The West Bank:
The Forgotten Fourth Front



Hamas' October 7 attack on Israel and the ensuing multi-front war initiated a new chapter in both the Israel-Iran and Israeli-Palestinian conflicts. The West Bank, where the IDF has stepped up its operations against terror groups, is central to both.

In parallel to legitimate anti-terror operations, Israel's political leadership has accelerated its multi-pronged effort to erode Palestinian governance and society to the detriment of Israel's own security interests.

Israeli counterterror operations
Since October 7, Palestinians from the West Bank and Jerusalem have carried out over 9,400 terror attacks since October 7, killing 66 Israelis. Over the past year, the IDF has regularly carried out military operations in the heart of the Palestinian cities and refugee camps, particularly in the northern West Bank. In late 2024 and early 2025, the Palestinian Authority Security Forces took the rare step of carrying out a high-intensity operation against Hamas and Islamic Jihad-affiliated militants located in the Jenin refugee camp.

This was followed by an IDF operation in the Jenin, Tulkarem, and Nur al-Shams refugee camps known as Operation Iron Wall. This multi-month campaign saw the IDF establish a permanent presence in the refugee camps. With the goal of dismantling terror infrastructure and easing the movement of troops, the IDF has demolished hundreds of buildings and emptied the camps of their inhabitants, resulting in the displacement of over 40,000 Palestinians. This operation constituted a shift in the IDF's tactical approach to fighting terror in the West Bank. It appears to have been successful in disrupting terror activity in the northern West Bank, but could further undermine the status quo established by Oslo, threaten the legitimacy of the PA and its security forces, and increase the burden of the IDF.

Settler violence
Violent settler attacks against Palestinian civilians were already on the rise prior to October 7, bolstered by political support from high-ranking figures in the Netanyahu government. According to data from the Israeli security establishment published by Haaretz, there were 1,350 documented attacks on both Palestinians and the IDF by settlers from October 7, 2023, until July 17, 2025.

The perpetrators often carry out these attacks as reprisals for Palestinian terrorism or rock-throwing (known as "price tag" attacks), but in many instances, settler violence is unprovoked and carried out with the goal of driving Palestinians off of their land and expanding the footprint of territory held by settlers. Violent settlers have driven more than 1,600 Palestinians from their homes and depopulated at least 38 rural Palestinian communities.

The IDF has been largely ineffective in confronting settler violence. In some cases, IDF soldiers have participated in attacks. Far-right ministers and MKs have also regularly incited against

security officials who speak out against settler violence and the need to confront it. Violent settlers have also carried out attacks against the IDF, increasingly condemned by figures in Israel's government. The rise in such incidents underscores the threat that settler violence poses to Israeli security and public order in the West Bank at large.

Settlement activity
According to Peace Now, 2024 saw the establishment of 53 illegal outposts. The government has also accelerated the process of increasing the number of legal settlements, including by establishing new communities and whitewashing existing illegal outposts. 2025 saw the approval of 18,994 housing units—nearly double the amount approved throughout 2024. The Civil Administration has accelerated the land registration process, declaring 25,510 dunams as state land. This effectively doubles the amount declared as state land since the Oslo Accords and paves the way for more settlement construction.

Creeping de jure West Bank annexation
The Israeli government is taking steps to change the legal status of the West Bank, transitioning it from a temporary military occupation to a formalized system of unequal governance without a formal declaration. In his role as minister in the Defense Ministry, Bezalel Smotrich has leveraged his authority over the new Settlements Administration to expedite settlement approvals and prevent enforcement against unlawful settlement construction. On July 23, the Knesset held a 71-13 vote symbolically endorsing West Bank annexation.

Sanctions against the PA
Israel's government is using legitimate gripes with the PA, including its appeasement of Hamas since October 7 and longstanding policies like the prisoner and martyr payments program, as a pretext for undermining the PA's viability as a counterweight to Hamas and other terror organizations.

The Israeli government has also taken direct action against the PA itself, including by withholding tax revenue transfers. Combined with the canceling of work permits allowing West Bankers to enter Israel, this move put a tremendous financial strain on the already weakened PA. Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich has also threatened to cancel the banking waiver allowing correspondent relations between Israeli and Palestinian banks.

Implications
The West Bank is a unique battlefront because it does not function as a discrete entity separate from Israel, but rather has a porous border with Israeli civilians inside of it, living enmeshed with a much larger Palestinian population. The territory not only presents both conventional security challenges, but also long-term threats posed by gradual annexation and the implementation of Smotrich's decisive plan, which envisions the "defeat" of Palestinians as a national collective and the establishment of an unequal binational state.

The Palestinian population in the West Bank has not demonstrated interest in a large-scale uprising akin to the Second Intifada. But if the economic crisis, settler violence, the deterioration of the PA, and settlement expansion persist, the territory will continue to be fertile ground for efforts by Iran and Hamas to open another full-scale front against Israel. Israel's ongoing counterterror operations in the Palestinian cities may be effective for now, but they are far from an antidote to the problems Israel is creating for itself down the line.



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