JEWISH TELEGRAPHIC AGENCY

Ideas

Why both sides are ducking settler violence ahead of Israel's elections

The transgressions are politically inconvenient for the two major blocs, but there's a way to find common ground on addressing the problem.

Tani Frank October 23, 2026



Protesters demonstrate against attacks by extremist Jewish settlers on Palestinians in the West Bank, at Paris Square in central Jerusalem on Sept. 2, 2026. (Yonatan Sindel/Flash90)

For American Jews who follow Israel closely, one of the hardest things to understand about Israeli politics today is the gap between the severity of settler violence in Judea and Samaria, also known as the West Bank, and the relatively limited role it plays in the election campaign.

The phenomenon is not being ignored altogether. Israeli politicians across the political spectrum condemn acts of violence by Jewish extremists, and security experts have warned that Jewish terrorism and nationalist crime have become a serious threat to Israel's security and democratic institutions. Yet the issue has not emerged as a major dividing line in the elections.

Why? Part of the answer is that Jewish violence in Judea and Samaria is politically inconvenient for both major blocs. On one side stands Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's coalition. On the other stands the loosely aligned "change bloc" seeking to replace it. That bloc includes parties with markedly different ideologies: Naftali Bennett's B'Yachad, Avigdor Lieberman's Yisrael Beiteinu, Gadi Eisenkot's Yashar and Yair Golan's Democrats. They agree on the need for political change, but they do not share a common position on the future of the settlements, Palestinian statehood or the long-term status of Judea and Samaria.

The reason settler violence has not become a defining campaign issue becomes even clearer once two different questions are separated. The first is straightforward: How should Israel deal with violence committed by Israeli Jews against Palestinians? The second is much broader: What should Israel do about the settlements, its control over Judea and Samaria and the long-term future of the territory? These are not the same question.

Distinguishing between these two lines of thought matters because the Israeli opposition may be united in its condemnation of settler violence, but it remains deeply divided over the settlements themselves. Yashar does not advocate for a general evacuation of

settlements. B'Yachad supports Jewish settlement and opposes the establishment of a Palestinian state. Yisrael Beiteinu supports strengthening Jewish settlement and Israeli control in parts of Judea and Samaria. The Democrats take a substantially different position, including opposition to illegal settler outposts and an explicit commitment to fighting what they call "Jewish terrorism."

There is, however, potentially a much broader consensus around law, order and state authority. That is where the political framing becomes important.

The Netanyahu camp does not entirely deny the existence of Jewish violence. After recent incidents in Samaria, Netanyahu condemned what he called a "handful of rioters" and called on law enforcement authorities to prosecute them. Foreign Minister Gideon Sa'ar described those responsible as criminals who should be dealt with severely.

This framing treats the problem primarily as one of law enforcement: Extremists are committing crimes, and the state must enforce the law against them.

That approach is also reflected in a significant proposal by Defense Minister Israel Katz. In August, Katz instructed the IDF to prepare a plan for transferring civilian enforcement involving Israelis in Judea and Samaria to the Israel Police, in part to reduce the military's involvement in civilian law-and-order incidents.

This position is coherent: If Israel regards itself as sovereign over the territory, Israeli civilians who violate the law should be dealt with by the police, while the military should concentrate on security threats.

But this logic is not inherently a right-wing argument. It can serve the change bloc just as well. The change bloc can describe Jewish violence as evidence of governmental failure, loss of control and the erosion of state authority. That allows parties with very different views about the future of Judea and Samaria to agree on an immediate principle: The state must enforce its laws.

For politicians such as Bennett, Lieberman and Eisenkot, this is a much easier political proposition than making the future of the settlements and their legal status the central issue.

This is where Yair Golan, leader of the Democrats, stands out. Golan does not limit himself to terms such as "rioters," "criminals," "extremists" or "lawlessness." He repeatedly uses the term "Jewish terrorism." While the change bloc party leaders have on occasion used that phrase in English, they do not often use it in Hebrew. Golan is the one who uses the term repeatedly.

In August, Golan said explicitly: "What we are seeing today is Jewish terrorism that is receiving legitimacy from the Israeli government." He has also presented the fight against Jewish terrorism as one of the issues on which he believes the change bloc can agree.

This choice of language is more consequential than it may initially appear. Once the phenomenon is called terrorism, difficult questions follow: If this is terrorism, should Israel not fight it with some of the tools it uses to fight other forms of terrorism? If Palestinian terrorism is understood as a national security threat requiring intelligence, organized investigation and preventive measures, what should happen when the perpetrators are Jewish Israelis?

Israel has developed extensive counterterrorism mechanisms for dealing with Palestinian terrorism: intelligence gathering, investigations by the Shin Bet internal security and counterintelligence service, administrative detention, military and security operations and other exceptional legal tools.

That does not mean those tools should automatically be applied identically to Israeli citizens. There are important legal and practical differences. But calling settler violence “Jewish terrorism” inevitably raises the question of whether it should be treated as more than ordinary criminality, and is important to harnessing the attention and power of the state to address it even as it labels it something that is an outlier.

The future of Judea and Samaria may be one of the most consequential questions facing Israel, but voters appear to be focusing more immediately on security, the economy, military service and Netanyahu’s political future. Here’s the dilemma all the parties are facing: The issue of settler violence can be important enough to condemn, but too politically complicated to campaign on.

For the Netanyahu bloc, emphasizing the systemic nature of settler extremism risks highlighting failures within a political constituency that is central to its coalition. For the change bloc, emphasizing it as a distinct political problem risks reopening the much larger argument over the settlements — an issue on which the change bloc itself remains divided.

Nevertheless, ahead of the elections, politicians can demand vigorous enforcement against violent settlers without supporting the

dismantling of settlements. One can oppose illegal outposts without opposing the settlement enterprise as a whole. And one can regard Jewish violence primarily as a security, governance and even terrorism problem without having a position on the ultimate political status of Judea and Samaria, as important as that may be.