



Sovereignty in All but Name: Israel's Quickening Annexation of the West Bank

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Headquarters

International Crisis Group

Avenue Louise 235 • 1050 Brussels, Belgium

Tel: +32 2 502 90 38 • brussels@crisisgroup.org

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Principal Findings

What's new? Israel's far-right government is restructuring the occupation of the West Bank, shifting governing powers from military to civilian agencies in order to gradually institute permanent control. With Israeli law reaching further into the territory and space for Palestinian independence shrinking, much of the territory has, in effect, already been annexed.

Why did it happen? Israel has long built and expanded settlements and created "facts on the ground" compatible with annexation while dodging criticism by stopping short of officially declaring sovereignty over the West Bank. But far-right ministers are making unprecedented legal changes, and more prominent Israelis are calling for formal annexation.

Why does it matter? Whether or not annexation is formalised, Israel's changes are erasing remaining distinctions between life in the West Bank settlements and life in Israel. For West Bank Palestinians, to whom Israel denies basic rights, these moves diminish the possibility of either achieving statehood or living normal lives in their homeland.

What should be done? Outside actors should seize the opportunity of Gaza ceasefire diplomacy to act, rather than wait for an arguably superfluous formal West Bank annexation. They should use their leverage, including trade and arms sales, to press Israel to stop the entrenchment and spread of annexation and to begin rolling it back.

Executive Summary

Ever since seizing the West Bank in 1967, Israel has asserted increasing control of the territory while contending that its occupation is temporary. It has expanded settlements and the Israeli state's reach beyond the Green Line, the 1967 armistice line that has become the de facto border separating occupied territory from Israel. But recently the pace and nature of these efforts, which the International Court of Justice (ICJ) found in 2024 had crossed the line into annexation in significant parts of the West Bank, have changed. Far-right ministers who took up their posts in 2022 have spurred the transfer of greater powers in the West Bank to Israeli civilian authorities and extended more Israeli laws to the territory. Whether or not Israel declares formal sovereignty, as settler leaders are advocating, outside actors need to face what Israel has done and continues to do. To prevent annexation's entrenchment, and to find a viable way for West Bank Palestinians to live with basic rights and dignity, these actors need to make a commitment to seek change and put muscle – from trade sanctions to arms export restrictions – behind it.

Israel's settler movement, which has long steered policy in the West Bank, has done so with a much firmer hand since Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu formed a government with far-right settler politicians in 2022. Pursuing their goal of realising a Greater Israel, settlers have been explicit about their intent to annex West Bank territory and make it impossible for Palestinians not just to have a state there but also (particularly in the case of those living near Israeli settlements) to subsist. With the appointment of Bezalel Smotrich – an explicit anti-Palestinian annexationist – as finance minister and a minister in the defence ministry, the settlers' ambitions have increasingly become reality.

Their principal accomplishment has been to institutionally divide civilian from military administration of the occupation, thus removing its veneer of temporariness. Working from inside the defence ministry, but in parallel to the minister of defence, not under him, Smotrich has assumed extensive powers over so-called non-security aspects of daily life in the West Bank. Those powers, covering both Israeli settlers and Palestinians but employing two separate systems of law, have allowed him and his aides to dramatically speed up settlement expansion and to grab ever larger tracts of Palestinian land for future settlement. The effect has been to expel increasing numbers of Palestinians from their homes and lands, pushing them further into enclaves connected by roads that Israeli military checkpoints sever at will.

Owing to the energies of Smotrich and his settler allies now ensconced in the bureaucracy, the creeping annexation of the West Bank has advanced to the point that declaring Israeli sovereignty over the territory, or at least significant parts of it, would be a matter of form more than substance. These moves were the backdrop for the ICJ's July 2024 advisory opinion on the legal status of the occupied territories, which found that Israel had unlawfully annexed parts of the West Bank.

Yet even though the court treated partial annexation as a *fait accompli*, the Israeli authorities may hesitate to make this status official. Externally, a formal declaration would, in effect, be an admission by Israel that it has extended its sovereignty to occupied territory and to a Palestinian population that it denies fundamental rights and freedoms. That could only feed growing perceptions that Israel has become an apartheid state, has violated the core international norm against acquiring territory by force and is dispelling what remains of hopes for a two-state solution. But while some Israeli officials may prefer not to put the question of how Israel will, or will not, safeguard Palestinian rights within an expanded state on the front burner, others talk about formal annexation as a way to unequivocally and permanently thwart formation of a Palestinian state or to rebuff the recent wave of recognitions of a state of Palestine.

But even if Israel never formally declares the West Bank's annexation, the reality is that a substantial and growing number of West Bank Palestinians already live under Israeli sovereignty, though without the rights of Israeli citizens and in a polity that Israel has carved up so as to render a Palestinian state impossible. The question is what world powers that still see a two-state solution as integral to regional peace-making, which presumably include those countries calling for recognition of a Palestinian state, will do about it. Are they prepared to invest the political capital required to halt and reverse a reality that Israel has been creating on the ground for decades – and with greater industry and ambition since Smotrich received his current mandate? Are they ready to intercede in this way after the 7 October 2023 attacks?

The record to date does not inspire hope. Until very recently, external actors have given Israel virtual *carte blanche* in its creeping annexation of the occupied West Bank. The U.S., the country with most influence over Israel, has given Israel its full backing, notwithstanding whatever personal animosity might have existed between Netanyahu and the U.S. president of the time. The Trump administration has been no different. Its ambassador to Israel, Mike Huckabee, in a clear departure from longstanding U.S. policy, has gone so far as to suggest that if Palestinians want a state, they should seek one elsewhere in the Muslim world or – in a sarcastic jab at France – that they create a

“Franc-en-Stine” on the French Riviera. While European powers may be more critical of Israel, they seem to be responding to Israeli transgressions in the West Bank with wrist-slapping gestures such as sanctions on egregiously violent individual settlers, while holding back on stronger measures pending a formal Israeli announcement of annexation.

Still, the carnage in Gaza has caused some outside actors to re-examine their approach toward Israel, with the Trump administration pushing Netanyahu in September to accept a 20-point plan for ending the war in the enclave – which has culminated in the announcement of a cease-fire deal as this report goes to press. Certain recent steps – including recognition of Palestinian statehood by a number of influential states as well as talk of suspending trade with Israel – suggest that there could be space for a new tack vis-à-vis the Israeli-Palestinian conflict writ large. Any such approach should begin by facing the reality that annexation is not a future threat – it is already under way. It should also be tethered to a long-term strategy, underwritten by a corresponding political commitment, to halt the further consolidation of Israel’s annexation and to begin the difficult work of persuading Israel to reverse course.

The strategy should also have teeth. The EU could use the potential suspension of the bloc’s Association Agreement, and EU member states might use arms shipments. Arab states could do much more to tie their willingness to “normalise” ties with Israel to its behaviour in the West Bank. The United Arab Emirates has held up formal annexation as a “red line” but said little about the reality of creeping annexation. Should Washington ever adopt such an approach – which is hard to imagine absent a sea change in U.S. politics – its political and military support for Israel would give it enormous leverage.

The impediments to a two-state solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict are longstanding and immense, and a body of informed commentary argues that they are indeed insurmountable. Perhaps they are, but there is no world in which the further progress of annexation will produce a better result for the Palestinian people – or, for that matter, for Israelis. Israel may never alter its posture in the West Bank, but if outside actors play a long game and act concertedly, they will optimise their chances of changing its behaviour. Absent that, the status quo, which denies the Palestinian people not just a state, but also basic rights, will only become further entrenched.

Tel Aviv/Jerusalem/Brussels, 9 October 2025

Sovereignty in All but Name: Israel's Quickening Annexation of the West Bank

I. Introduction

Israeli civilians have been settling in the West Bank since shortly after Israel occupied it during the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. International law is widely understood to prevent states from effecting major demographic change in occupied territory.¹ Yet a robust settler movement has arisen in Israel, espousing visions of a Greater Israel and seeking to consolidate Israel's grip on the lands that, using biblical language and claiming the fulfilment of prophecy, it calls Judea and Samaria. The Israeli state has promoted West Bank settlement, too, though generally citing security grounds – the need for a buffer between Israel and presumptively hostile Arab states – rather than a religious purpose. In recent decades, however, the settler movement's political clout has grown, and its ideas have increasingly come to shape the state's approach to the occupation writ large.² This trend culminated in the election of a far-right government in November 2022, which brought a marked change to Israeli settlement policy, to some extent in its nature, but even more in the intensity and openness with which it is pursued.

The shift gained even more impetus during the two years of war, starting with the Hamas attacks of 7 October 2023, that have pitted Israel not just against that group, but against a host of other enemies in the Middle East. Given the distraction of this fighting, and with nationalism running high, few Israelis have cared to question what has been happening in the West Bank.

The 2022 elections put ardent supporters of the settlement enterprise in the driver's seat of policymaking in the West Bank.³ Two settler leaders rose to special prominence. Bezalel Smotrich was handed the finance ministry and, in addition, given a rank parallel to the head of

¹ "Rule 130. Transfer of Own Civilian Population into Occupied Territory", International Humanitarian Law Databases, International Committee of the Red Cross.

² For more on the history of Israeli settlement policy, see Crisis Group Middle East Report N°246, *Stemming Israeli Settler Violence at Its Root*, 6 September 2024, Section II.

³ In order to form a ruling coalition after winning the elections, Netanyahu was forced to turn to politicians from the far-right fringe with whom he had refused to work before. Mairav Zonszein, "Israel's Winning Coalition: Culmination of a Long Rightward Shift", Crisis Group Commentary, 8 November 2022.

the defence ministry, despite the fact that his Religious Zionism party holds just a handful of Knesset seats.⁴ Another firebrand, Itamar Ben-Gvir, who was once convicted in Israeli court of incitement to racism, assumed the post of national security minister, overseeing the regular police as well as the Border Police, a militarised gendarmerie in the occupied territories.⁵

Smotrich and Ben-Gvir took up their positions at a time when half a million Israeli settlers were already living in the West Bank, not including East Jerusalem.⁶ But while settlements were looking permanent then, they look even more so today, as does Israel's intent to maintain control of the territory. While international law requires that an occupying power wield its authority on a temporary basis, understanding that eventually it will relinquish that authority, Israel's conduct suggests that it sees its West Bank presence as a permanent state of affairs. This and other considerations led the International Court of Justice (ICJ) to find in July 2024 that Israel had moved from occupation to annexation in much of the West Bank. (The ICJ additionally ruled that Israel has a legal obligation to end its unlawful presence and that other states have a legal obligation to press it in this direction.)⁷

This report examines how Smotrich, in particular, has pushed Israeli policy in the occupied West Bank onto new legal terrain and in the direction of enabling both informal and formal annexation of the territory to Israel. It explains the history of Israel's creeping annexation of the West Bank, describes how the effort is gaining steam and assesses the implications for both regional peace and security and for the lives of Palestinians living in the territory. It also offers recommendations for how outside parties interested in promoting Israeli-Palestinian peace can help stop Israel from absorbing the West Bank. The report is focused on Israeli actions, and the range of perspectives

⁴ Thanks to the alliance of small far-right formations in the 2022 elections, Religious Zionism is the third largest party in parliament, despite holding few seats. "Israel's election empowers a more muscular religious Zionism", *The New York Times*, 13 November 2022.

⁵ A European diplomat contended that, "Netanyahu appointed Smotrich and Ben Gvir to powerful ministerial positions because he did not want to promote people from within his own party who could challenge his leadership. He keeps mediocre people around him". Crisis Group interview, Tel Aviv, 13 May 2025.

⁶ As of June, there were 147 settlements and 274 settler outposts in the West Bank, not including 22 settlements newly authorised by the Israeli cabinet on 29 May or the settlements in East Jerusalem, which Israel formally annexed in 1980. Crisis Group telephone interview, coordinator, Peace Now's Settlement Watch, 8 June 2025.

⁷ "Summary of the Advisory Opinion of 19 July 2024", International Court of Justice, 19 July 2024.

on them within the Israeli polity, not on the Palestinian experience and potential responses.

The report is based on dozens of interviews with Israeli government officials, settler movement figures, Israeli and Palestinian civil society representatives, European and U.S. diplomats, and others, conducted from mid-2024 to mid-2025 in Israel and the occupied West Bank, including in Israeli settlements. About one third of the interviewees were women, including several senior Israeli security officials and foreign diplomats.

II. Reconfiguring the Occupation

Of the two settler movement leaders serving in the current Netanyahu government, Ben-Gvir is often the more visible, due to his provocative bombast, but the calculating Smotrich is the more consequential actor. Through a series of bureaucratic manoeuvres, he has not just accelerated settlement expansion but also effected a paradigm shift, re-designing the workings of Israel's occupation of the West Bank and transferring key powers from the military to civilian agencies. The result is a West Bank that increasingly falls under Israeli sovereignty in all but name.⁸

A. *Splitting Civilian from Military Control*

Smotrich entered the coalition government with a clear set of demands that he used to extract government pledges in the form of agreements signed with Netanyahu's Likud Party.⁹ These included a commitment by the prime minister to "work toward the formulation and promotion of a policy whereby sovereignty is applied to Judea and Samaria". ("Sovereignty" in the Israeli lexicon means annexation.)

