

Accelerating West Bank Colonization as the Genocide Proceeds in Gaza



By Jad Isaac and
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Smotrich's project to expand Jewish settlements and annex a substantial portion of the West Bank marks a significant shift in Israeli policy.¹ To achieve this goal, he has actively supported the establishment of 40 illegal agricultural and herding outposts in the West Bank and facilitated the appropriation of over 70,000 dunums of land under various pretexts, displacing around 25 Palestinian communities. The Planning Council's approval of over 30,000 housing units, the establishment of five new settlements, and the appointment of Smotrich's allies to key positions underscore the ongoing plan of annexation² and displacement. Settler violence is part of a broader strategy to expel Palestinians from Area C in the West Bank where designating large areas as "nature reserves" and "state land" complicates the prospects for a peaceful

resolution based on a two-state solution in addition to inflicting irreversible harm and threatening the security and future of Palestinians in their envisioned state.

Smotrich's strategy has been to redefine the role of settlement councils in the West Bank, transforming them into civilian entities that "manage" Area C under the administrative jurisdiction of Israel's army and Ministry of Defense. According to Smotrich, these newly fabricated entities provide settlement councils with the jurisdiction needed to design and execute plans for settlement expansion and legalize outposts and related infrastructure projects without restriction, and to bypass the lengthy authorization process that previously required final approvals by the minister of defense and the prime minister. Restructuring the Israeli Civil Administration (ICA) to bring

Settlers uprooting centuries-old olive trees.

When the most recent iteration of Benjamin Netanyahu's right-wing governments took charge on December 29, 2022, it caused a considerable stir. The new government was dominated by politicians from the settler movement who had been pushing for full control over the occupied Palestinian territories (oPt) for years – now, they finally had the platform to do so. The newly formed government proceeded to align official policy in the West Bank with the Israeli settler agenda – in other words, full Israeli expansion into the oPt, culminating in its annexation. Netanyahu himself had never shied away from his support for settlement expansion, despite the fact that it flew in the face of the Oslo Accords as well as international law. As is well documented, he has consistently sabotaged the internationally envisioned Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza, clearly stating earlier this year that there would be "no" sovereign Palestinian state.

In February 2023, Netanyahu appointed Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich to a new position within the Israeli Defense Ministry to oversee settlement construction and "development." Despite international protestations, the Ministry of Settlements and National Missions, which now coordinates funds with the Israeli Defense Ministry to support settlement activities, welcomed the move. Since the arrival of Smotrich to the reins of government, settlement projects have been expeditiously implemented thanks to generous funding and the bypassing of bureaucratic red tape that used to cause delays.



it under the aegis of the Israeli army, Netanyahu, Smotrich, and the entire current government are blatantly defying decisions of both Israel's Supreme Courtⁱⁱⁱ and the UN Security Council,^{iv} which clearly and unambiguously characterize Israeli control over the West Bank as a “temporary military occupation.”

With the world's attention fixated on Israel's genocidal aggression in Gaza, Israeli settlers are realizing their master plan, displacing hundreds if not thousands of Palestinians in the oPt with government support. In May 2024, the Israeli Civil Administration transferred control of building regulations and land management (including farmland, parks, and forests) in Area C to the Settlements Administration, headed by Smotrich. This move empowered Smotrich to accelerate settlement construction and the demolition of Palestinian houses and structures, both of which are illegal under international law and the Geneva Conventions: 1,175 Palestinian houses and structures were demolished in 2023, a 23 percent increase over 2022 (954 houses and structures); in the first seven months of 2024 alone, the number of demolished Palestinian houses and structures stands at 910. This figure is equivalent to 95.3 percent of all 2022 demolitions and to 77.4 percent of those in 2023. Of these demolitions, 723 were carried out purportedly because the structures were “lacking building permits” while

“military operations” and “punitive orders” justified the demolition of another 181.

As of October 6, 2023, Israel had restricted Palestinian movement across the West Bank with 567 different obstacles, including 77 main and partial checkpoints that regulate travel between Palestinian governorates, access to Jerusalem, and areas within the Green Line. Since the war began, Israel has increased by 40 percent the number of obstacles in the Palestinian governorates by adding 140 new physical barriers, including earth mounds, roadblocks, and metal gates. Primarily established along unpaved rural roads and between towns and communities, these new barriers have tightened Israel's control over the West

Bank. Combined with Israel's dominance over the bypass road network throughout the oPt, this obstacle regime has made movement between Palestinian governorates nearly impossible and severely hindered access to Jerusalem and areas inside the Green Line.



