightmare. Families started leaving – the violence worked.

Yunes Abu 'Eid, 'Ein Samia

Settler violence escalated in 2023, becoming a daily occurrence. Throughout the year, settlers coming from shepherding outposts attacked Palestinian shepherds, invaded residential compounds, torched tents, and stole livestock and property. The military and the Israel Police, the authorities responsible for the Palestinian residents' safety, did nothing in any of these incidents either to prevent the violence and harassment or to arrest and prosecute the assailants. The communities of 'Ein Samia and al-Qabun were forcibly displaced in the summer of 2023.

The outbreak of the war in Gaza was the final phase ahead of forced displacement. In the weeks that followed October 7, 2023, displaced revenge attacks by Israelis against Palestinians swept over the West Bank. During this period, armed settlers showed up in the communities, threatened their members, and in some cases, gave them an ultimatum to leave. Without even minimal protection from Israeli security forces, the communities of 'Ein a-Rashash, Khirbet Jib'it and Wadi a-Seeq were forced to leave the land where they had lived for decades.

Settler Shepherding Outposts

Over the past decade, with help from the state, Israeli settlers have built more than 100 shepherding outposts throughout the West Bank. Shepherding outposts have a small number of residents who, by building structures, grazing flocks over vast areas, taking over water resources and often perpetrating violence against the indigenous Palestinian residents, take control of large swaths of land. Shepherding outposts have mostly been built in Area C, however, in 2024, settlers began establishing new shepherding outposts in Area B as well, where no Israeli settlements had been established before.

There are 11 shepherding outposts across the area on which Displaced Communities, Forgotten People focuses. Malachei Hashalom Farm, Rashash Farm, Te'ena Farm, Gal Yosef Farm, Ma'oz Esther, Micha's Farm, Habaladim, Ma'ale Shlomo South, Rimmonim Farm, Zohar's Farm and Makuch Farm. The older settlements of Kochav Hashachar and Rimmonim are also located in this area, as are the established unauthorized outposts of Ma'ale Shlomo and Mitzpe Kramim, built in the early 2000s.

The modus operandi of establishing shepherding outposts and employing systematic violence to force out Palestinian shepherding communities is a carefully planned system designed to achieve an openly stated goal: taking over Palestinian lands. Through acts of violence and terrorism backed by the state, settlers have physically, psychologically, and economically harmed Palestinian shepherding communities and forced them out of their homes.

On October 7, militias of armed settlers showed up in our residential area and demanded we leave immediately, saying that if we didn't, they'd come and burn down our houses and anyone in them. We were helpless. We had no choice but to leave.

Harun Kahlah, Wadi a-Seeq)

The settlers from the shepherding outposts operate as state-backed armed militias, and in the absence of law enforcement, they replicate their tactics far and wide. In less than five years, using violence and terrorism, settlers from 11 shepherding outposts have taken over more than 100,000 dunams of land.

Israeli Policy

Israel fails to meet its obligations under international humanitarian law. Israel's settlement enterprise in the West Bank is a breach of international law. It is also, essentially, the cause and driver of all the events described in this report. Furthermore, Israel's perception of Area C as belonging to it and the government's open policy of annexing at least parts of the West Bank and applying Israeli sovereignty to them, backed by actions, also constitute brazen violations of international law.

Israel's official position is that most shepherding outposts in the West Bank are illegal. However, the state, through its various authorities, maintains close cooperation with settlers in these outposts who harm Palestinian shepherding communities. Moreover, the violent, repressive, and unlawful policy Israel pursued for years both through official bodies operating in the West Bank and through the settlers is ultimately what led to the forcible transfer of Palestinian shepherding communities.

The government and the Knesset: The state directs tens of millions of shekels of Israeli taxpayer money toward shepherding outposts each year. It gives them financial assistance and loans, connects them to infrastructure and roads, allocates pastureland, provides them with security, and purchases different types of equipment for them. In addition to all this, the Jewish National Fund, regional settlement councils, the World Zionist Organization Settlement Division, Amana, the settlement movement of Gush Emunim, and organizations such as Regavim, Artzenu, and Hashomer Yesh – all of which are fully or partially publicly funded – also provide grants and assistance to shepherding outposts. At the same time, a significant lobby of elected officials, some of whom are settlers themselves, is working to lend legitimacy to the illegal shepherding outposts, going so far as denying that settler violence exists. In addition, the government is pursuing the retroactive authorization of outposts built illegally and their regulation as what it considers legal settlements.

