



## The Situation of and Assistance to Palestinian Women

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### The Current Situation

Every person involved with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has seen tragedy and the core of the aftermath of the conflict. Women have always been painted in a weaker light and often face mistreatment; when a devastating conflict is added to it, women get the short end of the stick.

The problems of Palestinian women cannot be separated from the larger problems affecting all Palestinians. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is one of the most grueling problems facing the international community. The conflict is rooted in events of the early 20th Century, after the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, and the consequences of the 1967 war. Israel suddenly controlled much of Palestinian territory and began to colonize it with settlements. The latter are complete communities, permanent in everything except international law and the determination of the Palestinian people to remove them from what they see as their national territory.

The complex web of cultural, political, territorial, and religious influences and differences made this issue rise and rise again. Although all parties are affected, there have been serious changes to Palestinian women's rights; hundreds of thousands of women were displaced from their homes and banished. Within this conflict, women face physical violence and issues, psychological damage and conflicts, educational discrimination, economic insecurity, and sexual violence simply due to their sex and gender.

A prime example that had sparked the rise for change and serious concerns for international humanitarian and human rights was renewed

fighting in Gaza and Southern Israel. With eight days of fighting in May 2021, according to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, there were 174 Palestinians killed in Gaze, including 101 civilians, and 239 Israeli citizens injured. In the West Bank, there was an increase of injured citizens up to 4,156 being injured and this continued to take many more lives of citizens. For Palestinian women, the fighting was another example of degradation and violence.

### What Palestinian Women Face

Facing this crisis, Palestinian women have suffered a multitude of effects, on the physical level, psychosocial level, and overall mental level.

According to UN Women, a UN agency, some of the most pressing issues related to gender equality and women's empowerment include:

- Unequal distribution of power and resources between men and women and discriminatory legal systems against women's rights to property;
- Social norms and behaviors that propel violence against women, reinforcing superiority of men over women, degrading women's status and roles;
- Outdated and discriminatory laws that preclude women's access to justice, by reinforcing stereotypical images and roles of men and women and denying women's right to achieve their rights and live in dignity and free from violence;
- Israeli occupation which causes fragmentation of land and lack of the legal jurisdiction by the State of



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Palestine over East Jerusalem, which prevents the government from providing its services to women and the population as a whole;

- Underrepresentation of women in leadership, political participation, and peace-making process;
- Low level of women's awareness of their rights and of available services as well as limited access to services;
- Protracted protection and humanitarian crisis due to prolonged occupation by Israel.<sup>1</sup>

First, the surrounding environments and living conditions are often barren and unsustainable for average living. Women with higher sociocultural influences have the opportunity to have more kept living conditions, but this is very hard to gain and have the access to do. An example of this is the physical restrictions that were placed on low sociocultural status men and women, impeding vulnerable areas. Access to water that is properly sanitized is in a very critical state for all people, especially women. There are very few water resources that are drinkable and suitable for living purposes, even more so after the violence in Gaza.

### Food Insecurity

The United Nations defines food security as: “all people, at all times, have physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food that meets their food preferences and dietary needs for an active and healthy life.” Food security has always been a challenge that has presided over Palestine and its citizens



