

Proximity to settlements in the West Bank shifts protest behavior toward higher-risk actions and increases perceived collective injustice

Nils Mallock ^{1,2} | Christian Krekel ¹

¹Department of Psychological and Behavioural Science, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK

²Department of War Studies, King's College London, London, UK

Correspondence

Nils Mallock, Department of Psychological and Behavioural Science, London School of Economics and Political Science, Connaught House, 63-65 Aldwych, WC2B 4EJ London, UK.
Email: nils.u.mallock@kcl.ac.uk

Abstract

Engagement in political conflict has been linked to various material and psychological motives, while the role of perceived collective injustice remains empirically contested. We examine this hypothesis for protest behavior in the West Bank. Since 1967, civilian Israeli settlements have been established here, making salient stark local inequalities. Across two primary and four secondary data collections ($N=8360$), exploiting geographical coordinates, we show that proximity to settlements increased the relative likelihood of participating in higher-risk political action (between +41% and +82%) at the cost of moderate protest (−30% to −36%), flanked by corresponding attitudinal shifts. Effects were spatially limited to a 3-kilometer distance, time-insensitive, and validated through separate administrative data on protest events during the same ten-year observation period. Moreover, the shift toward high-risk protest engagement was not associated with past negative contact—instead, we find support for the perceived collective injustice mechanism, ruling out several socio-psychological alternatives. Salience of group-based moral outrage can shape political behavior in settings of violent asymmetrical conflict.

KEYWORDS

Israeli-Palestinian conflict, moral outrage, perceived injustice, political violence, protest

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INTRODUCTION

As aggression by and against political movements increases globally (Raleigh et al., 2023), understanding the motives and processes underlying violent and peaceful protest engagement remains both an important policy objective and largely unaccomplished. At the individual level, a paradox of participation persists (Olson, 1971), whereby political goals are often public goods and thus do not offer selective incentives to those who fight for them, making them subject to the problem of free-riding (Whiteley et al., 1994). For more extreme forms of engagement and in settings of violent conflict, where costs and risks of participation are most pronounced, a large literature has examined factors predisposing individuals toward accepting this seemingly irrational trade-off, such as past exposure to negative contact and traumatic events (Barber et al., 2016; Dubow et al., 2019) or ideological beliefs (Canetti, 2017). Less clear, however, is how political action in such contexts can be psychologically motivated by group-based perceptions of collective injustice.

Perceived collective injustice is the experience of morally illegitimate inequality, distinguishing it from unexpected, suddenly imposed grievances (which relate more to perceived threat; Walsh, 1981) and grievances over material resources (which are more likely to activate instrumentally rational decision-making about engagement) (van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2013). One influential framework in this domain is relative deprivation theory (Gurr, 2010; Merton, 1957; Runciman, 1966; Stouffer et al., 1949), which conceptualizes it as the result of negative social comparisons between one's current situation and a reference standard such as future aspirations, the status of others, or moral standards like equity and justice (Berkowitz, 1972; Folger, 1986). Widening gaps in this comparison between 'what is' and 'what should be' then create feelings of frustration and motivate political action (Gurr, 2010). Runciman (1966) distinguished between individual and group-level relative deprivation: While the former involves personal disadvantage relative to individual conditions, the latter reflects a sense of collective grievance, often felt on behalf of social or political ingroups. Importantly, empirical studies of RD suggest that perceived injustices are especially predictive of protest when they involve collective rather than individual grievances (Dubé & Guimond, 1986; Foster & Matheson, 1999) and affective rather than non-affective reactions (Thomas et al., 2012; Van Zomeren et al., 2008). However, while a direct link to increased willingness to join protests, revolutionary movements and outgroup prejudice has been found in some cases (Pettigrew & Meertens, 1995; Pettigrew et al., 2008; Smith & Pettigrew, 2015; Smith et al., 2008), other studies did not confirm these results (e.g., Schmitt et al., 2010; Snyder & Tilly, 1972).

An alternative framework for understanding perceived collective injustice is social justice theory, which distinguishes two types of perceptions. First, distributive justice relates to the fairness of social outcomes, in line with the comparison-based mechanism of relative deprivation theory. By contrast, procedural justice relates to the fairness of decision-making and relational aspects of social processes (Tyler & Smith, 1998; van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2013). This argument holds that people may care less about outcomes and more about being treated with respect and dignity, judging carefully whether authorities violate their social obligations. Tyler and Smith proposed that group-based perceptions of procedural injustice are especially predictive of social movement participation, yet there have been few tests of this hypothesis (e.g., Blader, 2007).

Perceived collective injustice, whether operationalized as relative deprivation or procedural injustice, is empirically compatible with predictions of protest mobilization based on emotions, group identification (Klandermans et al., 2002; Simon & Klandermans, 2001; van Zomeren et al., 2008) or collective efficacy (Thomas & McGarty, 2009; van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2013), but stands in contrast to these factors as standalone mechanisms (see Figure S12 in Supplemental Material for a visual overview of concepts). Perceived injustice has been integrated in social psychological models of collective action (e.g., Van Zomeren et al., 2008),

but its exact role remains contested, being at times proposed as a direct antecedent, mediator, or even as a consequence of political action. Issues of reverse causality, ecological validity, and a focus on attitudinal outcome measures highlight an overall paucity of robust testing in adequate field settings. Moreover, investigating effects across different forms of political action could resolve some of the conflicting evidence so far: For instance, perceptions of collective injustice may motivate specifically non-normative or violent political behavior (Gurr, 2010) but may be less consequential for lower-risk activities such as signing petitions.

Here, we examine realized participation in different forms of political action and two proximal indicators of engagement—attitudes (support) and intentions—empirically through a large-scale quantitative study in the West Bank. As one of the world's longest-enduring conflicts, Israeli-Palestinian disputes over territorial claims and the political and social rights of Palestinians underwent various phases of diplomatic and military confrontations, failed peace processes, bipartisan polarization, and violence—particularly during the two intifadas of 1987 to 1993 and the early 2000s, as well as the Israel-Hamas War that began on October 7, 2023 and is ongoing as of this publication. While the conflict's historical roots and ramifications are not discussed at length here (see Gelvin, 2021, for a review), the West Bank provides several advantageous conditions to examine the psychological underpinnings of political action.