No less critically, Smotrich also secured a promise that he would be granted extensive authority over daily life in the West Bank. The mechanism for him getting it was a separation of responsibilities within the defence ministry, whereby he was given a ministerial portfolio in addition to his position as finance minister. That split became formal on 23 February 2023, when he and then-Defence Minister Yoav Gallant signed a memorandum of understanding entitled, "The Principles and Division of Responsibilities and Authorities between the Minister of Defence and the Additional Minister in the Ministry of Defence".¹⁰

The agreement divided administration of the occupied West Bank into two functional areas. Gallant retained control of all matters under the rubric of security, while Smotrich assumed authority over everything defined as daily civilian affairs, in effect taking over these powers from the Israeli military in occupied West Bank lands. A year later, in June 2024, he boasted of his achievement to his base: "It's mega-dramatic. ... We created a separate civilian system".¹¹ Smotrich explained that he

⁸ "Israel's Smotrich launches settlement plan to 'bury' idea of a Palestinian state", Reuters, 14 August 2025.

⁹ Coalition agreement between Likud and Religious Zionism, 28 December 2022 [Hebrew].

¹⁰ The memorandum was reported on Mako, a news website operated by Israel's Channel 12, on 23 February 2023. The Israeli NGO Breaking the Silence provided an unofficial English translation from the original Hebrew.

¹¹ Full transcript by the Israeli NGO Peace Now of a recording of a Religious Zionism party conference at Shaharit Farm, a West Bank settler outpost, on 9 June

was exercising his new civilian authorities under defence ministry auspices, probably so that Washington and other capitals would not protest. Simply proclaiming Israeli civilian rule might have drawn backlash as violating the norm against conquest and the Fourth Geneva Convention, which assumes that an occupying power will administer but not annex territory it holds.¹² While Israel does not acknowledge the Fourth Geneva Convention's application to the West Bank, or accept the occupier label, it also says it "voluntarily" acts in accordance with relevant aspects of international humanitarian law in the area.¹³

Until Smotrich's arrival, Israel administered all aspects of the West Bank through what were in effect military mechanisms created to run an occupation.¹⁴ In 1967, the Israeli army took charge of West Bank affairs, not only as pertaining to security but also as related to matters such as housing, planning, construction and infrastructure. In 1981, the army placed the latter concerns under the aegis of the Civil Admini-

2024. See also "Israeli official describes secret government bid to cement control of West Bank", *The New York Times*, 21 June 2024.

¹² Ibid. The ICJ has ruled as follows: "It is the view of the Court that to seek to acquire sovereignty over an occupied territory, as shown by the policies and practices adopted by Israel in East Jerusalem and the West Bank, is contrary to the prohibition of the use of force in international relations and its corollary principle of the non-acquisition of territory by force". "Summary of the Advisory Opinion of 19 July 2024", op. cit.

¹³ Israel contends that it is not an occupying power in the West Bank because Jordan, from which it seized the territory in 1967, was not technically sovereign there at the time; it claims that absent a reversionary sovereign, occupation law does not apply. It further notes that the kingdom has since relinquished any claim to the territory. Israel says it is administering a "disputed" territory whose future should be decided in negotiations. According to Moshe Frucht, the deputy legal adviser to the defence ministry, "We are operating according to laws of war and international humanitarian law, but voluntarily – because Israel's official policy is that the West Bank is disputed, not occupied. De facto we have decided to administer the area as if it is occupied. This also means that when it comes to the term 'annexation' – it is not relevant because the area is not occupied". Crisis Group interview, Tel Aviv, 19 December 2024. Contradicting Israel's claims, the ICJ's advisory opinion in July 2024 states that Israel's presence in Gaza and the West Bank (including East Jerusalem) is both an occupation and illegal because it is the product of a military takeover of land, regardless of the territories' status prior to the 1967 war. "Summary of the Advisory Opinion of 19 July 2024", op. cit. Dismissing the court's opinion as "absurd", Netanyahu responded, "The Jewish people are not occupiers in their own land". Post on X by Prime Minister of Israel, @IsraeliPM, 9:34am, 19 July 2024. See also Kenneth Roth, "The ICJ has demolished Israel's claims that it is not occupying Palestinian territories", *The Guardian*, 22 July 2024.

¹⁴ Two scholars wrote, "The civil system was intertwined with the military one, as civil considerations were with those of 'security' – always meaning security of and for Jews. ... Complete separation could never be achieved, if only because a complete picture of civil and military activity in the Occupied Territories could never be obtained". Adi Ophir and Ariella Azoulay, *The One-State Condition* (Stanford, Ca., 2018), p. 43.

stration, a military body whose staff of Israeli defence ministry employees managed civilian affairs for both Israelis and Palestinians.¹⁵ In practice, Israelis living in West Bank settlements remained subject as individuals to Israeli civilian law and courts, but the Civil Administration, as part of the military occupation, provided them with day-to-day services in administration, housing and infrastructure. Hence there was at least a notional distinction between the state support received by settlers in the West Bank and Israelis living in Israel proper.

Since December 2022, in a significant departure from the system Israel put in place after seizing the West Bank, Smotrich has focused on ensuring that Israeli settlers have access to the same services that citizens who live inside Israel receive, without the encumbrances of the Civil Administration. By taking tasks that have been the province of the military command and subject to military orders since 1967, and transferring them to the Israeli civilian political echelon, Smotrich has extended a new dimension of Israeli sovereignty to the settlements and deepened the segregation between Palestinians (who continue to receive support from the Civil Administration) and Israelis (who now do not). He does not hide that his goal is to pre-empt Palestinian statehood by making the West Bank an integral part of Israel, though on a practical level he is also streamlining services to his voting base – settlers in the West Bank's Area C, mostly rural lands under full Israeli control.¹⁶ He has said:

West of the Jordan, from the Jordan River to the sea, there is room for only one national self-determination: Jewish. There will never be an Arab state in the heart of the Land of Israel".¹⁷

¹⁵ The Civil Administration was established by military order no. 947 on 8 November 1981. Jonathan Kuttab and Raja Shehadeh, "Civilian Administration in the Occupied West Bank", *Al-Haq*, January 1982. The Civil Administration is subordinate to the Coordinator of Government Affairs in the Territories (COGAT), a military unit overseeing civilian policy in the West Bank and Gaza, established upon the start of the occupation in 1967. Critics say it was created to provide the appearance of a civilian order governing Palestinians rather than a military one occupying their land. Neve Gordon, *Israel's Occupation* (Berkeley, 2008), p. 108.

¹⁶ Stating that the "Israeli presence in Judea and Samaria is irreversible", Smotrich asserted his plans in the West Bank at a December 2024 conference. See X post by Yehuda Shaul, @YehudaShaul, director, Israeli NGO Ofek, 12:35pm, 11 December 2024. Area C refers to the 60 per cent of the West Bank that remains under full Israeli management and control, as stipulated by the 1993 Oslo accords, and where half a million Israeli settlers as well as 200,000-300,000 Palestinians live. Areas A and B are where most of the Palestinian population lives, the former comprising the urban areas administered by the Palestinian Authority and the latter mostly swathes of the countryside under Israel security control.

¹⁷ Smotrich speaking at a conference on 11 December 2024, as posted on X by Yehuda Shaul, @YehudaShaul, director, Israeli NGO Ofek, 12:35pm, 11 December 2024. See also X post by Bezalel Smotrich, @bezalelsm, 6 December 2024, in

Thus, while the 23 February 2023 memorandum specifies that the West Bank's legal status has not changed, that reference to formal status is a mirage. In fact, the deal has handed extensive powers over the occupied territory to a prominent settler movement leader who is openly committed to the West Bank's annexation. Smotrich enjoys roughly the authority he would have if he became West Bank governor, in charge of three million Palestinians and half a million Israeli settlers. The split in administrative responsibilities has proven "critically significant", said a former high-ranking Israeli military officer. "It changed the rules of the game".¹⁸

B. A New Opportunity for Settlement Expansion

The administrative division that Smotrich effectuated in the defence ministry enhanced his ability to expedite settlement expansion. When the split became official on 23 February 2023, he established the Settlement Administration, a body responsible for all aspects of daily life in the West Bank's Area C unrelated to security, in effect replacing both the Coordinator of Government Affairs in the Territories (COGAT) – the military unit overseeing civilian policies in occupied territory since 1967 – and the Civil Administration, its executive arm. He appointed a close associate, Yehuda Eliahu, to head the Settlement Administration.¹⁹ Both COGAT and the Civil Administration continue to exist, answering in theory to the Israeli military command, but in reality they are now subordinate to the Settlement Administration within the defence ministry.

Working from an office in the defence ministry's Tel Aviv headquarters, Smotrich and his associates have assumed authority over all aspects of land allocation, such as registration of ownership, planning and construction, as well as the legalisation of settler outposts deemed illegal under Israeli law. They hold sway over electricity, water, communications and transport infrastructure for both Israelis and Palestinians, in addition to archaeological sites, nature reserves and farms. All these powers have been used to promote settlement expansion.²⁰ Crucially, too, in June 2023, the government at Smotrich's initiative abolished a requirement for settlements to obtain authorisation from

which he announced the expropriation of 23,000 dunams of West Bank land as "creating facts on the ground to thwart a Palestinian state".

¹⁸ Crisis Group interview, Tel Aviv, 11 September 2024.

¹⁹ A co-founder, with Smotrich, of Regavim, an NGO committed to blocking Palestinian construction in the West Bank, Eliahu lives in a settler outpost, Harasha, which he helped establish and which the Israeli government legalised retroactively in 2020. He has also served as a settlement regional council head. "This pro-settler NGO has been shaping Israeli policy for years. Now, it's in control", *Haaretz*, 27 April 2023.

²⁰ "Annexation under the Radar", *Peace Now*, July 2023.

the prime minister and defence minister for each stage of any expansion planning. In effect, this move put the cat – namely, Smotrich – in charge of doling out the cream.²¹

Smotrich's powers extend to the demolition of structures built without a permit in the West Bank. Virtually all new construction on Palestinian property in Area C, where building permits were already almost impossible for Palestinians to obtain, is thus now subject to his discretion.²² The impact has been immediate. In 2023, Israel demolished markedly more Palestinian homes in both the West Bank and East Jerusalem than it had the previous year, and in 2024, it tore down even more.²³ At the same time, it practically ceased dismantling illegal structures built by settlers in the West Bank. Whereas 2022 saw about 300 cases of enforcement of construction laws against settlers, there were only ten such instances in the first half of 2023.²⁴ In July 2023, the Civil Administration's enforcement of demolition orders against illegal settler outposts, which was already selective, came to a complete halt.²⁵

In May 2024, in another step that shifted control of the West Bank from military into civilian hands, the Israeli army signed an order that transferred day-to-day administrative powers from the head of the Civil Administration, a military officer, to a new deputy head, a position that Smotrich created.²⁶ The powers delegated to the person Smotrich named, Hillel Roth, a settler civilian and close associate committed to promoting Israel's settlement project, cover planning and construction (including also retroactive approval of illegal outposts), transport, infrastructure, nature reserves and archaeology.²⁷

²¹ Until now, advancing a construction plan in the West Bank has involved several stages, each of which has required the defence minister's approval. "Israeli government assigns sole responsibility for West Bank settlement planning process to minister Smotrich", *Peace Now*, 18 June 2023.

²² "Israel rejects over 98 percent of Palestinian building permit requests in West Bank's Area C", *Haaretz*, 21 January 2025.

²³ In 2023, Israeli authorities demolished or seized a total of 1,177 structures throughout the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, the highest number recorded since 2016. "One Year Report on Demolitions and Seizures in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem – Reporting Period: 1 January-31 December 2023", European Union, 19 November 2024. The next year, it demolished over 1,700 Palestinian structures. "Humanitarian Situation Update #252", UN OCHA, 2 January 2025. As of September, Israel had torn down over 1,000 structures in the West Bank, the vast majority of them in Area C. "Data on demolition and displacement in the West Bank", UN OCHA, 10 September 2025.

²⁴ "Since Smotrich appointment, Israel nearly stopped enforcing law on illegal settlement construction", *Haaretz*, 2 July 2023.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Unofficial translation of the order from Hebrew, posted on X by Yehuda Shaul, @YehudaShaul, director, Israeli NGO Ofek, 6:08am, 21 June 2024.

²⁷ Right-wing Israeli groups have long used archaeology in the service of expanding Israeli settlement. The current government has taken this project further, em-

The deputy title is misleading, since Smotrich made Roth subordinate not to the head of the Civil Administration but to Eliahu, head of the Settlement Administration. As Smotrich explained at his party's conference in June 2024:

All the authorities of the head of the Civil Administration were delegated to [Roth]. ... He signs the orders, convenes the Higher Planning Committee, declares state lands, signs the blue lines [delineating state land], manages the staff, issues tenders for personnel and signs expropriation [orders] for roads. Everything is in his hands. All civil powers.²⁸

The order also transferred authority in legal matters from the Israeli military advocate general's corps to the defence ministry. Legal counsel on all non-military matters in the West Bank came to reside in the ministry's legal adviser, a civilian, who is not subordinate to the military commander in the territory, but rather is tied to Israel's political leadership.

