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How Israel Is Reshaping the West Bank after 7 October

Unit for Political Studies

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In recent weeks, the West Bank has seen a major surge in violence by settlers and an intensification of military operations by Israeli occupation forces. While some have attempted to link this escalation to electoral calculations, in light of Israeli legislative elections scheduled for October, the reality is that it reflects a systematic Israeli policy that goes beyond electoral competition. Since its formation in December 2022, the Israeli government – dominated by religious extremist and ultranationalist parties – has pursued a drive to alter the facts on the ground in the West Bank. This process accelerated rapidly after Israel launched its genocidal war against the Gaza Strip following the events of October 2023. This policy encompasses the expansion of settlement projects, the tightening of restrictions on Palestinian movement, and the strangulation of the Palestinian economy. This is manifested in accelerating demolitions of Palestinian homes, displacement of Bedouin communities, attempts to depopulate refugee camps, and an unprecedented rise in settler violence and attacks on Palestinian villages, with the backing of the Israeli army. Ultimately, the strategy is altering the geographic, demographic, and administrative reality of the West Bank, imposing Israeli "sovereignty" as a fait accompli.

Aspects of the Shifting Geographic and Demographic Reality

A report by the Office of the European Union Representative in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, issued on 6 July 2026, revealed an unprecedented surge in Israeli settlement activity during 2025. This reflects a shift in settlement policy from gradual expansion to the fundamental reshaping of the geographic and demographic realities of the West Bank. The report indicates that the number of Israeli settlers in the territory has surpassed 750,000 (15 percent of the total West Bank population), distributed across 147 settlements, alongside a growing number of settlement outposts. Over the course of 2025, the Israeli government approved the establishment of 54 new settlements in the West Bank (excluding East Jerusalem) – the highest figure recorded in a single year since 1967.¹ Subsequent developments confirm that this trajectory is ongoing; on 14 July, the government signed a contract worth 8.5 billion shekels (US\$2.3 billion) to construct 12,000 new housing units in settlements.² Furthermore, approximately 86 new settlement outposts were established in 2025 – at an average rate of one to two outposts per week – while between 2023 and 2025, plans were set out for the construction of 40,064 housing units, expected to accommodate an additional 160,000 to 200,000 settlers.³

This trend has extended to reshaping the demographic geography of the West Bank and redistributing control over the land there. Settlers have employed a model of pastoral colonialism which involves establishing settlement farms to seize control of Palestinian land. They have effectively taken control of more than 1.07 million dunams (a dunam equals 1,000 square meters) – representing approximately 18 percent of the West Bank's total area, including about 300,000 additional dunams of land that they seized in 2025 alone. Furthermore, between 2023 and 2025, Israel declared approximately 25,959 dunams as "state land" – an area roughly equivalent to half of all land seized and designated as state property since the signing of the 1993 Oslo Accords. This expansion coincided with the construction of 223 kilometres of new settlement roads, as well as the advancement of the "E1" project through the approval of the construction of 3,401 housing units and the allocation of three billion shekels (\$900 million) for infrastructure – alongside 335 million shekels (\$100 million) to build the so-called "Sovereignty Road," which cuts off Palestinians from around three percent of the West Bank while reinforcing the

1 "2025 Report on Israeli Settlements in the Occupied West Bank, Including East Jerusalem Reporting Period: January - December 2025," The Office of the European Union Representative (West Bank and Gaza Strip, UNRWA), 17/7/2026, accessed 10/8/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBybHOP>.

2 "Netanyahu's Government Revealed to Have Allocated 8.5 Billion Shekels for Settlement Infrastructure," *Al-Ayyam*, 15/7/2026, accessed 10/8/2026 (in Arabic), at: <https://acr.ps/hBybHkF>.

3 "2025 Report on Israeli Settlements in the Occupied West Bank."

geographical links between settlements.⁴

This trajectory also entailed restrictions on Palestinian movement. By the end of 2025, Israel had established around 925 checkpoints, including over 120 new gates and 459 physical barriers, that block or limit Palestinian access to main roads, effectively isolating Palestinian cities, villages, and refugee camps from one another.⁵ Additionally, Israeli military operations in refugee camps across the northern West Bank have forcibly displaced more than 40,000 Palestinian refugees since the beginning of 2025.⁶ Continuing this strategy, Israeli occupation forces announced on 5 August that they were launching a "large-scale operation" in the Qalandia refugee camp north of Jerusalem, reiterating the same security pretexts the army used during previous operations in refugee camps in the northern West Bank.⁷