One reason for this is the Palestinian protest itself, which, over the course of a decade-long conflict and military occupation, has evolved into a broad variety of forms, including, among others, cultural rapprochement, social media activism, peaceful protests, riots, and armed violence (Dwonch, 2017; Mallock, 2022; Norman, 2009). Although diverse, these activities have similar political goals (PSR, 2021) and occur in a confined geographical and social space: the West Bank has less than two-thirds the land mass of the island of Cyprus. Together with high engagement rates despite heightened security risks for Palestinian protesters, this leads to a setting with an unusually low risk of confounding factors.

A separate reason for choosing this empirical case was specifically to test the effect of perceived group injustices on individual perceptions and behavior. Few contemporary settings feature asymmetrical group relations as explicitly as in the West Bank, where civilian Israeli settlements have been constructed more or less continuously since the Six-Day War of 1967. As of today, several hundred such developments exist primarily for residential use; many are unauthorized but largely tolerated by the State of Israel (known as 'outposts'; Ghanem, 2010); in addition, a number of 'economic zones' include agricultural farms or tourism sites (Figure 1). Hereafter, we refer to resident communities, outposts, and economic zones simply as 'settlements'.

The polarizing issue of settlements attracts strong local and international criticism (Gov, 2012; UNSC, 2016), and they are widely viewed as an obstacle to peace by complicating the geographical layout of a potential two-state solution (Shlaim, 2021). Moreover, violent and lethal attacks against Palestinians, although only endorsed by a minority of Israeli settlers, are a regular occurrence in some areas of the West Bank (Ginges & Atran, 2011). But beyond these material issues, little consideration is given to how the presence of settlements influences perceptions and downstream effects on conflict behavior. One hypothesis would predict a 'sedative' effect, and thus reduced Palestinian protest, due to increased social contact (Allport, 1954) or economic factors including employment (Mi'Ari, 1999). This approach has featured prominently in psychological discourse around the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and is supported by robust findings that within the West Bank, interpersonal contact with the outgroup is associated with stronger support for a normalization of political relations and lower willingness for revolutionary resistance (Albhour et al., 2019; Mi'Ari, 1999).

On the other hand, settler communities are noticeably wealthier and benefit from various legal, infrastructural, and security privileges not afforded to local Palestinian residents (Beinin, 2013; OHCHR, 2013). This disparity is not only material but institutional, often codified in different legal regimes and patterns of enforcement. An alternative hypothesis would



FIGURE 1 Settlement locations in the West Bank. Dots represent geographical centroids of residential settlements, outposts and economic zones as of 2022, within the Armistice Demarcation Line (Green Line) boundaries.

therefore predict that proximity to settlements and these salient asymmetries are likely to elicit perceptions of collective injustice and promote political protest as a consequence. These grievances would be consistent with both group-level relative deprivation based on social comparisons, as well as procedural injustice based on the perceived differences in acknowledgment, representation, and fair treatment of the ingroup and outgroup.

We introduce a spatial differences design to study these contradicting hypotheses, and in doing so, extend previous work (e.g., Hayward et al., 2018; Penić et al., 2024) through a focus on (i) settlements rather than military infrastructure or interactions outside of the West Bank (e.g., receiving healthcare within Israel); (ii) the effects of salient outgroup presence above and beyond experiences of positive or negative contact; (iii) actual participation behavior across differentiated forms of engagement (self-reported and validated using administrative data); exploring various potential sources of heterogeneity, such as between outposts and residential, or religious-nationalist and secular settler communities, in addition to extensive robustness

checks; and (v) testing the perceived collective injustice hypothesis relative to other plausible collective action mechanisms.

METHODS

This research complies with the Research Ethics Policy and Code of Research Conduct of the London School of Economics and has received full review and approval from the LSE Research Ethics Committee (REC, ref. no. 53197).

Data

We combined six waves of pooled cross-sectional household data from three separate, geocoded datasets (total $N=8360$) measuring attitudes, intentions, and behavior. The surveys were fielded over a ten-year period between 2012 and 2022. First, we collected novel data in two representative, cross-sectional survey waves ($N=2467$) in March and June of 2022, in collaboration with the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PSR). These new surveys were conducted to address key limitations of existing data. Specifically, while prior data collections have explored protest-related attitudes and public opinions, measures of realized participation behavior are rare, especially across different forms of engagement. Our surveys improve on this by incorporating a battery of items capturing self-reported participation across seven distinct types of political action, which were identified during four months of fieldwork in the West Bank by the lead author—including qualitative interviews with protesters, members of armed groups, and inactive civilians, as well as quantitative piloting to identify the full spectrum of protest forms in the West Bank, from non-violent to violent action (see Measures for details). Although behavioral self-reports can understate engagement in non-normative or high-risk actions, obtaining these data was crucial for this analysis and complements available attitudinal datasets, which in turn may be subject to over-reporting of intentions (Tourangeau & Yan, 2007). Additionally, the 2022 surveys extend our observation time period beyond one of the strongest accelerations in settlement expansion and record approvals in 2020 after several years of relative inactivity (Shalom Achshav, 2025). This is of some importance as political disputes around settlements reignited in this time, possibly shifting local attitudes and protest outcomes, which we capture in our data collection. Finally, in addition to socio-demographic data, our 2022 surveys contained a range of psychological covariates at the individual level (perceptions of threat, economic decline in the near future, and fear of authorities) used to better isolate the mechanisms under investigation in the second stage of our analysis (see Results). Our primary data are complemented by two secondary datasets for replication across a longer historical observation period and to examine further attitudinal outcomes. We specifically included Arab Barometer (AB) waves 3–5 in the West Bank (conducted in 2012, 2016, and 2018; total $N=4893$), which include some behavioral self-reports of protest behavior, albeit for fewer forms than in the 2022 surveys; and the Palestine modules of the Pluralistic Memories Project (PMP) collected in 2017 ($N=1000$) containing extensive attitudinal measures on protest engagement and individual-level psychological mechanisms (see Measures for details). Sampling in all data collections followed a process of stratification at the town/city level, which we refer to as ‘locality’, using weights proportional to population size. The combined dataset consists of 8360 individual observations in 210 unique localities across the Palestinian Territories, surveyed in six waves of data collection between 2012 and 2022. Given our research scope, 28 localities outside the West Bank (in the Gaza Strip) were excluded; additionally, 14 localities could not be identified due to ambiguous descriptors, resulting in an analysis sample of 5823 individuals across 168 localities.