Some Israeli officials downplay the significance of these moves. Of the military order, Moshe Frucht, the defence ministry's deputy legal adviser, said: "Legal counsel to civilians on civilian matters should be given by professional and experienced civilians, not military officials".²⁹ He noted that his boss, the legal adviser, had called for making this change well before Smotrich assumed his post in the ministry. "The Settlement Administration's objective is to make civilian life easier", Frucht went on. The transition from military to civilian authority is unremarkable, he argued, since West Bank civilian affairs have always fallen under the defence ministry – a political, not a military, institution. "The Civil Administration has worked independently from the IDF on civilian affairs since it was established", he said. "COGAT was always more civilian, and now it is under the Settlement Administration, which is much more civilian-oriented".³⁰

But Israeli human rights attorney Michael Sfard sees deep consequences to transferring authority over civilian affairs in the West Bank to the Settlement Administration and bringing the Civil Administration under a political appointee. De facto annexation has been happening for years, Sfard said. But with Smotrich's administrative changes the

powering the Civil Administration to restrict Palestinian construction or demolish Palestinian buildings on plots it deems to be Jewish heritage sites in the West Bank's Area B. See, eg, "Cabinet Decision to Allow Israeli Civilian Administration at Heritage Sites in Area B of the West Bank", *Emek Shaveh*, 4 July 2024.

²⁸ Transcript provided by the Israeli NGO Peace Now of a recording of an internal Religious Zionism Party conference at Shahrar Farm, a West Bank settler outpost, on 9 June 2024.

²⁹ Crisis Group interview, Tel Aviv, 19 December 2024.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

process has become, in his words “*de jure*. It is qualitatively different”. In his analysis, the previous structure of Israel’s military occupation kept a buffer between the government, which is bound to serve the interests of Israeli citizens, and the military, which is bound to administer the territory under laws of occupation. “With that [May 2024] order,” he said, “the government formally erased that buffer”.³¹ A system of occupation that, by definition, was someday supposed to end has been replaced by a system that is openly intended to cement permanent control.

Smotrich’s actions also have critics inside the Israeli military establishment, which has in the past often seen settlers as troublemakers. Gadi Shamni, a former head of the Israel Defence Force (IDF) Central Command (whose area of operations includes the West Bank), said Smotrich has in effect neutered military authority in the West Bank in a deliberate effort to escalate tensions. “Smotrich has tied the IDF Central Command’s hand behind its back. He has stripped the military of its ability to grasp the full picture on the ground and to balance the competing forces – something essential for an occupying force”. A key part of this balance, the civilian administrative dimension, has been shifted under Smotrich’s control, such that it is now used as a tool to “inflamm rather than stabilise the West Bank”.³² Shamni, like many of his peers, sees an inherent Israeli interest in keeping the West Bank as calm as possible. By contrast, Smotrich’s interest is in upending the status quo – and scoring points with his settler constituency.

³¹ Crisis Group interview, Tel Aviv, 27 January 2025.

³² Crisis Group telephone interview, 13 March 2025.

III. Backstory: Nearly Half a Century of “Creeping Annexation”

The steps that Smotrich and others have taken in recent years are building upon a decades-long Israeli project to bring the West Bank under Israel's actual if not declared sovereignty. By far the most important element of the project was to allow or encourage Israelis to settle on occupied land – international law notwithstanding – but there were other measures, too.³³ For years, Israelis have been able to travel by road across the Green Line, the 1967 armistice line that is the de facto boundary between Israel and the West Bank, without knowing they have entered occupied territory.³⁴ The map appearing on Israeli TV's nightly weather forecasts, and the one used in most classrooms, shows Greater Israel, stretching from the Mediterranean Sea to the Jordan River, with no demarcation of the pre-1967 borders. During this period of “creeping annexation”, Israel generally denied seeking sovereignty over the West Bank, thus mitigating the friction it would cause by frontally violating the international norm against redrawing borders by force, even as it chipped away at hopes for a two-state solution.³⁵

A. *The De Facto Extension of Israeli Control*

From an institutional standpoint, Israeli governing and legal arrangements in the West Bank tell a story of deliberate extension of Israeli control since the occupation started.³⁶ This process has required allocating budgets, resources and infrastructure for Israeli settlement. Israel has built roads and schools, established electrical grids and installed water pipes for decades in the West Bank.³⁷ All this construc-

³³ Crisis Group Report, *Stemming Israeli Settler Violence at Its Root*, op. cit. Article 49 of the Fourth Geneva Convention states, “The Occupying Power shall not ... transfer parts of its own civilian population into the territory it occupies”. “International Humanitarian Law Databases”, International Committee of the Red Cross.

³⁴ Other examples include road numbers that extend across the Green Line, signage that ignores Palestinian towns and villages lying near Israeli settlements, the presence of Israeli infrastructure companies in the West Banks and the imposition of Israeli regulation standards in the territory.

³⁵ Chris McGreal, “Former US ambassador accuses Israel of ‘creeping annexation’ of the West Bank”, *The Guardian*, 24 February 2023.

³⁶ Gordon reports that, “Already in 1967, one finds orders that reveal how Israel's concerns far exceeded those of a temporary occupying power, as formally understood by international law. For example, alongside orders concerning the restriction of movement and the imposition of curfews, one finds orders regarding the use of public parks, currency exchange rates, duties on tobacco and alcoholic beverages, postal laws, and the transportation of agricultural products”. Gordon, *Israel's Occupation*, op. cit., p. 27.

³⁷ Gordon, *Israel's Occupation*, op. cit.

tion has transformed the territory's political geography, demography and economy.

One of the most visible manifestations of de facto annexation is the barrier that Israel is building on its eastern flank. Israel began construction in 2002, with the stated aim of preventing Palestinian attacks inside Israel. As of December 2022, about 65 per cent of the barrier, which in some places is a fence and in other places a concrete wall, had been completed, and building continues along the approved route.³⁸ Nominally, the wall-and-fence complex is to separate the West Bank from Israel, but some 85 per cent of it zigzags within Palestinian territory, often serving to incorporate Israeli settlements that lie close to the Green Line into Israel.³⁹ Other sections of it cut off Palestinian villages from one another or from adjacent farmland.

Israel has always called the barrier a temporary security measure, but observers including the ICJ have noted its air of permanence from early on. In a 2004 advisory opinion, the Court stated that, "Whilst the Court notes the assurance given by Israel that the construction of the wall does not amount to annexation and that the wall is of a temporary nature ..., it nevertheless cannot remain indifferent to certain fears expressed to it that the route of the wall will prejudice the future frontier between Israel and Palestine, and the fear that Israel may integrate the settlements and their means of access".⁴⁰

A major sign of de facto annexation came two decades later, on 29 March, when the Israeli cabinet authorised and budgeted for construction of a road inside the West Bank, east of Jerusalem, reserved solely for West Bank Palestinians. While presented as a move to ease traffic between the villages of al-Azariya and al-Zaim, bypassing the large Ma'ale Adumim settlement, it puts in place a key segment to complete the segregation of West Bank roads. There will now be one road on which only Israeli-licensed vehicles (including vehicles belonging to Palestinians with Jerusalem residence permits) are allowed to drive and another designated for cars licensed by the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank.⁴¹ The bypass allows for seamless connection of Israel's own road system in occupied territory and sets the stage for settlement construction in an area known as E1,

³⁸ "The Humanitarian Impact of 20 Years of the Barrier – December 2022", UN OCHA, 30 December 2022.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ It continued, "The Court considers that the construction of the wall and its associated régime create a 'fait accompli' on the ground that could well become permanent, in which case, and notwithstanding the formal characterization of the wall by Israel, it would be tantamount to de facto annexation". "Legal Consequences of the Construction of a Wall in the Occupied Palestinian Territory", UN, 9 July 2004.

⁴¹ Crisis Group observations, Jerusalem, 14 February 2025. See also "Roadblocked", *The New York Times*, 13 October 2024.

whose construction was approved in August, after being frozen for decades due to U.S. objections.

Together, the road and the east-west extension of Israeli settlements will in effect cleave the West Bank in two, making it easy for Israel to block Palestinians' travel between north and south, and further isolating both parts of the West Bank from the large Palestinian population of East Jerusalem.⁴²

B. The Incremental Extension of Israeli Law to the West Bank

In addition to the creation of facts on the ground, examples abound of what may be termed the piecemeal de jure annexation of the West Bank. A few weeks after the occupation began in 1967, the High Court of Justice, Israel's top court, began hearing cases brought by Palestinian residents of the West Bank, in effect extending its jurisdiction to the territory. While the High Court afforded a venue to Palestinians who would otherwise have had limited legal recourse, it also gave an illegal occupation a veneer of legality – in a move critics have described as “judicial annexation”.⁴³

Successive Israeli governments, especially the current one, have passed laws and proposed bills or amendments that apply Israeli law to specific areas or issues in the West Bank, some 149 times since 2015.⁴⁴ The Knesset, Israel's parliament, has adopted ten of these, including a 2017 law transferring the authorities of the Council for Higher Education that operates in the West Bank from the military commander to Israel's Council for Higher Education, such that the latter has personal jurisdiction over Israeli individuals and corporations in the West Bank. Another example is a law passed in 2018 that amends the tax ordinance in Israel to include settlers, allowing them to derive tax benefits from profits they earn in the West Bank.⁴⁵

Among the most aggressive of these legislative efforts was the Regulation Law of 2017, which aimed to retroactively legalise all Israeli settlements in Area C. It was the first Israeli law that applied territorially in the West Bank itself.⁴⁶ Though Israel's High Court over-

⁴² “Israel's Smotrich launches settlement plan to ‘bury’ idea of Palestinian state”, op. cit. For more on E1, see Nadav Shragai, “Understanding Israeli Interests in the E1 Area: Contiguity, Security and Jerusalem”, Jerusalem Center for Security and Foreign Affairs, 2013; and “The ‘Sovereignty Road’ in the Area of Al-Azariya-Ma’ale Adumim is Advancing to the Implementation Stage”, Peace Now, 30 April 2023.

⁴³ Baruch Kimmerling, quoted in Gordon, *Israel's Occupation*, op. cit., p. 33.

⁴⁴ Sfar, the human rights lawyer and activist, believes that this trend in law-making (and the corresponding political rhetoric) gathered speed during U.S. President Donald Trump's first term in office, which started in January 2017. Crisis Group interview, Tel Aviv, 27 January 2025.

⁴⁵ “Annexation Legislation Database”, Yesh Din.

⁴⁶ Crisis Group interview, Tel Aviv, 27 January 2025.

turned the law in 2020 on the grounds that it violated Palestinian property rights and gave preferential treatment to Israeli settlers, Israel's far right has made concerted efforts since coming to power to weaken the High Court and erode checks and balances.⁴⁷ If it succeeds, the path can only be clearer for further attempts at extending Israeli law across the entire West Bank.

These legislative moves have been complemented by a growing tendency among political leaders to agglomerate the West Bank with Israel – treating the two as a single entity.⁴⁸ In December 2021, Israeli President Isaac Herzog, who is not from the annexationist camp, marked the first night of the Jewish holiday of Hanukkah by lighting candles with settlers in the occupied West Bank city of Hebron, where some 850 Israeli settlers live under military protection among over 200,000 Palestinians.⁴⁹

The government has also flirted more openly with formal annexation – including in mid-2020, when Netanyahu rolled out a plan to impose sovereignty in parts of the West Bank.⁵⁰ He made this announcement in the wake of U.S. President Donald Trump's "deal of the century" initiative, which was unveiled in January of that year.⁵¹ (That scheme would have recognised Israeli sovereignty over all settlements and seen Israel annex up to 40 per cent of the West Bank, with the remainder forming a demilitarised and non-contiguous Palestinian state.) Netanyahu soon shelved the plan, ostensibly in exchange for agreement by the United Arab Emirates to normalise relations with Israel through the Abraham Accords, which the two countries signed on the White House lawn in August 2020.⁵² But it was only a lull. Smotrich put formal annexation back on the table soon after Trump's second election

⁴⁷ "High Court nixes law aimed at legalizing settler homes built on Palestinian land", *Times of Israel*, 9 June 2020.

⁴⁸ In a 2020 poll, a small majority (52 per cent) of Israeli Jews said they supported annexation; 31 per cent among them said they identified as centrist, while 71 per cent were from the right. "Over Half of Jewish Israelis Support Annexation", Israel Democracy Institute, 10 May 2020.

⁴⁹ "Lighting candle at Hebron shrine, Herzog says Jewish connection is 'unquestionable'", *Times of Israel*, 28 November 2021. In another example, when ice cream company Ben & Jerry's announced in July 2021 it would stop selling its ice cream in the settlements, Israeli politicians across the political spectrum presented the boycott as targeting all of Israel, erasing the distinction between Israel inside its internationally recognised 1948 borders and the territories it has occupied since 1967. "PM Bennett Responds to Decision by Ben & Jerry's", Prime Minister's Office, 19 July 2021.

