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EDITED BY
Carol Kerven,
Odessa Centre Ltd., United Kingdom

*CORRESPONDENCE
Amin Abu-Alsoud,
✉ abualsoudamin@gmail.com

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The impact of pastoral outposts in the occupied West Bank: a comprehensive analysis of land control mechanisms, displacement, and humanitarian consequences

Amin Abu-Alsoud^{1*}, Ameer Mehrez¹ and Houcine Bchini²

¹Higher School of Agriculture of Kef (ESAK), University of Jendouba, Jendouba, Tunisia, ²National Institute for Agricultural Research of Tunisia (INRAT), University of Carthage, Tunis, Tunisia

Pastoral outposts are an effective and rapid tool of settler colonialism in the occupied West Bank. The paper provides a thorough analysis of these seemingly innocuous livestock farms, revealing them as a strategic instrument for expropriation of vast grazing areas, the fragmentation of Palestinian territories, and the displacement of local communities. The main limitation of this paper is its dependence on a vast, yet secondary, body of literature. However, the analysis reveals a systemic agenda of dispossession driven by coordinated state and non-state actors. Our findings confirm the establishment of over 270 such outposts, representing a 114 percent increase between January 2023 and May 2025. This expansion has profound long-term geopolitical and humanitarian implications, undermining the viability of a future Palestinian state. While international law deems these settlements illegal, this paper argues that current policy responses are insufficient to counteract the institutional state power propagating their growth. We conclude that a critical engagement with the realities of settler colonialism is necessary to address the root causes of this phenomenon and protect the rights of the Palestinian people.

KEYWORDS

settler colonialism, pastoral outposts, west bank, displacement, Israeli-Palestinian conflict, pastoral communities, humanitarian consequences, land dispossession

Introduction

The pastoral outpost is a new and sinister mode of land control that has emerged in the occupied West Bank. These settlements, which specialize in grazing livestock, are a strategic instrument for the accelerated occupation of Palestinian land and the displacement of indigenous Palestinian communities (Al-HaqAl Mezan Centre for Human RightsAddameer Prisoner SupportHuman Rights AssociationCairo Institute for Human Rights Studies and Habitat International Coalition, 2020; Al-Huraini,

2023; Al-Haq, 2025a; Wafa News, 2025; Dawood, 2024; Al-Haq, 2025b); see Supplementary Figure S1. Their ownership structure must be clearly defined: the livestock (e.g., cattle and sheep) are privately owned by the settler individuals or families operating the outpost. However, the land itself is typically not privately owned but consists of Palestinian lands that have been forcibly seized by settlers and subjected to *de facto* control for grazing and settlement. This paper provides an in-depth study of this phenomenon, distinguishing between settlements, outposts, and the recent, more strategic pastoral outposts. It is based on long-term research from Palestinian organizations such as Al-Haq and Badil, statistics from the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and the work of critical scholars (Al-Haq, 2025a; BADIL, 2017b; Heneiti, 2018; Habbas, 2024).

This paper critically examines the recent and accelerating growth of Israeli pastoral outposts in the occupied West Bank, arguing that it is not an informal or isolated phenomenon but a major tool of the larger settler colonial project. Framed by settler colonial studies, which defines settler colonialism as a structure based on a logic of elimination, not a singular event (Jabary Salamanca et al., 2012; Wolfe, 2006), this paper examines outposts as a central tool for displacing the indigenous population to create uncontested sovereignty. The establishment of these outposts, often on land declared as “state land” or in “firing zones”, creates facts on the ground that undermine the viability of a future Palestinian state. As the BADIL (2020) indicates, policies of forced transfer revolve around segregation, fragmentation, and isolation. This paper will demonstrate that pastoral outposts are a key instrument of this fragmentation, creating a coercive environment that displaces Palestinian communities, severs their connection to the land, and ultimately undermines the possibility of Palestinian self-determination (BADIL, 2020).

Drawing upon the fields of critical agrarian studies and settler colonial theory, this paper analyses how pastoral outposts are transforming the rural landscape of the West Bank. This analysis engages with key scholar works, including the study of agrarian questions in Palestine by Panosetti et al. (2025), Tramel’s (2025) agrarian perspective on territory grabbing, Shqair’s (2022) conceptualization of ecological colonialism, and Wolfe’s (2006) foundational analysis of settler colonialism as a logic of elimination (Panosetti et al., 2025; Tramel, 2025; Shqair, 2022; Wolfe, 2006). These strategies highlight how control over land, resources, and pastoral livelihoods is central to the structural dynamics of settler colonialism in Palestine.

By expanding their outposts, settlers engage not only in a land-grabbing effort but also in a battle over resources, livelihoods, and ways of life. By forcing Palestinian pastoralists off their traditional grazing fields, these outposts dismantle an essential sector of the Palestinian economy and society, thereby

contributing to the logic of elimination that characterizes settler colonialism.