For settlements, data were separately obtained from B'Tselem and Shalom Achshav (Peace Now), two internationally renowned Israeli non-governmental organizations (UN, 2022). Because of their central role in our empirical strategy, we cross-referenced the two data sources, resulting in a total of 372 unique entries and manually validated all coordinates using satellite imagery. Two settlements did not correspond to any visible built-up structures and were excluded from the analysis; additionally, we excluded four settlements with missing coordinates and no reliable third-party information confirming their existence, as well as six evicted settlements that no longer held a population at the start of the observation period in 2012. The final combined dataset contains 360 validated settlement locations within the pre-1967 West Bank boundaries according to the Armistice Demarcation Line (Green Line) as per UN Geospatial Maps (Figure 1), consisting of 165 residential settlements, 162 outposts, and 33 economic zones. While the main analysis relies on geographical centroid coordinates for settlements, we also report extensive robustness checks that include, for the first time, a precise geographical modeling of the outer boundaries of Israeli settlements over time (see Supplemental Material S6).

Measures

The complete list of item batteries and measures used is provided in Supplemental Material S11. Realized participation behavior was self-reported for seven distinct protest forms, which we categorize as 'lower-risk' and 'higher-risk' following previous practice (e.g., Pearlman, 2014) and conceptual suggestions by McAdam (1986, 2013). Although most political action by Palestinians in the West Bank involves significant personal risk, some behaviors are disproportionately dangerous and frequently entail consequences such as detention, arrest, or physical harm due to their confrontational and conspicuous character or confrontations with military forces (Bishara, 2022). Accordingly, we coded a binary indicator of such *higher-risk protest* for recent participation in at least one of the following activities: (1) Public campaigning, specifically by installing banners or spray-painting political messages on military infrastructure such as the separation barrier near Jerusalem, check points, and similar targets; (2) public demonstrations; and (3) violent action/use of force. Similarly, we coded a binary indicator for *lower-risk protest* for recent involvement in (4) formally joining a political party or organization; (5) donating money; (6) volunteering time for social media mobilization and organizational tasks; and (7) signing a petition or attending a town hall. We report descriptive statistics for all protest forms in Figure S2.

Our attitudinal measures capture support for violent and non-violent protest forms, as well as general (i.e., form-unspecific) intentions to engage in protest, answered on a four-point scale. *Support for violent protest* was measured in four items ('True Palestinian patriots think that armed resistance is the best means of liberation'; 'Armed resistance against the military power of Israel'; 'Armed resistance against settlers'; and 'Armed resistance against all the Israeli people (including civilians) and their institutions'; $\alpha=0.84$). *Support for non-violent protest* was measured in six items ('Peaceful resistance'; 'Negotiations with Israel'; 'Palestinian boycott of Israel'; 'Joint struggle and collaboration with the Israeli peace movements'; 'Participation in the joint struggle and collaboration with the Israeli peace movements for the two-state solution'; and 'Participation in joint Palestinian and Israeli activities'; $\alpha=0.71$). Our analysis uses indices as defined by Anderson (2008) by standardizing item values to have mean zero and SD one, and then calculating their average with higher weights applied to items that are less correlated and thus contain new information. All results are robust to using simple mean indices instead.

We measure the psychological mechanism of *perceived collective injustice* using an index of three items answered on a four-point scale ('Atrocities committed against Palestinians

are not sufficiently acknowledged by the international community'; 'Atrocities committed against Palestinians are not sufficiently acknowledged by the Arab community'; 'I am confident that in my life we Palestinians will see justice'; $\alpha = 0.73$). These items primarily reflect perceptions of *procedural injustice* (Tyler & Smith, 1998), emphasizing disregard and lack of fair treatment. For conceptual clarity, we separately examine two items representing social comparisons within the ingroup ('the economic differences between Palestinians') and with the outgroup ('I am envious of the Israeli Jews' living standard') to distinguish perceptions of material disadvantage from the moral grievances captured by our collective injustice measure.

We juxtapose this measure against the three main alternative mechanisms suggested in the literature of collective action: ingroup identification (11 items, $\alpha = 0.75$), collective efficacy (3 items, $\alpha = 0.74$), and direct negative emotions (7 items, $\alpha = 0.73$). A complete list of items and measures, including additional covariates and socio-demographic characteristics, is provided in [Supplemental Material S11](#).

Identification strategy

Our approach uses a spatial differences design to test whether settlement presence causes protest engagement among nearby Palestinian residents, and further whether this effect is due to perceived collective injustice, rather than alternative mechanisms. Leveraging geographical coordinates, Palestinian households are assigned to treatment or control conditions based on their location inside or outside a radius around each settlement ([Figure 2](#)).

For our analysis to be valid, we only require that the locations of settlements are independent of protest engagement in household localities. Importantly, there is a long-established scientific consensus between Israeli, Palestinian, and international sources (Agwani, 1985; Isaac & Rizik, 2002; Susskind et al., 2005; Tabarani, 2008) that the construction sites for post-1967 settlements are attributable to several historical, military, legal, and ideological conditions that are unrelated to individual protest among Palestinian residents, and therefore exogenous to protest engagement as our outcome. The central motives, according to this consensus, were to occupy defensive positions against potential invasions by neighboring Jordan, Syria, and Egypt following the Six-Day War of 1967; sites of historically Jewish communities such as the city of Hebron; and more recently, seizing legal opportunities for land purchases as part of ideological efforts to create 'facts on the ground' that would complicate the demarcation of a Palestinian state (Isaac & Rizik, 2002). For such ideologically driven parts of the settler movement, there is a history of strategic placement of settlement outposts in provocative locations or as a means of conflict retaliation (see e.g., Eiran, 2019; Getmansky & Sinmazdemir, 2018). While these factors constitute some non-random components, individual protest behavior and attitudes by Palestinian residents did not influence the geographical placement of settlements overall, the vast majority of which had been constructed before the start of our observation period in 2012.

To further rule out endogeneity and because the intensity and reach of potential effects were unknown a priori, the default treatment radius size in our analysis was specified to maintain balanced treatment and control groups, rather than basing it on administrative or geographical conditions. In our main specification, this corresponds to a radius of 2.46 kilometers, the median distance between household localities and settlements. We additionally provide results over a range of alternative radii ([Figure 3](#)) and multiple robustness checks including placebo testing, heterogeneous effects by settlement type and ideology (including those more at risk of being strategically placed), modeling the outer boundaries of settlements and their expansion, as well as changes in statistical methods, which confirmed our findings (see Results and [Supplemental Material S3–S9](#)).