The Civil Administration: The Civil Administration has broad powers covering most aspects of life in the West Bank, including planning and construction in Area C. Despite

its obligations as part of the occupying power, the Civil Administration applies an inherently, deliberately discriminatory policy, creating separate and distinct realities for the Israeli and Palestinian populations. As a direct result of this policy, for decades, the Civil Administration did not provide members of Palestinian shepherding communities with basic services and blocked them from installing and developing basic infrastructure, roads and educational facilities on their own.

The Civil Administration's state land declaration policy and land allocation, building permit and house demolition practices complement each other to promote Israel's agenda in Area C: annexation, development and prosperity in settlements along with dispossession and expulsion of Palestinians. Israel's discriminatory policy virtually prevents any Palestinian construction in Area C, essentially pushing Palestinians into Areas A and B, which make up only 40% of the West Bank.

The military: As the occupying army, it has an obligation to refrain from harming the Palestinian population and their property and to ensure their safety, including by protecting them from harm by third parties. However, there is a strong affinity between the Israeli military and Israeli settlers in the OPT, reflected in official policies, local initiatives by soldiers, and close cooperation.

Soldiers often escort and protect settlers who attack Palestinians, do nothing to prevent or stop the violence, and with increasing frequency, join the attacks. These are not isolated incidents of lone soldiers: support for the actions of settlers from shepherding outposts is a military policy that filters down from the top command.

After the events of October 7, 2023, thousands of soldiers were recruited to guard settlements, many of them settlers, and given military-issued firearms. Armed Israelis, in full or partial military uniforms, appeared in Palestinian villages and shepherding communities and harmed innocent people without justification or authority. These incidents included, among other things, violent attacks, threats, trespassing, theft, and property damage. The deliberate obfuscation of the differences between Israeli settlers and soldiers has further undermined the safety of these communities and their faith in the Israeli authorities.

The Israel Police: The Israel Police is tasked with enforcing criminal law on Israeli civilians in the West Bank. Two decades of Yesh Din monitoring point to a longstanding systemic and deliberate failure in law enforcement responses to ideologically motivated crime against Palestinians in the West Bank. Of the investigation files opened into ideologically motivated offenses by Israelis against Palestinians in the West Bank since 2005, 94% were closed without indictment, and only about 3% of cases ended in a full or partial conviction.

Due to this police policy, Palestinians' trust in Israeli law enforcement authorities has declined and complaints have dropped sharply. Palestinian crime victims reported extremely long wait times at police stations, humiliating treatment from police officers, no Arabic interpreters, and being treated as suspects rather than crime victims.

I filed three complaints and nothing came of them. We documented the settlers' violence in photos where you can see their faces and their license plates, and the case would close. We left, not willingly. It was a very difficult decision. We were helpless.

Mahmoud Ka'abne, Ras a-Tin

Aware that the police are not carrying out effective enforcement against them, settlers feel emboldened in their criminal actions and continue to replicate them. As of the end of 2024, there are no known cases of Israelis prosecuted for any of the violent incidents that led to the forcible transfer of the Palestinian communities.

Individual Health and Community Resilience

The ongoing violence experienced by Palestinians in the West Bank takes a significant toll on their psychosocial well-being and mental health. Chronic stress and anxiety due to the constant threat of violence, military incursions, and settler attacks afflict the entire Palestinian population living under occupation. In shepherding communities, these challenges are compounded by fears of home demolitions, forced displacement and loss of livelihoods, intensifying mental health struggles at both the individual and community levels. The moment an Israeli outpost is established near a community, or a home is broken into, or a family member is injured or loses their livelihood, both the individual and the community suffer a profound loss of safety.

The comprehensive research presented in this report has finds that the actions of Israelis have severely and systematically hurt the resilience of Palestinian shepherding communities and the health of their members. The long-term chronic exposure to systematic violence and various forms of oppression, both by the Israeli authorities and by settlers, has physically and psychologically harmed community members. The ongoing violence has decreased food security, created unsustainable housing conditions, eroded mental resilience, and produced prolonged, severe feelings of insecurity, uncertainty, and anxiety. The inability to find sanctuary in their own homes, coupled with the lack of stability and consistency, exacerbated health impacts, particularly among children.