Water Crisis, photography by Muna Dajani

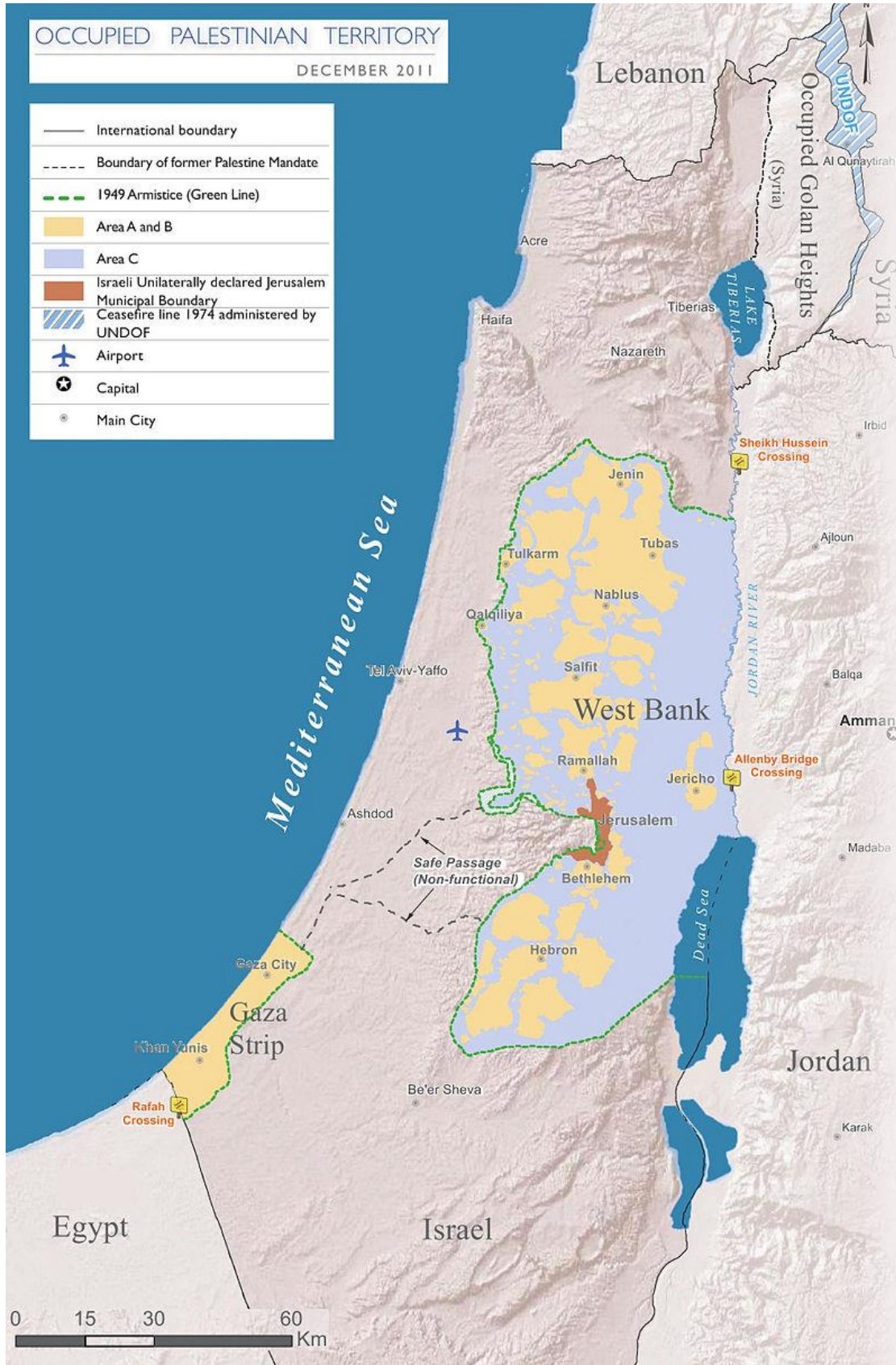
In Palestinian Gaza, food insecurity levels have seen a massive increase, reaching 57%. On the slim side of positives, in households where it is a female-lead or female-dominant, it is seen that there is a higher level of assistance; in 2012, it was recorded that female-led households received an average of \$131 dollars to aid in this assistance while the average male-led figure was \$78 dollars. However, even with this assistance, it is shown that women in Palestine are more likely to face food insecurity issues.

Food insecurity is sparked by more than just the sex of the people involved, but it is also seen due to poverty, unemployment, farmland loss to Israel, and natural calamities. Looking at farmland loss to Israel, this situation has led to many farmers losing the property of their land that was used to grow food for survival. Due to former President Trump's administration change in regard to US aid, international aid for agriculture aid is now sitting at 0.7% of aid in Palestine. This creates a domino effect and impacts imports and exports, which then increases food insecurity and decreases economic revenue.

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<sup>1</sup> 'State of Palestine', *UN Women*, n.d., <https://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/countries/palestine>

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### Economics

With the political uncertainty and other physical contributions that plague Palestine, economics are declining. Looking at the GDP of Palestine, it is seen that there has been a decline from 9 percent, ranging over the years 2008 to 2011, to 5.9 percent in 2012. By the first half of 2013, the GDP had dropped to 1.9 percent. A large part of why Palestine's GDP is dropping is restrictions on movement and access to resources. Limited access means that there are areas where Palestinians are forbidden to enter such as sections of the West Bank and blockades on the Gaza Strip (link). This creates a harsh impact on Palestinian women and their access to socioeconomic rights such as proper living conditions as explained previously. This is a gender-specific constraint that is controlling and exacerbating their economic marginalization.

An example of this is within the agricultural industry; according to the National Cross-Sectoral Gender Strategy per 2014, women have a prominent role in this field, but with economic restrictions, a mere 5 percent of women can actually own agricultural land and property.

