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POLICY ANALYSIS

# The price tag organization and the price tag paid by Palestinians

Dr. Mahmoud Muhareb | March, 2012

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Series: POLICY ANALYSIS

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## Introduction

This paper seeks to identify a phenomenon that has emerged in recent years among Israeli Jewish settlers in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, called the “price tag”. It appears to be a loose organization though it is directed by a central leadership. This organization seeks to further strengthen Jewish settlement in the West Bank and, to achieve this aim, uses violence and terrorism, primarily against Palestinians and their property in the West Bank, as well as “price tagging” the different departments of the Israeli authorities in protest against them not fully adopting their policies over settlement. The paper covers the background of the emergence of the price tag organization, its organizational structure and composition, and the intellectual background it bases itself on.

Since its further occupation of Palestinian territories in 1967, Israel has been continuously strengthening its settlement in these areas. Through perseverance to increase settlement, successive Israeli governments aim to create a new demographic reality in the West Bank, seeking to Judaize the largest area possible in preparation of its annexation to Israel as a future solution, whether this is a de facto and statutory solution imposed by Israel or one agreed upon with the Palestinian leadership. All Israeli governments initiated, in the past decades and in the vast majority of cases, the establishment and expansion of Jewish settlements, and an increase in the number of settlers, in the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

Several factors control the pace of the increase in settlements in the West Bank, particularly the Judaization and expansion policies that all Israeli governments are committed to; these policies are broadly supported by Israeli society, political parties, pressure groups, and active settlement forces in Israeli society, however, the governments change, whichever government is in power. On the other hand, both the Palestinian resistance and international pressure on Israel, particularly from the United States administration, limit the pace of settlement, with the resistance causing a serious slowdown in settlement growth during the first and second Intifadas was observed. When Israeli governments are exposed to pressure from the international community, particularly from the US administration, they respond to these pressures in some cases by declaring, in rare instances, an official and formal freeze to settlements, while continuing with it in practice under several pretexts, particularly completing the construction of what has already been started or what had the final approval of the

planning committees. From 1967 until today, settlement activity has never actually stopped, but its pace has changed from time to time because of international pressure to stop it or reduce it. There is less settlement activity during these times of pressure, particularly from the US administration, but it soon picks up once international pressure recedes. Today, the number of Israeli settlers in the West Bank has reached 550,000 settlers, which is equivalent to 10 percent of the total population of Israeli Jews. Two hundred and fifty thousand settlers live in occupied East Jerusalem and 300,000 in the rest of the West Bank. Israel gives utmost importance to strengthening Jewish settlement in occupied East Jerusalem as the Israeli government and different Israeli settlement institutions are working on doubling the number of Jewish settlers in East Jerusalem over the next two decades. An Israeli report has revealed the presence of 50,000 housing units in various stages of planning to be built in occupied East Jerusalem. It is expected that some will be built in existing Israeli settlements and others in the Arab neighborhoods of East Jerusalem.<sup>1</sup>

The settlers always push the Israeli government to build more new settlements in the West Bank, expand existing settlements and increase the overall number of settlers there. Their pressure often increases at the times when the Israeli government responds to international pressure and eases the pace or partly freezes settlement activity.<sup>2</sup> The settlers often construct outpost settlements that are not officially licensed by the Israeli government, but are established with the hidden encouragement and support of the government or some of the government coalition parties. In the mid-1990s, against a backdrop of settler resentment over the slowing of settlement pace on one hand, and the intensification of the conflict over the fate of the West Bank on the other, settlers proceeded to establish outposts on the hills in various areas of the West Bank at the direct and open invitation of Ariel Sharon, during his contest with Netanyahu over the leadership of the Likud Party when the latter was prime minister. These activities occurred without obtaining official permission, though they received the

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<sup>1</sup> Nir Hasson, "Plans to build 50 thousand additional housing units in East Jerusalem municipality," Ha'aretz, March 11, 2010, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/news/politics/1.1192933>.

<sup>2</sup> To learn more about Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories and the relations between the Israeli government, and the Israeli army and settlers, see the book: Akiva Eldar and Edith Zertal, *Lords of the Land: The war for Israel's settlements in the occupied territories, 1967-2004*, (Adoni Haaretz, Hametenhalim and Medinat Yisrael 1967-2004), (Or Yehuda: Kinneret ,Zamora-Bitan, Dvir, 2004).

financial support of some ministries and ruling elements in Israel. An official report on the settlement outposts revealed that many Israeli ministries and institutions facilitated, supported and financed the establishment of outpost settlements, and at the forefront were: the Ministry of Housing, the Ministry of Infrastructure, and the Ministry of Defense, as well as the Israeli Army, the Israeli Civil Administration in the West Bank and the World Zionist Organization Settlements Division.<sup>3</sup> The report said that the establishment of these outposts took place under a deceitful cover that everyone was aware of. It became familiar for a settler to submit a request to erect an antenna, farm or cultural institution on a hill and receive approval. This was then set up and connected to the electricity grid, followed by the building of a guard house, which is also connected to the electricity grid; they then proceed to build a hard-dirt road and pave the ground for mobile home sites, bringing mobile homes to the site and announce the establishment of an outpost. The number of outpost settlements established in the West Bank up until 2005 was over 105.<sup>4</sup> There is a tug of war between the settlers and the Israeli government over the issue of evacuating some of these outposts. When Israeli government departments remove houses from some outposts, thousands of settlers respond to these operations by rebuilding the houses and establishing further new outposts, so that the number of outposts has increased to number over 100 until now.<sup>5</sup> Against the backdrop of the settlers struggle to increase Jewish settlement in the West Bank and their opposition to the Israeli government's policy toward settlement and outposts, in addition to their hatred for Palestinians and the call for Israeli settlers to expel, oppress and kill Palestinians, a new settlement movement that is more radical and aggressive has emerged from among their ranks – the price tag.