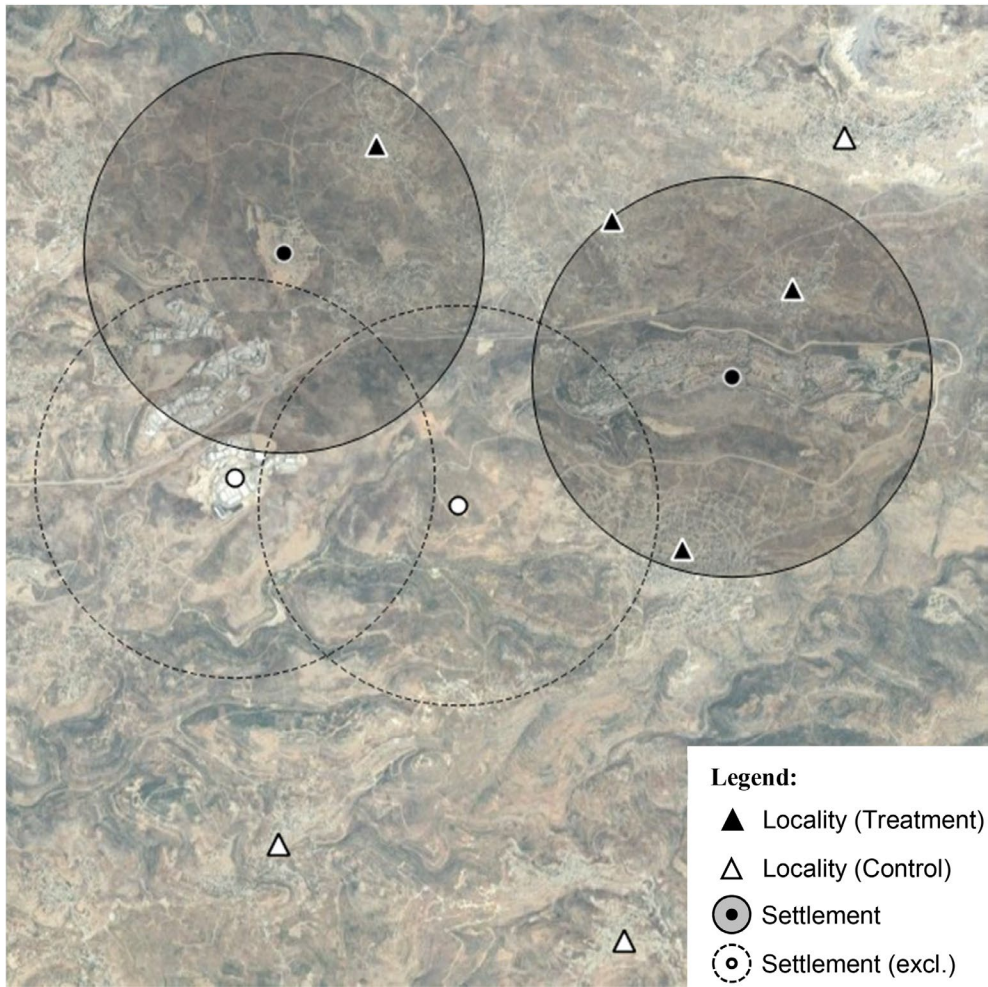


FIGURE 2 Spatial treatment assignment. Illustrative example of household localities by treatment or control group status, determined by their location inside or outside a default radius around settlements ($r = 2.46$ km). Non-treating settlements without nearby localities are excluded.

Modeling

We estimate the following baseline model:

$$y_i = \beta_0 + \delta_1 \text{Settlement}_{i,r} + \beta_1 X_i + \beta_2 \text{Wave} + \beta_3 \text{LocType}_i + \varepsilon_i \quad (1)$$

where y_i denotes either realized participation, attitudinal support, or intentions to engage in political protest; $\text{Settlement}_{i,r}$ is a dummy that equals one if an individual i was located within at least one treatment radius of size r (default $r = 2.46$ km), and zero else; X_i is a vector of socio-demographic characteristics age, gender, employment, education level, and income; Wave captures time fixed effects; LocType_i indicates locality type (urban, rural, or refugee camp); and ε_i is the idiosyncratic disturbance. The average effect on the treated is given by δ_1 . For the normally distributed indices of engagement attitudes and intentions, our main model uses OLS estimation, while the binary behavioral outcomes for realized participation are estimated using logistical regressions. Throughout, we cluster standard errors by each locality as both the sampling design

and experimental design take place at this level (Abadie et al., 2020). All results are robust to alternatively clustering at the level of the nearest settlement.

RESULTS

Settlement presence shifts the type of protest engagement

Table 1 shows the results of our main model, which uses the default treatment radius ($r=2.46\text{km}$) and logistic regression for participation behavior, or OLS estimation for the normalized attitudinal indices. Effects are reported separately by dataset, both for internal replication over our ten-year observation period and to prevent loss of information in two cases where a single protest form was not measured compared to the other datasets. Estimates routinely control for locality types (urban, rural or refugee camp), time fixed effects, and socio-demographic characteristics (age, gender, employment, education level, and income). Table S9 provides results for alternative model specifications. Table 1 reveals several important findings.

Across our behavioral and attitudinal outcomes, we find that overall, settlements exert a significant influence on protest engagement, yet the directionality of this effect differs by form. As hypothesized, realized participation in higher-risk actions (such as attending violent demonstrations) increased substantially—individuals living close to settlements were 41 to 82% more likely to engage than those further away (log-odds of +0.34 to +0.60). However, the relative probability of participation in lower-risk protest forms (such as signing petitions) decreased by 30 to 36% (log-odds of -0.36 to -0.45). Both of these effects are significant on their own; together, they indicate a drastic shift toward more extreme political behavior at the expense of less confrontational protest. This shift replicates stably across datasets both in magnitude and significance, with only one exception in the PSR data (for lower-risk protest) and in AB_{3,4} (for higher-risk protest). As estimations are otherwise fully consistent, this is likely due to missing protest forms in these specific waves, as previously discussed.