Geopolitical map detailing the Israeli army's strategic deployment of obstacles such as checkpoints and barriers across the West Bank, before and after October 7, 2023.

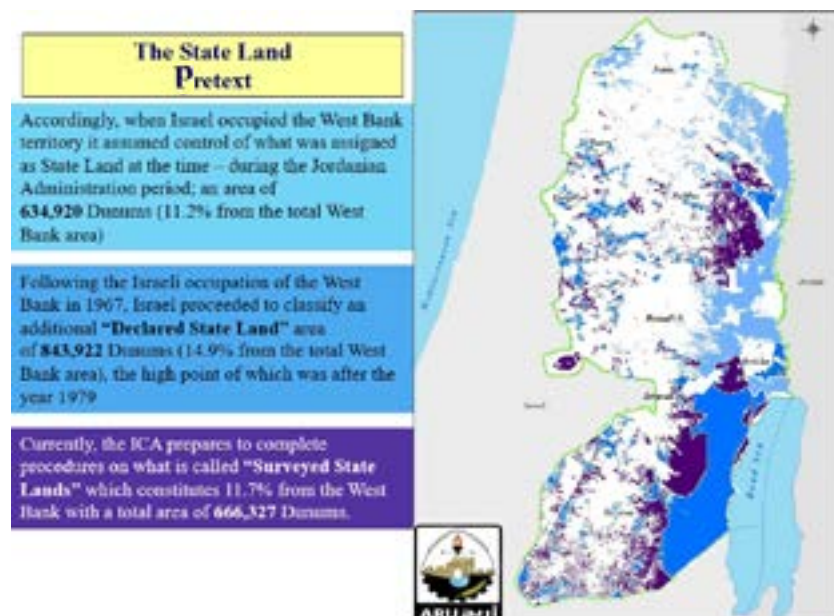
Israel has also legalized five formerly unauthorized outposts as settlements and carried out the largest land grab in the West Bank under the guise of “state land orders” since the 1993 Oslo Accords at a time when the International Court of Justice (ICJ) has declared Israel's occupation of the oPt illegal, stipulating in its ruling of July 19, 2024 that “Israel must immediately cease all new settlement activity.” Since December 2022, the government has allocated more than \$100 million in security and surveillance equipment to Israeli settler farms and herding outposts in the West Bank.

The current Israeli government has overseen settler violence against Palestinians more brazenly than its predecessors, with no accountability for perpetrators, effectively guaranteeing their impunity. Under the current Netanyahu administration, Israeli settlers are more equipped, subsidized, sponsored, shielded, and emboldened by government policies, all of which has significantly increased their capabilities to terrorize and kill Palestinians throughout the West Bank, including in: the Um Al-Khair-Hebron area (July), destroying the water mains feeding the village; El-Essawiyah-Jerusalem (May), with physical assaults on town residents and stores; Yatma (May), where they torched houses and vehicles; Duma in Nablus governorate (April), causing gunfire injuries and setting ablaze several homes; al-Sawiya (April), damaging vehicles, setting stores on fire, and killing a Palestinian medic; Hebron City (February), with repeated assaults on residents and attacks on stores; Artas-Bethlehem (May), setting up an outpost and physically assaulting shepherds; Ras Ein al-Auja and Ein al-Hilweh, in the Jordan Valley (April to end of June), physically assaulting shepherds and livestock, violently displacing residents, and attempting to grab a water spring.

Overall, there were 2,153 violent Israeli settler attacks against Palestinians in 2023, a 41 percent increase over the 1,527 in 2022, and in the first seven months of 2024 alone (up to July 31), the number of attacks reached 1,307, an 85.6 percent increase from the equivalent period in 2022. The situation has only escalated since October 7, when Ben Gvir facilitated the licensing and distribution of firearms, including semi-automatic rifles, to Israeli settlers.