⁵⁰ "Netanyahu plans to annex parts of the West Bank", National Public Radio, 18 June 2020.

⁵¹ "Trump unveils 'deal of the century'", *Globes*, 28 January 2020.

⁵² "UAE ambassador: 'Abraham Accords were about preventing annexation'", *Times of Israel*, 2 February 2021.

in November 2024, predicting that, “The year 2025 will, with God’s help, be the year of sovereignty in Judea and Samaria”.⁵³

Frucht, the deputy legal adviser at the defence ministry, has challenged the notion of piecemeal de jure annexation, saying, “Either there is annexation or there isn’t”. In his view, Smotrich wants to apply Israeli law in the West Bank, but “failing that, he is trying to make life for Israelis in Israel and the West Bank indistinguishable in any way he can”. Frucht also downplayed the importance of Smotrich’s role:

He is making a show as if he is leading a major political change, but this is not the case. He’s not reinventing the wheel. He is accelerating settlement growth, pouring funds into projects and adding more people and operations. But in essence, he’s doing more of the same. Just faster and in a bigger volume.⁵⁴

Frucht conceded that such steps would ease any future move toward formal annexation, saying, “As the systems operating in Judea and Samaria start operating according to Israeli standards, when they [ultimately] apply Israeli law, it will be a much smoother transition”.⁵⁵

⁵³ “Smotrich says Trump’s victory an opportunity to ‘apply sovereignty’ in the West Bank”, *Times of Israel*, 11 November 2024.

⁵⁴ Crisis Group interview, Tel Aviv, 19 December 2024.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

IV. What Comes Next?

Has Israel's steady absorption of the West Bank reached a tipping point, when decades of creating "facts on the ground" will yield to formal annexation? It is an unresolved question among Israeli strategists, with some saying yes, others saying no and still others suggesting various middle-ground scenarios (see Section V below). Yet, while the debate goes on, the settler movement is working to tilt the playing field in favour of annexation, undertaking a public relations campaign in Israel and the U.S. to stress its advantages. Smotrich is doing his part by picking up the pace of settlement expansion in the West Bank. At the same time, he is taking measures to undermine the Palestinian Authority (PA), which, by the logic of the 1993-1995 Oslo accords signed between Israel and the Palestinians, was to be the precursor of a Palestinian state. Public opinion among Israeli Jews appears to be swinging his way.

A. Driving toward Formal Annexation

For the Israeli settler movement, the distinction between creeping and formal de jure annexation is significant, and the movement's leaders are increasingly emboldened to pursue the latter. Settler leaders argue that formal annexation of the West Bank would clarify once and for all that Israel will never allow a Palestinian state between the Jordan and the Mediterranean. Such is the gist of Smotrich's "decisive plan" for resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, released in 2017, when he was chair of the Jewish Home Party and deputy speaker of the Knesset:

Ending the conflict means creating and cementing the awareness – practically and politically – that there is room for only one expression of national self-determination west of the Jordan River: that of the Jewish nation. ... It requires the application of full Israeli sovereignty to the heartland regions of Judea and Samaria and ... establishing new cities and settlements deep inside the territory and bringing hundreds of thousands of additional settlers to live therein.⁵⁶

Yehuda Amrani, who served until mid-2025 as a spokesperson for the Binyamin Regional Council, a cluster of 47 settlements in the central West Bank, elaborated the point:

⁵⁶ "Israel's decisive plan", *Hashiloach*, 7 September 2017. Smotrich reiterated this position at a conference in December 2024. See post on X by Yehuda Shaul, @yehudashaul, director, Israeli NGO Ofek, 12:35pm, 11 December 2024. At a January 2024 conference entitled "Settlements Bring Security", attended by over a dozen government ministers, Smotrich said "without settlements there can be no security". "Israeli settlers hold conference on resettlement in Gaza", Reuters, 28 January 2024.

When there is sovereignty, they [the Arabs] will understand their dream to kick us out is over. They are motivated by hope. A terrorist who goes to harm an Israeli is motivated by the hope that the Palestinian people will get a state and kick out the Jews. The Oslo accords, for example, gave them tons of hope. Until now Israel hasn't put an end to that hope. Israel has let them continue that dream. ... We need sovereignty in Judea and Samaria. If we don't have that, they will continue to believe they will [ultimately] have a state.⁵⁷

Beyond advancing this resolutely zero-sum approach to Israeli-Palestinian relations, the settler movement has also long framed its goals in terms of Israel's security. They portray settlements as the first line of defence that enables people in cities like Tel Aviv to live without fear of Israel's enemies. The concept has its origins in the pre-state Zionist movement, when Jews began developing land in Palestine based on the dictum that, "Wherever the Jewish plow plows its last furrow, that is where the border will run".⁵⁸ The Israeli right invokes this notion to criticise what it considers policy failures, such as Israel's withdrawal from Gaza in 2005, which it says served only to empower Hamas by limiting Israel's reach.⁵⁹

The argument has resonated even more powerfully since 7 October 2023, when Israeli towns along the (undeclared) border with Gaza and, shortly thereafter, along the northern border with Lebanon – and even some deeper inside Israel – came under attack.⁶⁰ As Amrani put it, "Applying sovereignty in Judea and Samaria will protect us in Jaffa and Acre, Kfar Saba and Tel Aviv".⁶¹

Some settler leaders acknowledge that formal annexation of part or all of the West Bank might trigger violence or even mass Palestinian resistance, but they seem confident that the army would be able to manage any such scenario. Amrani predicted, "In the short term, if we apply sovereignty, there could be a popular uprising. But the army will

⁵⁷ Crisis Group interview, Binyamin settlement, occupied West Bank, 17 February 2025.

⁵⁸ "Israel's National Security and West Bank Settlements", Molad, 12 December 2017. In 2017, more than half of all Israelis indicated that they believed settlements are good for national security. Ibid.

⁵⁹ "Gaza rockets 'proof' that withdrawals bound to fail, Erdan tells US diplomats", *Times of Israel*, 6 May 2019.

⁶⁰ In March, a majority of Jewish Israelis (58 per cent) said West Bank settlements create deterrence and contribute to the security of all Israelis. "JPPI Israeli Society Index – March 2025: The Confidence in the Country's Leadership", The Jewish People Policy Institute, 14 March 2025. For some Israelis, this notion also applies to the Gaza Strip. See "Israeli settlers hold conference on resettlement in Gaza", op. cit.

⁶¹ Crisis Group interview, Binyamin settlement, occupied West Bank, 17 February 2025.

be able to stop it. And in the mid- to long term, they [the Palestinians] will understand we are the landlords here”.⁶² Indeed, some believe that in today’s circumstances, amid Israel’s brutal assault on Gaza since October 2023 and its extensive military campaign in the West Bank since January, the Palestinian reaction to formal de jure annexation might be limited to verbal protest. Outside parties, they think, might be hamstrung. Eliyana Passentin, director of international relations at the Binyamin Regional Council, said, “It will be like Trump’s moving the embassy to Jerusalem. There was a lot of noise, but no Palestinian resistance. The European Union may try to sanction Israel, but they will be isolated”.⁶³

Not surprisingly, the settler leadership seems to have concluded that the combination of the 7 October 2023 attack and Trump’s return to the White House, followed by his musing about the need for mass displacement of Palestinians from Gaza, makes conditions ripe for going on the offensive to achieve formal annexation. As Amrani put it,

When Trump talks about [removing Palestinians from] Gaza, this complements the sovereignty issue in the West Bank. It’s a question of Palestinian ambition for statehood. When Gaza is emptied of Palestinians, they will understand that the ambition to kill Jews and return to Haifa is over. ... It kills their fantasies.⁶⁴

Settler leaders like Yossi Dagan, head of the Samaria Regional Council, and Israel Ganz, head of the Binyamin Regional Council, who also serves as head of the Yesha Council, a settler umbrella group, have been advocating for formal annexation of the West Bank in meetings with U.S. and European officials. After Trump was elected in 2024, Dagan set up the Congressional Friends of Judea and Samaria caucus in Washington.⁶⁵ Its first effort was to ensure that Trump repealed his predecessor’s sanctions on settlers, which he did on his second day back in office.⁶⁶ The caucus is also working to pass legislation that will rename the West Bank “Judea and Samaria” in U.S. official communications.⁶⁷ Such a bill has been introduced, and Representative Brian

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Crisis Group interview, Binyamin settlement, occupied West Bank, 17 February 2025. Israel’s Operation Iron Wall, which started in the West Bank in January, has been the most destructive since the second intifada (2000-2005), displacing tens of thousands of Palestinians. The army has also set up nearly 900 checkpoints throughout the territory, most of them new, impeding Palestinians’ movement to a nearly unprecedented degree. “Humanitarian Situation Update #276/West Bank”, UN OCHA, 27 March 2025.

⁶⁴ Crisis Group interview, Binyamin settlement, occupied West Bank, 17 February 2025.

⁶⁵ “Initiative launches West Bank support in US Congress”, *Ynet*, 17 January 2025.

⁶⁶ “Trump cancels sanctions on Israeli settlers in West Bank”, Reuters, 21 January 2025.

⁶⁷ “Recognizing Judea and Samaria Act”, Senate legislation, 4 February 2025.

Mast, head of the House Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee has instructed Republican staffers to refer to the territory that way in the meantime.⁶⁸ In March, Dagan met with Trump's senior adviser for Africa, Massad Boulos, who reportedly called him the "governor of Samaria".⁶⁹

Ganz has been just as active. In December 2024, he attended an event held by the One Israel Fund, a U.S. charity that supports the settlement enterprise, to raise money for the first-ever emergency medical centre in the Binyamin area.⁷⁰ The keynote speaker was Mike Huckabee, an evangelical Christian and former governor of Arkansas, who became Trump's ambassador to Israel shortly thereafter. He has long supported annexation and once said, "There is no such thing as a Palestinian".⁷¹ Since being confirmed, Huckabee has visited a West Bank settlement – a first for a U.S. ambassador – and declared that "there's no room" for a Palestinian state in the West Bank.⁷²

Formal annexation could have implications for Israeli relations with other Middle Eastern countries, notably the United Arab Emirates, the more powerful of the two Gulf countries (the other is Bahrain) that have normalised relations with Israel via the Abraham Accords. Since Smotrich's open call for Israel to annex most of the West Bank in September, Abu Dhabi has made clear both privately and publicly that any such step would incur consequences for its ties with Israel, though it stopped short of saying it would quit the Accords.⁷³

Threats to formally annex parts of the West Bank represent a direct challenge to Emirati officials. But they appear reluctant to cut off relations with Israel.⁷⁴ For now, they are satisfied that their "red line" comment has led Netanyahu to curb public talk of annexation.⁷⁵ Some

⁶⁸ Mast is a Republican from Florida. "GOP staffers told to call West Bank Judea and Samaria", *Axios*, 26 February 2025.

⁶⁹ "Trump Arab aide meets with settler leader in bid to lift his standing with Israeli right", *Times of Israel*, 10 March 2025.

⁷⁰ "First-ever hospital coming to Judea and Samaria", *Israel Hayom*, 24 December 2024.

⁷¹ During his 2008 presidential campaign, Huckabee said Palestinian identity was "a political tool to try and force land away from Israel". "Mike Huckabee once said that 'there's really no such thing as a Palestinian'", CNN, 14 November 2024.

⁷² He visited the settlement of Shilo in May. "US ambassador makes history in Judea and Samaria visit", *Israel Hayom*, 7 May 2025.

⁷³ "UAE could downgrade diplomatic ties if Israel annexes West Bank, sources say", Reuters, 18 September 2025.

⁷⁴ "The UAE owns the political investment in the agreement that stopped annexation. It was a legal engagement by the U.S. as well. That [annexation] is the part that Abu Dhabi can act on [now]". Crisis Group telephone interview, expert on UAE, 30 September 2025.

⁷⁵ "Israel backs off talk of annexing West Bank after UAE warning", *Washington Post*, 6 September 2025. Crisis Group telephone interview, Emirati official, 18 September 2025.

Israelis presume that Abu Dhabi would prefer to take steps like downgrading relations or suspending flights to Israel, rather than consider abrogating the Abraham Accords.⁷⁶ The rise of far-right Israeli ministers who openly support formal annexation did not prevent the UAE from continuing its trade, defence and political relations with Israel. Nor did it halt tourism. The war in Gaza also has not stopped bilateral visits and meetings, including between Emirati officials and Israeli politicians who favour annexation. The UAE shies away from taking public actions against Israel, which it sees as linked to its partnership with the U.S. It is also loath to validate criticisms of its “warm” relations with Israel. Abu Dhabi’s official line is that it believes in dialogue rather than confrontation, which it says would impede its ability to increase humanitarian aid to Gaza or negotiate with Israel on other fronts.⁷⁷

B. *Attacking the Palestinian Authority*

Another tack for advancing the sovereignty agenda in the West Bank is to attack the PA, which is formally the administrative and governing authority in the West Bank (and was in Gaza until Hamas took control in 2007). Smotrich, as well as other settler leaders and members of government, see dissolving the PA as a necessary step toward realising their vision of absolute Israeli rule over the entire West Bank.⁷⁸

As finance minister, Smotrich is well positioned to bring about the PA’s economic collapse. Under the 1994 Paris Protocol – part of the Oslo accords – the PA relies on Israel to collect monies such as customs duties and value-added taxes on its behalf, which Israel is supposed to pass on to the PA.⁷⁹ These funds make up most of the revenue that the PA uses to pay public-sector salaries and provide services in the occupied territories.