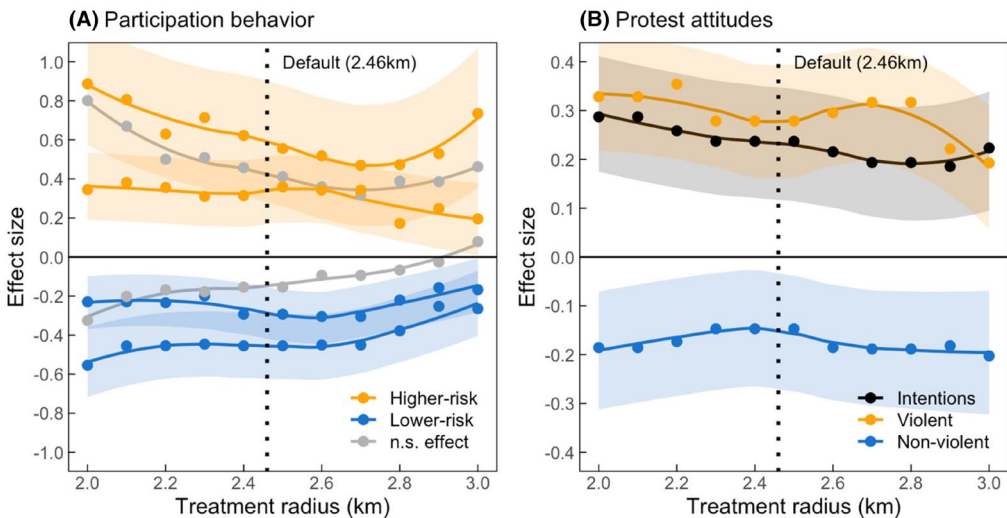


FIGURE 3 Geographical reach of settlement effects on protest engagement. Markers indicate effect coefficients at various sizes of treatment radii, based on (A) logistic estimation plotted by data cohort or (B) OLS. Fitted curves defined by a locally estimated scatterplot smoothing (LOESS)-smoothed regression (span=0.75) based on model coefficients and 95% confidence intervals.

TABLE 1 Effects of settlement presence on protest engagement.

	Effect size (standard errors)		Model	Obs	Fit/R ²
Participation behavior					
Higher-risk protest ^A	0.599 (0.276)**		Logit	1,403	0.106
Higher-risk protest ^B	0.343 (0.185)*		Logit	1,515	0.100
Higher-risk protest ^C	-0.094 (0.177)		Logit	1,419	0.106
Lower-risk protest ^A	0.313 (0.422)		Logit	1,309	0.108
Lower-risk protest ^B	-0.360 (0.163)**		Logit	1,491	0.071
Lower-risk protest ^C	-0.451 (0.150)***		Logit	1,411	0.117
-1.0 -0.5 0.0 0.5 1.0					
Protest attitudes					
Support violent protest	0.317 (0.110)***		OLS	842	0.048
Support non-violent protest	-0.216 (0.092)**		OLS	805	0.040
Intentions to engage	0.227 (0.112)**		OLS	831	0.077
-0.6 -0.3 0.0 0.3 0.6					
Mechanisms					
Perceived collective injustice	0.256 (0.096)***		OLS	931	0.028
Ingroup identification	0.039 (0.086)		OLS	798	0.029
Perceived political efficacy	0.048 (0.078)		OLS	909	0.025
Direct negative emotions	0.075 (0.094)		OLS	950	0.053
Material grievance: Outgroup	-0.066 (0.086)		OLS	980	0.032
Material grievance: Ingroup	0.081 (0.068)		OLS	969	0.029
-0.6 -0.3 0.0 0.3 0.6					
Treatment Effect					

Note: Coefficients represent changes in log-odds (Logit) or standardized means (OLS) of dependent variables. Treatment effects are based on geographical proximity to settlements using a default radius of $r=2.46$ kilometers. All models include as covariates socio-demographic and individual-level variables, locality type (rural/urban/refugee camp), and cohort/time fixed effects. Models with the dependent variable 'participation behavior' are shown separately for ^APrimary PSR field data, ^BArab Barometer wave 5, and ^CArab Barometer waves 3–4. Model fit statistics represent McFadden R^2 (Logit) or R^2 (OLS). Cluster-robust standard errors at the locality level are in parentheses and *** $p < .01$, ** $p < .05$, * $p < .1$.

On the attitudinal side, the same central finding emerges: Presence of a settlement increased support for violent political action ($d=0.32$) and decreased that for non-violent political action ($d=-0.22$), significant at 1% and 5%, respectively. Finally, overall intentions to engage in political protest regardless of form moderately intensified ($d=0.23$) in response to treatment.

To further unpack these effects, we examine their spatial sensitivity by varying the size of treatment radii around settlements, holding everything else constant. The default range had been determined as $r=2.46$ km for equally sized experimental conditions; here we test radii in 100-meter increments over a [2.00 km; 3.00 km] interval, within which statistical power remains sufficient despite imbalances in treatment/control group sizes. Figure 3 reports the average treatment effects at different radius sizes. Results are consistent with our main findings across the testing interval. Additionally, a sizable decline in effects can be observed with increasing treatment radii, before estimates diminish and thus lose statistical significance toward reaching a 3 km distance to settlements. This spatial decay further points to the uncovered effects as local and limited to the immediate areas surrounding settlements in the West Bank.

Next, we re-estimate our results using two measures of treatment intensity as predictors: living near multiple settlements and prolonged temporal exposure defined as the number of years between the construction of the oldest nearby settlement and the time of data collection, constrained by respondents' age. In both tests, the median number of treating settlements ($M=3$) or years of exposure ($M=33$) provided natural thresholds to define balanced groups of high vs. low intensity treatment status.

First, there is some evidence for an additive treatment effect such that among treated households, those near multiple settlements reported significantly higher intentions to engage ($|t|=3.86$; $p<0.0001$; two-sided t -test; $n=431$), higher support for violence ($|t|=1.89$; $p=.059$; two-sided t -test; $n=466$), and lower support for non-violence ($|t|=1.90$; $p=0.058$; two-sided t -test; $n=434$) compared to households near fewer settlements. However, the number of simultaneously treating settlements did not seem to moderate realized participation behavior in either higher-risk protest ($|t|=0.31$; $p=.758$; two-sided t -test; $n=2210$) or lower-risk protest ($|t|=0.05$; $p=0.964$; two-sided t -test; $n=2190$). No significant differences were found regarding treatment duration, suggesting the local effects of settlements to be time-insensitive, and thus attributable to their ongoing presence, rather than to their initial construction. Put differently, there appears to be no notable habituation effect even in locations with a decade-long settlement presence.