The paper is structured as follows. First, it provides a comprehensive description of the land control mechanisms employed by pastoral outposts, including the institutional, legal, and administrative structures that facilitate their expansion. Second, it examines the “architecture of dispossession”, covering the definitions, models, and fast-track mechanisms of outpost creation. Third, it analyzes the devastating consequences of pastoral encroachment on Palestinian lives and land, drawing on a wide a body of evidence, including testimonies from impacted communities. Fourth, it discusses the international legal context and divergent Israeli perspectives on the matter. The paper concludes by arguing that a more robust and critical approach to understanding the realities of settler colonialism is necessary to address the underlying drivers of this phenomenon and to safeguard the rights of the Palestinian people.

The architecture of dispossession

The establishment of pastoral outposts is not a spontaneous or accidental phenomenon; it is a calculated and systematic plan of land expropriation. This section examines the institutional and operational framework of this dispossession, outlining the mechanisms of land control, legal frameworks, state support, and settler coordination that facilitate the proliferation of these outposts.

Defining the tools of dispossession

To understand the unique role of pastoral outposts, it is essential to distinguish them from other forms of settlements, as described by Habbas (2024). The key differences lie in their legal status under Israeli law and their method of creation:

- **Settlements:** These are Jewish residential areas officially recognized and approved by the Israeli state. Established through a top-down process, they are designed and incorporated into Israeli civil life with their own municipal councils. Israel refers to them as towns (yishuv) or cities (see Supplementary Figure S2) (Habbas, 2024).
- **Outposts:** are informal residential settlements established without initial government approval. They are often a bottom-up project, constructed to circumvent bureaucracy or to project a presence in locations not yet approved by the military. While they are often legalized retrospectively by the Israeli state, they are regarded as illegal under international law and Israeli law. They are

called by Israel bu-a-r, “young towns,” or “sites” (Habbas, 2024).

- Pastoral Outposts (Shepherd Farms): represent a more recent and strategically distinct model of settlement expansion. Typically established by an individual farmer, a small community, or a single family to raise livestock, their primary objective is not immediate residential construction. Instead, the strategic aim of these outposts is to expropriate vast areas of land (thousands of dunams) in area with low population density (Supplementary Figure S3). This model seeks to establish a huge territorial footprint, create frontiers that restrict Palestinian access to land, and lay the groundwork for future infrastructure and settlement development. The Israeli state refers to them as “farms” or “personal farms” (Habbas, 2024).

Models of pastoral outposts

Habbas (2024) identifies three overlapping models of pastoral outposts. While all share the goal of territorial conquest, they differ in their methods and the actors involved:

- Torah-Ideological Pastoral Settlement: These outposts are established by members of the religious Zionist movement’s ideological core (Hardal), who are driven by a powerful ideological imperative to settle the land. The “Migdal Ha’aretz” farm, created in 2018, is a notable example.
- Pastoral-Tourism Settlement: This model combines a Torah-based ideology with a business model enterprise, typically operated by a nuclear family that mixes religious conviction with lucrative tourism ventures. They tend to be strategically located in areas easily and safely accessible to Israelis, such as near the Green Line or along Route 90 in the Jordan Valley.
- Pastoral Farms of Hilltop Youth: These are operated by organized groups from the Hilltop Youth, a loose association of radical Israeli settlers known for militant and violent actions against Palestinians. Often described as “youth in distress,” they strategically position their outposts along critical transportation routes, such as Route 60, to create a demographic barrier between major Palestinian cities and the Jordan Valley, thereby fragmenting Palestinian territorial continuity.

Despite different ideological motivations and operational structures, all three models serve the same strategic purpose: the territorial control and the displacement of Palestinians, organized under the institutional framework detailed in Section *The institutional framework of expansion*.

A mechanism of “fast-track” land seizure and strategic expansion

The establishment of a pastoral outpost typically begins with a small, seemingly innocuous footprint, often just a single tent or caravan and a small herd of animals. This initial presence, however, grows rapidly as settlers impose control over expansive areas of neighboring rangeland through grazing (Panosetti et al., 2025). This method of land confiscation is a form of “territorial grabbing,” a process that, as Tramel (2025) defines it, breaks established territorial relations and create new ones (Tramel, 2025).

This rapid expansion is not peaceful; it is accompanied by a steady trend of violence and intimidation directed at local Palestinian residents. Systematic violence has been widely documented, including attacks on Palestinian shepherds, the destruction of crops and livestock, and the denial of access to water resources (B’Tselem, 2021). These acts of settler terrorism are often conducted with the support and complicity of the Israeli military, which frequently acts on behalf of the settlers.