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<sup>3</sup> Talia Sasson, unauthorized outposts, a report submitted to Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, (Mahezim belti morshim mogash larosh hamemshelah Ariel Sharon), (Jerusalem, 2004), Chapters V and VI, p.91 to 119. This report was submitted by Talia Sasson, a lawyer, to the Israeli prime minister who officially commissioned it as 343 pages of the most in-depth reports that studied and addressed the outposts. Talia Sasson recommended the removal of outposts as they are not officially licensed and therefore illegal under Israeli law; in 2004, there were 105 illegal outposts, but Sharon's government and successive Israeli governments did not implement this.

<sup>4</sup> The same source.

<sup>5</sup> B'Tselem report under the heading "Data on the Settlement,"

<http://btselem.org/hebrew/print/64529>.

## The price tag organization

The term *price tag* carries a double meaning. It is a label for terrorist activities carried out by Israeli settlers in the West Bank against Palestinians and their properties, and against the Israeli government's policy toward settlement. At the same time, it is a label for an Israeli settler terrorist organization that carries out operations, mainly against Palestinians, and signs these operations and its different activities with the name *price tag*. The price tag movement emerged in mid-2008, and, since that date, the movement has undertaken activities in four sectors:

Palestinians in the West Bank: Most of the price tag activities and operations take place among this group, as throughout the year, they target Palestinians in the West Bank on a daily basis, with actions such as: physical assaults on Palestinians, such as shooting at them and their homes, attacking villages and towns, uprooting trees, destroying crops or stealing produce, and setting fire to fields, cars, houses and mosques. Palestinian and Israeli organizations that work with human rights issues in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, monitoring and documenting Israeli violations of these rights, confirm that the price tag organization has, since it started its activities, carried out dozens of attacks each month against Palestinians and their properties in the West Bank.<sup>6</sup> In order to provide a picture of the type of attacks committed by the price tag movement, and the frequency of their occurrence, examples of attacks carried out by the movement during December 2011 that were documented by the human rights organization B'Tselem<sup>7</sup> will be showcased here, providing a microcosm of what the price tag movement has done during the remaining months of the year.

On December 3, 2011, settlers from *price tag* threw stones at a Palestinian taxi carrying Palestinian women when it passed near the Givat Gilad outpost. When the driver

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<sup>6</sup> See the reports by the Applied Research Institute – Jerusalem, Arij (<http://www.arij.org>) and the B'Tselem reports – “The Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories” (<http://www.btselem.org>).

<sup>7</sup> “Settler violence against Palestinians and Palestinian property, December 2011,”

[http://www.btselem.org/hebrew/settler\\_violence/20111229\\_settler\\_violence\\_in\\_dec2012](http://www.btselem.org/hebrew/settler_violence/20111229_settler_violence_in_dec2012).

complained to some of the Israeli soldiers who were situated at a distance of only 100 meters from the stone-throwing settlers, the soldiers refused to intervene.

On December 7, 2011, *price tag* settlers, under the cover of darkness, made an attack on the village of Barqin that is close to the Palestinian town of Salfit; they set fire to the village mosque and to a car and a tractor in the village, writing anti-Arab slogans in Hebrew on the wall.

On December 12, 2011, *price tag* settlers attacked the village of Assira at night and broke the windows of six houses with stones and damaged several cars. On the same day, they threw stones at a Palestinian car near the Karny Shomron outpost, which resulted in the smashing of the car's windscreen.

On December 14, 2011, *price tag* settlers attacked three Palestinian villages: Douma, Yasooof and Hares in the West Bank's north. The settlers burned two Palestinian trucks in Douma, where the Aish Kodesh settlement outpost has been established, and the attackers wrote several slogans including "Mitzpe Yitzhar – mutual insurance". *Price tag* activists also set fire to two other cars, one in the village of Yasooof and another in Hares village, and wrote the slogan "price tag" on the walls in Hebrew next to the cars that were set ablaze.

On December 15, 2011, at dawn, settlers set fire to a mosque in the town of Burqa on which the Migron outpost was established, and they wrote, in Hebrew, "war" and "Mitzpe Yitzhar".

On December 19, 2011, settlers wrote obscene slogans against the Prophet Mohammed on the walls of the mosque in the village of Beni Naim, near Hebron and wrote underneath them "price tag" and "Yitzhar".

On December 21, 2011, settlers uprooted 30 olive trees in Khirbet Shweikeh, south of Hebron, writing "price tag" and "Yitzhar."

It is clear from investigations conducted by B'Tselem and other organizations that monitor settler attacks on Palestinians and their properties that the Israeli Army were present in many cases when settlers launched raids on Palestinian villages in the West Bank and that they made no attempt to stop the raids. They only interfered in the final



stages of the raids when the Palestinians started defending themselves by throwing stones at the settlers.<sup>8</sup>

Secondly, looking at terrorist activity against Israeli peace activists who oppose the settlement policy and settlers, *price tag* wrote slogans on the walls of their homes, creating an atmosphere of terror and intimidation around them and threatening them with death. This threatening behavior usually occurs against Israeli peace leaders and activists when they try to remove a settlement outpost or house in the West Bank through the means of the official Israeli departments. They do this to dissuade them from their activities and punish them for their stance, putting a price tag on them for their opposition toward settlement in the West Bank. For instance, on November 6, 2011, a *price tag* follower threatened a Peace Now activist, the director of the Settlement Watch Committee at Peace Now, Hagit Ofran, with blowing up the offices of the movement in West Jerusalem. A person contacted her on the evening of that day from the internal phone of the building where the office of Peace Now is situated and told her that "the building will be blown up in five minutes," and then fled from the scene after writing the slogan *price tag* on the building walls. The Israeli police were called but did not find anything.<sup>9</sup> On the evening of November 8, 2011, *price tag* members then wrote slogans on the building where Ofran lived, like "Hagit Ofran, Rabin is waiting for you" (an inference that her fate will be the same as that of the assassinated late Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin) and "the revenge of Givat Asaf" (an outpost that the Israeli government is planning to evacuate), and "Greetings from Maoz Zion" (an outpost that was evacuated two days earlier).<sup>10</sup> In the wake of increasing threats and terrorist activities against peace activists in Israel that amounted to five in two months at the end of 2011, Israeli police placed a permanent guard on the MK Zehava Gal-On from the Meretz Party after death threats were made against her.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The same source.