Perceived collective injustice vs. alternative mechanisms

We next examined the psychological mechanism of the identified treatment effects, primarily testing the role of perceived collective injustice juxtaposed against three alternative socio-psychological hypotheses on protest engagement. First, identification with politicized social groups, especially those projecting strong ingroup cohesion or 'entitativity' (Hogg & Adelman, 2013) has been directly linked to participation in collective action (Klandermans et al., 2002; Simon & Klandermans, 2001; van Zomeren et al., 2008). A second strand suggests that perceived collective efficacy of a group in reaching its political goals helps individuals rationalize the personalized costs and risks of participation (Thomas et al., 2009; Thomas & McGarty, 2009; van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2013; van Zomeren et al., 2010, 2012). Finally, some studies found a direct association of negative emotions, especially anger and frustration, on protest engagement (Gurr, 2010; Sabherwal et al., 2021; van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2013). Social psychological research has examined these mechanisms as direct or indirect predictors of collective action as well as in integrated models of engagement alongside perceived collective injustice (e.g., van Zomeren et al., 2008, 2012). In our empirical setting of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, group identification, collective efficacy beliefs, and direct negative emotions are all conceivable consequences of proximity to settlements, and as such, warrant examination compared to perceived collective injustice as the psychological channels through which settlements affect protest engagement.

For this test, we replace the dependent variable in our main estimation model with our measure of perceived collective injustice, and then separately with each alternative mechanism as a falsification check (Table 1). All variables are defined analogously to our attitudinal measures, i.e., as normalized indices following Anderson's (2008) method, and the full list of items is provided in Supplemental Material S11. Results show that perceived collective injustice is positively and significantly predicted by treatment ($d=0.26$). By contrast, neither of the competing measures—ingroup identification, efficacy beliefs, and direct negative emotions—were associated with nearby settlement presence; moreover, these insignificant results are due to near-zero coefficients, rather than larger variance. We further rule out a meaningful role of material comparative grievances both within the ingroup (between Palestinians) and toward Israelis (Table 1). We interpret this as suggestive evidence for the hypothesis that the identified main

effects of settlements on protest engagement were likely not driven by strengthened group identity, collective efficacy, or emotions directly; instead, they appear to be linked to perceptions of collective injustice.

Robustness: Treatment exogeneity and heterogeneous effects

Our identification rests upon the assumption that treatment allocation is quasi-random, or independent conditionally on controlling for observables. This may be violated in the case of either endogenous construction of settlements or endogenous sorting of residents; that is, for certain Palestinian households, it could be systematically more likely that either settlements were constructed in their surroundings or that they moved away from or toward existing settlements. In both cases, estimates would be biased if such an endogenous assignment was correlated with protest engagement. We have argued that the first path (endogenous construction) is unlikely, based on the geographical placement of settlements being primarily attributed to ideological, historic, and other factors that are unrelated to individual political action (see our discussion in the Methods section). Below, we support this assumption through extensive robustness tests examining in depth the possibility of heterogeneous effects by settlement type (e.g., outposts vs. residential settlements) and ideology (e.g., religious-nationalist vs. secular settler communities). The second path (endogenous sorting of residents) prior to data collection, is unobservable but unlikely: mobility restrictions in the West Bank make relocations rare (Abbott, 2018; Beck & Soledad Martinez Peria, 2007), and near-universal opposition to settlements (PSR, 2021) makes sorting only realistic in one direction, whereby treated individuals may move away from settlements and enter the control group. Endogenous assignment of this kind, if at all present, would therefore lead to underestimated effects. Our data confirm this: Movers (identified by self-reported area of residence at the time of data collection and in the years before) did not differ significantly from non-movers in attitudes, except for slightly lower engagement intentions.

To scrutinize endogenous construction first, we first rule out the possibility of random effects and confounding of settlement locations. To do so, we conducted a series of placebo tests to validate that treatment effects are in fact attributable to settlement presence. In this robustness check, households were repeatedly reassigned to treatment conditions using counterfactual settlement locations; subsequent significant results would signal a validity threat. We randomly generated sets of geographical coordinates within the West Bank boundaries, holding the default treatment radius constant at $r=2.46\text{km}$ and adjusting the number of placebo settlements to maintain balanced treatment and control group sizes (Figure S3). In 50 iterations of our estimation models, each with a new set of randomly generated placebo settlements, only 6.9% of results were statistically significant. This is in line with an expected false-positive rate by conventional significance standards, as well as some randomly generated counterfactual locations overlapping with the treatment areas of actual settlements within the small geography of the West Bank. This provides strong evidence that identified effects are attributable to the real locations where settlements have been established.

A second robustness check examined concerns raised in the literature that some Israeli settlements may have been strategically placed in ways that are not exogenous to Palestinian presence or political dynamics. Scholars have noted that parts of the Israeli settler movement have pursued the construction and expansion of settlements in contested or symbolically charged areas as part of a broader ideological project aimed at securing territorial claims (e.g., Eiran, 2019; Getmansky & Sinmazdemir, 2018). In contrast to religious-nationalist settlers, many secular settlers are more often motivated by economic considerations and tend to move to larger, established settlements with less strategic or confrontational intent (Maidhof, 2013; Mokski, 2022). A related distinction concerns the status of outposts, which

are often established without formal authorization and placed closer to Palestinian communities, frequently leading to violent confrontations. Both patterns raise the possibility that certain types of settlements may not be exogenous to our outcome, local Palestinian protest engagement. To address this, we coded each settlement based on the predominant community ideology (religious-nationalist, secular, or mixed) and separately by settlement type (residential, outpost, or economic zone) based on our cross-validated dataset. We found that the estimated effects were consistent in both size and significance across secular and religious-nationalist settlements, with no meaningful differences between the two groups. We further find effects to be either equivalent between outposts and residential settlements, or for some outcomes (e.g., higher-risk behavior) entirely driven by residential settlements. This lends empirical support to our identification design: if strategic placement were a meaningful source of bias, we would expect effects to be stronger or exclusive to religious-nationalist settlers or outpost settlements. Moreover, the overall lack of effects by economic zones suggests a negligible role of material grievances over agricultural and economically viable sites, where economic zones tend to be established. We interpret this as further evidence that settlement presence invokes psychological mechanisms relating to contextualized perceptions (such as of collective injustice), rather than instrumentally rational or material considerations.

Third, we conducted an extensive robustness check to account for the possibility that our primary proximity measure, which is based on geographical centroid coordinates of settlements, might underestimate actual exposure to settlement presence. This is particularly relevant because the spatial expansion of existing settlements (in addition to the establishment of new settlements) is a central issue in Israeli-Palestinian disputes in the West Bank, widely seen by Palestinians as illegal encroachment. Settlement midpoints, while providing consistency across datasets, are not informative of such changes over time. To address this, we manually mapped the outer boundaries of all settlements in our dataset using high-resolution satellite imagery from multiple sources ([Supplemental Material S6](#) and [Figure S6a](#)). The resulting geospatial dataset (accessible on OSF, see data availability) is the first and most comprehensive account of the geographical extent of all 360 validated settlements over time. We then recalculated localities' treatment status based on proximity to the nearest outer edge of settlements rather than midpoints, thereby capturing the de facto spatial footprint of settlements at different time points. Re-estimating our models with this revised proximity measure ([Table S7](#)) yielded results that were substantively and statistically consistent with our original findings, suggesting that effects are robust to different operationalizations of proximity. Moreover, effects were congruent toward the beginning of our data observation period (earliest spatial data in 2014) compared to the end (2022). While settlement expansion was significant during this timeframe ([Supplemental Material S6](#)), shifts in settlement boundaries did not affect the average effect on protest engagement and perceptions of collective injustice.