The geographical location of these outposts is highly strategic. They are situated in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, a designation affirmed by international law (International Court of Justice, 2024). Most of these outposts are in Area C, a designation created by the 1995 Oslo II Accord with the specific provision that it would be gradually transferred to Palestinian jurisdiction (United Nations, 1995). The agreement stipulated that this transfer would occur in phases and be completed within 18 months of the Palestinian Council’s inauguration (United Nations, 1995). More than 30 years later, this transfer has not occurred, Area C remains under *de facto* Israeli military occupation and is legally part of the occupied territory (Supplementary Figure S4).

This failure to implement a binding international agreement has transformed a temporary interim status into a permanent occupation. An overlay of administrative boundaries and outpost distribution reveals that the outposts are located almost exclusively in Area C, as part of a systematic campaign to fragment Palestinian communities and dominate key transportation corridors on territory for a future Palestinian state (see Supplementary Figure S5). This pattern is particularly evident in the southern Hebron Hills and the corridor between Jerusalem and Bethlehem. Locating outposts in Area C allows for settlements expansion without encroaching on Areas A and B, which are administered by Palestinians National Authority, thereby maximizing land and resources acquisition. Special attention is given to the agriculturally significant Jordan Valley, which constitutes approximately 30 percent of the West Bank and contains about 50 percent of its agricultural land (Al-Jazeera, 2024), and to the Masafer Yatta area, where active efforts to displace long-established Bedouin and rural populations have been observed (Amnesty International, 2025; Shaaban, 2023; Dawood, 2024).

The strategic placement of these outposts is matched by the alarming rate of their proliferation in recent years (Supplementary Figure S6). By May 2025, the number of these illegal outposts had risen to 270, including 136 pastoral farm (Peace Now, 2025; Ofra and Etkes, 2025). The timeline of this growth is particularly striking. While the establishment of outposts remained comparatively low through 2022, the period between 2023 and 2025 witnessed a dramatic surge. As shown in Supplementary Figure S7, 32 new outposts were established in 2023, 61 in 2024, and 82 in the first 5 months of 2025 alone, representing a 114 percent increase in just under 3 years (Peace Now, 2025). This acceleration is further illustrated in Supplementary Figure S8, which shows that the cumulative growth rate has been over 5 times faster since the beginning of 2023. Over half of all existing outposts have been established since that time, which providing clear evidence that this colonial territorial strategy is intensifying dramatically.

Proponents of this policy, primarily within the Israeli settler movement and its government allies, view it as an effective method for asserting control over territory in the occupied West Bank. Ze'ev Hever, secretary-general of the Amana settlement movement, has explicitly described the strategic merits of this approach. In a telling comparison, Hever noted that while it took 50 years for conventional settlements to bring 100 square kilometers of the West Bank under control, pastoral outposts achieved control over twice that territory in just a few years. This comparison highlights the strategic efficiency of pastoral outposts, which allows for the seizure of large territories in significantly less time than is required for the construction of traditional settlements. Hever openly described traditional settlement as more costly and inefficient means of controlling large land areas (Wafa News, 2025; Dawood, 2024; Associated Press, 2024).

The institutional framework of expansion

Pastoral outposts exemplify the institutionalization, of dispossession, with state and non-state actors coordinating across organizational, financial, legal, and coercive scalar levels to appropriate pastoral commons. The Amana movement, with assets of 160 million dollars, acts as a structural broker for this strategy, providing intellectual rationale, and organizational coordination to frame pastoral grazing as a territorial demand (Ofra and Etkes, 2025; Habbas, 2024).

This organizational nexus is complemented by the Settlement Division of the World Zionist Organization, which channels state funding to the settler-pastoralists, and the Ministry of Agriculture, which provides direct grants. The Palestinian Center for Human Rights (PCHR) confirms that this financial architecture constitutes official financial and administrative support from the Israeli government and several of its

ministers (Peace Now, 2024; Jessica, 2025; PCHR, 2026; PCHR, 2025).

The institutional system operates through strategic scalar differentiation. On one level, legal organizations like Regavim-co-founded by Finance Minister Smotrich, work to establish juridical legitimacy of settler-pastoral claims, strategically contesting Palestinian land claims in Area C (Regavim, 2026). On another level, extremist organizations such as Hashomer Yosh and the Hilltop Youth, both designated as terrorist organizations by the U.S. Department of State, enforce territorial claims through political violence and intimidation (U.S. Department of State, 2024).

This multi-level coordination is actively promoted by the state. Finance Minister Smotrich has openly stated his goal to increase the settler population by over one million, declaring: "This is how you introduce a million inhabitants, and the government is already working on it" (Shezaf, 2025). The PCHR defines this dynamic as a structured policy of coordination and role-sharing between the Israeli government, the army, and the settlers (PCHR, 2025). This institutional totality of pastoral dispossession reflects (Wolfe, 2006) research on the logic of settler colonialism: the organized extermination of indigenous claims to territory.