Smotrich has argued for withholding the money, on the grounds that the PA’s activity is “hostile” to Israel, and he is acting on that

⁷⁶ Crisis Group interview, former Israeli diplomat, Tel Aviv, 21 September 2025.

⁷⁷ Nevertheless, there has been some friction between the UAE and Israel of late. Emirati officials are not dealing directly with the Israeli ambassador in Abu Dhabi (out of objections to his personal behaviour). They have not kicked him out of the country, but they expect Israel to pull him out. Crisis Group telephone interview, Arab diplomat, 25 September 2025. The UAE has also issued statements to denounce settler violence as well as settlement construction and expansion. Netanyahu has not visited the UAE, but President Herzog and Strategic Affairs Minister Ron Dermer have.

⁷⁸ “Settlers plan major Trump-era transformation of West Bank”, *Israel Hayom*, 1 December 2024.

⁷⁹ Nur Arafah, “How the Oslo accords stunted Palestinian growth”, Institute for Palestine Studies (blog), 18 September 2018.

premise.⁸⁰ Since October 2023, he has withheld PA funds earmarked for Gaza, arguing that they could reach Hamas. In November 2023, Smotrich began deducting an additional \$75 million from Israel's monthly transfers to the PA to match what Israel estimates the PA pays its Gaza-based employees.⁸¹ As of the end of September, Smotrich has withheld nearly \$600 million in tax revenue the PA is supposed to get.⁸²

With some 65 per cent of the PA's revenue spent on salaries, the blocking of this money immediately and severely hurt the Palestinian economy in both the West Bank and Gaza.⁸³ In the West Bank, these steps have resulted in a significant increase in unemployment and losses to the private sector, in turn deepening poverty.⁸⁴ Smotrich has also repeatedly threatened to withhold a waiver for Israeli banks to do business with Palestinian banks, which would rob the latter of the hard currency they need to pay salaries and finance basic services for the West Bank's Palestinian population.⁸⁵

Smotrich's efforts to discredit the PA have not been limited to the fiscal realm. Drawing upon his new authority over the West Bank, he has issued orders for Israeli demolition of Palestinian structures in Area B, where the PA is supposed to exercise civilian authority and Israel to handle security, though there are no Israeli settlements there.⁸⁶

Smotrich has treated measures taken by external actors to hold Israeli leaders to account as a pretext for imposing new punishments on the PA. In May 2024, following the decision by Spain, Ireland and Norway to recognise a Palestinian state, Smotrich called for cancelling VIP permits for top PA officials. (These are entry permits Israeli authorities issue to high-ranking Palestinian officials, allowing them easier movement and passage through Israeli checkpoints than much of the Palestinian population.) He also pushed for settlement expansion in what he termed strategically critical locations.⁸⁷ The same month,

⁸⁰ "Minister Smotrich to Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee: 'Our work will hopefully lead to a cabinet decision to define PA's activity in Judea and Samaria as hostile political activity'", Knesset News, 20 July 2023.

⁸¹ Ismat Quzmar, "Palestinian Clearance Revenues: Israel's Tool to Collapse the PA", *Al-Shabaka*, 1 December 2024.

⁸² "As Western countries recognize a Palestinian state, Smotrich holds back 1.8 billion shekels from the Palestinian Authority", *Haaretz*, 29 September 2025.

⁸³ "How Israel has brought the Palestinian Authority to the brink of financial collapse", *The Conversation*, 11 July 2024.

⁸⁴ Naser Abdulkarim, "The Palestinian Authority's Dire Financial Straits", Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, 13 June 2025.

⁸⁵ Michael Wahid Hanna and Rami Dajani, "Meltdown Looms for the West Bank's Financial Lifelines", Crisis Group Commentary, 27 June 2024.

⁸⁶ "Israeli Government Assumes Authorities of the Palestinian Authority in Area B", *Peace Now*, 19 July 2024.

⁸⁷ See post on X by Bezalel Smotrich, @bezalelsm, 2:29am, 22 May 2024 [Hebrew].

after the International Criminal Court (ICC) issued arrest warrants for Netanyahu and then-defence minister Yoav Gallant (along with Hamas leaders Yahya Sinwar and Mohammad Deif), Smotrich called for sanctions against the PA.⁸⁸ The Trump administration joined in by suspending visas for PA officials who were planning to attend the UN General Assembly in September.⁸⁹ The State Department has sanctioned Palestinian civil society groups engaged in efforts to get the ICC to investigate Israel.⁹⁰

As for what would replace the PA, Smotrich's vision for Palestinian life in the West Bank once Israel has formally annexed it is detailed in his 2017 "decisive plan". He sees Palestinians, having realised that there will never be a Palestinian state, choosing either to emigrate or to continue residing in the West Bank, but as individuals under a form of "autonomous self-management" that "lacks national characteristics".⁹¹ Smotrich denies that this situation would constitute a form of apartheid, saying Palestinians would have the right to vote in municipal elections. He says Israel might eventually apply models of residency rights and even citizenship based on loyalty to the state and national service.⁹²

In this regard, Smotrich appears somewhat different from Netanyahu, who has not outlined a vision for governing the Palestinians under Israeli sovereignty. On one hand, the Israeli premier has worked to undermine the PA's legitimacy for years, most conspicuously by propping up the rule of the PA's rival, Hamas, in Gaza before 7 October 2023 and rejecting political negotiations with President Mahmoud Abbas. On the other hand, he has refrained from taking decisive steps to destroy the PA, which he has the power to do.⁹³ Netanyahu has taken the side of the Israeli military, which tends to view the PA as helpful in managing Palestinian civil affairs while enabling continued Israeli security control of the West Bank. Shamni, the former head of IDF Central Command, said, "Netanyahu can say whatever he wants against the Palestinian Authority, but he has not cancelled agreements with the Palestinian Authority. He has not cancelled the Oslo accords.

⁸⁸ "Blaming PA for ICC decision, Smotrich calls for sanctioning it into oblivion", *Times of Israel*, 21 November 2024.

⁸⁹ "US suspends visas for Palestinian passport holders, officials say", *The New York Times*, 31 August 2025.

⁹⁰ "US sanctions Palestinian rights groups who asked top court for Israel war crimes investigation", CNN, 5 September 2025.

⁹¹ Israel's decisive plan", op. cit.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ "Buying quiet": Inside the Israeli plan that propped up Hamas", *The New York Times*, 10 December 2023.

There's a reason for that. He understands that there is no other mechanism that can maintain normal life in the territory".⁹⁴

C. *Upping the Tempo*

Since the 7 October 2023 attacks, the Israeli government has been able to accelerate annexation, with the bloody drama playing out in Gaza both drawing international attention away from its actions in the West Bank and creating additional support for annexation among the Israeli public. In 2024, Israel broke several of its own records in the territory. The year saw the biggest increases in decades in the numbers of building permits granted inside existing settlements, settlement outposts legalised, kilometres of segregated roads, incidents of settler violence, checkpoints restricting Palestinian movement and Palestinians displaced from their homes.⁹⁵

Israel also expropriated more Palestinian land than ever before in 2024. By seizing 24,258 dunams – nearly 6,000 acres – and declaring it “state land”, it enabled settlement construction in accordance with Israeli law. This area amounts to approximately half of all the land declared as state land since the Oslo accords were concluded more than 30 years ago. Settlers erected a record 59 illegal outposts throughout the West Bank in 2024, many of them farming or herding camps that take up large swathes of land but with a small number of settlers.⁹⁶ The Netanyahu government also allocated 75 million shekels (\$21 million) in 2024 to fund illegal outposts, more than half (39 million shekels) of which it designated for unauthorised farms.⁹⁷

Under Smotrich's guidance, 70 existing illegal outposts became eligible for state funding and services, paving the way to permanence.⁹⁸ Then, in the first four months of 2025, Israel approved over 10,000 housing units in West Bank settlements, nearly the same number as in all of 2024.⁹⁹ Smotrich boasted, “We just started”.¹⁰⁰ By June, the state had greenlighted a record high of nearly 20,000 housing starts in the

⁹⁴ Crisis Group telephone interview, 13 March 2025. Likewise, a former top Israeli security official said, “Netanyahu would agree with everything I have said about the importance of the Palestinian Authority to security in the West Bank. He has no interest in [seeing] the Palestinian Authority [collapse], certainly not in the next ten years”. Crisis Group interview, Tel Aviv, 11 September 2024.

⁹⁵ “2024 in the West Bank: The Year of Annexation and Expulsion”, Peace Now, February 2025.

⁹⁶ For comparison, from 1996 to the beginning of 2023, fewer than seven outposts were established on average each year. Ibid. See also Crisis Group Report, *Stemming Israeli Settler Violence at Its Root*, op. cit.

⁹⁷ “2024 in the West Bank: The Year of Annexation and Expulsion”, op. cit.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ “Advancement of 1,211 Housing Units in the West Bank”, Peace Now, 13 March 2025.

¹⁰⁰ Post on X by Bezalel Smotrich, @bezalelsm, 1:38am, 21 March 2025.

West Bank.¹⁰¹ The acceleration is in large part due to Smotrich convening the council that meets to approve settlement units on a weekly basis rather than every three months. On 23 March, the Israeli cabinet fast-tracked the granting of official status as independent municipalities to thirteen unofficial extensions of existing settlements. Smotrich declared it “an important step to the path of ‘de facto [Israeli] sovereignty’” in the West Bank.¹⁰²

The changes on the ground over the last year are visible and viscerally felt. “I am no longer able to hike in most places in the West Bank, either because the IDF has declared the area off limits to Palestinians or for fear of being attacked by settlers”, said Raja Shehadeh, a Palestinian lawyer, author and life-long hiker on the West Bank’s byways.¹⁰³ In large parts of the Jordan Valley and vast stretches of land between Jerusalem and Jericho, the sight of Palestinian shepherds, farmers or picnicking families, once common in the pastoral landscape, has become a rarity. Instead, one often sees small groups of armed Israeli settlers guarding grazing sheep or cows.¹⁰⁴

Israel has made most of its changes in Area C, which has become progressively less hospitable to Palestinians. For many years, the 200,000-300,000 Palestinians living in these rural areas have had trouble obtaining building permits, but in 2024, for the first time since Oslo, the number issued stood at zero.¹⁰⁵ Citing a lack of such permits, Israel proceeded to demolish a record 1,065 Palestinian structures that year, displacing 860 Palestinians.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰¹ “Since the Beginning of 2025, the High Planning Council Has Advanced a Total of 19,389 Housing Units. All-Time Record”, Peace Now, 16 June 2025.

¹⁰² “Security cabinet approves 13 West Bank ‘neighborhoods’ to become independent settlements”, *Times of Israel*, 23 March 2025.

¹⁰³ Crisis Group interview, Ramallah, 15 February 2025. Shehadeh is author, *inter alia*, of *Palestinian Walks: Notes on a Vanishing Landscape* (2007).

¹⁰⁴ Crisis Group observations, West Bank, 14 February 2025. See also “Displaced Communities, Forgotten People: Israel’s Forcible Transfer of Palestinians in the West Bank”, Yesh Din, March 2025.

¹⁰⁵ “2024 in the West Bank: The Year of Annexation and Expulsion”, op. cit. On Israel’s demolition policy, see also “Planning Policy in the West Bank”, B’tselem, 11 November 2007.

¹⁰⁶ The number includes seventeen demolitions in Area B. “2024 in the West Bank: The Year of Annexation and Expulsion”, op. cit. The number surpassed the previous peak in 2016, when Israel demolished 870 structures. Ibid. In addition, the Israeli army knocked down 452 structures during military operations in 2024, affecting 2,704 residents in Area A, primarily in Jenin and Tulkarem. “Escalation in the West Bank”, Norwegian Refugee Council, 23 January 2025. This number has soared since the army launched Operation Iron Wall in January, when it occupied and then flattened whole neighbourhoods in Jenin and Tulkarem refugee camps, leaving some 40,000 Palestinians homeless. “Israeli military operation displaces 40,000 in the West Bank”, UN News, 10 February 2025. As of September, Israel had demolished over 1,200 Palestinian structures and displaced more than 1,400

Now things could get even more difficult for Palestinian residents. On 11 May, Israel's security cabinet made the decision to launch a new land registration process in Area C designed to determine property rights, following mapping and verification of ownership claims.¹⁰⁷ While such a process could take years, the results would be difficult to reverse. If Israel awards property rights to settlements or finds Palestinian claims invalid, it could entail the large-scale dispossession of Palestinian landowners, enabling their eviction.¹⁰⁸ Human rights organisations have condemned the decision, stating that depriving Palestinians of their property would violate their rights under international law, since an occupying power is barred from making long-term, much less permanent, changes to the territory it occupies. Recognising settler claims would amount to an act of annexation, they say, as it would extend Israeli sovereignty to occupied territory.¹⁰⁹

Israeli public opinion has hardly put the brakes on these developments. Even before the October 2023 Hamas attack, Israeli support for a two-state solution had eroded.¹¹⁰ Since then, the idea has essentially disappeared from public discourse. The Netanyahu government's position on a Palestinian state is now that it would "reward Hamas terror".¹¹¹ Israeli opposition leaders, like Yair Lapid and Yair Golan, say they seek ways for Israel to exist separately from the Palestinians. They reject the notion of annexation, but, sensing they are in a minority, they also shy away from explicitly endorsing a two-state solution.¹¹²

Palestinians in 2025, surpassing the numbers in all of 2024. "West Bank: record number of demolitions over building permits as Israel furthers annexation", Norwegian Refugee Council, 1 October 2025.