Although Area C, an area delineated under the Oslo Accords which comprises approximately 61 percent of the West Bank, has seen the most extensive campaigns of demolition, displacement, and emptying of Palestinian communities since October 2023,⁸ this policy has gradually extended to Areas A and B. This development reflects the erosion of the administrative divisions established by the Oslo Accords. In late July 2026, the occupation army issued 15 military orders seizing control of approximately 199.8 dunams of land in the Jenin Governorate (northern West Bank). Most of this land was designated for the construction of military roads, although one order targeted land within Area A for the establishment of a military outpost and an access road.⁹ Israel has also expanded its enforcement, planning, and construction powers within Area B, establishing eight new settlement outposts there in 2024 – a first since the signing of the Oslo Accords – and has intensified the demolition of Palestinian structures under the pretext that they were located in "security zones."¹⁰

The Rising Influence of Settlers and the Evolving System of Government

The transformation of the reality in the West Bank has been linked to the current Israeli government's efforts to restructure the system of colonial administration that had been in place since the 1970s, by transferring the powers of the Israeli army's Civil Administration to institutions led by settlers, and by directly involving the settler movement in governance. On 23 February 2023, former Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant and Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich signed an agreement transferring broad powers over civil affairs in the West Bank to the latter, stipulating the creation of a "Settlement Directorate" within the Civil Administration. These powers included setting government spending priorities, approving masterplans, and delineating administrative boundaries for settlements, as well as

4 Ibid.

5 Naila Khalil [et al.], "The West Bank 'Archipelago'... A Giant Prison with 925 Checkpoints and Gates," *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed*, 2/8/2026, accessed 10/8/2026 (in Arabic), at: <https://acr.ps/hBybHry>.

6 "Nakba is 'the World's Longest Standing Protracted Refugee Crisis', UN Assistant Secretary-General Says at the Commemoration of the 78th Anniversary of the Nakba," press release, United Nations, 15/8/2026, accessed 10/8/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBybGOd>.

7 "Israel Conducts Large-Scale Military Operation in Qalandia Palestinian Refugee Camp," *BBC Arabic*, 5/8/2026, accessed 10/8/2026 (in Arabic), at: <https://acr.ps/hBybHeW>.

8 "oPt: Humanitarian Situation Report | 23/7/2026," OCHA, 23/7/2026, accessed 10/8/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBybGBB>.

9 Zahran Maali, "How Do Seizure Orders Redraw the Map of Jenin?," *Palestine News and Information Agency (WAFA)*, 3/8/2026, accessed 10/8/2026 (in Arabic), at: <https://acr.ps/hBybH2k>.

10 "Al-Haq Submission to the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Adequate Housing on Consolidating Annexation of the West Bank: Israel's Demolitions in Area B," *Al-Haq*, 31/8/2026, accessed 10/8/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBybHt3>.

regulating and monitoring Palestinian planning and construction, and enforcing demolition orders.¹¹

In recent years, settler organizations have emerged that also play a role in implementing settlement policies on the ground. Prominent among them are Regavim, which supplies state institutions with files and maps regarding Palestinian construction; Amana, which establishes settlement outposts and neighbourhoods and develops their infrastructure; and the so-called "Guardians of Judea and Samaria," which organizes groups to protect settlement farms – alongside other organizations performing similar roles. This trend has been reinforced by a rapid growth in government allocations to settler groups and the expansion of their roles in executing road projects, the connection of outposts to water and electricity grids, and supervision of the construction of new settlement neighbourhoods.¹²

This shift has extended to regional settlement councils, which have moved beyond their traditional role of managing settlements and providing services to residents to become partners in implementing the settlement project. Today, six regional councils – distributed across the northern, central, and southern West Bank – publicly advocate for expanding settlements, bringing in more settlers, and imposing Israeli "sovereignty." These councils play a direct role in seizing land, securing outposts, and establishing new facts on the ground. The practices of several of their officials, particularly in Area C, reveal an increasing integration between state authorities and settlers; the two parties operate within a unified system aimed at dispossessing Palestinians and imposing Israeli control over their lands.¹³ Furthermore, groups such as the Hilltop Youth, "price tag" activists, and armed security squads act as arms of the state and its settlement enterprise on the ground, benefiting from funding provided by regional councils and colonial organizations, protection from the military, and the expansion of settlers' powers and weaponry.¹⁴

Israel's Objectives

Since it took office Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government has pursued a range of policy aimed at achieving a set of interconnected settler-colonial objectives, most notably the following:

Ending the Oslo Model

Although the Israeli Ministerial Committee on Legislation – at the request of Prime Minister Netanyahu – postponed a debate on a bill calling for the annulment of the Oslo Accords and the termination of the legal obligations arising from them,¹⁵ his government is effectively proceeding to dismantle the Oslo model by undermining its foundations and reimposing direct Israeli control over the West Bank. In February, Israel's Security Cabinet adopted several decisions expanding Israeli jurisdiction in the West Bank; these included publishing land registries, permitting Israelis to purchase land directly, and broadening enforcement powers within Areas A and B.¹⁶ In June, the government transferred planning and construction authority

¹¹ Jeremy Sharon, "Smotrich Handed Settlement Planning Authority and Broad Powers Over the West Bank," *The Times of Israel*, 24 February 2023, accessed 10/8/2026 (in Arabic), at: <https://acr.ps/hBybGPI>.