Spatial binarism and the settler-colonial reconfiguration of territory

Pastoral settlement functions as a system for legitimizing settler ownership of Indigenous lands, a characteristic is typical of settler-colonial projects worldwide (Wolfe, 2006; Greer, 2012; Glenn, 2015). This logic is often based on the premise that nomadic or pastoral land use is "unproductive" or "wasteful," while sedentary agricultural settlement represents a superior form of civilization, therefore, providing an ethical and legal justification for dispossession (Habbas, 2024; Bhattacharya, 1996; National Museum of Australia, 2024).

In the Palestinian context, pastoral outposts serve as strategic tools to delineate the boundaries of settler-controlled territory. As Habbas (2024) explains, the concept of the "frontiers" is essential to understanding this dynamic. These are not fixed borders but creeping, mobile frontiers through pastoral expansion: as settlers continually move and open new pastures, they gradually tighten their encirclement of Palestinian territory, transforming it into a series of besieged enclave (Habbas, 2024). This e spatial demarcation, achieved through pastoral expansion and demographic pressure from the settler presence, becomes a primary instrument in the current reconfiguration of space under settler-colonialism. It centralizes territorial control and systematically destroys Palestinian territorial claims and presence (Tramel, 2025).

The devastating consequences: impacts on livelihoods and land

The institutional coordination and spatial strategies discussed in the previous sections have had a devastating impact on the Palestinian rural communities, leading to mass displacement, economic disruption, and the destruction of traditional ways of life. This section examines the complex consequences of this phenomenon, including displacement, economic destabilization, the erosion of pastoral life, and the acceleration of these processes during ongoing genocidal war in Gaza (International Court of Justice, 2024).

Displacement and the destruction of the pastoral economy

Pastoral outposts have inflicted severe long-term social and economic consequences on Palestinian rural communities, which Palestinian grassroots organizations describe as a deliberate campaign of displacement. The group Stop the Wall has reported how these outposts are used as an instrument of “ecological colonialism” to systematically destroy the pastoral economy and seize land (Shqair, 2022). The most drastic consequence of this strategy has been the forced displacement of pastoral communities (ARIJ, 2025) (Supplementary Figures S9, S10).

According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), 1105 individuals from 28 Palestinian herding communities had been displaced from their areas of residence since 2022, primarily due to settler violence and the prevention of access to grazing land by settlers (OCHA, 2023). Palestinian sources provide further context, documenting additional displacement and destruction that are not fully captured by these official figures. In 2023 alone, OCHA documented about 4000 Palestinian displaced across the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, with at least 1,539 people and fourteen entire herding communities driven from their homes amid Israeli settler violence and shrinking access to grazing land (OCHA, 2024). Human rights organizations describe these dynamics as part of an accelerating pattern of settler and military violence that has uprooted numerous Palestinian herding and pastoral communities in Area C (HRW, 2024; Gideon and Alex, 2024). A comprehensive report by Physicians for Human Rights-Israel and Yesh Din concludes that Israel is responsible for the war crime of forcible transfer of Palestinian communities in the West Bank and characterizes this as a systematic and recurring process, amounting to a grave breach of international law (PHRI and Yesh Din, 2025).

This displacement has had a disastrous effect on the local pastoral economy. For thousands of Palestinians, raising crops and grazing livestock are the primary sources of

livelihood, and the loss of access to pastures and water sources poses an existential threat (Supplementary Figures S11, S12). A UN report found that 95 percent of affected Palestinian communities were forced to sell their livestock, while 71 percent had to borrow money to buy fodder. This has plunged them into a vicious circle of debt and dependency, weakening their ability to remain on their land (OCHA, 2023).

The territorial scale of this policy underscores its geopolitical significance. A report by Peace Now and Kerem Navot revealed that this network of outposts already controls over 786,000 dunums (14 percent of the West Bank), an area larger than all traditional settlements combined (see Figure 1) (Ofra and Etke, 2025). Palestinian analysis from sources like Al-Mayadeen describes this land seizure as a core objective of the pastoral settlement “weapon” (Al-Mayadeen, 2025).

Testimonies of dispossession

While statistics illustrate the scale of displacement, the human cost of this phenomenon is captured in the testimonies of the affected pastoral communities. These accounts are not merely stories of passive victimization but are records of active, though often suppressed, resistance and survival.

Data confirms a worsening crisis. The UN recorded the highest-ever daily average of settler attacks in 2023, a trend that continued into 2024, which human rights organizations have declared the most violent year for settler violence in a quarter-century (OCHA, 2023; Amnesty International, 2025; Heneiti, 2018). Amnesty International describes this not as a series of random incidents but as a “coercive environment” deliberately created by the state to force Palestinians from their land (Amnesty International, 2025). Table 1 summarizes key indicators of this displacement and its impact.