¹⁰⁷ "Cabinet approves West Bank land registration process to 'strengthen Jewish settlement'", *Times of Israel*, 13 May 2025.

¹⁰⁸ "The Cabinet Decides to Initiate Land Registration Process That Would Dispossess Palestinians from Their Lands the West Bank", Peace Now, 12 May 2025.

¹⁰⁹ The Israeli government has 60 days following the cabinet decision to come up with a plan for conducting the registrations, which requires court decisions. Yet there is no pertinent court in the West Bank, so the government will have to devise a plan through bureaucratic manoeuvres instead. Crisis Group interviews, Michael Sfard, Israeli human rights attorney; Ziv Stahl, director, Israeli NGO Yesh Din, Tel Aviv, May-June 2025. For more information on the land registration process, see "Renewing Settlement of Title in Area C of West Bank", Yesh Din, 16 August 2021.

¹¹⁰ A year after the 7 October 2023 attacks, more than twice as many Israeli Jews said they do not support the two-state solution (64 per cent) as said they do (27 per cent). This figure was virtually unchanged since a 2023 survey done before the attacks, when 65 per cent declared they did not support the two-state solution, but far higher than in 2012, when only 30 per cent said they did not support it (and 61 per cent did). "Dim outlook for peace in the Middle East", Gallup, 1 October 2024.

¹¹¹ "Netanyahu tells Macron that establishment of Palestinian state will 'reward' terrorism", *France 24*, 15 April 2025.

¹¹² Golan, head of the opposition Democrats Party, said, "The most important decision Israelis face is choosing between annexation and separation. Here in the Holy Land we are pretty much the same number of Jews and Arabs. If we want to preserve a Jewish homeland, we need to preserve a Jewish majority. Therefore, we

A 28 January survey indicated that 68 per cent of Jewish Israelis support applying sovereignty in the West Bank, with 71 per cent opposing the establishment of a Palestinian state.¹¹³ Other surveys show that when it comes to political arrangements with West Bank Palestinians, Jewish Israelis are split between wanting some kind of unilateral separation with continued security control (35 per cent) and supporting outright annexation of the territory (31 per cent).¹¹⁴

Yet despite the lack of real opposition to the sovereignty movement and the government's efforts on behalf of the settlers, Israelis are not moving to the West Bank in high numbers. Were it not for natural growth, the settler population would be in slight decline. In 2024, 1,596 Israelis moved out of West Bank settlements, the highest number in years.¹¹⁵ In 2010, 82 per cent of the population in Area C were Israeli settlers; in 2020, only 60 per cent were, and in 2023-2024, that number stood at 55 per cent.¹¹⁶ The main reason is worsening insecurity in the West Bank; another, presumably, is the natural growth of the Palestinian population.¹¹⁷

While Israelis are averse to withdrawing from settlements, they are fearful of a 7 October 2023-style disaster in the West Bank.¹¹⁸ Over the last two years, the number of attacks by Palestinians on Israelis in the West Bank and inside Israel has substantially increased.¹¹⁹

cannot have a nation in the whole of the British Mandate. So, what is more important – the cohesion of our people or the whole of the Holy Land?”. Crisis Group interview, Tel Aviv, 15 May 2025. His question was rhetorical: his answer is the former. Lapid has also spoken out on the need to take annexation off the table. See, eg, “How Israel’s opposition sees the Gaza war ending and the future of the Middle East”, *The National*, 25 November 2024.

¹¹³ “71% of Israelis oppose Palestinian state; 68% support sovereignty in J&S: poll”, Jewish News Syndicate, 2 February 2025.

¹¹⁴ “Swords of Iron Survey results – February 2025”, Institute of Security Studies, 3 March 2025. Another survey conducted in August found that 35 per cent of Israelis support annexation of both the West Bank and Gaza (up from 29 per cent in 2024). “The Israeli Foreign Policy Index 2025”, Mitvim Institute, September 2025.

¹¹⁵ In three of the last five years, more Israelis have left the West Bank than have moved there. Crisis Group telephone interview, Yariv Oppenheimer, Tamrur Research Group, 25 March 2025.

¹¹⁶ “The obsession with construction does not correspond to the public’s will’: The extent of the exodus from Judea and Samaria is revealed”, *Israel Hayom*, 24 March 2025 [Hebrew].

¹¹⁷ The settler population in Area C has also fallen during earlier periods of high friction, such as the second intifada (2000-2005).

¹¹⁸ “Poll: Majority of Israelis fear massacre in Judea and Samaria”, Israel National News, 18 February 2025.

¹¹⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Israeli officials, Jerusalem, 10 February 2025. See also “Summary of terror attacks in Israel and the West Bank 2023-2024”, Institute for National Security Studies, 4 February 2025. “Iran smuggles arms to West Bank, officials say, to foment unrest with Israel”, *The New York Times*, 9 April 2024. For their part, PA officials are adamant that many of the arms and nearly all the am-

(The number of Palestinians killed by Israeli forces and settlers has also soared.¹²⁰) As a result, it is unclear how quickly Israelis will move into the new housing units approved by the Israeli cabinet in 2025, when they are built.¹²¹

munition reaching militants in the West Bank come from Israel's own large black market. Crisis Group interviews, Ramallah, 12-13 February 2025.

¹²⁰ The Israeli human rights organisation B'tselem reports, "Between 7 October 2023 and 31 May 2025, Israeli soldiers and settlers killed 927 Palestinians in the West Bank, at least 183 of them minors, and displaced over 29 communities". B'tselem, 8 June 2025.

¹²¹ "The obsession with construction does not correspond to the public's will: The extent of the exodus from Judea and Samaria is revealed", op. cit.

V. An Unresolved Question

For all the impetus behind formal annexation coming from the settlement movement, it is still uncertain that Israel is prepared to take this step. Some pieces are already in place, including a majority in the Knesset that favours such a move, reflecting the post-7 October 2023 political climate.¹²² Annexation of the West Bank does not require formal passage of a law; it could be done by government order or decree, as was done with East Jerusalem in 1967.¹²³ It is also clear that the Israeli right and the settler movement believe that whatever price Israel might have to pay would be nowhere near as high as the price it has already paid throughout years of conflict, especially in light of the 7 October 2023 attacks.

But the issue of formal annexation cuts deeper, to the nature of the Israeli state and its standing in the world. Outright annexation would be condemned as conquest, but it would also put the question of extending equal rights to all people living under Israeli rule on the front burner – or, more accurately, formalise systematic inequality that leading human rights groups have already labelled apartheid.¹²⁴ The defence ministry's Moshe Frucht, for example, said formal annexation would mean that, by law, Israel would have to extend to Palestinian residents of the West Bank political rights much the same as those of Israeli citizens, even if it withholds citizenship from them. West Bankers would then have a status like that of Palestinians in East Jerusalem and Syrian Druze in the Golan Heights:

If Israel annexes and does not pass a law that would apply Israeli law to all residents of that territory, that is apartheid. The move to annex would automatically obligate the Israeli Knesset to legislate a law granting any resident of the territory equal rights. If Israel doesn't do that, it will become a pariah that doesn't act according to international law.¹²⁵

Yet for many Israelis, the idea of affording equal rights is a non-starter, as it would spell the end of the Zionist vision of a Jewish majority in the state of Israel. A workaround would have to be found.

¹²² In a symbolic vote on 23 July, the Knesset approved a non-binding motion to “apply Israeli sovereignty to Judea, Samaria and the Jordan Valley”. Notably, the deputies from the centrist opposition parties Yesh Atid and Blue and White were not present. “Knesset approves declaratory measure to apply Israeli sovereignty to West Bank”, *Jerusalem Post*, 23 July 2025.

¹²³ “Government of Israel Decree of Expansion of Jerusalem”, 1967 [Hebrew].

¹²⁴ “Leading human rights group calls Israel an ‘apartheid’ state”, Associated Press, 12 January 2021.

¹²⁵ Crisis Group interview, Tel Aviv, 19 December 2024.

It is therefore unclear what rights, if any, Israel would grant Palestinians in the event of de jure annexation or whether those rights would be upheld. Nor is it clear how much Israel is concerned about being in violation of international law, having regularly brushed off international condemnation – and, in some cases, adverse judicial opinions – of how it has conducted its occupation and how it has waged war, most recently in Gaza since the autumn of 2023.

The Israeli right in power today does not talk about equal rights for Palestinians under annexation, even if a decade ago some right-wing figures, like former President Reuven Rivlin, a Likud member, did talk about a Jewish state that would grant Palestinians citizenship.¹²⁶ But it also seems reluctant to confront the issue head on. Indeed, in order to avoid having to deal with this issue anytime soon, Smotrich announced a plan in September seeking to annex as much of the West Bank's land as possible, but with the minimum number of Palestinians.¹²⁷ As Frucht explained,

Most of the solutions being thought of here, legally speaking, are about how to apply sovereignty to an area that includes maximum Israelis and minimum Palestinians, so that there is a clearly defined territory – this is Israel, this is not – and not to deal with a demographic problem. There will be Palestinians in that territory, but on a scale Israel can deal with.¹²⁸

Alternatively, Israel could reap benefits from keeping the threat of formal annexation alive and using it as a bargaining chip in a normalisation deal with Saudi Arabia or in negotiations over other issues. “The last time there was a threat of annexation of the West Bank, we got the Abraham Accords”, an Israeli defence official noted.¹²⁹ In this scenario, Israel could once again take de jure annexation off the table, in an apparent concession, even as it continued to absorb the West Bank de facto.¹³⁰

¹²⁶ Noam Sheizaf, “What is the Israeli right's one-state vision?”, *+972 Magazine*, 12 May 2014. Some pro-annexation voices in Israel and the U.S., including former U.S. Ambassador to Israel David Friedman, have talked about a Puerto Rico model, by which Palestinians would have certain civil rights under permanent residency but not the right to vote in national elections (like Palestinians living in East Jerusalem). “‘Future of Judea & Samaria’: Former US envoy unveils sovereignty plan”, *Jewish News Syndicate*, 9 February 2024.

¹²⁷ In a statement announcing plans to annex 82 per cent of the West Bank, Smotrich said “maximum land, minimum Arab population”. “Smotrich proposes annexing 82% of West Bank in bid to prevent Palestinian state”, *Times of Israel*, 3 September 2025.

¹²⁸ Crisis Group interview, Tel Aviv, 19 December 2024.

¹²⁹ Crisis Group interview, Tel Aviv, 24 December 2024.

¹³⁰ In response to Smotrich's proposal to annex 82 per cent of the West Bank, Anwar Gargash, a top adviser to the Emirati leadership, issued a statement that

Or Israel could annex only a portion of the West Bank, such as the Jordan Valley, which would appear less extreme to the outside world. The Jordan Valley has always been considered of particular importance as it provides Israel with strategic depth and constitutes Israel's longest naturally defensible border. Those who think this way say Israel has no strategic interest in formally annexing the West Bank in toto. As a former top Israeli security official said, "Annexation? I don't see any government that will do this; it is not in Israel's interest. If there is anything to annex, it is the Jordan Valley. Smotrich is just reducing the possibility for there to be a Palestinian state. The Green Line doesn't exist anyway".¹³¹

Such predictions could prove wrong, however, meaning it is worth asking what would happen if formal annexation does proceed. It might make little difference for West Bank Palestinians, at least in the short term. They have lived for decades under varying degrees of Israeli rule, in what many call a "one-state reality" and subject to discrimination at levels that have led human rights groups to make the apartheid findings noted above.¹³² But assuming that equal rights are not on the cards – as seems almost inevitably the case – then the medium- and long-term consequences for the Palestinians could be severe. Annexation would certainly embolden settlers – and perhaps soldiers as well – to perpetrate violence that would displace more Palestinians from parts of the West Bank the settler movement covets.