### Action by the United Nations

There are two sides to the role of UN addressing the problems of women in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT, known more commonly in the United States as Gaza and the

West Bank). UN agencies, working under mandates from the General Assembly and ECOSOC, work on specific aid and development programs.

Assistance to Palestinian refugees, including Palestinians living in Jordan, Lebanon and elsewhere, is primarily organized by *The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East* (UNRWA), a relief and human development agency. Also active is the *UN World Food Programme* (WFP), which stresses elevating gender equality, especially in its long-term projects.<sup>2</sup> Both agencies can play a major role implementing future ECOSOC mandates. But specific donor countries may make this difficult. The United States refuses to work with UNWA, especially under Republican administration. Other donors, such as Gulf Arab States, prefer to work separately.<sup>3</sup>

The other side of UN action comes from resolution agreed by its Member States. The most relevant include passage of the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women* (CEDAW) in 2014 without reservations, and United Nations Security Council resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security for 2017-2019, and specific resolutions.<sup>4</sup>

These agreements and resolutions established principles that most Member States support. But they have not led to rapid action. Funding remains specially troublesome, with traditional sponsors such as Gulf Arab States preoccupied

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<sup>2</sup> 'WFP and UN Women join forces to foster gender equality and women's empowerment in Palestine', *World Food Programme*, 8 February 2021, <https://www.wfp.org/news/wfp-and-un-women-join-forces-foster-gender-equality-and-womens-empowerment-palestine>

<sup>3</sup> A 'UN – Aid for Palestinian refugees in the Middle East (UNRWA) - Q&A - Excerpts from

the daily press briefing', *France Diplomacy*, 17 January 2018, <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/french-foreign-policy/united-nations/news-and-events/news/events-2018/article/un-aid-for-palestinian-refugees-in-the-middle-east-unrwa-q-a-excerpts-from-the>

<sup>4</sup> UN Women, *op. cit.*



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with other issues such as the war in Yemen, continuing operations against Islamic States, and strategic balancing against Iran.

The most reliable funder is the European Union and many of its 27 Member States, but even they have become more circumspect in recent years, insisting on careful oversight of all initiatives to reduce corrupt practices and use of funding for political purposes. Most UN Member States prioritize the problems facing the Palestinian people in and of itself. A few others, notably the United States, view the issue. Primarily in terms of relations with Israel. This makes them less likely to support assistance to Palestinians.<sup>5</sup>

### Some themes for further UN action

UN initiatives are organized through UN Women, in collaboration with the Government of the State of Palestine, civil society, development partners, UN sister agencies, and the private sector, promotes gender equality and women's empowerment in the State of Palestine.<sup>6</sup> These efforts stress three strategic impact areas:

1. Women have income security, decent work and economic autonomy

2. Women and girls live a life free of violence
3. Women lead, participate in and benefit from peace and security, humanitarian action and recovery efforts in Palestine

A major issue for the ECOSOC is the role of the Palestinian Government in the implementation of UN mandates and programs. Most UN Member States seek above all to support the Palestinian Government, and prefer to give it complete authority over all matters. Others, many of them important foreign donors, want implementation by a neutral body, directly under their authority. These differences can lead to great tensions.

There are many specific issues to be tackled: advancing social, economic and political rights and opportunities for women and girls, placing special focus on the most marginalized and furthest left behind groups such as Bedouin women, women with disabilities, young women, women survivors of violence, elderly women and women living under the blockade in the Gaza Strip.

Regardless of the specific goals from improving the rights and conditions of Palestinian women, Member States will have solve their own disputes over priorities, the role of the Palestinian Government, and the endless problems of funding.

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<sup>5</sup> 'UN – Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) – Q&A – Excerpt from the daily press briefing', *France Diplomacy*, 31 July 2019, <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/french-foreign-policy/united-nations/news-and->

[events/news/news-2019/article/un-economic-and-social-council-ecosoc-q-a-excerpt-from-the-daily-press-briefing](https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/french-foreign-policy/united-nations/news-and-events/news/news-2019/article/un-economic-and-social-council-ecosoc-q-a-excerpt-from-the-daily-press-briefing)

<sup>6</sup> UN Women, *op. cit.*

## Background articles

**Esat Firat, 'Palestinian women lead resistance against Israeli occupation', *Anadolu Agency*, 16 May 2021**



Palestinian women are leading the resistance against Israel's forced migration and threats of displacement in the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood of occupied East Jerusalem.

While the tension that started with Israel's attacks in East Jerusalem is rising, the historic Sheikh Jarrah is at the center of the events.