These testimonies reveal the multi-faceted nature of dispossession. The theme of economic devastation is a recurring one, as expressed by Muhammad Ayoub Abu Subha, a shepherd from Al-Fakheit:

“This has been the worst year of my life . . . I have family and children . . . they all require some basic facilities such as clothes, food, and the fundamental needs of schools. These needs were no longer a concern, as I could easily fulfill them; today I cannot.” (Al-Huraini, 2023)

This economic strangulation is compounded by systematic restrictions on movement and land access. Issa Makhamra, a resident of Jinba village in Masafer Yatta, describes living under constant military surveillance:

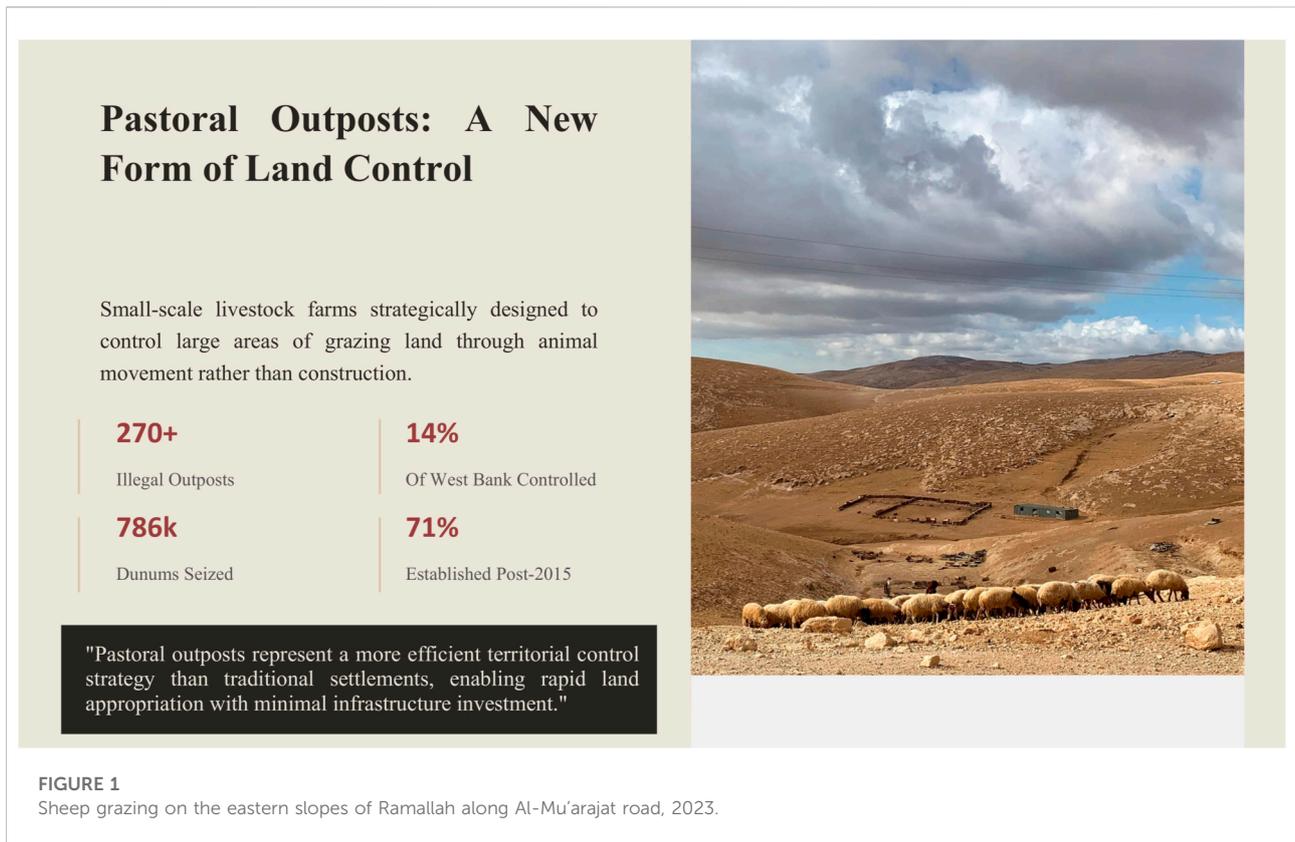


TABLE 1 Impact of Israeli settler violence on Palestinian herding communities (2022–2025).

Metric	Figure	Source
People displaced	1,105 (from 28 communities since 2022)	UN OCHA (2023)
Families displaced	Over 300 (1,762 people since Oct 2023)	UN OCHA (2023), Amnesty International (2025)
Daily settler incidents	4 per day (average in 2024)	UN OCHA (2023), Amnesty International (2025)
Livestock decrease	Reported by nearly all 55 communities assessed	UN OCHA (2023)
Grazing land reduction	Reported by at least 80% of communities	UN OCHA (2023)

“Nothing is permitted on the pretext of us living in a firing zone, including shepherding sheep. They have a roadblock whenever we go somewhere. I do not even manage to pass through this checkpoint on the way to the city, and I am detained for long hours.” (Al-Huraini, 2023).