<sup>9</sup> Oz Rosenberg, "Jerusalem offices of Peace Now evacuated after bomb threat," Ha'aretz, November 6, 2011, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/misc/article-print-page/1.1559676>.

<sup>10</sup> Oz Rosenberg, "Death threats sprayed on home of Peace Now activist," Ha'aretz, November 8, 2011, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/misc/article-print-page/1.1560919>.

<sup>11</sup> Jonathan Lis, "Israel MK Gal-On assigned bodyguard after death threats from right-wing extremists," <http://www.haaretz.co.il/misc/article-print-page/1.1582129>.

The third aspect looks at activities against Israeli government bodies, particularly against the Israeli Army and its bases, the Israeli police, the Israeli Civil Administration, and the general prosecution in Israel. Rabbi Yosef Elitzur has developed the intellectual foundations for “price tagging” the sections of the Israeli authorities that implement the policy of the Israeli government concerning the outposts, as will be detailed later, in order to deter the Israeli government from implementing the decision to evacuate them. On the back of this, *price tag* settlers have attacked two Israeli military bases in the West Bank on two occasions so far. On September 9, 2011, dozens of *price tag* settlers attacked the “Benjamin Command” military base near the Beit El settlement in the central West Bank, damaging 13 military vehicles and writing slogans condemning the Israeli Army in the wake of them demolishing several houses in the Migron outpost several days earlier.<sup>12</sup> On December 13, 2011, dozens of *price tag* members attacked the “Benjamin Command” military base in the West Bank near Qalqiliya. They damaged several military vehicles inside the military base, set the cars’ tires on fire, threw stones at officers and soldiers, and wounded the base commander in the head.<sup>13</sup> As a result of the ongoing dispute over the outposts, the *price tag* organization has increased its activities against different Israeli government bodies during recent months. *Price tag* activists used violence against Israeli Army soldiers and officers – “throwing rocks, and even fire bombs, at Israeli Army and border police patrol vehicles is no longer a rare incident, and physical altercations have also become almost routine.”<sup>14</sup>

Lastly, we look at activity against Palestinian Arabs inside the Green Line, including the burning of mosques and churches, and the destruction of their livelihoods (e.g., restaurants), and the tagging of slogans advocating their murder or expulsion from the country. In the last months of 2011, *price tag* committed significant hostile activities against Palestinian Arabs inside the Green Line. During this period, *price tag* activists burned a mosque in the Touba-Zangariyya village in the Galilee and a restaurant in Jaffa owned by a Palestinian, wrote racist anti-Arab slogans such as “Death to Arabs” inside two Arab cemeteries in Jaffa, one Muslim and another Christian, vandalized more

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<sup>12</sup> Anshel Pfeffer and Jonathan Lis, “Right-wing activists price tagging inside an Israeli military base,” Ha’aretz, September 9, 2011, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/misc/article-print-page/1.1438305>.

<sup>13</sup> Anshel Pfeffer and Chaim Levinson, “Dozens of rightists break into IDF base in West Bank, wound officer,” Ha’aretz, December 13, 2011, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/misc/article-print-page/1.1589961>.

<sup>14</sup> Anshel Pfeffer, “Israeli law is powerless in the settlements,” Ha’aretz, December 13, 2011, <http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/israeli-law-is-powerless-in-the-settlements-1.401187>.

than 25 tombs there, and left the slogan "price tag" written all over the scene of their crimes.<sup>15</sup>

## The beginning of the activity

At the end of June 2008, a large group of settlers held an extensive meeting in the "Yitzhar" settlement south of Nablus in the West Bank. The participants discussed the dispute with the Israeli government over the settlement policy and the strategy that the settlers should follow. This meeting included hundreds of activists from the various Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank. The goal of the meeting was to dissuade the Israeli government from its policy toward settlements and deter them from further pursuing a policy that would reduce the pace of the expansion of settlements in the West Bank, exerting pressure on the government to not demolish houses built by settlers in the outposts without obtaining an official governmental permit for establishing it.<sup>16</sup> In order to achieve this, the meeting's purpose was to mobilize the largest possible number of settlers from different Israeli settlements in the West Bank to carry out a range of activities against the Israeli government's policy and against its various departments that implement this policy. Settlers participating in this meeting decided that in order to force the Israeli government to change its policy it should be "price tagged" for any activity carried out by it or any of its bodies charged with blocking or slowing down settlement.<sup>17</sup> In order to avoid any confusion or ambiguity concerning the goals that they were seeking to achieve or who the activities were committed in the name of, those who carried out operations wrote "price tag" at the site of their actions.

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<sup>15</sup> Jack Khoury and Chaim Levinson, "Vandals set fire to Arab restaurant in Jaffa suspected 'price tag' attack," Ha'aretz, October 31, 2011, <http://www.haaretz.com/news/national/vandals-set-fire-to-arab-restaurant-in-jaffa-in-suspected-price-tag-attack-1.392931>.

<sup>16</sup> Hagit Rotenberg, "decision makers will think twice next time," Arutz Sheva 7, June 29, 2008, <http://www.inn.co.il/Controls/SendFriend.aspx?print+1&type=7&item=7528>.

<sup>17</sup> The same source.