In one more test of how proximity is instrumentalized in our analysis, we allowed for treatment radii to vary over time, based on the median distance to settlements at each year. This robustness check complements our spatial sensitivity analysis ([Figure 3](#)) where we tested different radius sizes across the entire sample. As settlements expanded over our observation period, the balance between treatment and control groups slightly shifted when radii are fixed; instead, here we use an adaptive allocation that creates balanced conditions within each dataset. As reported in [Table S8](#), results remain robust to this approach as well.

Finally, we checked whether omitting variables affects our results. The underlying assumption here is that coefficient movements would be informative of relative bias due to unobservables; however, this is only the case if unobservables are correlated with observables and if coefficient movements are accompanied by changes in R-squared (Oster, 2019). [Table S9](#) shows that our coefficients are stable to removing controls; moreover, the R-squared in this simple

specification is substantially reduced, suggesting these to be informative control variables. This further evidences that our identification is free from confounding risk. Results are robust to using linear probability models instead of logistic regression for binary dependent variables, using mean indices instead of normalized indices, and clustering standard errors at the treatment level (settlements) instead of the sampling level (localities).

The role of negative contact: Does violence beget violence?

Although only a minority of Israeli settlers generally approve of lethal violence against Palestinians, aggressions are a well-documented reality in some areas of the West Bank (Ginges & Atran, 2011). Therefore, a concern with the results presented so far is that more confrontational actions by Palestinians near settlements may not be caused by their salient presence and perceived collective injustice, but rather by material factors, such as being themselves exposed to negative contact in the form of settler attacks. Indeed, such experiences could even increase felt injustice as a conceivable side effect.

We assessed this possibility using a single measure (“Have you or a member of your immediate family been attacked by an Israeli settler or citizen?”). Figure 4 shows the results of mediation tests using our most generalizable attitudinal outcome—intentions to engage in political action—and perceived RD as dependent variables; results are equivalent for the remaining outcomes. Unsurprisingly, geographical proximity to settlements was associated with more experiences of settler violence, $r(998)=0.06$, $p=0.031$. However, this relationship loses statistical significance upon clustering standard errors to account for within-locality correlations, confirming once again that attacks are concentrated in some settlement locations, and thus do not mediate average treatment effects in the overall sample. Moreover, controlling for experiences of attacks does not affect the direct link between settlement presence and our outcomes, either in terms of coefficients or significance.

To assess whether the relationship between settlement proximity and protest-related outcomes was mediated by experiences of settler violence, we conducted causal mediation analyses with extended covariate adjustment and sensitivity testing (Supplemental Materials S10). While proximity had consistent direct effects, mediation via reported violence was not supported. These results remained robust across alternative model specifications and simulated violations of the sequential ignorability assumption.

Importantly, negative contact is still likely related to protest engagement—indeed, our data confirms a sizable and significant direct association of experiencing settler attacks and

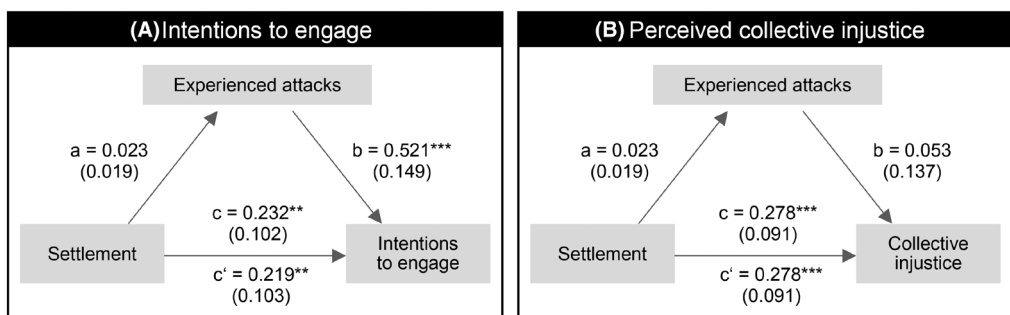


FIGURE 4 Mediation analysis by negative contact. a, b, c and c' are path coefficients representing OLS regression estimates and clustered standard errors at locality level (in parentheses); $***p < .01$, $**p < .05$, $*p < .1$. Experiences of attacks independently predict protest intentions but did not mediate treatment effects on intentions to engage (A) and perceived collective injustice (B).

protest intentions. However, the mediation results suggest that such a pathway would operate independently from the effects identified in our analysis, and in particular, separately from perceived collective injustice, which was uncorrelated to past attacks but remains robustly predicted by nearby settlement presence.

Mapping stated participation to protest events

As with all research relying on self-reported outcomes, a general concern was that some respondents may have over- or understated their protest participation due to social desirability or the political sensitivities surrounding this issue in the West Bank, particularly regarding higher-risk and non-normative action such as the use of violence. Our study design minimized this risk through anonymous and representative sampling across datasets; in fact, high participation rates and few non-responses suggest no substantial withholding effect. Note that, due to the quasi-random allocation into treatment and control conditions, factors like social desirability or political sensitivities should be balanced between groups and results unaffected unless these would systematically correlate with treatment assignment, for which there is no indication. As an additional objective validation for our self-reported outcomes, we obtained publicly available administrative data from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (Raleigh et al., 2023) on all registered incidents of violent riots and protests initiated by Palestinians in the West Bank during our observation period between 2016 and 2022 ($N = 12,149$). As shown in Figure 5, such events, which correspond to our classification of higher-risk action, occurred significantly more frequently in the treatment areas surrounding settlements than further away ($|t| = 6.01$; $p < 0.0001$; two-sided t -test; $n = 168$). Our central finding, that proximity to settlements causes a shift in protest forms toward confrontational and violent action, thus maps onto real-world events during an overlapping time period in the West Bank.