These systematic coercion is punctuated by direct physical violence and intimidation. Hadeel Jabareen, a resident of the now-displaced community of Zanuta, recounts the terror that forced her family to flee after 7 October 2023:

“Settlers attacked us at our home more than once after 7 October 2023. Once they broke our door and beat our children with their rifles. They broke the windows as we were sleeping.”(Amnesty International, 2025).

Her neighbor, Adel A-Tal, adds, “The settlers were armed and continued to attack us. We were the last family there . . . It was terror, we were scared (Amnesty International, 2025). This is not an isolated case. Residents of the Shi’b Al-Butum community live under constant fear of an armed settler in military uniform who storms the village at all hours to destroy property (Amnesty International, 2025).

Together, these personal accounts illustrate an existential threat to the pastoral way of life itself. Odeh Khalil articulates this existential dimension:

“People cannot live without sheep. If we leave, it will be all gone. They are compelling us to leave and argue that this “the land” belongs to Israel.” (Sawafta and Mackenzie, 2025).

These testimonies are carefully collected and amplified by numerous organizations. Palestinian groups like Al-Haq and Stop the Wall provide legal analysis and reports that situate these acts within international law, categorizing them as war crimes and features of an apartheid regime (Al-Haq, 2025b; Colman et al., 2024). International organizations such as Amnesty International and the UN provide corroborating data and legal condemnations, while Israeli organizations like B’Tselem and Yesh Din document state collusion and settlers’ impunity. The voice of the displaced have been woven into a powerful body of evidence, revealing a systematic and ongoing process of dispossession that is organized through the institutional and spatial strategies described in previous sections.

Legal and political frameworks

International legal consensus

There is a broad consensus within the international legal community, encompassing foundational treaties, major international bodies, and leading human rights organizations, that Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories are illegal under international law. This consensus is built on several layers of legal authority and documentation.

The legal framework is anchored in Article 49 of the Fourth Geneva Convention (1949), which establishes protections for civilians in occupied territories and explicitly forbids an occupying power from transferring its own civilian population into the territory it occupies. This fundamental principle has been consistently upheld and reinforced by the world’s highest international institutions. The United Nations Security Council, for example, has passed numerous resolutions on the matter. Resolution 2334 (2016) reaffirmed that the settlements have “no legal validity” and constitute a “flagrant violation” of international law (UN Security Council, 2016). Further, underpinning this position, the International Court of Justice (ICJ), in its 2004 advisory opinion on the Legal Consequences of the Construction of a Wall in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, determined that Israel’s establishment of settlements violates the Fourth Geneva Convention (MADAR, 2024; UN Security Council, 2016).

In addition to this institutional consensus, major human rights organizations have independently reached the same legal

conclusion, often using even stronger language to condemn the settlement enterprise. Both Human Rights and Amnesty International have reported that the settlement project entails gross violations of international law, arguing that such actions constitute a war crime under the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (Amnesty International, 2022). This assessment is shared and supported by leading Palestinian human rights organizations, such as al-Haq (Al-Haq/Al Mezan Centre for Human Rights/Addameer Prisoner Support/Human Rights Association/Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies and Habitat International Coalition, 2020). Palestinian civil society bodies have systematically documented the effects of the settlements, arguing that they lead to systematic breaches of international law that constitute not only war crimes but also the crime of apartheid as defined in international law (Al-Haq, Addameer Prisoner Support and Human Rights Association, Al Mezan Centre for Human Rights, Al-Quds University Community Action Center, Jerusalem Legal Aid and Human Rights Center, Palestinian Initiative for the Promotion of Global Dialogue and Democracy, 2022; PCHR, 2025; Shqair, 2022; BADIL, 2017a; OFAC, 2024; Nimer et al., 2024; Al-Haq, Al Mezan Center for Human Rights, Palestinian Centre for Human Rights and Dameer, 2021).

Israeli perspectives on settlement expansion

Within Israeli society, the issue of settlements and land use in the occupied West Bank is not a settled matter but a highly contested terrain shaped by deep political, religious, and ideological differences. Public opinion is not monolithic. A June 2024 poll by the Pew Research Center revealed that Israeli are divided on whether settlements enhance the country’s security: 40% believe they do, 35% believe they are harmful, and 21% believe they have little effect (Pew Research Center, 2024). This division reflects a broader societal split, particularly along religious and political lines. For instance, while 85 percent of ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) Jews and 68 percent of right-leaning Israelis view settlements beneficial to security, only 21 per cent of secular (Hiloni) Jews and 9 percent of left-leaning Israelis share that opinion (Pew Research Center, 2024).