## Organizational structure and activity

It is obvious that since the emergence of the price tag movement, its activities did not originate from one or several settlements, but from all Israeli outposts in the West Bank. The group operates within the entirety of occupied Palestinian in the West Bank and anywhere inside the Green Line. The frequency and spread of its operations, the types of targets, the methods it uses and the reports written about them clarify that *price tag* is a secret organization with a secret central command that directs its activities and operations and accurately chooses its targets. This does not mean that everyone involved in the more general activities of *price tag*, like demonstrations and road blocking is a member of the organization, which are the activities the fans and supporters of *price tag* mainly participate in. It is clear that the more aggressive operations carried out by *price tag* are secretly planned by the central command and executed by small and secret groups of members. A report by the Israeli security agency, Shin Bet, was leaked to Ha'aretz newspaper following actions by *price tag* against the Israeli Army and peace activists in Israel, and points out that *price tag* activists are now working in small cells and groups that are well-organized and secret, so much so that Shin Bet is unable to penetrate it. The report added that some of these cells and groups are monitoring Palestinian villages and communities in the West Bank to collect information about them, ways to reach, and escape from, them. The report also says that some of these groups are monitoring Israeli peace activists, collecting information about them in preparation to carry out actions against them. The report points out that these operations and activities are in fact terrorist<sup>18</sup> in nature. In addition, *price tag* groups are monitoring the movements of the Israeli army and collecting information about it and the operations intended to evacuate houses in settlement outposts. Israeli journalist Nadav Shragai, who specializes in settlers' affairs and activities, estimated that the number of those involved in price tag activities in 2008 exceeded 3,000, most of whom come from ideological religious settlements and

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<sup>18</sup> Chaim Levinson, "Shin Bet: extreme right-wing groups are forming into organized terror cells," Ha'aretz, September 13, 2011, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/misc/article-print-pages/1.1471635>.

from Jewish religious schools (Yeshiva) that are spread throughout the West Bank.<sup>19</sup> The activities of settlers who are involved in price tag activities are increasing in number every year and are widely supported by all settlers in the West Bank, many Israeli parties, and a wide sector of the Israeli society, as long as activities target Palestinians in the West Bank. When *price tag* targets the army and Israeli peace activists, this support is reduced.

*Price tag* as an organization encompasses a wide-range of people and groups, including those that are Jewish politico-religious, as well as various movements and formations that are concentrated in the West Bank. They are:

- Rabbis from the religio-national Zionist movement and the Haredi Jewish religious movement
- Graduates and students of Yeshivas that are spread across the West Bank and inside the Green Line
- Activists and followers of the Kach Movement, which has been legally banned since 1994, and activists supporting the National Union Party and the Jewish Home Party
- The “hilltop youth,” who are young settlers that have been active in the establishment of settlement outposts in the West Bank since the mid-1990s. This group consists of different categories and types, many of whom come from the religio-national Zionist movement, and others who are second-generation Jewish West Bank settlers. They seek to continue the process of settlement and the establishment of new settlements, as did their parents, and not just increase the number of settlers in the existing settlements. Some are graduates of Yeshivas that are situated in Israeli towns and cities inside the Green Line, while others are graduates of Jewish religious juvenile correctional facilities that were set up specifically to deal with deviant Israeli youth inside the Green Line in order to integrate them back into Jewish life.

## Intellectual Foundations

The *price tag* activists, along with their supporters and wider audience, embrace a racist viewpoint based on intense hatred of Palestinian Arabs. They call for their murder, extermination, or expulsion from the Occupied Palestinian Territories, in addition to the

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<sup>19</sup> Nadav Shragai, “The settlers’ new policy: price tag on every evacuation done by the army,” Ha’aretz, October 3, 2008, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/misc/article-print-page/1.1352560>.

strengthening of Jewish settlements in the Occupied Palestinian West Bank and the acceleration of its Judaization and annexation to Israel. Until the extermination or expulsion of Palestinians takes place, *price tag* actively calls for making the life of Palestinians in the West Bank unbearable, to a degree beyond the limits of endurance through tyranny and maltreatment. *Price tag* theorists, leaders and intellectuals compete in coming up with increasingly extreme calls for action and ideas to expel or exterminate Palestinians.

There is also competition among many Israeli parties, some of which are involved in the government coalition, such as the National Union Party and the Jewish Home Party, to actively support *price tag* in its terrorism and repeated calls to keep Palestinians out of the occupied territories, bringing in settlers instead. The theorists, intellectuals, and leaders of *price tag* do not attempt to hide their calls for the killing and exterminating of Palestinian Arabs. On the contrary, they are proud of their racist ideas, and publish them openly in books and articles, as well as preach them publicly. For example, in order to strengthen the settlements in the West Bank and remove the Palestinian owners, Yitzhak Shapira and Yosef Elitzur, the settler Rabbis of Yitzhar and two of the most prominent leaders of *price tag*, in their book *The King's Torah*, released in 2009, not only called for the killing of Palestinians, but made it a religious duty to do so. In their book, they stressed that Palestinian men and women, elders and children should be killed without exception, with a large section of the book devoted to the necessity of killing Palestinian children.<sup>20</sup> In addition to the call for the oppression, expulsion and killing of Palestinians, many of the religious leaders argue that they must seize the property of Palestinians and steal their agricultural produce.

Rabbi Mordechai Eliyahu issued a religious edict during his visit to the settlement of Gilad Farm, located on Palestinian lands in the Occupied West Bank, permitting the stealing of olives from Palestinians.<sup>21</sup> In 2009, Rabbi Yosef Elitzur published a lengthy

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<sup>20</sup> For more, see the book: Yitzhak Shapira and Yosef Elitzur, *The King's Torah*, (Yitzhar: Biblical Institute of Yeshivat Od Yosef Chai (*Joseph Still Lives*), 2009). For more details, see Mahmoud Muhareb's review of *The King's Torah* published on October 13, 2011, on the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies' website,

<http://dohainstitute.org/Home/Details?entityID=5d045bf3-2df9-46cf-90a0-d92cbb5dd3e4&resourceId=64c6f546-a5f8-4402-a13c-3ae4930c226b>.

