

Written evidence submitted by MK Dr. Ofer Cassif (IPC0051)

To:
Foreign Affairs Committee
House of Commons
UK Parliament

Re: Submission for the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict Inquiry

1. I apply to you as a member of the Knesset (Israeli Parliament) who is devoted for promotion of just peace between Israel and Palestine. I wish to thank you for the opportunity to address the UK Parliament, renowned around the world for its strong democratic foundations.
2. I have been suspended from all parliamentary activities due to my comments against war crimes perpetrated in Gaza and my acknowledgment of the legitimacy of genocide charges brought against the Israeli Government before the International Court of Justice. The punishment, lasting from November 2024 to May 2025, is the lengthiest ever imposed on an Israeli lawmaker. Last February, an earlier attempt to completely expel me from the Knesset was only narrowly avoided, even though both the legal counsel for the Knesset and for the government deemed it unlawful. I mention this only to indicate the extreme political persecution and alienation those opposing the war face within Israel.

Introduction

3. Since 2019, I have represented the Democratic Front for Peace and Equality (Hadash) in the Israeli parliament. Hadash is the sole political faction shared by both Jewish and Palestinian citizens of Israel on a platform of national and civil equality. Hadash was also the first political force in Israel that called for the establishment of a sovereign Palestinian state, in a vision of peaceful coexistence, side by side, with the state of Israel.
4. My compatriots and I have struggled relentlessly to achieve that goal for decades. We have played an instrumental role in securing a parliamentary majority for the 1990's *Oslo* reconciliation process and pledge to support future negotiations towards a just peace. Amidst increasing political persecution, we continue to advocate the termination of the illegal occupation of the Palestinian Territories.
5. Over the years, Hadash has been calling the international community, including the government of the UK, to recognize the State of Palestine and fulfill its obligation to accord freedom and liberation for the Palestinian people. We are sure that is also the only path for security, prosperity and stability for Israelis.

6. Since the outbreak of the war, my colleague and I have demanded an immediate end of the bloodshed, the release of all hostages and unlawful detainees, and called time after time for the protection of innocent lives and civilian infrastructure. We have supported every international measure to prevent the ongoing humanitarian calamity, famine and carnage.
7. Specifically, Hadash was the only political party in the Knesset that endorsed the International Criminal Court's decision to issue arrest warrants in its composition for the *Situation in the State of Palestine*. We continue to implore all parties to the Rome Statue, including the government of the UK, to uphold the rule of law and respect the arrest warrants issued by the ICC.
8. Hadash stated that the court's decision clearly indicates that the Gaza war is full of serious war crimes and crimes against humanity, including starvation as method of warfare. I would also like to add that recent occurrences strengthen the risk that an actual genocide is perpetrated in Gaza.
9. Therefore, the utmost necessity is securing a lasting ceasefire, that will include the release of the hostages and the complete abolition of the blockade imposed on Gaza. It will also act as the first step towards much needed path for a just peace.
10. In this submission I wish to shed light on a specific dire issue, the rising level of settlers violence in the Occupied West Bank. I believe an objective analyses of these violent incidents clearly suggests an organizational capacity of engaging hostilities and racial ideological foundation. Ergo, I assert that violent settlers currently operate in the Occupied West Bank as an unlawful para-military or quasi-military force, conducting illicit terror attacks against innocent Palestinians and their property.

Israeli Settlers Terrorism in the Occupied West Bank

11. Israeli, Palestinians and international human rights organizations and defenders documented numerous forms of settlers terrorism in recent years. These include lethal assaults, incursions in public roads, mass invasions to villages, torching of houses and cars, harassments and deprivation of access to lands, uprooting trees and damaging crops.
12. Separate offenses committed by individuals combine to form a systematic pattern of ideological crime designed to dispossess Palestinians of their lands and livelihood. Settlers groups have been using violence to expand the breadth of Israel's takeover of Palestinian territories, sowing fear and terror among Palestinians and disrupting their daily lives.
13. According to the UN, the first half of 2023 witnessed 591 settler attacks, an average of 95 per month or about three per day. This number marked a 39 per cent increase over a similar period in 2022 and the sixth consecutive annual increase. Even the Israeli security establishment's own data indicates rising level of settlers terrorism prior to the outbreak of the war. Leaked information published by journalist of Israeli Army Radio showed a sharp rise in "Jewish terror attacks" in the West Bank for the first half of 2023.¹

