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## ***Jewish settlers, paving the way for West Bank annexation***

Israeli settlers are escalating state-sanctioned violence and annexation ambitions in the occupied West Bank, exploiting the world's distraction with the war on Gaza to legalize outposts, land-grab, and advance ethnic cleansing against Palestinians.



(Photo Credit: The Cradle)

While the world's attention has been diverted to Tel Aviv's relentless military offensive in Gaza, the Israeli settler movement has escalated its state-sanctioned violence in the occupied West Bank.

**Capitalizing** on the distraction, Jewish settlers have intensified their attacks, culminating in the recent 'legalization' of five outposts by the government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. This move is part of a calculated strategy of settlement expansion and ethnic cleansing, paving the way for eventual formal annexation.

The occupation government has approved measures proposed by far-right Finance Minister Bezael Smotrich to legalize the settler outposts, initiate tenders for thousands more illegal settler units, and impose sanctions on the Palestinian Authority (PA) in the West Bank.

Smotrich, himself an [illegal West Bank settler](#), has vowed that these measures will pave the way for the [introduction](#) of a million new settlers.

### **Record settler violence and ethnic cleansing**

Decrying the [expansion](#) of settlements at record rates, UN Human Rights Chief Volker Türk condemned Israel's decision in March to construct an additional 3,476 settler homes in the West Bank. In this post-Al-Aqsa Flood reality, assaults on the homes, businesses, and Palestinian populations by rampaging settlers have surged to unprecedented levels.

In an April [report](#), Human Rights Watch (HRW) documented the extreme violence:

**Israeli settlers have assaulted, tortured, and committed sexual violence against Palestinians, stolen their belongings and livestock, threatened to kill them if they did not leave permanently, and destroyed their homes and schools under the cover of the ongoing hostilities in Gaza.**

Since the beginning of the war in the Gaza Strip, over 540 Palestinians have been [murdered](#) in the West Bank, dozens of them by Israeli settlers assaulting defenseless villages under the protection of the occupation army.

In addition, state-backed settler “[Defense Squad](#)” militias that were [supplied](#) with some 7,000 rifles after 7 October immediately took to ethnically cleansing thousands of Palestinians from some 16 farming communities located in Al-Khalil (Hebron), in addition to four other communities near Ramallah.

As Ubai al-Aboudi, Director of the Bisan Center for Research and Development, tells *The Cradle*:

**What has happened since October 7 is that the Israeli army's general order has collapsed, so any action by any soldier is not only permitted but is also allowed against Palestinians. So, if you look at this from a historical perspective, it is a continuation and intensification; they see that the world is busy with what is happening in Gaza, so they are implementing their plans to push people out of their lands and replace them with Jewish settlers.**

### **Strategic annexation plans**

One investigative report published in the Hebrew media indicated that since the Hamas-led resistance operation began, Israel's Security Minister [Itamar Ben Gvir](#) had [ordered](#) the police to stop enforcing the law against his fellow West Bank settlers. This spike in settlement expansion, lawlessness, and illegal settler violence also fits into what appears to be an accelerated effort to annex large swathes of the West Bank entirely.

Back in February, a document presented by Netanyahu to his war cabinet, entitled “[The Day After Hamas Principles](#),” set out to assert complete Israeli sovereignty over everything west of the Jordan River.

Although the occupation state has failed abysmally to defeat the Palestinian resistance in Gaza, and the prospect of annexing the besieged coastal territory – with any international buy-in – appears slim, the Zionist settler movement, which currently dominates Netanyahu’s ruling coalition is seizing an opportunity to achieve many of their desired goals in the area they see as “Israel’s biblical heartland.”

Israel recently implemented a decision, first announced by the military on 29 May, to [transfer](#) the responsibility for dozens of Civil Administration bylaws from the army to “civil servants” who work as officials at the Israeli defense ministry under Smotrich.

This followed Tel Aviv’s decision to begin changing the official governing structure of the West Bank by [transferring](#) administrative powers from military to civilian control – in essence, a step toward declaring the de jure annexation of the West Bank.