<sup>21</sup> Ben-Dror Yemini, "The Jihadi Right: Terrorism Protected by the State," *Ma'ariv*, December 14, 2011, [http://www.nrg.co.il/Scripts/artPrint/artPrintNew.php?channelName=channel\\_news&ts=14042008120049](http://www.nrg.co.il/Scripts/artPrint/artPrintNew.php?channelName=channel_news&ts=14042008120049)

article, titled "Mutual Guarantee," that laid out the intellectual and political guidelines for the actions of the price tag organization.<sup>22</sup> It is important to review the ideas and central issues described in this article for two reasons. First, *price tag* is still implementing the actions described in the article, almost to the letter. Second, the article explains in detail the philosophy of the group toward the different arms of the Israeli government, including making the Israeli army pay, by attacking its military bases, something that has never happened before in the history of Israel.

Elitzur emphasizes in his article that no Israelis should ever forget, not even for one moment, that the real enemy is the Palestinian Arabs who are trying to occupy the country and who are confusing the minds of corrupt Jews who are too removed from the Torah. The article also called for the use of force against Palestinians, and for defeating them and overcoming them using violence. Elitzur devotes a large section of his article, which he wrote during the official settlement freeze period proclaimed by the Netanyahu government, to stinging criticism of the government in Israel and to outlining the foundations of how to "price tag" the government. The writer perceives that the leadership of Israel consists of people who have lost their Jewish sensibilities and values, including the Israeli prime minister, the majority of ministers, Knesset members, senior army officers, and senior staff in various government ministries.

Elitzur went on to criticize the attitude of the leaders of the settlements in the West Bank. He points out that despite the pressure they place on the Israeli government to increase Jewish settlements, and their success in some cases to bring the government with them, and in remaining within the bounds of the law, they exist as part of the establishment and never leave it, especially when the government issues orders to evacuate homes in settlement outposts. The article then moved on to the Israeli government's treatment of Palestinians both in the Occupied Palestinian Territories in 1967 and those inside the Green Line. It claimed that the Israeli government was too lenient with them, and lambasted the government because it did not brutalize the Palestinians and yielded to their demands while suppressing the settlers because they are part of the state. The writer summed up by denying the fact that the Palestinians are people living under occupation, turning the facts around by using the phrase "people under occupation" to describe the settlers.

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<sup>22</sup> Yosef Elitzur, "The Mutual Guarantee Strategy", *Hechal Yehuda Journal*, issue 16, 2009.



The writer asserts: "what we need to do now is clear: become a people living under occupation. At that point, the government loses its moral and effective power as well." Only then, and "at the moment when we realize that we are a strong Jewish power facing a strong force that desires to strangle Judaism, can we begin to fight and achieve victory in this confrontation." In this context, the writer mentions that the Israeli government's decision to freeze settlements may in fact be a blessing because it may lead many to think deeply and accelerate their delivery from their psychological relationship with the state of Israel. When the mind is liberated, it is free to take up work and activities. The more free the mind, the more it can lead to accomplishing "great works," primarily against the Palestinians, and these can bring about significant results.

The writer calls for the adoption of a policy of mutual guarantee between the settlers, which means:

1. Settlers must stand united against the steps taken by the Israeli authorities to reduce the pace of settlement or to demolish houses in some settlement outposts.
2. The settlers themselves determine when and where confrontation will take place with the Israeli authorities and the various bodies that implement government policy on settlements. The settlers should not wait for the Israeli authorities to take action. The writer calls for intervention and operations to deter different Israeli authorities from any action against settlers and their settlement activity, including conducting operations against the Israeli Army, its leaders and military bases, and sabotaging its weapons. Also, they must conduct operations against the Israeli police and its top officials who are responsible for following-up on the activities of the settlers; against the Israeli civil administration in the Occupied West Bank; against senior members of the public prosecution service and its representatives in Israel; and against Israeli peace activists.
3. The writer emphasizes that "we must always remember that the Arabs are the real enemy," and that violence should be used against them constantly because it keeps the settlers in the permanent state of alert, and ready for any emergency.<sup>23</sup>

## The position of the Israeli government toward price tag

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<sup>23</sup> Previous Source.



Although *price tag* has assaulted the Palestinians and their property almost daily throughout the year, including burning 15 mosques in the Occupied West Bank since 2008, the Israeli government, be it the government of Olmert or Netanyahu, never held a specific meeting or set aside time in its regular meetings, to address the activities and terrorist attacks committed by *price tag* against the Palestinians and their property in the West Bank. As long as the activity is targeting Palestinians, their property, and their lands, the Israeli government did not/is not doing anything to stop them, but is content with releasing statements in its name, or from one of its ministers, condemning such activities.

However, when *price tag* targets the Israeli authority or violently opposes the evacuation of a house in one of the settlement outposts, the Israeli government puts it at the top of its agenda. For example, at the beginning of November 2008, the Israeli government discussed the violence practiced by the settlers and *price tag* activists against the Israeli security forces that carried out the evacuation of one of the settlement outposts. It is useful to review the debate conducted by the Olmert government regarding this issue, and how it was addressed: Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak, the minister directly in charge of the Occupied Palestinian Territories, including settler activity, highlighted the fact that the majority of settlers in the Palestinian West Bank respect the law, and that they are living in their settlements due to the initiatives and support of successive Israeli governments. Barak claimed that only a few of settlers practice violence against the Israeli Army and police.<sup>24</sup>

Shin Bet's chief Yuval Diskin pointed to the increasing gap between broad sections of settlers and the institutions of government in Israel. While in the past these settlers achieved their goals by convincing the Israeli institutions of government in friendly ways, today they use the slogan "Victory through War". Diskin added that the "hilltop youth" are active in *price tag* and are disrupting the Israeli army's operations to control settler activity. He foresaw that if the government took a decision to evacuate outposts and isolated settlements, then the scale of confrontation with the settlers would be much more than those that took place when they implemented the disengagement plan. He added: "A study conducted by Shin Bet shows that settlers are increasingly willing to use of violence not limited to throwing stones, but including the use of firearms in order to thwart this plan or others that include the evacuation of

