The myth of escalating settler violence

written by David M. Weinberg | 09.12.2023

Everybody, from US President Joe Biden to B'Tselem, is propagating the myth that West Bank settlers are exploiting the war against Hamas to invade private lands and attack Palestinians in the West Bank at alarming, never-seen-before levels of violence.

When US Vice President Kamala Harris spoke with President Isaac Herzog amid Israel's difficult war against Hamas, she found it necessary to scold him about "holding extremist settlers accountable for violent acts."

The US State Department spokesman this week denounced "unprecedented levels of violence by Israeli extremist settlers targeting Palestinians and their property, displacing entire communities," no less.

The situation is supposedly so bad, so spiraling-out-of-control, that the US this week announced visa bans on "extremist settlers." Belgium has now done so too.

Except that it is not true. There is no escalating or unprecedented wave of settler violence in Judea and Samaria under cover of the war in Gaza. The frenzied focus on "settler terrorism," by the highest officials in Washington, is based on fake news.

And why is such fake news being bandied about?

Apparently, this is to "balance" the crimes of Hamas, a way for wishy-washy friends of Israel or extreme left-wing Israelis to distance themselves from Israeli bad guys (settlers) while being forced, alas, to also condemn Palestinian bad guys (Hamas).

In other words, this is an attempt to uphold some degree of perverse moral equivalence between Israelis and Palestinians; to express equivalent condemnation of "all sides" for the proverbial "cycle of violence" that professional Mideast peace processors and hackneyed journalists like to babble about; for "fair-minded" international observers to make it clear that they are not, G-d forbid, fully on Israel's side – even at a time when Hamas and Palestinian Islamic

Jihad have committed the most atrocious crimes.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres and UN Middle East envoy Tor Wennesland are among the worst such offenders. As is their usual rotten wont, they regularly condemn, and this week too, the "continuing cycle of violence" in Judea and Samaria – as if Israelis and Palestinians each were cavalierly engaging in murder just for fun or out of comparable burning hatred.

As if this sets an exculpating background for Hamas's genocidal rampage of October 7 and its ongoing war crimes, including the holding of civilians as hostages.

TO GET PAST the fog of war, lies, and misinformation I decided to investigate this matter by going straight to the source. I submitted a formal request for information to the Israel Security Agency (Shin Bet), which is the government arm responsible for tracking and countering violence in Judea and Samaria.

From the detailed and precise statistics I received, it is crystal clear that there has not been a significant increase in right-wing Israeli-Jewish violence against Palestinian Arabs in Judea and Samaria since the beginning of the current Gaza war compared to the period of January-July 2023. There certainly has been no uptick or "surge" in settler violence in October-November as compared to the same period in 2022.

(There was a noticeable decrease in such activity in August and September; the reason for this is not explained) Overall, the level of friction/violence in 2023 is about the same as that of 2022, totaling about 1,000 incidences of violence of all types over the course of the full year.

"Violence" in this context means many different things, from verbal altercations and rock throwing (what the ISA calls "frictions" or "harassment"), to spray-painting of anti-Arab slogans and other undercover vandalism including agricultural vandalism ("price tag activities"), to firebombing of homes or mosques (which are classified as outright "terrorist strikes").

In fact, the more serious type of incidents dropped by 50% as compared to last year (although the handful of incidents that did take place this year were of a more violent nature), and there were zero incidents of "terrorist strikes" over the past 60 days. There is no evidence whatsoever of the wild B'Tselem accusation

that “600 Palestinians from 13 communities were forced to abandon their homes” due to fear of settler attacks.

B’Tselem, Yesh Din, the Palestinian Authority Health Ministry, and the fiercely anti-Israel UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), also have fed the international media with blatantly false statistics that allege more than 180 Palestinians have been killed by “Israeli forces and settlers” this year, making it sound, once again, as more innocent Palestinian civilians targeted by “settler violence.”

In fact, 99.9% of these deaths are Palestinian terrorists who were eliminated by the IDF in counter-terror operations against Hamas and Fatah hideouts and weapons factories in Jenin, Nablus, Hebron and elsewhere in the West Bank.

These IDF counter-terror operations are the only thing that prevents the genocidal attacks of October 7 from repeating themselves in central Israel.

But that does not stop the PA or OCHA from pumping out more false allegations of “settler violence.”

It is unfortunately true that altercations and aggressions by settlers in 2022 (again, not 2023) rose sharply over that in 2020 and 2021. Perhaps this is because Jewish residents of Judea and Samaria, in fact all citizens of Israel, were subject to a wild wave of murderous Palestinian terrorist attacks in 2022.

In case officials in Washington and elsewhere have forgotten, here is a reminder. In 2022, there were more than 5,000 Palestinian terror attacks against Israeli Jews, including car-ramming, shooting, stabbing, and bombing of innocent men, women, and children. These attacks included over 500 Molotov cocktail attacks (firebombs), leading to the injury of more than 150 Israelis. There was a 210% rise in rock throwing incidents in 2021 compared to 2020, and a 156% rise in bomb throwing incidents in 2021 over 2020.

And in spring-summer 2023, Palestinian terrorists slaughtered close to 40 Israelis in and beyond the Green Line, with more than 3,640 recorded acts of Palestinian and Arab terror throughout Israel, including 2,118 cases of rock-throwing, 799 fire-bombings, 18 attempted stabbings, and six vehicular assaults.

So, is there Jewish violence in Judea and Samaria? Yes. This is unacceptable, and

I hold no wellsprings of sympathy for the hilltop wild men involved. Israel must aggressively combat this lawlessness, while acting even more aggressively against exponentially greater and more deadly Palestinian terrorism.

But has there been an enormous, out-of-control surge in settler violence recently? No.

And is there a culture of Jewish violence in settler communities? Also no. In fact, attacks on Palestinian property and individuals committed by a few extremists at the fringes of a half-million-person strong and overwhelmingly peaceful community of Israelis who live over the Green Line calculates to a level of violence that is lower than the level of violence (by Israelis against Israelis) that afflicts greater Tel Aviv.

And without meaning to diminish the ugliness of extremist Israeli attacks on Palestinians, violence by some settlers also pales in comparison to the "regular" 5,000 Palestinian stone-throwing, bomb, and shooting attacks a year aimed at killing Israeli civilians.

And of course, this completely pales in comparison to the 1,200 Israelis slaughtered by Hamas on October 7 or the reign of terror inflicted on all Israelis by the more than 10,500 rockets and missiles fired by Hamas into Israeli civilian population centers over the past seven weeks.

So, at a time when Israel is reeling from the monstrous October 7 Hamas massacre and rightfully expects global support for its war effort against Hamas, it is surreal that some nauseatingly feel the need to conjure-up a false moral counterweight to Hamas violence in the form of non-existent "surging settler violence."

Essentially, the straw man of "settler violence" is an effort to limit sympathy for Israel and to backhandedly excuse Hamas atrocities. The Harvard and MIT presidents might superciliously say they are "putting the violence of all sides into context." How noxious.

To the Biden administration I say: Stop throwing "settler violence" in Israel's face as it fights for its very life against the genocidal Hamas. At best, this is a red herring issue. At worst, it is an ugly attempt to discredit the righteousness of Israel's war effort.

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