¹² "The Israeli Government's Record in the West Bank (2023–2026): Settlement Expansion, Transfer of Powers, and Undermining the Oslo Accords," Roundtable Discussion Paper (1), *The Palestinian Forum for Israeli Studies (MADAR)* (July 2026), accessed 10/8/2026 (in Arabic), at: <https://acr.ps/hBybHgr>.

¹³ Fathi Nimer, "The Future of the West Bank: Between Settler Control and the Annexation Project," *Al-Shabaka: The Palestinian Policy Network*, 3/2/2026, accessed 10/8/2026 (in Arabic), at: <https://acr.ps/hBybGD6>.

¹⁴ Muhammad Watad, "Names and Figures: Who Is Leading Settler Violence in the West Bank?" *Al Jazeera Net*, 2/8/2026, accessed 10/8/2026 (in Arabic), at: <https://acr.ps/hBybH3P>.

¹⁵ "Netanyahu Postpones Discussion of Bill to Revoke the Oslo Accords," *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed*, 10/8/2026, accessed 10/8/2026 (in Arabic), at: <https://acr.ps/hBybHuy>.

¹⁶ Nava Freiberg & TOI Staff, "Security Cabinet Okays Deepened Israeli Control of West Bank; Hamas Urges 'Escalation'," *Times of Israel*, 8 February 2026, accessed 10/8/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBybGRd>.

in the Old City of Hebron from its municipality to Israeli institutions – a move Smotrich described as "effectively nullifying the Hebron Protocol," one of the agreements stemming from the Oslo Accords.¹⁷

Undermining Prospects for a Palestinian State

Recent decisions by the Israeli government reveal that preventing the establishment of a Palestinian state is a primary, declared political objective – one translated into action through laws, legislation, and control over the land. In July 2024, the Knesset for the first time adopted a resolution rejecting the establishment of a Palestinian state, with 68 members voting in favour and only nine opposed.¹⁸ In May 2025, the Security Cabinet approved the resumption of land ownership registration in Area C and transferred to Israeli institutions the administration of this process, encompassing land registration, the issuance of sale permits, and oversight of registration procedures, while barring the Palestinian Authority from exercising these powers.¹⁹ In August 2025, Smotrich reactivated the E1 project, which had been frozen since 2012 due to American and European pressure. This project separates the northern West Bank from the south via a large settlement bloc south of Jerusalem; Smotrich's office described the move as aiming to "bury the idea of a Palestinian state."²⁰

In December 2025, the government amended the "Disengagement Law," permitting settlers to return to the four settlements Israel had evacuated in the northern West Bank in 2005, a move that expands settlement activity in the north, deepens the geographic fragmentation of the area, and undermines the possibility of establishing a geographically contiguous Palestinian state.²¹

Redefining the Status of Palestinians

The Israeli far right views Palestinians in the West Bank merely as residents of the region who could be allowed to manage their daily affairs, rather than as a people entitled to political rights and national aspirations. Accordingly, it proposes a model based on dividing the West Bank into six municipal districts – Hebron, Bethlehem, Ramallah, Jericho, Nablus, and Jenin – where the population is managed according to local and familial ties, while remaining economically and administratively linked to Israel.²² This vision aligns with the current Israeli government's support for alternative governance models based on family structures, rather than Palestinian political institutions; this was evident in Smotrich's call to annul the Hebron Protocol and revive the concept of a "Hebron Emirate," promoting figures from local clans as an alternative to the PA.²³ Israel has reinforced this trajectory by weakening the PA itself, specifically by withholding clearance revenues (tax and customs funds collected by Israel on behalf of the Palestinians), exacerbating the crisis over public sector salaries, and imposing increasing restrictions on

17 Beirut Hammoud, "Smotrich Officially Strips Hebron Municipality of Planning and Construction Powers," *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed*, 16/6/2026, accessed 10/8/2026 (in Arabic), at: <https://acr.ps/hBybHhW>.

18 "Israeli Knesset Rejects Establishment of a Palestinian State," *Al Jazeera Net*, 18/7/2024, accessed 10/8/2026 (in Arabic), at: <https://acr.ps/hBybGEB>.