14. The situation has been constantly deteriorating ever since. Under the guise of war, settlers' terrorism has peaked immensely and reached inconceivable levels, both in terms of quantity and severity of attacks.²
15. Since 7 October 2023 and as of 5 February 2024, OCHA has recorded 506 Israeli settler attacks against Palestinians, resulting in Palestinian casualties (49 incidents), damage to Palestinian-owned property (399 incidents), or both casualties and damage to property.³ According to B'Tselem, settlers have forced at least 18 Palestinian communities — over 1,000 people — to flee their homes since October. According to OCHA, Since 7 October 2023, settler violence, intimidation and harassment have displaced at least 300 Palestinian households comprising of 1,757 Palestinians, including 855 children, in Bedouin and other herding communities.⁴
16. The Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) recorded in the last quarter of 2023, over 535 violent incidents involved settlers in the West Bank — the highest quarterly total in the area. In nearly half of all settler attacks documented in 2023, Israeli forces were either accompanying or actively supporting the settler perpetrators. ACLED also noted that militarization of settlers lead to formation of de facto “Quasi-Military forces” and that “the lines between settlers and the military are increasingly blurring, and the difference between civilian aggressors and the Israeli state apparatus is fading even further.”⁵
17. In the immediate outbreak of the war, settlements councils have purchased hundreds of assault rifles for civilian security squads. Weaponry was distributed in accordance with the National Security Ministry, Defense Ministry and the Israeli military. On April 2024, the Jewish National Fund has begun to fund equipment of emergency squads in settlements, previously limiting funding for municipalities within Israel proper. Members of settlements emergency squads have increasingly exploited the situation and have engaged in violence against Palestinians with much less restraint. They have been increasingly wearing military uniforms, often times making it difficult to identify the perpetrators of violence
18. Settler violence has been extremely deadly during the olive harvest period, an indication for the nationalistic target of the violence. Since 1 October 2024, OCHA has documented 225 incidents involving settlers directly related to the olive harvest in 82 communities

<https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/east-mediterranean-mena-israel/palestine/246-stemming-israeli-settler-violence> ¹

<https://www.yesh-din.org/en/israeli-settler-violence-against-palestinians-in-the-west-bank-under-the-guise-of-war> ²

<https://www.ochaopt.org/content/hostilities-gaza-strip-and-israel-flash-update-111> ³

<https://www.ochaopt.org/content/humanitarian-situation-update-244-west-bank> ⁴

<https://acleddata.com/2024/06/10/civilians-or-soldiers-settler-violence-in-the-west-bank> ⁵

across the West Bank, the majority of which (171 incidents) resulted in casualties or property damage. In this period, eleven Palestinians were injured by Israeli settlers, 55 by Israeli forces, and more than 2,500 mostly olive trees and saplings burnt, sawed-off or otherwise vandalized, and many crops and harvesting tools stolen.⁶

19. Similar data has been collected by Israeli NGO Yesh Din. During the six weeks between October 1 and November 15, 2024, Yesh Din documented and verified 113 separate incidents of violence, harassment, harvest thwarting or damage to olive trees and crops involving Israeli civilians and soldiers. These incidents took place throughout the entirety of the West Bank, on lands belonging to 51 Palestinian villages, towns and communities.⁷
20. In the following section of this submission, I wish to expand on the Israeli's government failure to prevent and punish violent settlers. I will claim there is no real separation or disagreement between the governments of Israel and the settler movement.

