

Experts Explain: How Arson Became a Tool of Systematic Displacement





With every new incident in which settlers set fire to a Palestinian home, the haunting memory of the 2015 arson attack that killed the Dawabsheh family in the village of Duma, near Nablus, resurfaces. As settler violence escalates across the West Bank, fears grow of similar tragedies recurring.

These repeated attacks are not isolated acts of individual violence but appear to be part of a deliberate strategy aimed at terrorizing Palestinian residents and gradually displacing them from their land a process occurring in tandem with settlement expansion and a striking absence of legal accountability.

In this report for Noon Post, a group of experts in documentation, human rights, and mental health address key questions many Palestinians are now asking:

Can another Duma-style attack happen elsewhere?

What is the link between arson and forced displacement?

How are women and children coping psychologically with these traumas?

A Surge in Settler Attacks and the Institutionalization of Arson

Amir Dawood, Director of Documentation and Media at the Wall and Settlement Resistance Commission, explains that the unprecedented spike in settler attacks over recent months did not occur in a vacuum. Since October 7, these attacks have reached sustained and historically high levels.

“Arson has been part of settler violence since the beginning of the occupation,

but what we are witnessing now is a peak in this tactic,” Dawood says. He cites the 2015 Dawabsheh family arson attack as an early warning that has since evolved into a systematic approach. “Since October 7, 2023, we’ve documented over 780 arson incidents by settlers targeting homes, fields, vehicles, and personal property.”

These are not random acts, Dawood stresses. “The goal is not only to destroy property but to inflict harm and terrorize lives. There is a clear methodology, reinforced by public statements from Israeli ministers advocating for village burnings, especially Huwara. These calls go unpunished, revealing official complicity.”

He notes that prominent settler militia leaders assumed governmental roles in early 2023, blurring the line between state and settler violence.

“What we see today is not lone-wolf terrorism but organized attacks under the protection of the Israeli army and legitimized by official policy. Arson is now a central tool for expelling Palestinians and asserting control over land.”

Could the Duma Attack Happen Again?

“Duma revealed the presence of fascist criminals within the Israeli state,” Dawood states. “What was once a shocking exception has now become a normalized threat across Palestinian villages, towns, and Bedouin communities.”

He emphasizes that, while Duma resulted in fatalities due to its surprise nature, most Palestinian communities are now more alert. “Many towns have established protection committees to sound the alarm before settlers strike, often thwarting attacks. Still, the intent behind these arsons has grown even more extreme, with an increased willingness to kill.”

Aisha Ahmad, a legal researcher with the Independent Commission for Human Rights, notes that the perpetrators are often young extremists, including the so-called “Hilltop Youth,” a network of ultra-religious settlers backed by political and military figures.

“These attacks happen under the protection of the Israeli army, which does nothing to stop them. We’re not seeing isolated incidents, but a campaign of organized, state-enabled violence aimed at driving Palestinians from their land,” she explains.

Ahmad warns that another Duma-style atrocity is entirely possible. “These operations serve dual purposes: punishing Palestinians and expanding settlements by instilling fear.”

She also highlights the Israeli government’s role in arming settlers and providing political cover. “These right-wing policies seek to reshape the landscape through

force, transforming Palestinian life into a daily risk.”

The absence of accountability further entrenches this impunity. “No serious investigations were conducted into the Dawabsheh case, nor into ongoing arsons or home invasions, where property is destroyed, residents assaulted, trees uprooted, and crops burned especially during the olive harvest season.”

Settlements and Fire: A State Strategy for Displacement

According to Dawood, arson and related settler violence are central components of a coercive environment designed to force Palestinians off their land. “These attacks target the very nerve of stability in Palestinian communities, particularly Bedouin groups, many of whom have already been displaced.”

He underscores that settlers are not fringe actors. “They are the executors of a state policy. The Israeli government shields them, supports their goals, and offers them ground-level protection because their actions align with the broader colonial strategy.”

The geographic pattern of violence also mirrors settlement plans. “In South Hebron, the residents of Masafer Yatta face daily assaults as part of a formal plan to expel them. East of Ramallah, settlers are enforcing a de facto ban on Palestinian access to areas east of Route 60 as part of an explicit annexation blueprint.”

Even international sanctions are neutralized by the state. “When the EU imposes travel bans or banking restrictions on violent settlers, Israel compensates them financially and facilitates travel to countries that don’t enforce those measures.”

Following European sanctions, the Israeli government intensified its defense of settlers. The appointment of Israel Katz as Defense Minister led to the repeal of administrative detention for settler offenders a symbolic punishment at best thereby boosting settler violence.

Rising Attacks and Local Protection Efforts

Asked about future trends, Dawood predicts the violence will either escalate or maintain its current intensity. “So far, no real pressure has been exerted on Israel to halt this terrorism. On the contrary, the state continues to support settlers and shield them from consequences.”

Local communities, however, are increasingly taking initiative. “Several villages have formed night patrols to protect themselves. Singel’s committee is a notable example, and other villages like those in northeast Ramallah and South Nablus have long maintained protection teams.”

These grassroots efforts have grown in response to what Dawood calls a “state-

sponsored assault” on Palestinian life. “We are up against a national policy, not rogue settlers, and yet the Palestinian popular resistance deserves praise for its resilience.”

He calls on the international community to abandon its double standards. “The world must move from statements to action imposing real sanctions and severing ties with the Israeli state until these crimes end.”

Psychological Toll: Impact on Women and Children

Psychologist Alaa Hreish of the Center for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture Victims explains that violent events, especially those involving home invasions and arson, cause profound psychological trauma.

“A house is not just a shelter it’s a symbol of safety. Losing that sense of security, especially for children and women, results in anxiety, nightmares, sleep disorders, and difficulties concentrating,” she notes.

Behavioral changes vary. “Some children become aggressive; others withdraw. Academic performance suffers. Physical symptoms like bedwetting, appetite loss, and psychosomatic issues are common.”

For women, the trauma includes fear, depression, PTSD, and family tension, particularly when compounded by financial burdens from property loss.

“If left unaddressed, these stressors can lead to domestic strife and violence,” Hreish warns.

Healing After Trauma: What Families Need

“Trauma overwhelms a person’s ability to cope,” Hreish explains. “In the immediate aftermath, children need a safe environment and opportunities to express emotions through drawing, play, and open dialogue.”

She advocates for gradual returns to daily routines and the use of calming techniques like deep breathing. Group support networks, particularly for women, help mitigate trauma through shared experiences.

“The community plays a crucial role. No family can cope alone,” she emphasizes. “Schools, neighbors, and civil society must work together to provide psychological, material, and emotional support.”

Despite growing needs, service gaps remain due to resource limits and stigma around mental health. “In 2022, our center treated 1,754 individuals; in 2023, 3,610; and by 2024, over 6,200. The rise reflects not just demand but the expanding scale of trauma.”

Access is also hindered by logistical and cultural challenges. “Mobile clinics face danger in conflict zones, and many still avoid seeking help due to shame or lack

of awareness.”

“Palestinians live in a constant state of trauma,” Hreish concludes. “Supporting their psychological resilience is essential to preserving the social fabric.”

The pattern is clear: settlers set fires, homes burn, and no one is held accountable. Arson is no longer a spontaneous act of revenge but a calculated weapon of displacement. Experts warn that unless deterrents are imposed, every Palestinian village could be the next Duma. Families now live between flames and fear, caught in a cycle of unchecked violence and perpetual vulnerability.

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