



The devastating harms of Israel's settlements and the UK's obligation to help dismantle them

Legal context

In July 2024, the [International Court of Justice \(ICJ\) Advisory Opinion](#) (AO) reaffirmed the illegality of Israel's occupation of Palestinian territory. The court ruled, among other things, that: 1) Israel's settlements must be dismantled; 2) the illegal occupation be brought to an end as swiftly as possible; and 3) that the UK and [other states have a grave and urgent obligation](#) not to assist in maintaining the illegal situation of occupation. The AO and the subsequent [implementing resolution by the UN General Assembly](#) stipulate an obligation to abstain "from entering into economic or trade dealings with Israel concerning the Occupied Palestinian Territory or parts thereof which may entrench its unlawful presence in the territory". This briefing summarises the *devastating harm and human rights violations* arising from the ongoing presence in the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt) of settlements, settlers, and the policies and militarised infrastructure which support them.

Displacement and division

International Humanitarian Law (IHL) prohibits an occupying power from the forcible transfer of the population in land they occupy, or from transferring its own population into the territory it occupies. At least [700,000 Israeli settlers](#) have transferred into the oPt since 1967, with settlements now controlling around [40% of the territory](#) of the West Bank. In so doing, hundreds of thousands of Palestinians have been [systematically forced from their homes and lands](#) by Israel's armed forces and settlers, and a range of discriminatory policies. Frequent house demolitions, discriminatory denial of planning permission, movement restrictions, punitive residency revocations, land confiscation, violence and harassment by settlers and soldiers and other abuses amount to a [coercive environment](#) for Palestinians which makes their lives untenable and forces them to leave.

Israel has imposed hundreds of physical barriers and checkpoints across the West Bank, some 900 as per February 2025, designed to [restrict Palestinians' freedom of movement and fragment the West Bank](#) into isolated areas and to separate communities and families from one another. The largest single barrier is the [712km-long 'Separation Wall'](#), 85% of which is constructed upon illegally occupied land, and which was already deemed 'contrary to international law' in a [2004 ICJ Advisory Opinion](#). These barriers create widespread human rights violations and harm for Palestinians, including their forcible displacement, violations of the rights to [health](#), water, education and housing, and constitute a breach of two severe forms of racial discrimination [according to the ICJ](#): racial segregation and apartheid.

Theft and destruction of Palestinian natural resources

Israel has, states [Amnesty International](#), "*appropriated the vast majority of Palestinians' natural resources in the OPT for the economic benefit of Jewish citizens in Israel and in the illegal settlements*". This includes extracting millions of gallons of [water](#) from under the West Bank for use by settlements and within Israel, while Palestinians are deprived of [access to their own water supply](#). The appropriation of natural resources extends, likewise, to mines and quarries extracting Palestinian [mineral resources](#) and [stone](#), including for settlement construction materials. Settlers have also uprooted [over 800,000 olive trees](#) and burnt swathes of agricultural land, while rivers and wildlife in Palestinian communities are toxified by 19 million cubic metres of [settlement-produced wastewater](#) each year. Not only are olive trees destroyed, but they are replaced with [monoculture tree plantations](#), introducing non-native pine trees that destroy biodiversity and increase the risk of forest fires. According to estimates by the [World Bank](#), Palestinians are denied many billions of dollars of revenue yearly through Israel's misappropriation of the West Bank's natural resources.

Violent attacks by settlers, the military, and police

Accompanied by Israeli military and police, violent attacks by settlers occur at a rate of [at least seven per day](#). A West Bank Palestinian child is killed every two days by a settler or Israeli soldier, Defence for Children International – Palestine ([DCIP](#)) has documented. Attacks occur [throughout the West Bank](#), with among the most

at risk Palestinian communities being those in the South Hebron Hills, near Nablus and Ramallah, and the Jordan Valley. At times, groups of hundreds or more settlers have attacked villages such as al-[Mughayyir, Turmusaya and Huwara](#). [UN OCHA has reported](#) that settler attacks were a driving force behind the displacement of 1,762 Palestinians between October to December 2023 to December 2024. The Israeli human rights organisation [B'Tselem](#) documented that since October 2023, about 21 Palestinian communities have been driven out of various areas in the West Bank by settlers – and that “*Settler violence is state violence. The Israeli apartheid regime and its representatives actively aid and abet these attacks as part of a strategy to cement the takeover of Palestinian land.*” Occupying Israeli soldiers regularly accompany settlers during attacks on Palestinians, while also carrying out a wide-range of lethal attacks themselves. This includes large-scale military incursions and operations, such as that ongoing in the northern West Bank refugee camps Jenin, Tulkarm, Nur Shams and al-Fara’a. The operation, the largest in the West Bank since 2002, has displaced [more than 40,000 Palestinians](#), killing dozens, arresting hundreds, and destroying critical civilian infrastructure.

Impact on children

Restrictions imposed by Israel have drastically cut West Bank movement by 85%, and [education is suffering an unprecedented crisis](#). On average, school facilities are open only two days a week, with many students unable to attend altogether due to increased time, costs, and risks associated with travelling through Israeli military positions and checkpoints and with [attacks against schoolchildren by settlers](#). The overwhelming majority of arrests in the West Bank occur within a few kilometers of a settlement or a road used by settlers. Children are particularly affected. Hundreds of Palestinian children are detained each year by Israel - more than 12,000 in total since 2020. The [most cited reasons](#) for subjecting children to the traumatic and illegal experience of arrest and detention is for allegations as minor as alleged stone-throwing or gathering in groups of 10 or more. Within Israeli military detention, these children are subjected to severe rights violations. According to research by [Save the Children](#), 86% of children report being beaten in Israeli detention, 69% strip-searched and 42% injured at the point of arrest, including gunshot wounds and broken bones. Children are also subjected to [sexual assault](#) and threats of rape. Systematically unfair trials find children [guilty in over 99%](#) of cases.

The UK’s failure to act

The UK government has long recognised the illegality of Israel’s settlements but taken no meaningful actions to help bring them to an end. The UK has [sanctioned four Israeli settlers](#) as well as [seven settlement entities](#) but left untouched the government infrastructure and ministers who promote, sustain and expand settlements, as well as 700,000 other settlers. Contrary to its obligations under international law, the UK has in effect condoned Israel’s occupation and settlements. By continuing to permit trade with and investment in settlements, to sell arms and materials crucial for the occupation, and to fail to sanction those responsible for illegal acts, the UK is likely violating its obligation not to “*render aid or assistance in maintaining the situation created by Israel’s illegal presence in the Occupied Palestinian Territory*”.

Recommendations

To help bring the illegal and harmful occupation to a swift end in line with international law, the UK government must: Publicly state that settlements are illegal and must be dismantled; Suspend its existing trade agreement with Israel and the current negotiations over a free trade agreement (as stated in a [joint letter](#) to the UK government in September 2024); Prohibit trade with and [investment in](#) settlement businesses as well as sectors of Israel’s economy which may entrench the illegal occupation.

This briefing was sent as a joint letter to the UK Government on 24 March 2025.

Signatories

War on Want

International Centre of Justice for Palestinians (ICJP)

Global Legal Action Network (GLAN)

Campaign Against Arms Trade (CAAT)

Global Justice Now (GJN)