Forced displacement has stripped Palestinian shepherds of control over their future and impaired their access to essential services and sources of income. It has disrupted traditional ways of life and fractured community bonds. Its lasting socio-economic and psychological impacts have collectively eroded community resilience. Furthermore, many communities have faced attacks by Israelis in their new locations, perpetuating

the trauma of insecurity and undermining the ability to regain control over their lives. This ongoing predicament continues to afflict Palestinian shepherds today.

Settler violence has ruined our lives. This violence has made us live in constant fear and scared to leave our homes. Stress and anxiety have become part of our daily lives.

Suleiman Mleihat, Al-Mu'arrajat East)

Solidarity between us has been really hard hit. We lived together as a united community, helping each other during the hard times and celebrating together in happy times. Now everyone lives in fear and anxiety, and the isolation in our midst has grown harder.

Muhammad Ka'abneh, Wadi a-Seeq

The forcible transfer of Palestinian shepherding communities whose members have already experienced expulsion and displacement - further deepens the ongoing collective trauma of dispossession, expulsion, and the loss of home, land and community.

Legal Aspects

In the area studied in this project, seven Palestinian shepherding communities were forcibly displaced between 2022 and 2023 following violence by settlers and soldiers, as well as Israeli government actions.

Given the state's significant support for the establishment and expansion of these outposts, the involvement of state officials in many of the incidents described in the report, as well as the failure of Israeli authorities to enforce the law, all indicate from a legal stand point that the violence and practices leading to the displacement of Palestinian communities must be seen as state-sanctioned or, at the very least, a form of systemic coercion.

These acts amount to the crime of forcible transfer – both as a war crime and as a crime against humanity – as well as the crime of persecution. Moreover, these crimes did not occur in isolation, and being part of a widespread and systematic attack makes each incident more egregious than if considered separately. There is growing suspicion that the primary driving force behind them is a deliberate effort to 'clear' the area of its Palestinian presence - essentially, a policy of ethnic cleansing.

The legal understanding of 'ethnic cleansing' is still evolving. However, it is increasingly recognized as a criminal phenomenon that encompasses a series of targeted actions against a distinct group, with each act constituting an international crime in its own right, including forcible transfer. This legal framing underscores the extreme gravity of ethnic

cleansing as a systematic criminal campaign driven by discriminatory motives and aimed at erasing the presence of a particular group from a specific area.

The ethnic cleansing taking place in the West Bank, and specifically in the area covered in this project, has three major elements: coercive measures reflected in violent acts by settlers and security forces, systemic coercive measures employed by the state and manifesting as deprivation of rights and conditions required to lead normal lives, and, finally, the absence of state protection. These coercive measures created an unsustainable and unsafe environment for Palestinian shepherding communities, inevitably leading to their forcible displacement.

The grim conclusion is that the State of Israel is responsible for the crimes of forcible transfer and persecution, perpetrated directly, by proxies, or by its citizens with state support. Israel is also responsible for formulating, steering, and at least partially implementing a policy of ethnic cleansing in the West Bank.

Displaced Communities, Forgotten People is a case study that focuses on a limited area, but the same Israeli policies and settler methods are implemented in other parts of the West Bank. There is, therefore, concern that these patterns and practices, which have resulted in the forcible transfer of these Palestinian communities, will evolve into a long-term government strategy of ethnically cleansing Palestinians, at least in Area C, which accounts for 60% of the West Bank's territory.

In July 2024, the International Court of Justice ruled that Israel's continued presence in the OPT is unlawful, and that various practices it employs lead to the displacement of Palestinians living in Area C. This landmark ruling should serve as a blueprint for action by the international community vis-à-vis the State of Israel.

Yesh Din and Physicians for Human Rights Israel call on the international community to take active, effective measures against the State of Israel and demand it fulfill its legal obligation to protect the occupied population, with an emphasis on shepherding communities. Israel must guarantee the basic rights of Palestinian residents, stop the forcible transfer, remove the violent outposts, and provide Palestinian shepherding communities with conditions for a safe return home.

- This document is an executive summary of the report Displaced Communities, Forgotten People. All citations and sources are listed in the full report.
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