

Israeli settler vigilantes see attacks as route to Jewish theocracy

by [Joshua Mitnick](#) in the [September 30, 2015](#) issue

([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) Clinging to a barren hillside, the Baladim outpost was little more than a solitary trailer, a farming tractor, a makeshift tent for shade, and a flock of goats.

But Israeli security authorities say Baladim and other hilltop outposts served as a base for a new generation of Jewish militants, disaffected youths who allegedly vandalized churches and carried out a deadly arson attack in the nearby Palestinian village of Duma on July 31. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu denounced the attack, which killed Saad Dawabsha and his 18-month-old son, Ali, as an act of “Jewish terrorism.”

In just a few hours one day in late August, the police and the army cleared the Baladim encampment and two other outposts nearby. It was part of a weeks-long crackdown on so-called “price tag” vigilantes who aim to punish both Palestinians and Israeli security forces for moves against the settlements.

Now authorities are alleging that a hardened core of hilltop youths have adopted a strategy that goes beyond price-tag reprisals. They say this group, believed to have dozens of members, has drawn up a manifesto calling for a “revolt” against Israel’s “wicked” secular government and its replacement with a Jewish theocracy that would bring a religious redemption.

Most Jewish settlers identify as mainstream religious Zionists and consider the hilltop rebels to be a group of teen dropouts who have drifted to the outposts, where they absorb an extremist ideology.

“They are really a group of anarchists who are anti-Zionists, who don’t respect the rabbis and don’t respect the state, and distance themselves from Israeli authority,” said David Ha’ivri, a resident of the Jewish settlement of Tapuach and a former spokesman for the local settler council. “It would be simplistic to call them extreme right wing.”

Experts on Jewish radicalism, however, argue that the hilltop hard-liners likely have plenty of sympathizers and supporters, both in the Jewish settlements and among Israel's Orthodox Jews.

"This is an outgrowth of religious Zionism," said Mordechai Inbari, a professor of religion at the University of North Carolina at Pembroke. "This is an ideological movement that has mentors, a program, texts; they have many books they publish. It's not just a matter of crazy kids looking for ways to express their violence. It has leaders, and it has a program for action."

Both the experts and the mainstream settlers seem to agree that the vigilante attacks and their backers are driven in part by disillusionment with Israel's government. While critics in the West assail Netanyahu for a security-first policy that allows little compromise with Palestinians, many far-right Israelis hold the opposite view. They point to too much lenience toward Palestinian militants and a failure to assert Israeli sovereignty in areas controlled by Arabs, such as the holy sites in Jerusalem's Old City. They also blame the Israeli establishment for razing settlements ten years ago when the military pulled out of the Gaza Strip.

"If you have a state which succumbs all the time to the creation of the Palestinian Authority on land allotted to Israel, if you see homegrown terrorism popping up around you, and the Temple Mount off limits to Jews—if you see all this phenomena of weakness, there are going to be people who are unsatisfied, and are going to be more aggressive," said Yishai Fleisher, a radio host at the Voice of Israel Internet radio.

What sets the hilltop vigilantes apart from mainstream settlers is that they make an additional argument: Israel's government has become a hostile entity hopelessly corrupted by Western, non-Jewish political values.

Israel has a history of violent acts motivated by religious conviction among Jews. In the 1980s, a Jewish underground carried out attacks on Palestinian buses, university students, and mayors, and in the mid-1990s, religious opponents of Israel's peace talks with the Palestinians took the law into their own hands, most notably with the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin by Yigal Amir.

"One common denominator is that they [radicals] have some of the same spiritual authorities," said Dan Ephron, the author of a forthcoming book on the Rabin assassination, *Killing a King*. Though there are no specific calls by rabbis for

violence, “it’s enough for rabbis to talk about incendiary issues in the yeshivas.”

An alleged hilltop document released by the Shin Bet lays out a “means of action” and recommends establishing small vigilante cells because “the chances of establishing an organized underground against this foreign rule are so big.” The document discusses the pros and cons of carrying out arson attacks on a mosque, Palestinian homes, and churches—which are considered places of idolatry.

Yesh Din, a human rights group, said Israel has done little to prosecute perpetrators of vigilante violence. Before the arson in Duma, the organization handled 15 cases of house burnings, but zero indictments came out of them.

Honeinu, a legal aid organization which represents hilltop youth arrested by Israeli authorities, said the allegations of Jewish terrorism have been inflated and that the government is rounding up “anyone who looks like a hilltop youth” at places like Baladim and in the region around the nearby settlement of Shiloh.

Despite the crackdown against outposts, observers say there are legal and political impediments to a wider campaign of arrests and indictments in terror cases involving Jewish suspects. Law enforcement officials lack the infrastructure, legal tools, and political backing that exists for counterterrorism against Arab groups, these observers say.

“It will always be more interesting to deal with other security threats, rather than deal with administrative detention and restraining orders for Jewish terrorists,” wrote Yuval Diskin, a former Shin Bet chief, on his Facebook page last month. “With a government based on right wing parties, a political and rabbinic lobby, it doesn’t make political sense either.”

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