19 Saeed Ammouri, "Israel Approves Resumption of Land Registration in the West Bank," *Anadolu Agency*, 12/8/2025, accessed 10/8/2026 (in Arabic), at: <https://acr.ps/hBybH5k>.

20 Khaled Salameh, "Israeli Settlement Project to 'Bury' the Idea of a Palestinian State," *Deutsche Welle*, 14/8/2025, accessed 10/8/2026 (in Arabic), at: <https://acr.ps/hBybHw3>.

21 "Israeli Security Cabinet Approves Establishment of 19 New Settlements in the Occupied West Bank," *BBC Arabic*, 21/12/2025, accessed 10/8/2026 (in Arabic), at: <https://acr.ps/hBybGSI>.

22 "Bezalel Smotrich: The Israeli 'Decisive Plan'," *Interactive Encyclopedia of the Palestine Question*, 7/9/2017, accessed 10/8/2026 (in Arabic), at: <https://acr.ps/hBybHjr>.

23 Kifah Zaboun, "'Hebron Emirate' Back in the Spotlight Under Smotrich's Arrangements," *Asharq Al-Awsat*, 19/6/2026, accessed 10/8/2026 (in Arabic), at: <https://acr.ps/hBybGG6>.

the Palestinian banking sector. Most notable among these measures was the Knesset's approval, on 9 June, of a law authorizing the deduction of annual sums from clearance revenues – amounts determined by the Ministerial Committee for National Security Affairs based on a report by the Minister of Finance – for transfer to the state treasury or use in paying compensation as mandated by Israel.²⁴

Imposing Israeli "Sovereignty"

In July 2025, the Knesset approved a non-binding motion calling for the imposition of Israeli "sovereignty" over the entire West Bank and the Jordan Valley.²⁵ Although the proposal did not make annexation official, the Israeli government is proceeding with de facto implementation, through measures that dismantle the arrangements created by the Oslo Accords, undermine the possibility of a Palestinian state, entrench control over most of the land, and confine Palestinians to isolated enclaves devoid of sovereignty or political rights. In this context, the imposition of "sovereignty" is linked to the entrenchment of an apartheid system that subjects Palestinians and settlers to two distinct legal and judicial regimes, granting settlers rights and privileges that Israel denies to Palestinians on the same land. Simultaneously, Israel is employing this system to reshape Palestinian geography, stifle Palestinian political and economic, and erode the Palestinians' capacity for resilience and survival on their land.

On the ground, this trajectory manifests in the displacement of Palestinian communities from Area C and the forced relocation of residents from refugee camps in the northern West Bank toward city centres and their outskirts, alongside escalating settler attacks on Palestinian villages and expropriation of their lands. Collectively, these policies gradually push the population from camps and villages toward city centres, confining them to narrower geographic areas where employment opportunities and the means of making a livelihood are dwindling. This creates an environment that drives people away, undermines their ability to support their families, and potentially compels them in the end to seek a life outside Palestine. This trajectory is most clearly manifested in Smotrich's plan to impose Israeli "sovereignty" over 82 percent of the West Bank and confine Palestinians to the remainder – specifically within city centres and isolated, separate population enclaves – devoid of the basic elements of sovereignty, geographic contiguity, and political or economic independence.²⁶

Conclusion

Since the current Israeli government took office, the West Bank has entered a new phase of the settler-colonial project – the worst since Israel occupied the territory in 1967. The pace of this project accelerated following the events of October 2023, which Israel seized upon as an opportunity to reshape the West Bank's geographic, demographic, and administrative reality in a way that imposes Israel's de facto sovereignty, regardless of whether it formally declares that annexation or not. Netanyahu's government views the current moment as a favourable opportunity to realise this project, capitalizing on the alignment of US President Donald Trump and his administration's policies with the agenda of the Israeli right wing, the weakness of European stances, and the absence of an effective Arab role. Simultaneously, the PA lacks an effective role in confronting a project that targets its political existence, gradually strips it of its functions, and restricts its role to managing daily civil affairs.

²⁴ "Israeli Knesset Approves Law to Freeze Palestinian Authority Funds," *Al-Jazeera Net*, 9/6/2026, accessed 10/8/2026 (in Arabic), at: <https://acr.ps/hBybH6P>.

²⁵ Anwar Al-Ziyadat, "Knesset Approval of West Bank Annexation Proposal Poses Direct Threat to Jordan," *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed*, 25/7/2025, accessed 10/8/2026 (in Arabic), at: <https://acr.ps/hBybGtu>.

²⁶ Sam Sokol, "Smotrich Proposes Annexing 82% of West Bank Territory to Prevent Establishment of a Palestinian State," *The Times of Israel*, 4/9/2025, accessed 10/8/2026 (in Arabic), at: <https://acr.ps/hBybGUD>.