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<sup>24</sup> Chezki Ezra, "Shin Bet: Hilltop youth active in price tag", Channel Seven site, November 2, 2008, <http://www.inn.co.il/Controls/SendFriend.ashx?print=1&type=0&item=181133>.

settlements." He added: "This situation is very worrying, and the security forces are susceptible to severe aggravation by certain groups of these settlers, and the government does not know how to deal with this matter."<sup>25</sup>

Meni Mazuz, the attorney general of the Israeli government, joined the debate and pointed out that in recent years, there has been an escalation in settler activities; he called on ministers to submit concrete proposals to address this matter. He also confirmed that the application of the law against settlers over the past years has been very limited, saying: "During the past years we have looked to the security establishment to carry out its duties in this regard, but they did not respond, nor do their work." Mazuz added that the Israeli government has broadcast a mixed message to settlers over the past years.

On one hand, they issue statements against some settler activities, but, on the other hand, they turn a blind eye to settler activities on the ground. Indeed, state institutions helped them to break laws and decisions. The attorney general concluded that, "it is necessary to have one message, and the administrative tools and steps to implement against settlers who have broken the law, including decisions to deport them from the occupied territories." The Minister of Justice Daniel Friedman said that the Israeli government is using double speak to settlers who have broken the law. He called for action against settlers in conflict with the law and said that it is important to ask, "Who is funding them? Who is providing them with work and employing them? The state is paving roads for them and connecting them to electricity, water and sewage infrastructure network. This must be stopped."

Minister Haim Ramon mentions the important issue of the settlers' success in deterring the Israeli government from attempts to evacuate settlement outposts, using violence against the police and the army during the evacuation of the settlement outpost Amona. Since the confrontation at Amona, the government has not evacuated any settlement outposts. Ramon spoke concisely about the problem and its cause saying that, "the settlers consider it a success for them, as there is apartheid against the Palestinians on one hand, and on the other hand there is favoritism toward settlers who have broken the law." Minister Benjamin Ben-Eliezer reminded the ministers that he had said at a meeting of the Israeli government on the eve of the killing of Yitzhak

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<sup>25</sup> Previous Source

Rabin that "there will be a killing," but no one had listened to him. Then he added that "this is going to keep happening; these settlers are not like us. They have evil thoughts. We are stupid because we are afraid, and they are reading our weakness. We must arrest hundreds of settlers."<sup>26</sup>

Despite lengthy discussions and harsh criticisms made by several ministers regarding the activity of *price tag* activists, and the violence of settlers against the Israeli police and army, the Israeli government led by Ehud Olmert would not take action against these settlers who have violated the Israeli occupation law. It did not freeze any of the various types of support provided to them. Instead the Olmert government gave into their demands and halted activities against settlement outposts, which were already limited. At the same time as it continued to talk about peace and its negotiations with the Palestinian leadership, the government increased the number of settlements and support for the settlers, including aide for *price tag*, and to the settlers in the outposts, which demonstrates that Olmert's government was considering them above the law.

*Price tag* and the settlers oppress Palestinians throughout the year, abusing them and carrying out terrorist attacks against them, yet the Israeli government does not stand in the way, nor do they make any effort to put an end to their actions against the Palestinians. Moreover, the Israeli police rarely open an investigation into the terrorist operations of *price tag* and the thousands of attacks by settlers on Palestinians and their properties. In the few instances when an investigation was opened, no one was put on trial. An Israeli report mentioned that between 2005 and 2010 the Israeli police in the Occupied West Bank investigated 97 cases of assault on Palestinians, out of the thousands of attacks perpetrated by settlers, but did not indict any settlers, nor place any settlers on trial.<sup>27</sup>

*Price tag's* activity increased their four areas of operation after the formation of Benjamin Netanyahu's government at the beginning of 2009. This happened for a variety of reasons, most importantly:

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<sup>26</sup> Previous Source

<sup>27</sup> Ohad Hamou, "The activities of price tag: 97 investigations and zero indictments," Channel two site, October 20, 2010, <http://www.mako.co.il/news-military/security/Article-0ea1ca723aacb21004.htm>.

1. *Price tag's* activity against the Palestinians and their property in the Occupied West Bank was not only tolerated by the Netanyahu government, but also encouraged by ministers of some of the parties participating in the government coalition. The Netanyahu coalition government includes far-right parties, which openly call for the oppression and expulsion of Palestinians from the Occupied West Bank.
2. The partial and temporary freeze on settlement activity by the Netanyahu government, under pressure from the US, enraged the *price tag* leadership and the settlers, particularly as they thought that a government composed of the right and the far-right would hasten to intensify settlement activity and support for settlers.
3. There are no political groups with any real control or impact on politics and society in Israel that can seriously stand up against the activity and operations perpetrated throughout the year by *price tag* against the Palestinians in the Occupied West Bank, with only a few associations and political groups issuing reports or statements denouncing such operations from time to time.
4. Most important of all, in the absence of Palestinian resistance, even on a civilian level, and of Arab and international pressure, *price tag*, along with its audience and supporters, plays an important role in settlement politics as it spearheads settlement activity in the Occupied West Bank, and receives widespread support from the majority of the Israeli community and its various elite groups. The role of the settlers, driven by *price tag*, is to continuously create a reality of new settlement activity in the Occupied West Bank, to Judaize the largest possible area of the Occupied West Bank, and annex these areas to Israel. *Price tag* and its audience are the driving forces behind the achievement of this goal, while at the same time pushing the Israeli government to increase and strengthen settlements. They continuously push the government to stop the dismantling of settlement outposts, by carrying out operations against the different arms of government, such as the military, the police and the public prosecution service.

