The Sleight of Hand in Dismissing Settler Violence

Settler violence is real, and a real problem. Pretending otherwise requires shallow and obvious misdirection and does Israel no favors.

By Michael J. Koplow

When President Biden issued an executive order two weeks ago aimed at combating violence in the West Bank by enabling sanctions on anyone engaging in or complicit in terrorism, property destruction, threats, or intimidation against civilians, it was the culmination of years of warnings about settler violence. These warnings came not only from the United Nations or foreign countries, but from the Biden administration, members of Congress, and American Jewish organizations. They also came after IDF Chief of Staff Herzi Halevi and Shin Bet director Ronen Bar warned Israel’s cabinet about settler violence in the fall, after Israeli authorities arrested a settler who shot and killed a Palestinian without provocation while serving as an off-duty soldier, after illegal outpost resident and terrorism suspect Ariel Danino was arrested and placed into four months of administrative detention by Defense Minister Yoav Gallant, and after the IDF and Israeli police reported in December that despite a drop in incidents they had recorded there were still 50 nationalist attacks per month by Israelis against Palestinians in the West Bank. In other words, if you only relied on Israel’s own reporting and warnings from Israeli officials, you would still have a hard time dismissing settler violence as something that is overblown or does not really exist.

I lead with this because the pushback to Biden’s executive order—and to the constant stream of warnings from American officials for months on end, and well before October 7—has been to shoot the messengers, who are always either allegedly biased foreign interlopers or pro-Palestinian Israelis. The most thorough example came last week in Tablet, which blamed United States Security Coordinator for Israel and the Palestinian Authority Lieutenant General Mike Fenzel for getting officials in Washington exercised over settler violence, and claimed that the USSC is simply parroting statistics from the fatally unreliable U.N. and B’Tselem and thus alarm over settler violence is misplaced and should be discredited.
The USSC is the office in charge of U.S. efforts to coordinate security between the IDF and the Palestinian Authority—arguably the only thing that the U.S. has done in the last 15 years in the realm of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that has been an unqualified success. The USSC works hand in glove with the IDF as part of its job and is a better judge than any other U.S. government entity as to how events in the West Bank are influencing the U.S.’ ability to operate and pursue its policy goals on the ground in the West Bank. It has its own firsthand methods for tracking the extent of settler violence and assessing its damage to U.S. interests and has independently assessed that it is a serious risk to everything the U.S. is now trying to pull off—from preventing terrorism and an uprising in the West Bank to setting the conditions for normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia.

But let’s set aside for a moment the facts, as opposed to anonymously and barely sourced innuendo. For the purposes of this exercise, let’s pretend that the charge that the USSC is being duped is true. Even then, one has to engage in rhetorical backflips to deny that settler violence is genuine and carried out with increasing bravado, and that Israel has ignored it for far too long to its detriment.

The U.N. numbers that are disparaged because they come from an institution that is unquestionably biased against Israel are very high, and they indeed do not provide the backstories to the 511 Palestinians and 31 Israelis killed in the West Bank in 2023, or the 373 Palestinians and 6 Israelis killed in the West Bank since October 7 alone. Most of those Palestinian deaths are not the result of settler violence, or even at the hands of settlers, but occur during IDF operations in which soldiers are confronted by terrorists and armed young Palestinians. But the focus on deaths in the pushback to the USSC and to the settler violence narrative is instructive, because if that is your metric, then it is reasonable to conclude that there have been a handful of ugly incidents but that there is no epidemic of settler violence. The bait and switch involved is to look only at murders, and not to look at all of the ways in which violent settlers are assaulting Palestinians, harassing Palestinians, and doing whatever they can to make their communities unlivable.

One need not go to the U.N. or to the USSC to see what is happening, since so much of it is filmed and photographed, sometimes by settlers themselves. Watch settlers shoot unarmed Palestinians for no discernible reason, harass Palestinian farmers and pelt them with rocks, and drive Palestinian shepherds off pastureland. Ponder that there are now over 200 West Bank outposts that are illegal under Israeli law—as compared to 132 approved Israeli settlements—and ask whether the residents of these outposts have any compunction about attacking Palestinians who have little recourse against them when
they have no problem flouting Israeli law so brazenly. Read the stats showing that between 2005 and 2022, only 7% of Israeli police investigations of settler violence led to an indictment and only 3% led to a conviction, and that indictments for settler violence against other Israelis happen at a rate 2.5 times higher than indictments for settler violence against Palestinians. Absorb that even the reported incidents are likely a vast undercount, since 58% of the victims of settler violence in incidents independently documented by Israeli NGO Yesh Din in 2023 chose not to report them to the police for fear of harm or retribution. Look at the backstories of the four settlers who have been sanctioned by the U.S. under the new executive order, three of whom have already been convicted or indicted by Israel itself. Even if you think that the U.N. is making up numbers, and that Palestinians are lying to the tens of journalists who have written articles about settler violence over the last year, and that it is only a coincidence that the rise in violence comes under a minister in charge of the police who himself was arrested and convicted multiple times for violence and incitement, it requires a measure of obtuseness or willful blindness not to see that there is a problem.

The fact that there is a problem does not mean that other problems should be ignored. The Tablet piece’s main argument is really that the U.S. should not be devoting any time to what a segment of settlers is doing to Palestinians because there is horrific terrorism against Israelis, which is both an odd conviction that the U.S. cannot walk and chew gum at the same time and a heavy dose of distracting whataboutism. When Itamar Ben Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich embrace the same line of reasoning and ask why the focus isn’t on thousands of Palestinian terrorists, it’s as if they don’t know that Hamas is a U.S.-designated terrorist organization, or that Palestinian terrorist leaders are under U.S. sanctions, or that the U.S. has been militarily supporting Israel to the hilt in its operation in Gaza since October 7, or that the USSC’s primary activities are geared at making sure that Hamas does not gain a stronghold in the West Bank. The fact that Israelis face unrelenting terrorism does not also mean that settler violence is made up or does not matter. These two things live alongside each other simultaneously, and both require attention. Shouting “look over there!” to distract from what is going on over here does not make the thing over here go away.

The USSC is doing critical work to combat violence on both sides—and it absolutely exists on both sides—and Fenzel should be thanked and commended for doing a yeoman’s job of advancing U.S. interests in a brutally difficult environment rather than attacked in a shallow hit piece. But the larger issue is not about Fenzel or the USSC; it is about the fact that the U.S. cannot help Israel to effectively combat terrorism and rout Hamas if a small group of extraordinarily violent Israeli vigilantes in the West Bank do everything they can to set off a third intifada. It is in the U.S.’ clear interests to safeguard
West Bank stability, protect civilians on both sides from harm, and help create conditions for some sort of political resolution between Israelis and Palestinians. Settler violence—the kind documented, acknowledged, and called out by Israeli officials themselves—makes these things harder, if not impossible, and do not be fooled by anyone who tries to distract you into believing otherwise.

Michael Koplow is Israel Policy Forum's Chief Policy Officer, based in Washington, D.C. To contact Michael, please email him at mkoplow@ipforum.org.

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