In response, the international community, spearheaded by the US administration, has imposed sanctions against individual Israeli settlers, freezing their assets and implementing travel bans. The European Union has followed suit. However, as observers and experts note, such measures are ineffective in stopping or deterring settler aggression or halting settlement expansion. Because of the traditional leniency exhibited by consecutive Israeli governments and the tepid international response, and bolstered by their own government's unwavering support, Israeli settlers have been undeterred. Israel remains in denial, however, refusing to acknowledge the reality unanimously agreed upon by the entire world, including its staunchest ally, the United States, that it is an occupying force as documented by decades of UN resolutions. Israel considers its presence in the oPt as legitimate, arguing that it is the natural heir to what was designated during the period of Jordanian administration (1949–67) as state land, an area of 634,920 dunums (11.2 percent of the West Bank). Following the occupation of the West Bank in 1967 and throughout the 1970s, Israel proceeded to classify an additional 843,922 dunums (14.9 percent of the total West Bank area) as “declared state land.” Then, in the 1980s, it further claimed a total area of 666,327 dunums, constituting 11.7 percent of the West Bank as “Surveyed State Lands.” In so doing,

it illegitimately disqualified Palestinians from using approximately 38 percent of West Bank territory. Under the Yitzhak Rabin government in the early 1990s, Israel had halted the declarations of state land in the oPt, but as soon as Netanyahu took office in 1998, the state land designation procedure was reactivated. Since then, Israel has declared an additional area, exceeding 52,300 dunums, as state land. It should be noted that a significant part of the designated “state land” had for decades been defined as nature reserves or “firing zones” reserved for military use.



Smotrich’s ultimate goal is the annexation of the entire West Bank. He envisions a future where mass transit and road systems encourage settlement growth and “bring a million people to Judea and Samaria,” according to a leaked tape of an address the finance minister gave in June. In the speech, he also reiterated his commitment to preventing the establishment of a Palestinian state. Smotrich’s office confirmed that the speech had taken place. Rote international calls for a political settlement establishing a Palestinian state alongside Israel notwithstanding, the Netanyahu and Smotrich agenda of prioritizing annexation is evident from the kind of infrastructure development

associated with such a project, including ramping up land surveys and seizure plans, and the dramatic alteration of the West Bank’s geographical map. As mentioned above, key steps of the project include transferring power from the army to a purportedly civilian administration, legalizing outposts, and allocating significant budgets, including an additional ILS 1 billion for settlement security and ILS 6 billion for roads.

The situation in the West Bank has rapidly deteriorated as settlers exploit the chaos of the Gaza war to expand their presence with minimal international pushback. The situation in both Palestinian territories remains dire, with

no clear resolution in sight. While efforts continue to secure humanitarian aid and a ceasefire, the challenges posed by settlement expansion highlight the complexities involved in tackling the root cause of the problem and of reaching a lasting solution. The indecisiveness of the international community and its continued failure to act to protect Palestinians and to support a viable path to Palestinian statehood has only emboldened the Israeli government and settlers to disregard the recent ICJ ruling and to continue expanding settlements in clear and blatant violation of international law.

The global community must recognize and respond to this silent takeover, protect Palestinian rights, and work toward a lasting political resolution. Settler violence is part of a broader strategy to expel Palestinians from Area C in the West Bank. These policies inflict irreversible harm, threatening the security and future of Palestinians in their envisioned state.

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ⁱ <https://www.timesofisrael.com/smotrich-handed-sweeping-powers-over-west-bank-control-over-settlement-planning/>.

ⁱⁱ <https://www.timesofisrael.com/smotrich-recorded-describing-mega-dramatic-plan-for-civilian-control-over-west-bank/>.

ⁱⁱⁱ “NYT: Israel’s Smotrich Recorded Describing Plan to Increase Control Over West Bank,” Haaretz, June 21, 2024, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2024-06-21/ty-article/.premium/nyt-israels-smotrich-recorded-describing-plan-to-increase-control-over-west-bank/00000190-3c0d-d768-adf8-3cbf01e40000>.

^{iv} See United Nations, the Question of Palestine, “Letter Dated 15 June 1967 from the Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics” (A/6717), <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/auto-insert-179249/>; UN Security Council Resolution 237 of 1967, 237 (1967); and United Nations, the Question of Palestine, “Protection of civilians/Internally displaced persons – Gussing mission report, SecGen report under A/RES/2252 (ES-V) and S/RES/237” (1967), <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/auto-insert-179249/>.