



SHUSHAN STREET: IT'S TIME TO SANCTION SMOTRICH, BEN-GVIR, AND KEY ENTITIES PERPETUATING SETTLER VIOLENCE AND ANNEXATION

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One hundred radical Israeli settlers recently descended on the Palestinian town of Jit in the occupied West Bank in August, reportedly [armed](#) with M16 rifles and knives, masked, and clad in black. Approaching on three fronts, the settlers threw Molotov cocktails, burned homes and cars, and allegedly shot a 23-year-old Palestinian man to death while injuring others. When a similar settler attack was perpetrated in Huwara in 2023, the then-commander for the IDF in the West Bank [called](#) the onslaught as a “pogrom.” In a [probe](#) of the Jit attack, the current commander admitted the IDF failed to protect Palestinians from “a very serious terror incident.”

With all eyes on the war in Gaza, the Netanyahu government is [taking actions](#) in the West Bank that abet settler violence, advance annexation, weaken the Palestinian Authority, destabilize the territory, and fuel rising Palestinian [extremism](#) and support for armed struggle. Top Israeli military brass warn of the eruption of ‘[a third Intifada](#),’ while Shin Bet chief Ronen Bar [warned](#) Netanyahu that “terrorism” committed by extremist settlers “will lead to bloodshed and will unrecognizably change the face of the State of Israel.”

In February, President Biden issued [Executive Order \(EO\) 14115](#). It declared that the “high levels of extremist settler violence, forced displacement of people and villages, and property destruction” constitute a “national emergency” that poses “an unusual and extraordinary threat” to US national security. The Biden Administration has subsequently taken important steps by issuing [seven rounds of sanctions](#) pursuant to the EO targeting Israelis and Palestinians who are “undermining peace, security, and stability in the West Bank.”

In the [latest round](#), the Biden Administration took a significant step forward by sanctioning Hashomer Yosh and Yitzhak Levi Filant. The former is an Israeli NGO that provides material support to individuals and illegal farming outposts already sanctioned by the US government. A [recipient](#) of Israeli state funds, the organization recruits volunteers who have [facilitated](#) displacement of Palestinian communities. As for Filant, he is the civilian security coordinator of the notoriously violent Yitzhar settlement and has participated in forcefully [expelling](#) Palestinians from their lands. He is the first sanctioned individual on the payroll of one of the Regional Councils that govern Israel’s West Bank settlements. This shows important progress – and still, the US government must do more to deliver an unmistakable message to Netanyahu and his government that the Biden Administration will not allow settler violence and illegal annexation to continue on its watch.

It is time for the Biden Administration to sanction two ringleaders in the Netanyahu government – Ministers Bezalel Smotrich and Itamar Ben-Gvir – and key entities that are responsible for driving illegal settlement activity and enabling settler violence.

Finance Minister Smotrich, who also holds a portfolio in the Defense Ministry, is a hardline ideologue who has committed incitement, including by calling for Huwara to be “[wiped out](#)” after the settler pogrom there. He was [arrested](#) during Israel’s 2005 disengagement from Gaza on suspicion of planning to blow up cars on a major highway. Smotrich has leveraged his position

as Finance Minister to take measures – [including](#) withholding Palestinian tax revenues and threatening to effectively cut off Palestinian banks from Israel’s financial system – to [undermine](#) the PA and weaken the West Bank economy. He has used tools at his disposal to [secure new settlements](#), including through retroactive legalization of unauthorized outposts and plans for thousands of settlement homes. Evyatar – the outpost where American [Aysenur Eygi was fatally shot](#) in the head while peacefully protesting, “[highly likely](#)” by Israeli troops – is one of those for which Smotrich pushed *ex post facto* legalization. He is also responsible for the [largest seizure](#) of land in the West Bank since the 1993 Oslo Accords – while Secretary of State Blinken visited Israel in March.

Smotrich has worked methodically to realize his [vision](#) for Israel to “annex everything and create a Greater Israel that incorporates all the so-called Palestinians.” In May, the IDF issued orders to [transfer](#) vast governing responsibilities in the West Bank from military to [civilian control](#) under Smotrich and [Hillel Roth](#), a longtime leader of the settlement movement. These orders further *de jure* annexation by stealth. Save for security matters, the Israeli military will no longer manage Israel’s occupation of the West Bank, as required by international law. Administrative powers [will now rest](#) with Israeli elected officials and public servants.