Correspondence with Israeli Law Enforcement Figures

21. As a member of the Knesset, for the past two years, I have addressed the the Legal Counsel of the Government, Adv Gali Bahrav-Miara, who also acts as the Attorney General and head of the criminal justice system. In official correspondence, I implored her to take al necessary steps to put an end to the escalation in settlers violence and terrorism.
22. I first wrote to the AG in May 2023, sending documentation of social networks channels called "News from the Hilltop", associated with the violent settlers forces known as "Hilltop Youth". **Groups admins use the social network to incite and celebrate terror attacks against innocent Palestinians and share the deadly results of their hate crimes.**
23. Thereafter and for nearly two years, I continued to send such documentation that showcase the usage of the platform as a propaganda and coordination tool of the settlers terrorism movement.⁸
24. After the outbreak of the war, I specifically addressed the AG and warned that publication in the group have become more and more violent as **settlers terror campaigns against Palestinian civilians become more frequent and more severe, taking the form of para-military or quasi military forces.**

<https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/occupied-palestinian-territory/humanitarian-situation-update-240-west-bank-enar> ⁶

[/https://www.yesh-din.org/en/summary-of-the-2024-olive-harvest-season](https://www.yesh-din.org/en/summary-of-the-2024-olive-harvest-season) ⁷

Dates of correspondent: 24.5.23, 21.6.23, 25.6.23, 17.8.23, 20.8.23, 7.9.23, 6.10.23, 9.10.23, 29.10.23, 15.5.24, ⁸
13.8.24 and 26.8.24

25. Unfortunately, up until this moment, **no actions have been taken by Israeli authorities and this terror network continue to operate freely.** In all responses by the AG and subordinates in the State's Attorney's office, time after time I am told nothing but an ambiguous statement: "Your correspondence has been forwarded to relevant bodies..." For the avoidance of doubt, it is clarified that these replies do not constitute an expression of a position regarding your request, to the substance of the matter."
26. The fact that the highest legal authority within the justice system has been employing for over two years an avoidance policy towards concrete warning by a member of the Knesset signals the depth of delinquency in which settlers terrorism is dealt in Israel.
27. **My experience clearly indicates that in regards to settlers terrorism, the Israeli justice and law enforcement system show low levels of autonomy and objectivity. It is unable to unwilling to prevent, counter and punish the paramilitary settlers terror forces.**
28. What I have detailed also correlates for the findings of Israeli human rights organizations. Data of Yesh Din, which has been monitoring settlers violence since 2005, indicates that 93.7% of all investigation files regarding settlers violence were closed without an indictment. Even when criminal investigation are open, there is no intention of actually identifying perpetrators. Such sham investigation actually shield perpetrators from justice.⁹

Political Support for Settlers Terrorism

29. The failure of law enforcement agencies in combatting settlers terrorism is heightened by the political environment of justification and acceptance of these terror acts.
30. High ranking Israeli political figures, such as ministers and lawmakers, utilize their political, authoritative and legislative power in order to support violent settlers groups and abate attempts to counter them.
31. The ideological kinship between the government and the settlements movement is presented in official documents. The government's "basic foundations" first article stipulates that "The Jewish people possess the sole and undisputed right over the entire realm of Eretz Israel... The government will promote and develop settlements through the entire regions of Eretz Israel, in the Galilee, the Negev, the Golan and Judea and Samaria".
32. On March 2023, Finance Minister and Minister in the Ministry of Defence, Betzalel Smotrich clearly stated he believes "there is no such thing as Jewish terrorism". In his capacity in the ministry of defence, Smotrich has complete authority over the civil administration, the de facto governing force in the Occupied West Bank.