## The attack on the military base

The confidence of *price tag's* leaders in themselves and in their integral political and historical role in serving the settlement project has reached such a degree that in December 2011 more than fifty followers of the organization launched an unarmed, quick, night attack on an Israeli military base in the Occupied West Bank. They

assaulted the soldiers and officers at the base, destroyed some of its contents, and injured the base commander, who was hit on the head by a stone thrown by one of the attackers.<sup>28</sup> This operation was aimed at deterring the army from evacuating a settlement outpost near the military base. The investigation into the identity of those who carried out this operation later found out that several dozens of those who participated came from the religious school Yeshivat Center of the Rabbi Kook, located in West Jerusalem, which is attended by the elite of the national, religious Zionist party.

Unlike *price tag's* operations against the Palestinians, their attack on the Israeli military base provoked anger in the media and public discontent in Israel. Many senior journalists, political analysts, opinion leaders and political party leaders started a call for the punishment of *price tag* for its operation against the military base, and for it to put an end to attacks on the army and its officers. The journalist Ron Ben-Yishai sharply criticized how political and military institutions are dealing with the price tag phenomenon. He began his article by stating, "the attitudes and reactions of politicians, settler leaders, and military leaders do not cause less indignation than the Jewish terrorism itself which we are witnessing these days. They and the prime minister are condemning and denouncing these acts and are well aware of what they have to do to put an end to them. They all realize that in order to fight community crime, which is the so-called group *price tag*, it should be defined first and above all as a crime, and then addressed in the same way that the police and the prosecution in Israel deal with organized crime. But instead they are not doing anything."<sup>29</sup> Ben-Yishai said that the Israeli Army is dealing with *price tag* with kid gloves, and attributed this to the following reasons: first, senior and middle ranking military commanders fear the political and legal lobby that support the price tag policy since army leaders do not want to get involved in squabbles with the supporters of *price tag*. Second, many officers and soldiers who serve in the Occupied West Bank are sympathetic to the ideology and activities of *price tag* and similar groups. Some officers and soldiers provide the activists

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<sup>28</sup> Anshel Pfeffer and Chaim Levinson, "Dozens of right-wing activists vandalized and attacked a brigade commander; no arrests," *Haaretz*, December 13, 2011, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/misc/article-print-page/1.1589961>.

<sup>29</sup> Ron Ben-Yishai, "The fear of the right-wing lobby, which paralyzes the officers", Ynet website, December 14, 2011, <http://www.ynet.co.il/Ext/Comp/ArticleLayout/CdaArticlePrintPreview/1, 2506, L-4161335, 00.html>.

with information about army plans and operations against them in advance, helping them prepare for and stand up to army action against them.<sup>30</sup>

The journalist Yael Paz-Melamed stated that as long as the Netanyahu government is in power there is no way that any limit will be placed on *price tag* activities. The government responds to the requests of the settlers, so if the police arrest two or three settlers in conflict with the law, the rabbis put pressure on party leaders who in turn put pressure on the appropriate government party. The detainees are then released, *price tag* actions continue, and their settlement outposts remain untouched. Paz-Melamed concluded that "the Israeli government is the living spirit that supports ultra-extremists" who are educated in religious schools which are funded by the state, and which drive them to extremism.<sup>31</sup>

Sternhell Zeev, a professor of political science at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, realized the political function of the *price tag* policy and its role in serving the settlement project as a whole in the Occupied West Bank. He said in his article, that *price tag*, and similar groups, can be likened to the racist phenomena that emerged in Europe between the two world wars, and that this racism *price tag* represents is the leading force in the fight of the Israeli settlements in the Occupied West Bank. Sternhell added that the operations carried out by *price tag* and the activities of the settlers are determining the limits of Israel's strength. On the one hand, they deepen Israel's expansion and control of the Palestinian land and people. On the other hand, even if the Israeli right-wing was not in power, Israel's policy towards the Occupied Palestinian Territories would not drastically change because settler gangs control the Occupied Palestinian Territories in cooperation with the Israeli Army and police.

Sternhell added that these settlers can start a violent uprising against any Israeli government that does not serve their interests. In these circumstances, all negotiations with the Palestinians to reach an agreement are merely a sad joke because the society and the government institutions in Israel stand helpless in front of the "rule of the

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<sup>30</sup> Same source

<sup>31</sup> Yael Paz-Melamed, "The Government of Israel in its existing make-up," *Ma'ariv*, December 15, 2011, [http://www.nrg.co.il/Scripts/artPrint/artPrintNew.php?channel=1&channelName=channel\\_news&ts=14042008120049](http://www.nrg.co.il/Scripts/artPrint/artPrintNew.php?channel=1&channelName=channel_news&ts=14042008120049).

settlers that is based on intimidation and blackmail."<sup>32</sup> He pointed to the fact that the settlers enjoy broad support in Israeli society. Furthermore, they have allies from the rightwing, which represents the Israeli nationalist radicals, and whether they are secular or religious, they all have common rules and goals. They believe that Jewish supremacy is the fundamental basis for the existence of Israel and Zionism. Sternhell added that the Israeli nationalist, racist Jews are crystallizing ethnic cohesion through the hatred of the other and of strangers, just as the nationalist, racist Europeans did in the dark period of the last century, and racists in Europe do today. They believe that citizenship is an artificial term, thereby considering the community of citizens in the state, which includes Arab citizens as well, an artificial society. Therefore, this society is inferior to the ethnic and religious Jewish community, which is the natural society in their opinion. Sternhell goes on to say that they also believe universal human rights and values, such as justice, equality and freedom, to be trivial values.<sup>33</sup>

The media and Israeli elites' handling of *price tag's* attack on the military base angered the Israeli journalist Gideon Levy. He has dismissed this wave of condemnation in an article titled "Thank You Right-wing Hooligans" because it pretends that settler violence is a new phenomenon, and it condemns and deplors it when it is directed against the Israeli Army, while it supports it implicitly or explicitly when it is directed toward the Palestinians. Levy said in his article that this isn't a new phenomenon, and that settler violence hasn't increased; no one has crossed any red lines.