The pro-settlement camp, composed of a coalition of nationalists and religious groups, presents a variety of legal, security, and ideological justifications for its existence in the West Bank. For many supporters, the territory, which they refer to as Judea and Samaria, a biblical reference for the land, holds profound historical and religious significance for the Jewish people. Legal advocacy groups like Regavim, provide legal frameworks to support settlement growth, framing their work as a defense of Israeli land and resources. They engage in legal and

political advocacy to halt what they term “illegal” Palestinian construction, thereby justifying further settlements expansion (Regavim, 2026).

In opposition to the settlements, a vocal segment of Israeli civil society has long championed an end to the occupation and the settlement enterprise. Although representing a minority viewpoint, this ecosystem includes prominent and long-standing organizations such as B’Tselem (The Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories), Breaking the Silence (an organization of former Israeli soldiers who document and testify about the realities of the occupation), and Peace Now (Israel’s largest and oldest peace movement) (B’Tselem, 2026; Peace Now, 2026). These groups argue that the settlements are contrary to international law, causing grave human rights abuse, and ultimately undermine Israel’s own security and integrity. Notably, B’Tselem has described Israel’s rule over the occupied territories as a “regime of apartheid,” an assessment that aligns with the conclusions of international legal bodies and human rights organizations (see Section *The International legal consensus*) (B’Tselem, 2026).

These anti-occupation groups operate in a hostile political environment, facing significant pressure from the government and right-wing organizations that seek to delegitimize their work through funding restrictions, legal challenges, and public smear campaigns (UN OCHA, 2019). In a 2023 report, a UN Commission of Inquiry documented a pattern of attacks, restrictions, and harassment targeting civil society actors in both Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories (United Nations Commission of Inquiry, 2023). This context of marginalization is essential for understanding why political discourse often favors the pro-settlement agenda, despite the clear divisions within the Israeli public.

International sanctions against settlement expansion

The international community’s response to the institutional framework driving the growth of pastoral outposts has been largely limited to a selective sanction on key organization and individuals involved in violence. Amana, the primary organization orchestrating the pastoral settlement strategy, has been sanctioned by Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States, which have imposed asset freezes and financial prohibitions (Global Affairs Canada, 2024; UK Foreign and Commonwealth and Development Office, 2024; OFAC, 2024). Similarly, extremist groups like Hashomer Yosh and the Hilltop Youth have been designated by the U.S. Department of State and the UK Foreign Office as perpetrators of systematic violence against Palestinian communities (UK Foreign and Commonwealth and Development Office, 2024); (U.S. Department of State, 2024). These designations represent one

of the few tangible global instruments being used to address the institutional drivers of pastoral dispossession.

However, the effectiveness of these sanctions is severely limited by the decentralized and institutionally embedded nature of the pastoral outpost system. The deep involvement of these agencies, including the Ministry of Agriculture, the Settlement Division of the WZO, and the Israeli military, means that sanctions targeting non-state actors address only to the periphery of a state-orchestrated strategy (PCHR, 2025). This situation is indicative of the “sanctuary problem” described by (Drezner, 2011): when a state is itself engaged in territorial appropriation, sanctions against non-state actors become a weak accountability mechanism, as the state can provide protection and resources to sanctioned entities.

The financial structure supporting these outposts utilizes multiple avenues, including direct government grants, quasi-governmental bodies, and private donations, allowing asset freezes to be circumvented through channels not covered sanctions regimes (Jessica, 2025). The system’s structural redundancy, with its many settlements and informal networks, ensures that the sanctioning of one actor does not significantly impede the overall operations, as other actors can assume similar functions (Panosetti et al., 2025). Furthermore, international bodies lack enforcement mechanisms in the occupied Palestinian territory, where the Israeli state maintains its a monopoly on law enforcement and security (International Court of Justice, 2024). Indeed, the sanctions imposed on key actors in 2024 did not slow the establishment of new outposts, on the contrary, their numbers grew by 114% between January 2023 and May 2025, demonstrating the weakness of the current sanctions regime (Peace Now, 2025).

This rapid expansion signifies a profound commitment to pastoral settlement as a strategic territorial tool. It demonstrates that addressing pastoral dispossession requires measures that confront the drivers of this phenomenon at the state level. Sanctions that are not coupled with structural interventions in state institutions are insufficient to challenge settler colonialism (Wolfe, 2006). The evidence presented in this section shows that a phenomenon that is fundamentally institutional and strategic cannot be resolved with punitive measures alone. Effective action must involve mechanisms that address the state-level motivations behind pastoral outposts expansion, rather than focusing solely on the non-state actors who implement it.