<https://www.yesh-din.org/en/data-sheet-december-2023-law-enforcement-on-israeli-civilians-in-the-west-bank-9/settler-violence-2005-2023>

33. On November 2024 the Defense Minister announced he will cease to sign administrative detentions order against violent settlers involved in terror activities. Administrative detentions order has been utilized as a last resort mechanism because of the short coming of the ordinary punitive criminal procedures. It has been described as “one of the few tools Israel used to curb settler violence”. It is also a clear discriminatory policy, given that the administrative detention continue to be signed against thousands of Palestinians from the West Bank and a handful of Arab citizens of Israel.
34. On December 2024, the Department for Internal Police Investigation opened a criminal investigation against the commander of “Judea & Samaria District” of Israel Police for neglecting his duties to counter settlers terrorism. It was reported the police commander carried out explicit policy by the National Security Minister to avoid criminal investigations against settlers suspected in violent activities.
35. The combination of the two, political compliance and justice system insouciant, means that the settlers movement is free to exercise its vow to subjugate, deport and demolish Palestinians using force and violence without any limitation or repercussion.

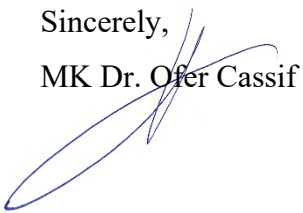
Concurrent Actions by the UK and Suggestions

36. On February 2024, the previous British government has announced sanctions against “extremist Israeli settlers who have violently attacked Palestinians in the West Bank”. These sanctions imposed financial and travel restrictions on four individuals: Moshe Sharvit, Yinon Levi, Zvi Bar Yosef and Ely Freedman.
37. Although the announcement itself indicated organizational capacity of violence incidents, linked to the establishment and operations of illegal outposts, the sanctioned remained exclusively in the individual level.
38. Individual sanctions, specifically those who target low level personal, have limited effect. For instance, Bar Yosef — sanctioned by the UK — has been in possession of an M16 rifle, allocated from the Israeli military as he is a member of the Neveh Tzuf’s emergency squad.¹⁰
39. On October 2024, the current British government has announced new financial sanctions in response to continued escalation in settlers violence. These sanctioned targeted three illegal outposts and four non governmental organizations “that have supported, incited and promoted violence against Palestinian communities in the West Bank”: Tirzah Valley Farm Outpost, Meitarim Outpost, and Shuvi Eretz Outpost, Od Yosef Chai Yeshiva, Hashomer Yosh, Torat Lechima and Amana.

40. As a member of the Constitution, Law and Justice Committee of the Knesset, I can assure you first hand that these organizational sanctions deeply frighten the settlements movement. It is imperative that the sanction regime on the settlement movement will deepen and broaden, circling more and more organizations and high ranking individuals.
41. Specifically, I believe the utmost necessity is to include settlements municipalities in future sanctions, as they are the driving force behind violent attempts to take control of more Palestinians territories; Moreover, personal sanctions against government ministers that abate counter terrorist measures against violent settlers groups are essential.
42. On July 2024 The International Court of Justice have found in its advisory opinion on the “Legal Consequences arising from the Policies and Practices of Israel in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem“ that “Israel’s settlement policy has given rise to violence by settlers and security forces against Palestinians” and found “Israel’s systematic failure to prevent or to punish attacks by settlers against the life or bodily integrity of Palestinians... inconsistent with its obligations”.¹¹
43. I have detailed how the Israeli government utilize these attacks to deepen the occupation of Palestinian lands and relinquish all hope for peace, and hence, why this phenomenon should be characterized as state sponsored terrorism. The government of the UK should view terror incidents by settlers as the natural outcome of the policy of the Israeli government, and act accordingly.
44. I hope you will find this submission useful and insightful. As the committee noted in its decision to launch this inquiry, Tens of thousands of innocent civilians have already been lost in Palestine, Israel and other countries of the regions. Urgent international action to counter the horrors of settlers terrorism is acutely needed to prevent further escalation and expansion of the bloodshed.
45. I am positive the UK could have a leading role in bringing forward peace and justice. I would be willing and honored to assist in any capacity deemed favorable by the Foreign Affairs Committee, including in the form of an oral evidence.

Sincerely,

MK Dr. Ofer Cassif



31st December 2024