In addition to Smotrich, the Biden Administration should sanction National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir. Another [lawbreaker turned lawmaker](#) in Netanyahu’s government, Ben-Gvir was [convicted](#) by an Israeli court of racist incitement and supporting the Kahanist terror organization. Due to his extremist activities, he was [deemed unfit](#) for compulsory military service. Tapped by Netanyahu to oversee both Israel’s police and its border police, Ben-Gvir has [prevented enforcement](#) against settler violence, [encouraged](#) police officers to shoot any ‘terrorist’ even if they don’t pose a threat, and [supported](#) builders of illegal outposts. Ben-Gvir continues to incite violence; the perpetrators who attacked Jit reportedly [identified](#) themselves as “Ben-Gvir’s gang... here to kill Arabs.”

Ben-Gvir’s moves since Hamas’ attack on October 7 to [ease](#) firearm regulations, fast-track new gun licenses, and [distribute](#) rifles at political events [prompted](#) concern by US officials that US-manufactured weapons could be used in settler attacks against Palestinians. According to Israel’s Police Chief, Ben-Gvir has [prevented](#) police from protecting humanitarian convoys bound for Gaza, allowing settlers to attack and halt aid.

Secretary Blinken [condemned](#) Ben-Gvir’s [provocative visit](#) to the Temple Mount during the Jewish holiday of Tisha b’Av, in which Ben-Gvir extolled violations of the status quo at the sensitive holy site. Subsequently, Ben-Gvir made a highly incendiary call for building a synagogue on the site of the al-Aqsa Mosque complex, a move denounced by the [US](#), [Arab states](#), and Israel’s [Defense Minister](#).

According to [reports](#), the White House is [considering](#) sanctioning Smotrich and Ben-Gvir, as is the [European Union](#), and the Biden Administration should move ahead swiftly. While sanctioning Smotrich and Ben-Gvir will not be a silver bullet, and could boost their popularity among Israel’s far right-wing voters, it is a strong step that will send a clear message to Netanyahu – which he apparently has not yet received – regarding US willingness to take action at the highest levels to combat settler violence and West Bank destabilization.

The Biden Administration should take additional action that would have a greater impact on the

ground by sanctioning entities instrumental in perpetuating West Bank annexation and violence. Foremost among these is the [Settlement Division](#) of the World Zionist Organization (WZO). It plays a seminal role in providing [land](#) (some of it [privately owned](#) by Palestinians) and [funds](#) to those establishing illegal, unauthorized [outposts and farms](#) across the West Bank, which act as forward bases for attacking and displacing Palestinians. The Settlement Division also enables [Amana](#), the development arm of the settlement movement already [sanctioned by Canada](#). Amana has been involved in [establishing](#) the majority of West Bank settlements, while providing [loans](#) and building infrastructure for new illegal outposts. The Biden Administration should also sanction [Regavim](#), an organization co-founded by Smotrich, that “[wag\[es\]](#) a total war on Palestinian construction in the West Bank,” furthering Palestinian displacement to pave the way for Israeli annexation. Regavim helped [organize](#) Tzav 9, a group [sanctioned](#) under the EO for “repeatedly [seeking] to thwart the delivery of humanitarian aid to Gaza.” These three entities play pivotal roles in facilitating settler violence, Palestinian displacement, settlement activity, and destabilization of the West Bank.

The Biden EO can be a potent tool for addressing settler violence and the settlement enterprise that fuels it – if wielded effectively. President Biden has political latitude to act boldly. The Chairs of the Senate committees focused on national security – Senators Cardin (Foreign Relations), Reed (Armed Services), and Warner (Intelligence) – have [called](#) on the Administration to “take swift action” and “increase efforts to target all actors complicit,” including the “wider ecosystem of entities which facilitate the enterprise of forcible displacement of Palestinians and the perpetration of violence by extremist settlers.”

This moment presents President Biden with an opportunity to send a clear message that he will not tolerate actions that further incite violence and destabilize the West Bank and the region – and that such moves will be met with real consequences. This will serve a new Harris-Walz Administration well when it (hopefully) takes over in January, while positively impacting Biden’s legacy. In a [statement](#) on the “unacceptable” shooting that killed Aysenur Eygi, Harris pledged that, “The United States will continue to hold accountable anyone in the West Bank – Israelis and Palestinians – who stokes violence and undermines peace and stability.”

Sanctioning Smotrich, Ben-Gvir, and the key entities pushing annexation, facilitating settler violence, and otherwise destabilizing the West Bank are necessary next steps. It’s time.