### **State-backed settler expansion**

Currently, there are around 146 Israeli [settlements](#) and roughly 191 settler outposts in the occupied West Bank, which [controls](#) around 46 percent of the territory. Almost all of these Jewish settlements are situated in what is known as Area C, which accounts for roughly 61 percent of the territory and is under full Israeli security and administrative control as per the 1995 Oslo Agreement signed with the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO).

The recent measures in the West Bank are part of a 2017 settler movement proposal titled “[Decisive Plan](#),” aiming to double the Jewish presence in the territory. Although the plan was not enacted at the time, the war in Gaza provided opportunistic conditions for its implementation and means to facilitate the annexation of the West Bank.

In August of last year, Israeli Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich, who himself resides in the illegal settlement of Kedumim, announced his intention to [allocate](#) \$120 million to settlement and settler outpost construction. It was also revealed in 2023 that the Israeli military had set up what it calls the ‘[Desert Frontier](#)’ unit, which integrated extremist settlers from the ‘Hilltop Youth’ settler groups.

These radicals drew such concern that Israeli intelligence launched an operation to infiltrate their ranks. Known for turning their weapons on both army soldiers and Palestinian civilians, these Jewish extremists were once considered terrorists even by Israeli standards.

### **Political empowerment**

While Israeli settler attacks on Palestinian civilians in the West Bank had already [risen to record highs](#) between 2021 and 2023, UN data indicates that settler violence [doubled](#) in October 2023 and has only continued to surge.

This spike coincides with [increased influence](#) granted by Netanyahu to far-right politicians such as Ben Gvir and Smotrich – and emboldened others like the Israeli military’s Chief of Staff [Herzi Halevi](#), yet another illegal West Bank settler.

To compound matters, Israeli settler militias that launch violent, unprovoked assaults on Palestinian villages have been discovered using army-issued [assault rifles](#) in their rampages. Settler organizations, including legal outfits that launch appeals in Israeli courts to bulldoze Palestinian homes, also receive financing from the government. All of this demonstrates the interconnectivity between the occupation state and the most radical elements of the settler movement.

To smooth that pathway, Israel’s wealthiest billionaire, Miriam Adelson, recently [donated \\$100 million](#) to Donald Trump’s 2024 Presidential bid, anticipating that he would recognize the Israeli annexation of the West Bank once re-elected.

Should the Israeli government pursue official annexation, it is expected to target Area C of the West Bank, an area rich in water and agricultural lands that accounts for about 61 percent of the territory.

### **Legalizing land theft**

On 18 July, the Israeli Knesset passed a bill [rejecting Palestinian Statehood](#), reinforcing a long-standing government agenda. Since 2017, public [proposals to annex](#) parts of the West Bank have been promoted by the ruling Likud Party.

Speaking to *The Cradle*, Khaled Barakat, a leader of the Palestinian Alternative Revolutionary Path (PARP) movement, says:

**To explain this new wave of Israeli settlements, we have to go back to 2005, 2006, to the time when Ariel Sharon was the Prime Minister and when all the Israeli troops withdrew from Gaza due to the resistance; he found himself in a situation where he had suffered a defeat and so adopted the strategy of occupying all the hills of the West Bank.**

Barakat adds:

**They then established new armed settler organizations, which is why there are now 12 of them; they are armed, they are militias, and they cooperate directly with the Israeli army. The major danger behind these settler militias in the West Bank is that they are non-State actors, so when they attack Palestinians daily, Israel says well, we have nothing to do with that; they are just residents of the West Bank. They are, of course,**

**not residents; they are armed colonialist settlers that remind Palestinians of the same gangs that existed in Palestine in the 1930s and the ones that actually founded the Zionist regime.**

In 2019, Netanyahu [proposed](#) annexing the Jordan Valley, sparing only a small pocket [under PA control](#). This strategy involves maintaining the PA's power in Areas A and B, home to over 3.2 million Palestinians, to avoid the logistical and financial burden of direct rule. Netanyahu's policy aims to ensure the [PA's survival](#) for security collaboration while simultaneously undermining Palestinian Statehood and annexing West Bank territory.

As Israel struggles to secure military victories over Hamas in Gaza and Hezbollah in Lebanon, Netanyahu may pivot to annexation efforts in the West Bank. This could involve a military campaign similar to the [2002 Operation Defensive Shield](#), aimed at dismantling resistance groups and projecting an image of victory to maintain support from far-right settler allies.

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