As a practical matter, it would also banish any remaining hopes for a two-state solution, likely prompting Palestinians to shift their focus to a struggle for the civil rights they have been denied, irrespective of whether the trajectory is one state or two states. Israel's systematic destruction of Gaza, accompanied by repeated calls from officials for the expulsion of its people, have understandably raised fears that West Bank Palestinians could be subjected to large-scale ethnic cleansing. Some Israeli ministers have explicitly called for making the territory "unliveable", just like Gaza.¹³³ With talks about ending the Gaza war

annexation would be a "red line". See post on X by Anwar Gargash, @AnwarGargash, 12:47am, 3 September 2025.

¹³¹ Crisis Group interview, central Israel, 12 May 2025.

¹³² In 2016, the UN Security Council affirmed, through Resolution 2334, that settlements are "a flagrant violation of international law" that contribute to "entrenching a one-state reality". UN Security Council Resolution 2334, 23 December 2016. Leading human rights organisations, such as Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, Al-Haq and B'tselem, have accused Israel of committing the crime of apartheid. In its advisory opinion in July 2024, the International Court of Justice declared that Israel is pursuing a policy of "systematic discrimination, segregation and apartheid". ICJ Advisory Opinion, op. cit.

¹³³ Gila Gamliel, a minister in Netanyahu's Likud Party, has openly called for making the West Bank unliveable, much like Gaza, as a way of encouraging the Palestinians to leave. "Likud minister: Gaza will be unliveable post-war; Pales-

under way, and the announcement of a ceasefire at the time of publication, the Netanyahu government has made clear its determination to block the creation of a Palestinian state and to maintain absolute control of the West Bank, whatever the future of Gaza may be.

VI. Coming to Grips with Reality

As speculation about formal annexation heats up and Israel tightens its de facto control of the West Bank, the government appears to have decided, for now, to keep going down the incremental path it has pursued since 1967 – just faster and more explicitly than before. While it could certainly change tack and issue a formal declaration of annexation, it may also choose to continue with what, to date, has been an effective strategy. By punting a formal declaration into the future, the government avoids an immediate fight with those who purport to oppose annexation, but who do not want friction with Israel. Exhibit A is the UAE statement in September warning Israel that moving ahead with annexation would be a red line – a declaration that indirectly let Israel off the hook for Smotrich's administrative overhaul of the last two years and the annexationist project it advanced. Exhibit B is Trump's flat declaration in the Oval Office when asked about annexation on 25 September. "It's not going to happen", he said, even though it already has.¹³⁴

Taking the position that annexation is tomorrow's issue, rather than today's reality, also continues to help the Israeli government duck at least some pointed questions about how it plans to integrate the West Bank's Palestinian population into the broader polity, whether they will receive equal rights and, if not, how it could possibly justify such a dispensation.

None of the above is good for the Palestinian people, for regional stability or for an international order that has at its core a norm against redrawing international borders by force (though this norm is increasingly under threat). Whether or not the situation can be arrested, much less reversed, is a fair question. But before discounting those possibilities, it is worth considering what would be necessary to mount a meaningful effort to halt Israel's accelerating annexation of the West Bank and to begin to roll it back.

Such an effort would seem to require three elements. The first is a clear-eyed perspective on the situation in the West Bank. Outside actors – particularly Arab and Western governments that purport to have Palestinian interests at heart – need to dispense with the fiction that Israeli annexation is a frontier not yet reached. That position is not tenable, for the reasons outlined in the ICJ's 2024 opinion, which find additional support in the information and analysis laid out in this report. In word and deed, Israel has asserted its authority over the West Bank and made clear that its designs are enduring. To be sure,

¹³⁴ "It's not going to happen': Trump says he won't let Israel annex the West Bank", *Times of Israel*, 26 September 2025.

there is more it could do in the service of this project, and a formal declaration could entrench its control even further. But none of that can obscure the reality of Israel's assertion of permanent control of much of the West Bank in a way that both common sense and the ICJ – the UN's main judicial organ – deem to be annexation.

The second element of any credible effort to push back against Israel's accelerating annexation of the West Bank is political will. Until a flurry of diplomacy in September opened the possibility of ending the Gaza war, it had been difficult to imagine the Trump administration, most EU member states or Arab states that have normalised relations with Israel taking anything more than rhetorical or symbolic measures with respect to Israel's conduct in the West Bank. These governments, after all, failed for two years to restrain Israel from pursuing a campaign that a UN commission of inquiry has described as genocidal.¹³⁵ U.S. Ambassador to Israel Huckabee went so far as to suggest that if Palestinians want a state, Israel's "Muslim neighbours" could give up land for it.¹³⁶ In July, after Paris said it would recognise a Palestinian state, he quipped that the state could be located on the French Riviera and called "Franc-en-Stine".¹³⁷

Yet there are signs that at least some Western and Arab countries are rethinking the strategies they are willing to employ in the face of Israeli transgressions – particularly, but not exclusively, in response to Israel's withholding of life-saving humanitarian aid from Gaza and the images of starvation that subsequently emerged. On 20 May, EU foreign ministers voted to review Israel's compliance with the human rights clause of the 1995 Association Agreement that governs the EU's trade and scientific and diplomatic ties with Israel.¹³⁸ It was a significant shift, even if EU member states failed to act after the review found Israel in breach of its obligations to "respect human rights and democratic principles".¹³⁹ On 17 September, the European Commission proposed various steps – from suspending trade benefits and bilateral cooperation to sanctions – aimed at pressing the Israeli government to change course.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁵ "Legal Analysis of the Conduct of Israel in Gaza Pursuant to the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide", A/HRC/60/CRP.3, UN Human Rights Council, 16 September 2025.

¹³⁶ "US holds deep doubts about Palestinian state", Bloomberg, 10 June 2025.

¹³⁷ Post on X by Mike Huckabee, U.S. ambassador to Israel, @GovMikeHuckabee, 10:55pm, 24 July 2025.

¹³⁸ "EU to review trade and cooperation with Israel over Gaza offensive", EuroNews, 21 May 2025; and "Euro-Mediterranean Agreement", *Official Journal of the European Communities*, 21 June 2000.

¹³⁹ "Full text of EU report on Israeli crimes in Gaza", *EU Observer*, 20 June 2025.

¹⁴⁰ Commission proposes suspension of trade concessions with Israel and sanctions on extremist ministers of the Israeli government and violent settlers, European Commission, 17 September 2025.

Outside the EU, the UK in May suspended negotiations with Israel over a free trade agreement. It also imposed sanctions on Israeli settlers in the West Bank it had identified as having “supported, incited and promoted violence against Palestinian communities in the West Bank”.¹⁴¹ Subsequently, in June, the UK, Canada, New Zealand, Australia and Norway placed sanctions on Israel’s two far-right ministers, Smotrich and Ben-Gvir, with UK Foreign Secretary David Lammy stating that the two leaders “have incited extremist violence and serious abuses of Palestinian human rights”.¹⁴²

Some European foreign ministers have also called for EU sanctions against Israeli ministers who are pushing the illegal settlement policy – in addition to the sanctions the bloc has already imposed on violent settlers and organisations – though individual member states’ veto power makes such a step difficult.¹⁴³

Perhaps the most high-profile sign that the global approach to Israel could be shifting was the high-level conference sponsored by France and Saudi Arabia at the UN General Assembly on 22 September (it had first been scheduled for mid-June, but was derailed by Israel’s airstrikes on Iran). Its purpose was to reinvigorate a two-state solution, if belatedly, and provide a platform for announcements by France and others that they recognise Palestinian statehood. The move was attacked by both Israel and the U.S., yet nine countries, including France and other close U.S. allies like the UK, Canada and Australia, did in fact recognise Palestine. Regardless of how evanescent the goal of a two-state solution may seem, the wave of recognitions (157 of 193 UN member states now recognise Palestine) underlines that a wide swathe of the world sees Israel’s long-term occupation as a direct obstacle to Palestinian self-determination.¹⁴⁴

Should the political will for a counter-annexationist movement emerge, then a third element will be key: the imposition of pressure. Outside actors will need to commit to concrete, sustained steps that create far greater costs for Israel continuing along the current trajectory. They will need to marry these to a long-term strategy to use more leverage than most influential parties have been willing to deploy to date. They will have to insist that any momentum gained from efforts to end the horrors in Gaza should be extended to the West Bank. That means not just generating pressure but sustaining it for years to come.

¹⁴¹ “UK sanctions hit West Bank violence network”, press release, UK Government, 20 May 2025.

¹⁴² “UK and partners unite to sanction ministers inciting West Bank violence”, press release, UK Government, 10 June 2025.

¹⁴³ “Sweden calls for EU sanctions targeting ‘individual Israeli ministers’”, *The Local*, 20 May 2025.

¹⁴⁴ See Amjad Iraqi, “Can the World Make Recognition of Palestine’s Statehood Matter?”, Crisis Group Commentary, 26 September 2025.

While the U.S. has by far the most potential to shape Israeli behaviour, too little in Washington's approach – certainly under Trump but also under previous administrations – suggests that it has interest in leveraging its influence on the settlement issue. But other actors such as the EU and its member states also have a role to play.¹⁴⁵ The EU is by far Israel's biggest trading partner, accounting for a third of its global trade in goods (whereas Israel makes up less than 1 per cent of the EU's).¹⁴⁶ EU foreign ministers should respond to the results of the Association Agreement review by voting to suspend parts of the agreement, such as those covering free trade, scientific exchange and movement of capital. A full suspension is unlikely, as it would require a unanimous vote, and Hungary (and likely several others) would veto it. But a partial suspension, for example of Israel's preferential trade benefits, would only require a qualified majority – ie, fifteen of 27 member states, representing at least 65 per cent of the EU's population.

Europe is also a major supplier of weapons to Israel and a customer for its arms exports. EU member states could begin to more strictly apply the legally binding provisions of the EU Common Position on Arms Exports, which sets out eight criteria they must consider before granting an export licence for conventional military technology and equipment.¹⁴⁷ For its part, the European Commission could move to ensure that member states comply strictly with its regulation on the export of dual-use items.¹⁴⁸ The result of litigation over EU member states' compliance with the EU Common Position in national jurisdictions may force them to apply the Common Position more strictly.¹⁴⁹ An even more far-reaching step would be to ban arms sales to Israel, as Spain has, which several civil society organisations and some EU member states have called for.¹⁵⁰ In August, German Chancellor

¹⁴⁵ "Europe on Gaza: Words are Not Enough", Crisis Group Statement, 3 June 2025.

¹⁴⁶ "Israel: EU trade relations with Israel. Facts, figures and latest development", European Commission, undated.

¹⁴⁷ These eight criteria are intended to ensure that European arms exports do not contribute to internal repression, international aggression or human rights abuses by the recipient country. "Regulation (EU) 2021/821 of the European Parliament and of the Council", *Official Journal of the European Union*, 11 June 2021.

¹⁴⁸ The regulation does not authorise the export of dual-use software and technology if it risks being used in violation of human rights, democratic principles or freedom of expression.

¹⁴⁹ One such legal proceeding is under way in The Hague, "ECLI:NL:GHDHA:2024:191", *De Rechtspraak*, 12 February 2024. For a full explanation of the legal claim, see "Dutch court halts F-35 aircraft deliveries for Israel: A 'clear risk' of abuse", *Verfassungsblog on Matters Constitutional*, 14 February 2024.

¹⁵⁰ "Spain proposes imposing sanctions on Israel to force end to Gaza war", *Times of Israel*, 26 May 2025. In Germany, Israel's second biggest arms supplier, calls for an end to the country's weapon exports to Israel are getting louder, especially among lawmakers from the Social Democratic Party, the junior coalition partner to Chancellor Friedrich Merz's Christian Democratic Union.

Friedrich Merz took an unprecedented step for his country when he imposed a partial ban on arms exports to Israel, in an effort to block them being used in Gaza.¹⁵¹

In addition, European governments that are party to the Rome Statute should commit publicly to upholding the ICC's arrest warrants for Netanyahu and Gallant, the former defence minister, if they travel to their countries. Following the British and other examples, they could sanction the senior officials and ministers who are behind Israel's illegal settlement policy. They could consider sanctioning institutions that promote and subsidise settlement activity, such as the World Zionist Organization's settlement division.¹⁵² By the terms of a 17 June agreement to modify the rules surrounding visa-free travel, the EU could also move to restrict visa-free travel for certain Israeli decision-makers implicated in abuses for breaches of human rights, fundamental freedoms or the UN Charter without requiring a unanimous decision among member states.¹⁵³

Europeans could also begin discussions about how to make sure they comply with the ICJ's advice to refrain from rendering aid or assistance in maintaining the occupation. An important step in that direction would be to enforce the EU's differentiation policy more robustly and consistently. This policy is supposed to ensure the non-application of all cooperation agreements, trade policies and EU funding in occupied territory. Yet the EU does not rigorously enforce the policy, for instance in trade with settlements, cross-border data transfers, police cooperation and marketing standards for fruits and vegetables. The picture is even patchier at the level of EU member state relations with Israel.¹⁵⁴ By adhering to the policy more strictly, the EU and its member states would send a clear message that they support Israeli sovereignty and security, but only within internationally recognised borders.