He added, "We have written reports about the settlers' attacks on Palestinians week after week, for many years. We have described how they threaten the Palestinians, beat their children on their way to school, throw their garbage at Palestinian mothers, unleash their dogs to attack elderly Palestinians, kidnap shepherds, and steal Palestinian properties. They make their lives miserable at all times and in any location, in the mountains and the plains, in the street, the village and the city. They seize their land and build settlements on it. They control and strike against the Palestinians." Instead of punishing them, Israeli society embraces them. All Israeli governments, its military, and the majority of Israeli society has supported their attacks, and buoyed them with extensive budgets. They considered them pioneers of the society, the salt of

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<sup>32</sup> Zeev Sternhell, "Signs of the next war signals are already here", *Ha'aretz*, October 14, 2011, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/misc/article-print-page/1.1522619>.

<sup>33</sup> Same source



the earth. They also promised them that they would remain in their settlements forever. The settlers started considering the Occupied Palestinian Territories as their own country and themselves as the masters. They believed that they are allowed to do anything they want in it. Gideon Levy called at the end of his article to "put an end to the settlement project as a whole and to remove it from the Occupied Palestinian Territories, and to end the unbearable illegal and immoral reality taking place in the backyard of our homes."<sup>34</sup>

## Conclusion

The actions taken by *price tag* and the overall activity of the settlers against the Palestinians in the West Bank was in no way affected by the minor steps taken by the Israeli government against some of the activists after the attack on the military base in December 2011. There is almost a consensus among Israeli analysts that these activities, and the activities of all settlers, against the Palestinians is supported by large segments of the Israeli society, enjoying support, encouragement and protection from the governing system in Israel, and, above all, the army and parts of the Israeli government. Furthermore, the Israeli government, army, police, prosecutors, and the courts is incredibly lenient regarding this activity against Palestinians.

It is highly unlikely that settlers and *price tag* activists will stop their daily assaults on Palestinians. On the contrary, much evidence suggests that these attacks will increase both in frequency and intensity, in light of the continuing conflict over the fate of the West Bank. It is also to be expected that the Israeli government will not attempt to stop the attacks of *price tag* activists and settlers against Palestinians and their property, or even to alleviate it. The Israeli government and the settlers, spearheaded by *price tag* activists, consider attacks on Palestinians, their property and their lands, a part of the settlement process itself and of the struggle for the fate of the West Bank. The Israeli government and the settlers themselves, are aware of the important historical role being played by the settlers in the Judaization of the West Bank, and of their continuous hard work to devour more of its territory without stop, as well as their important role, along with the Israeli Army, in the oppression of Palestinians, in order to

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<sup>34</sup> Gideon Levy, "Thank you right-wing hooligans", *Ha'aretz*, December 18, 2011,

<http://www.haaretz.co.il/misc/article-print-page/1.1593977>.



break their will, humiliate them, reduce their aspirations, and tame them into accept the existence of settlements and settlers on their land.

One of the worst things that could happen to Palestinians living under occupation is that the robbing and looting of their land by settlers becomes routine, happening around the clock, and that attacks by settlers and the assault and abuse of those under occupation becomes part of their normal, everyday life. This is exactly what is happening in the Occupied Palestinian Territory. Sadly, there isn't any Palestinian or Arab strategy to deal with the settlements, the occupation, or the oppression. When a group of Palestinians is exposed to oppression by the settlers, or when land is confiscated and a settlement is built on it (which happens constantly), those under direct attack, who are having their land confiscated, are left to face the situation and deal with it alone.

This confrontation, however, is not among equals, and its outcome is known in advance. When *price tag* followers and crowds of settlers assault Palestinians, grab their land by force, and oppress them, supported and protected by the Israeli Army, they realize that they are leading a settlement project sponsored and guarded by a strong occupying state, which owns an army described as the most powerful of all the armies of the region put together, a state that has a monopoly on nuclear weapons in the region and enjoys a special relationship with the United States, which supports it, along with Europe and other countries.

Israeli settlement activity in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, accompanied by settler oppression of Palestinians, threatens the fate of the Palestinian territories and is an existential threat to the Palestinian people and their just cause. Israel has taken the utmost advantage of the absence of the Palestinian and Arab strategy to deal with settlement activity and occupation, and has benefited greatly from this by continuing settlement activity and doubling it. On top of this, Israel, at the same time, took advantage of the futile negotiations with the Palestinians that have lasted more than a decade and a half, using them as a cover for increasing settlements in the West Bank, and, in particular, occupied East of Jerusalem.

It is not enough for the Palestinian leadership to stop negotiations, nor is it sufficient for the Palestinian leadership to return to negotiations with Israel on stopping settlement activity. Israel is determined, as its leaders have made clear everywhere and to all listeners, that it will carry on building settlements, whether there are negotiations or not

because it does not lose anything by doing so.

Therefore, it is necessary to draw up a Palestinian national strategy that places the settlement, the settlers, and the struggle to end settlement and the occupation at the top of its priorities. The strategy should focus on the following:

1. The confiscation of land, the continuation of settlement activity, and the oppression by settlers against Palestinians should be core issues at the top of the agenda for the Palestinian National Movement.
2. The utmost importance must be given to any assault on Palestinians, the confiscation of their land, and, in general, an increase in settlement activity. Furthermore, they must take steps to address this struggle by means such as organizing general strikes, demonstrations and other forms of protest in the Occupied Palestinian Territories and in other places where Palestinians live.
3. There must be a comprehensive action plan that calls on Arab states, the League of Arab States, all countries in the world, and all international bodies to oppose and denounce settlement activity and the Israeli occupation, and then putting these stances into action. At the forefront of these actions is to impose sanctions on Israeli settlers in the 1967 Palestinian territories, and to boycott them and their products, preventing them from entering other countries. This is in preparation for demanding and imposing painful political and economic sanctions on Israel, making Israel pay, in order to force Israel to remove the settlements and end the occupation.