Discussion and conclusion

The paper has provided an in-depth analysis of pastoral outposts as a methodical and fast-tracked strategy of land control in the occupied West Bank. Moving beyond the perception of these outposts as an isolated or haphazard phenomenon, we have demonstrated that they are part of a well-planned and organized national project, driven by a network of state and non-state

actors, to permanently alter the geopolitical landscape. Taking into account the information on land control, displacement, and financial flows, it becomes evident that a small group of shape-givers with livestock can successfully occupy and control space four times the area of all constructed settlements put together. This has disastrous effects, as it ruins the Palestinian pastoral economy, destroys the territory, and endangers the existence of a people as a distinct cultural community.

The escalating settler violence and land dispossession in the West Bank cannot be viewed in isolation from the broader political context, particularly the ongoing military assault on the Gaza Strip. As scholars have suggested, both are expressions of the same comprehensive settler-colonial strategy, which aims at the systematic replacement of Palestinian presence with Jewish Israeli one (Nimer et al., 2024; Tramel, 2025; Al-Monitor, 2024; Aly et al., 2025). As framed by the theoretical framework of this paper, settler colonialism is defined by a “logic of elimination”, which is the core feature that distinguishes it from other colonial endeavors (Wolfe, 2006; Amoruso et al., 2019). The heightened assault on Palestinian lives and territory in the West Bank is not merely a spillover from other conflicts but is an integral part of this project of dispossession.

The international community’s failure to hold Israel accountable for its actions has emboldened settlers and state actors to escalate their activities, creating a vicious cycle of violence and impunity. As settlement activities intensify, more Palestinians are displaced, and Israeli territorial control is further consolidated. This cycle reinforces the main finding of this paper: that pastoral outposts are a systematic phenomenon undergoing dramatic acceleration. The 114% increase in outpost creation between 2023 and 2025 underscores the unprecedented pace of this territorial initiative.

The international community’s response to this crisis has been poorly coordinated and largely ineffective. Repeated condemnations have failed to address the fundamental structure of the problem. As (Amoruso et al., 2019) argue, such liberal peace paradigms fail to recognize and treat the causes of settler colonization. The persistence of pastoral outposts demonstrates the limitations of diplomacy alone means alone. In the absence of substantial enforcement measures and sanctions against state actors, international law remains symbolic rather than being transformative (Wolfe, 2006).

This paper contributes to a critical discussion by debunking mainstream narratives and offering a more precise picture of the situation on the ground. By centering the voices and experiences of the most affected individuals, primarily through Palestinian civil society sources such as Al-Haq, Stop the Wall, and PCHR, and grounding the analysis in a critical theoretical framework. This study highlights the human dimension of this territorial strategy. The testimonies of displaced communities reveal not an abstract land conflict but lived experiences of displacement,

trauma, and resistance. Any meaningful policy response must prioritize these voices.

Further research is needed to (1) collect primary data to measure the direct economic and social impacts of the outposts; (2) conduct specific research on the psychological trauma experienced by the Palestinian farmers due to the settler violence to develop more targeted humanitarian interventions; (3) carry out longitudinal studies on the long-term consequences of displacement for pastoral communities; and, (4) examine the effective resistance strategies and community resilience mechanisms employed by Palestinians.

Finally, this paper underscores the necessity of a radical shift in the international community’s policy from passive condemnation to active intervention. The first step is to recognize pastoral outposts not as an obstacle to peace but as a continuation of settler-colonial formation. Dismantling the outpost phenomenon requires more than removing caravans; it requires cutting off their financial and military support. At the same time, aid should not be limited to subsistence but should empower communities to achieve self-reliance on their own land, thereby fostering resilience and dignity. International institutions like the International Criminal Court and the UN agencies must be empowered to hold state actors accountable for fostering this trend. This analysis shows that pastoral outposts are not marginal to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict; they are at the heart of an ongoing project to territorial erasure. The solution to this phenomenon cannot be found in diplomatic reproach alone but requires structural intervention in the state institutions that perpetuate it. Only such a comprehensive approach can safeguard the rights and dignity of the Palestinian pastoral communities.

Data availability statement

Availability of Data and Materials: This paper is based on publicly available reports, articles, and data cited in the references section.

Ethics statement

Ethical approval for this perspective article was granted by the Academic and Ethics Committee of the Higher School of Agriculture of Kef (ESAK), University of Jendouba, Tunisia (Approval No.: ESAK-IRB-2025-002-A, dated 05 December 2025). This research involved a critical review of existing literature and publicly available data on pastoral settlement in the occupied West Bank, with no primary data collection from human or animal subjects. The study was granted an exemption from requiring ethics approval on these grounds and is in full compliance with ESAK ethical standards and internationally recognized research principles.

Author contributions

AA designed the study, carried out the research, and wrote this manuscript. AM and HB gave important comments that helped improve the final version of the manuscript.

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Conflict of interest

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Supplementary material

The Supplementary Material for this article can be found online at: <https://www.frontierspartnerships.org/articles/10.3389/past.2026.16020/full#supplementary-material>

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