Sheikh Jerrah is an area where diplomatic representations and institutions are located near the region where Palestinians live in East Jerusalem, and has also been associated with Jewish settlers' attacks on Palestinians living in the region.

In the neighborhood, 27 Palestinian families face pressure to evacuate their homes in favor of Jewish settlers and the threat of forced eviction due to a ruling by Israeli authorities.

Palestinians have long held demonstrations at Sheikh Jarrah to support families threatened with forced eviction.

Despite attacks by Israeli police and Jewish settlers, Palestinians continue their peaceful demonstration.

Many Palestinian women also support the demonstrations, while the Israeli police use disproportionate force against the demonstrators.

Anadolu Agency spoke to Palestinian women who were detained by Israeli police.

Activist Meryem Afifi, who was detained last week in a demonstration in Sheikh Jarrah, said she was beaten while detained by the Israeli police.

Afifi, who is also a musician, was released after two days in detention.



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"If we, women, don't resist this occupation and don't struggle to stay in this land, who will do it?," says Palestinian activist Meryem Afifi

A photo of her while being taken into custody by Israeli police was widely used by international media outlets and social media.

"Many people said I was smiling for the cameras," she said. "Of course, I wasn't laughing at the cameras, but with my other friends who were demonstrating in the field."

Yes, even though it was a time of detention, I was right and I had the right. The rightful person also smiles and is not afraid."

According to Afifi, resistance to the occupation cannot be put only on the shoulders of men and children. "If we women do not resist this occupation, if we do not demand our rights, if we do not struggle to stay in this land, who will do this?" she asked

### Zena Al Tahhan, 'Palestine: Femicide highlights need for domestic violence law', *Al Jazeera*, 29 November 2021

*The killing of a 30-year-old mother in occupied Ramallah by her husband has caused an uproar among Palestinians.*



Palestinian women hold a banner that reads: 'Palestinian Woman's General Union, we need a law to protect us and to protect the Palestinian family,' during a rally in front of the PM's office, in Ramallah in 2019 [Nasser Nasser/AP Photo]

**Ramallah, occupied West Bank** – In the early hours of November 22, Sabreen Yasser Khweira, a 30-year-old mother of four, was allegedly stabbed to death by her husband in a small Palestinian village on the outskirts of Ramallah.

Her husband, Amer Rabee, also attacked his own mother, 75, who suffered injuries and was transferred to the nearest hospital in Ramallah. She is now in stable condition.

Rabee fled the scene but was arrested later that morning, while Khweira's body was transferred for forensic medical examination after it was found by Palestinian Authority (PA) police in her home in the village of Kufr Ni'ma.

The Khweira family are calling on authorities to execute Rabee for the gruesome murder – a demand backed by Rabee's family.

The family says that Rabee had been violent to Khweira throughout their 12-year marriage and that she had left him multiple times.

Jumaa Tayeh, Khweira's uncle and the family's elected media spokesperson, told Al Jazeera Rabee spent a month in prison earlier this year after Khweira filed a complaint with the police for an incident in which he beat her with cables.

"She was severely bruised – she had marks all over her body. I was with her when we filed a complaint to the police's Family Protection Units. There were





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several court hearings, and he spent a month [in prison] before he was released,” Tayeh said.

Al Jazeera reached out to the media officer for the PA’s Public Prosecution regarding pre-existing domestic violence cases filed by Khweira but was told that this information could not be disclosed at this stage due to the ongoing investigation.

Tayeh said Rabee had been released five days before the murder, after spending 40 days in jail for a drug-related case. “She spent one night with him after his release, and then he started threatening to hurt her, so she went back to her father’s house,” her uncle said.

“The night she was killed, he had threatened to hurt her 11-year-old son who was at his grandmother’s house next door, so she would come home. When she returned, he killed her.”

Khweira’s murder came as the world prepared to mark the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women on November 25 and launched a 16-day global campaign demanding an end to gender-based violence (GBV), including in Palestine where awareness activities are being held.

The killing has caused an uproar among Palestinians about the persistence of domestic violence and patriarchal norms in Palestinian society.

### **Demands to adopt the Family Protection Law**

Khweira is the 26th Palestinian woman to be killed in a case of femicide so far in 2021 in the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip, the Ramallah-based Women’s Centre for Legal Aid and Counselling (WCLAC) told Al Jazeera. At least 15 other Palestinian women have been killed inside Israel.

Women’s civil society groups have long condemned the absence of a Palestinian law to protect women from domestic violence.

The Ramallah-based Union of Palestinian Women’s Committees, which Israel recently designated among the six civil society institutions a “terror organisation”, condemned the killing.