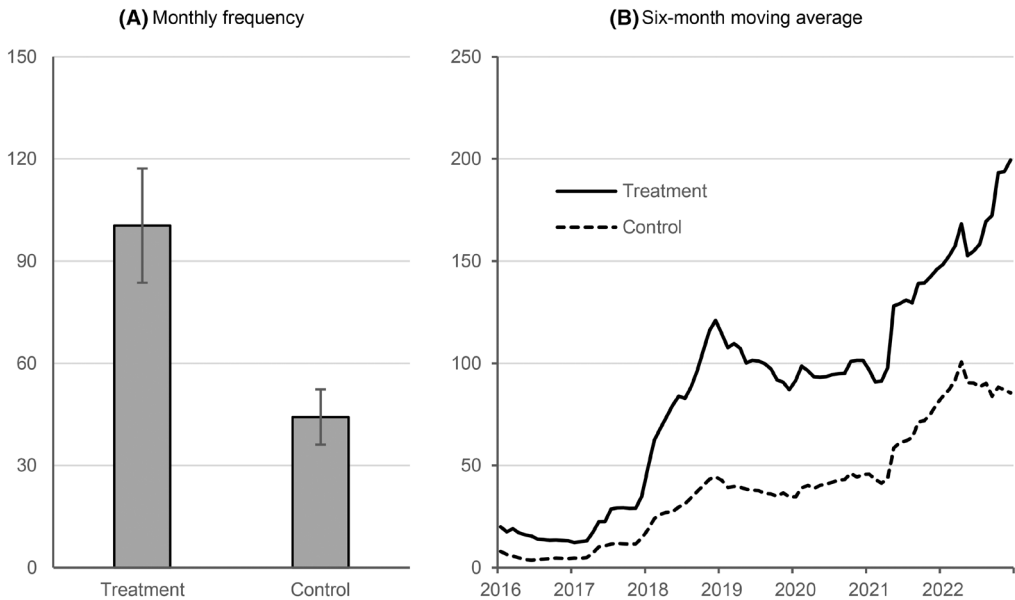


FIGURE 5 Event frequency by proximity to settlements. Based on administrative data (2016–2022), representing the number of violent riots and protests within or outside a default treatment radius around settlements ($r = 2.46$ km). Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

DISCUSSION

Discourse around Israeli settlements in the West Bank is focused on material aspects such as their legal status, obstruction of two-state solution scenarios, or settler violence in the context of the ongoing military occupation. Exploiting geographical information from six large-scale datasets, we show that the mere presence of settlements also drives apart political attitudes and behavior among nearby Palestinians, away from moderate forms of engagement and toward increased confrontation and violence. This shift, which replicated stably across a 10-year period and diminishes spatially up to an approximate 3-kilometer radius around settlements, appears to be linked to perceptions of collective injustice, rather than other conceivable mechanisms or past exposure to settler attacks.

These findings have wide-ranging implications. In just the first quarter of 2025, more than 16,825 housing units have been approved for construction in existing and new settlements across the West Bank (Shalom Achshav, 2025). The results presented here suggest that as settlement presence expands, so may political violence and reciprocal violence between local Palestinian and Israeli communities. Even worse, settlements appear to crowd out psychological incentives and motivation to engage in cooperative and non-violent political efforts, which may additionally fuel cycles of intergroup violence. This contrasts with a recurring view that emphasizes the centrality of intergroup contact in exerting either sedating (Mi'Ari, 1999; Saguy et al., 2009) or mobilizing effects (Di Bernardo et al., 2021; Hayward et al., 2018) on collective action. Instead, even in the absence of contact, mere geographical proximity to the outgroup in contexts of asymmetrical power relations can create a sense of collective injustice and cause a shift toward confrontational protest engagement among disadvantaged groups.

In addition to the common methodological challenges of drawing causal inferences in natural field settings, a key limitation of our study lies in the difficulty of fully isolating complex psychological mechanisms such as perceived injustice, a known issue discussed in recent meta-analytic work (Smith & Pettigrew, 2015). Consequently, while the empirical effects in this study were confirmed in various robustness checks, the evidence for collective injustice as the underlying mechanism should be validated further in other identification designs. One other limitation of our study remains the risk of under-reported involvement in illegal or higher-risk behavior (or conversely, over-reporting of socially desirable answers). There is no reason to assume that this would differentially occur in localities close to or far from settlements, and thus does not affect our analysis; moreover, potential underreporting of illegal behavior near settlements, where military presence is stronger, would bias our estimates downward. However, the relatively low self-reported involvement in explicitly violent protest (12.5% of high-risk behavior and 3% of all protest forms; Figure S2) means that we were not able to conduct a separate analysis of political violence in the behavioral domain. Moreover, it is difficult to delineate personal involvement in violence from participation in protests in which violence is used, and in light of subjective interpretations of violence among some protesters. Our approach addressed these challenges by focusing on higher-risk and lower-risk behavior, explicitly measuring attitudes about violent and non-violent action, and using administrative data on violent riots to confirm settlement effects on more extreme forms of political protest. However, future studies may explore additional measures to capture political violence at the individual level to replicate our findings.

Several other aspects of this study provide a basis for further research. Effects were moderate in size, yet the actual impact of settlements is likely to be even larger. Providing an upper bound is difficult because, while settlements evidently affect individuals living within close range they may also have indirect effects on individuals in the control group, for instance, through media exposure or social interaction with treated communities. Furthermore, a small possibility remains of treated individuals having unidirectionally moved away from settlements

prior to observation. Both scenarios would result in lower-bound estimates. Replications of our identification design in other empirical settings can help to assess both the generalizability and magnitude of perceived collective injustice effects.

Finally, research may expand on the testing of psychological mechanisms. As discussed, one challenge is a lack of uniform psychometric measurements for the concept of perceived collective injustice, and similar challenges remain for measuring ingroup efficacy and identity in contextualized field settings. As such, this study provides strong evidence for ruling out several mechanisms for the observed effects, but provides only suggestive evidence for ruling in the perceived collective injustice mechanism in a highly relevant empirical context. Beyond much-needed harmonization of instruments, studies may explore research designs involving controlled manipulation of key variables, further contributing to our understanding of the psychological processes driving political behavior in protracted conflict environments.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in Open Science Framework at <https://osf.io/395vw>.

TRANSPARENCY STATEMENT

All original data, materials, and analysis scripts are available at the Open Science Framework (<https://osf.io/395vw>). Permission to access secondary data for the extended analysis has been obtained through SWISSUbase, ref. no. 100590. The study was not preregistered, as it was uncertain at the time of fieldwork whether key measures could be included in the data collections.

ORCID

Nils Mallock  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9331-7311>

Christian Krekel  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5960-3891>

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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