Many civil society organisations have called on the EU to go further and introduce legislation that bans all imports and exports of goods and services from and to Israeli settlements, as well as investments

¹⁵¹ "German arms exports to Israel fall to zero after embargo", Deutsche Welle, 25 September, 2025. A senior diplomat said what Merz did has not altered Israeli policy in Gaza but added that it was an important signal to Israel. It was also necessary if Germany is to avoid being implicated in delivering weapons used in Gaza. Crisis Group interview, senior European diplomat, Tel Aviv, 29 September 2025.

¹⁵² In 2015, Israel passed a law making this group an arm of the government dedicated to promoting Jewish communities on both sides of the Green Line. See "Controversial bill on settlement funding signed into law", *Times of Israel*, 24 December 2025. See also "What is the Settlement Division?", Peace Now, 6 December 2024.

¹⁵³ "Visa policy: Council and European Parliament secure a deal on rules about the suspension of visa-free travel for third countries", Council of the EU, 17 June 2025.

¹⁵⁴ "Differentiation Tracker", European Council on Foreign Relations.

therein.¹⁵⁵ As long as such an EU trade ban appears elusive, member states should take their cue from Ireland and explore national trade bans for goods from the settlements.¹⁵⁶

From its side, the UK should expand its sanctions to include large settler organisations that are integral to the settlement enterprise, like Amana, an arm of the settler movement that is instrumental in building and developing settlements. The Biden administration imposed such penalties in 2024 only for the Trump administration to lift them.¹⁵⁷ An additional measure, which would be more effective than sanctions, would be for the UK to place conditions on its arms sales to Israel.

As for Arab countries, they are divided between those (like the UAE) that have normalised relations with Israel and others (like Saudi Arabia) that have not. Both sets of nations have recoiled at Israeli actions in Gaza. Still, it was only after Israel's failed strike in the Qatari capital Doha in September, nearly two years into the war in Gaza, that these countries banded together to press Trump to get Israel to stop its offensive.¹⁵⁸ The UAE, for example, has criticised Israel's conduct in the strip but continued to deal with it because of the Abraham Accords. They have been reluctant to go further than statements of protest at Israel's campaign in Gaza and words of warning about steps to annex the West Bank. Partly, these states value the economic and other benefits accruing to them from relations with Israel; partly, they fear offending the U.S., which is Israel's chief external patron and, in most cases, theirs as well. As noted, the UAE contends that its ties with Israel allow it to coax concessions from Israel, for instance in aid delivery to Gaza, that have ameliorated Palestinians' plight.

Still, as demonstrated by the surge of Gulf diplomacy that followed Israel's strikes in Doha, Arab states have levers they can pull to affect Israel's actions indirectly by applying coordinated pressure on Washington, which values its Gulf relationships. They can also do so directly. Those that have diplomatic and commercial ties with Israel, like Egypt and the UAE, can loosen them, for instance by recalling their ambassadors or suspending flights to Ben Gurion International Airport.¹⁵⁹ Any and all Arab states could signal that they might join the

¹⁵⁵ "Israel/OPT: Ban EU Trade and Business with Israel's Illegal Settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territory", Amnesty International, 4 February 2025.

¹⁵⁶ "Cabinet approves move to draft an occupied territories bill", *Irish Times*, 27 May 2025.

¹⁵⁷ "US hits Israeli settler group with sanctions over West Bank violence", Reuters, 14 November 2024.

¹⁵⁸ "How fury over Israel's Qatar attack pushed Netanyahu on Gaza", *The New York Times*, 3 October 2025.

¹⁵⁹ Jordan is the only Arab state that has normalised relations with Israel to have recalled its ambassador. Egypt has left its ambassadorial post vacant since the last envoy completed his term.

Hague Group of countries, led by Colombia and South Africa, that have imposed limited sanctions on Israel.¹⁶⁰ Such concrete measures would have material consequences for Israel but – perhaps more importantly – they would demonstrate that Israel cannot integrate into the Middle East while pounding Gaza, absorbing the West Bank and quashing Palestinian aspirations for self-determination.¹⁶¹

Given Israel's long-running commitment to annexation, it is entirely possible that even the full weight of these measures will do little more than slow its pace. To go further would almost surely require dramatic steps by Israel's main security and diplomatic partner, the U.S., and those seem unlikely. To be sure, President Trump's statement ahead of the unveiling of his 20-point plan to end the war in Gaza that he will not allow Israel to annex the West Bank was the first time that he spoke against Israel's maximalist goals in the territory.¹⁶² It was likely a direct result of his meetings with the eight Arab and Muslim majority states at the UN General Assembly and the potential ramifications of annexation for normalisation. Still, nothing about Israel's annexation of the West Bank made it into the 20-point plan for Gaza, which therefore leaves room for Israel to stay on the path of imposing its sovereignty in all but name.

But politics can change. While at present Washington is still largely deferential to Israel's demands, this degree of backing cannot be taken for granted. Splits are emerging between more traditional and populist Republicans, particularly along generational lines, about the Gaza war; support for Israel is declining among Democratic voters; and disenchantment with Netanyahu's policies is deepening among the U.S. public writ large.¹⁶³ It is thus possible to imagine a day when even the U.S. signals that it has had enough and is prepared to make constructive use of its leverage. But forecasting when that day might come – and whether it will come soon enough to change the trajectory of Israel's annexation of the West Bank – is a different matter.

¹⁶⁰ "Hague Group announces steps to hold Israel accountable in Bogotá summit", Al Jazeera, 16 July 2025.

¹⁶¹ "The World's Shame in Gaza", Crisis Group Statement, 2 September 2025.

¹⁶² Notably, during his first term in office Trump recognised Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights and repudiated longstanding U.S. policy on the *per se* illegality of settlements in the West Bank.

¹⁶³ "Americans' support for Israel dramatically declines, Times/Siena poll finds", *The New York Times*, 29 September 2025.

VII. Conclusion

Israel is accelerating its annexation of the occupied West Bank. Since the Netanyahu government took office in December 2022 and Hamas staged its attacks on Israel in October 2023, Israel has undertaken an administrative overhaul that has placed governance of both Israeli settlers and the Palestinian population under Israeli civilian control, in violation of international law and contrary to the will of most outside actors.

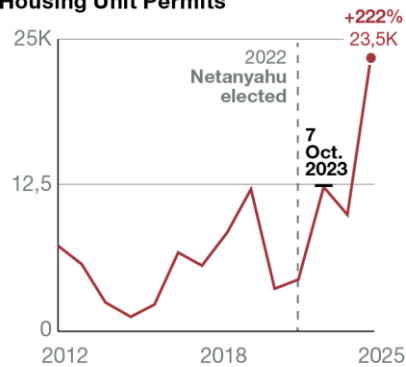
It remains unclear if and when Israel will formalise its quickening annexation of the West Bank, fully incorporating all or part of the territory into its own. Such is the clear demand of the settler movement, which drives policy and views *de jure* annexation as a means of precluding the possibility of a Palestinian state, thus (the movement argues) ending the Israeli-Palestinian conflict decisively on Israel's terms. Still, the Israeli establishment remains divided on the issue, as a significant part of it fears the consequences.

But whether or not the Israeli government makes a formal declaration, annexation is a reality on the ground – hence the need to halt its progression and begin to turn it around. Israel's war in Gaza has given many states pause about their deference to Israeli transgressions in the strip and in the West Bank, not least because of their implications for a peaceful outcome to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Whether such an outcome is possible remains to be seen. But if outside actors squarely face the reality of annexation, summon the political will to counter it and resolve to pursue a long-term strategy including concrete measures to impose meaningful costs on Israel, they will at least give themselves a fighting chance.

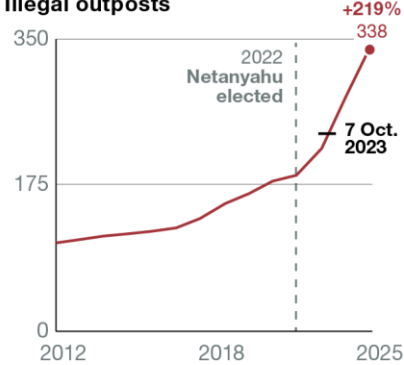
Tel Aviv/Jerusalem/Brussels, 9 October 2025

Appendix A: Upping the Tempo of Annexation

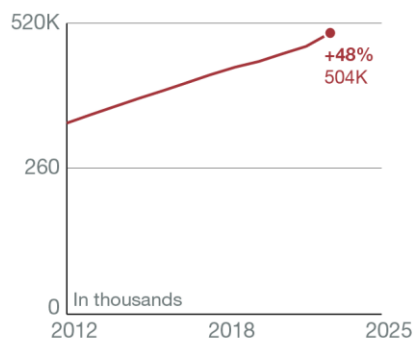
Housing Unit Permits



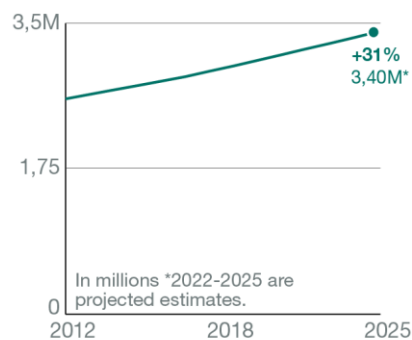
Illegal outposts



Settlers



Palestinians



Since 7 October 2023, the number of housing permits and illegal outposts in occupied territory has increased dramatically, and the settler population has grown faster than the Palestinian one.

Each chart uses its own scale to show trends clearly.

Source: PeaceNow, Higher Planning Council and Israeli and Palestinian Central Bureau Statistics / CRISIS GROUP

Appendix B: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes CrisisWatch, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is co-chaired by President & CEO of the Fiore Group and Founder of the Radcliffe Foundation, Frank Giustra, as well as by former Foreign Minister of Argentina and Chef de Cabinet to the United Nations Secretary-General, Susana Malcorra.

Comfort Ero was appointed Crisis Group's President & CEO in December 2021. She first joined Crisis Group as West Africa Project Director in 2001 and later rose to become Africa Program Director in 2011 and then Interim Vice President. In between her two tenures at Crisis Group, she worked for the International Centre for Transitional Justice and the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General in Liberia.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Addis Ababa, Bahrain, Baku, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Kabul, Kyiv, Manila, Mexico City, Moscow, Seoul, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

Crisis Group receives financial support from a wide range of governments, foundations, and private sources. The ideas, opinions and comments expressed by Crisis Group are entirely its own and do not represent or reflect the views of any donor. Currently Crisis Group holds relationships with the following governmental departments and agencies: Australia (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade), Austria (Austrian Development Agency), Canada (Global Affairs Canada), Complex Risk Analytics Fund (CRAF'd), Denmark (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), European Union (Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace, DG INTPA), Finland (Ministry for Foreign Affairs), France (French Development Agency), Germany (Federal Foreign Office), International Organization for Migration, Ireland (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade), Japan (Japan External Trade Organization), Latvia (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), Principality of Liechtenstein (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), Luxembourg (Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs), Malta (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade), The Netherlands (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), , Norway (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), Qatar (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), Republic of Korea (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), Slovenia (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), Sweden (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), Switzerland (Federal Department of Foreign Affairs), United Nations World Food Programme, and the World Bank.

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Ten Challenges for the UN in 2025-2026, Special Briefing N°13, 9 September 2025 (also available in French).

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Stopping Famine in Gaza, Middle East Report N°244, 8 April 2024 (also available in Arabic).

Stemming Israeli Settler Violence at Its Root, Middle East Report N°246, 6 September 2024 (also available in Arabic).

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Syria: Ruling over Aleppo's Ruins, Middle East Report N°234, 9 May 2022 (also available in Arabic).

Iraq: Stabilising the Contested District of Sinjar, Middle East Report N°235, 31 May 2022 (also available in Arabic).

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Containing Transnational Jihadists in Syria's North West, Middle East Report N°239, 7 March 2023 (also available in Arabic).

Containing Domestic Tensions in War-hit Lebanon, Middle East Briefing N°94, 27 February 2025 (also available in Arabic).

The New Syria: Halting a Dangerous Drift, Middle East Briefing N°95, 28 March 2025 (also available in Arabic).

Supporting Effective Policing by Lebanon's Embattled Security Agencies, Middle East Report N°251, 27 August 2025 (also available in Arabic).

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Steering Libya Past Another Perilous Crossroads, Middle East and North Africa Briefing N°85, 18 March 2022 (also available in Arabic).

Saïed's Tunisia: Promoting Dialogue and Fixing the Economy to Ease Tensions, Middle East and North Africa Report N°232, 6 April 2022 (also available in French).

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Egypt's Gaza Dilemmas, Middle East and North Africa Briefing N°91, 16 May 2024 (also available in Arabic).

Getting Past Libya's Central Bank Stand-off, Middle East and North Africa Briefing N°93, 1 October 2024 (also available in Arabic).

Managing Tensions between Algeria and Morocco, Middle East and North Africa Report N°247, 29 November 2024 (also available in Arabic and French).

Frozen Billions: Reforming Sanctions on the Libyan Investment Authority, Middle East and North Africa Report N°249, 24 April 2025 (also available in Arabic).

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