“At a time when Palestinian women face the crimes of the Zionist occupation, including killings, arrests, settlements, wars, and destruction of homes, and its decisions to designate institutions defending women’s rights as ‘terrorist organizations’, another hand has touched a Palestinian woman, in a horrific stabbing crime,” the union said in a statement.

The union called for the rapid adoption of a much-delayed domestic violence law, known as the Family Protection Law, “in light of the increase in murders, violence and all kinds of violations against women and children”.

A draft of the domestic violence law has been stalled since at least 2016, though it was written more than a decade ago.

“Violence occurs because we don’t have deterrence laws or protection laws. There need to be laws to protect these women from violence and these laws have to deter those who carry out violence,” Amal Abu Srour, director of programmes at WCLAC, told Al Jazeera.

“The reason is that, until now, we do not have the political will to issue them. At a time when we’re noticing there are many laws being passed with presidential decree, such as the electronic crimes law or the laws that are related to journalism and expression, restricting freedom of expression. What should be a priority is issuing laws that are related to social rights,” said Abu Srour.





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### **‘Palestine Refugee Women Learn to Protect their Families Thanks to Emergency Preparedness Training’, UNRWA, 28 January 2022**

"We are exposed to attacks by settlers and the (Israeli) occupation forces almost every day. Even if we call an ambulance, it may be delayed due to the Israeli checkpoints and sometimes it may not arrive at all." Bara'a Matariyyeh, is one of 33 women from the Wadi al-Hussein neighbourhood in the southern West Bank city of Hebron in the area known as H2<sup>[1]</sup> who showed up to a course in Emergency Preparedness. Here, they learned how to put out fires and the basics of First Aid in order to protect their families when they are on their own.

There are 10 Palestinian refugee families registered with UNRWA living in Wadi al-Hussein, including Bara'a's family. The area has been subject to repeated attacks by settlers and the harassment rose considerably during the conflict in Gaza in May 2021. Access to services is limited here, including emergency services, leaving the community extremely vulnerable to emergencies related to armed conflict.

As Bara'a can attest to, the threat is very real: "A while ago, some of the homes in our neighbourhood caught fire [due to settler violence]. It was a big fire. They called the fire department, but they were delayed due to the checkpoints. If we had taken this course before, we would have known how to deal with this problem. Now we know how to deal with fires."

Under the umbrella of Protection of Palestine Refugees Victims of Armed Conflict and Forced Displacement project - co-funded by EU Humanitarian Aid and the UNRWA Emergency Flash Appeal for the occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT) - UNRWA provides a host of services for families and individuals impacted by protection threats. The Emergency Preparedness training for the Wadi al-Hussein community which Bara'a and her neighbours attended is part of a series of similar

trainings that were carried out between October and December 2021 in partnership with the Palestinian Authority's Civil Defense in communities facing life-threatening emergencies throughout the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, mainly as a result of settler violence.

The women were trained on proper handling of gas cylinders, fire-safety (especially in the kitchen) and basic first aid instruction, including CPR, treatment of burns and stabilization of fractures. In addition to the training, all households also received First Aid Kits and a fire extinguisher as part of the programme.

Thanks to the course, Bara'a feels empowered to deal with any eventuality that occurs in her neighbourhood as a result of settler violence: "If we are suddenly exposed to any event, we have learned how to deal with first aid and firefighting. The Civil Defense will certainly be delayed due to checkpoints, so now we learned how to deal with it [ourselves]." She adds, "Even though the first aid training was basic, it is helpful as we face so many attacks by settler and the (Israeli) army on an almost daily basis."

In a report released by the United Nations Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) in early November of last year, already in the first 10 months of 2021, there have been 410 attacks by settlers against Palestinians (302 against property and 108 against individuals). As of 10 November 2021, four Palestinians were killed by settlers. In 2020, there was a total of 358 recorded attacks. In 2019, there were 335 such attacks.<sup>[2]</sup> As mentioned in the report, these settler attacks are primarily directed against rural Palestinian families living on small farms or in villages and towns in the occupied West Bank located in close proximity to Israeli settlements, like the Wadi al-Hussein neighbourhood.

[1] Hebron is divided between Palestinian Authority-controlled H1, home to 200,000 Palestinians, and Israeli-controlled H2, which includes expanding Israeli settlements compounds, including Kiryat Arba, and some 33,000 Palestinians.



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[2] "UN experts alarmed by rise in settler violence in occupied Palestinian territory", 10 November 2021, United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner.

(<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=27792&LangID=E>)