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Maximum Territory with Minimum Arabs: How Israel's Far-Right Government Uses Settler Violence to Pave the Way for Annexation

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April 7, 2026

Settler violence against Palestinians in the West Bank has reached a tipping point. Recently, it has accelerated so dramatically that even [senior Trump Administration](#) officials joined [widespread international calls](#) for Prime Minister Netanyahu to take action. What these condemnations miss is that settler violence is not an aberration that Israeli officials have failed to prevent. It is a central component in a systematic campaign by far-right elements in the Israeli government to drive Palestinians out of most of the West Bank and replace them with Israeli settlers.

Unprecedented Levels of Settler Violence

Organized attacks by armed settlers, which former head of Shin Bet Ronen Bar [describes](#) as “settler terrorism,” have reached truly unprecedented levels. [Over 4,500](#) settler attacks – four per day – have been recorded since Israel’s far-right government took office in December 2022. Repeated assaults, arson and threats of further violence have entirely depopulated [59 communities](#) in that period – [displacing](#) more than 5,500 Palestinians.

These attacks include the murder of dozens of civilians, including [three](#) US citizens killed by settlers, none of whose deaths have resulted in criminal charges. The settlers enjoy almost complete impunity from prosecution, with upwards of [96 percent](#) of incidents never resulting in formal charges being filed.

The frequency and severity continue to escalate: Over 1,500 Palestinians were [displaced](#) in the first ten weeks of 2026 alone, and [eight](#) have been killed by settlers.

The Annexation Strategy Behind the Attacks

Bezalel Smotrich, the minister in charge of the West Bank, has repeatedly called for annexing the West Bank and forcibly displacing its Palestinian residents, [stating plainly](#) that “the overriding principle for applying sovereignty [to the West Bank] is maximum territory with minimum Arabs.” Smotrich, a settler who was [arrested](#) in 2005 on suspicion of planning to blow up an Israeli highway to protest Israel’s withdrawal from Gaza, has also been [explicit](#) about the far-right’s ultimate goal: “We will apply sovereignty over the West Bank, initially through actions on the ground and subsequently through legislation and formal recognition.”

Smotrich has [unveiled](#) a comprehensive plan that would annex 82 percent of the West Bank – including territory in which some 250,000-300,000 Palestinians live. He has also repeatedly [called](#) for “encouraging the emigration” of Palestinians from the West Bank, a thinly veiled euphemism for forced displacement.

The logic of the far-right government is clear. For Israel to annex this territory, Palestinians must first be removed from it. Rather than carry out mass displacement directly and absorb the international backlash, the state empowers armed settlers to do so while preserving a measure of plausible deniability. Settler terrorism is best understood as the kinetic arm of Smotrich's annexation strategy.

The campaign to forcibly displace Palestinians operates alongside unprecedented settlement construction – [over 50,000](#) new housing units, 98 [new settlements](#) and construction in strategic chokepoints that sever Palestinian territorial contiguity. Just last week, the cabinet approved [30 new settlements](#).

Role of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF)

While Israel is required under international law to protect the people living in territory it occupies, in many cases the IDF has done the opposite. In fact, this level of violence can only be sustained with the support of the IDF and senior Israeli officials. When settlers attack Palestinian families, they often use weapons and ATVs provided by the government. The IDF soldiers [stand guard](#) as the attacks occur – [instructed](#) to protect the settlers and [arrest Palestinians](#) if they resist. In many cases, the soldiers themselves [participate](#).

The role of the IDF increased dramatically with the massive expansion of the IDF's regional defense battalions after October 7. They now include [over 5,500 settler reservists](#), further blurring the distinction between the IDF and violent settlers. Many of the [same extremists](#) responsible for attacks on Palestinians were enlisted into these battalions and issued military uniforms, army weapons and government vehicles.

Members of the regional defense battalions have been [widely documented](#) carrying out attacks on Palestinian communities. Recently, an IDF soldier whose unit detained a CNN crew [described](#) their mission clearly: "We are here because this is our land. All the West Bank is ours. [...] Slowly, slowly, this will be a legal settlement."

The IDF [condemned](#) the soldier's remarks and disciplined his entire battalion. The IDF's Chief of Staff Eyal Zamir and Maj. Gen. Avi Bluth, head of Central Command, also recently publicly [denounced](#) settler violence. However, the IDF's leadership has yet to act sufficiently to alter the reality on the ground, where its soldiers continue to frequently stand by to protect violent settlers – even in the [same Palestinian village](#) where the CNN incident took place.

Institutional Support from the Israeli Government (GOI)

The backbone of GOI support comes from the very institutions responsible for preventing settler violence, which are run by officials who share the settlers' ideology:

- **The IDF:** Maj. Gen. Avi Bluth, who oversees the West Bank, has distributed a book to IDF commanders that [describes](#) seizing land from Palestinians in religious terms as “redemption.” Bluth has reportedly [introduced](#) a formal mechanism through which the IDF actively helps settlers establish outposts, which routinely serve as launching pads for violent attacks on nearby Palestinian communities. The process includes coordinating the timing and location of each outpost’s creation and deploying forces to guard them.
- **The Israeli Police:** Itamar Ben-Gvir, the National Security Minister who controls the police force, is himself a [convicted](#) supporter of Jewish terrorism – including Baruch Goldstein, the perpetrator of the 1994 Cave of the Patriarchs massacre. Ben-Gvir has [reportedly](#) directed the police force, which is responsible for dealing with Jewish terrorists, not to arrest or investigate violent settlers. He has also [spearheaded](#) a government program distributing weapons to West Bank settlers.
- **The Shin Bet:** David Zini, head of Shin Bet, which previously used administrative detention and dedicated investigative resources to preventing Jewish terrorism, is a prominent member of the same extreme wing of the religious Zionist movement as Ben-Gvir and Smotrich. He studied at a far-right religious seminary in Hebron, where students [reportedly](#) carried Uzis and roamed the streets with [well-known](#) violent settlers. His wife [describes](#) the destruction of homes in Gaza and its resettlement as a religious obligation.

The Security Cost to Israel

As [echoed](#) by several former senior Israeli security officials, the far-right's violent campaign in the West Bank carries a direct cost to Israel’s own security. The Israeli military's inadequate presence on the Gaza border on the eve of the October 7 attacks was in part driven by the [redeployment of forces](#) to the West Bank to protect settlers. Today, settler violence and new settlements require a [significant diversion](#) of IDF resources to the West Bank at a time when the military is stretched across active engagements in Gaza, Lebanon, Syria and Iran. The IDF Chief of Staff himself recently [warned](#) the cabinet that the army is nearing its limits, telling ministers, "I'm raising ten red flags for you. At this rate, the IDF will collapse into itself."

The Ultimate Casualty Will Be Long-Term Peace

While President Trump has often said he is delivering regional peace in the Middle East, the Israeli far-right clearly sees his presidency as an opportunity to permanently seize Palestinian territory, even at the cost of endless conflict. Senior officials in his Administration have recently voiced their frustration at the recent escalation in violence, and their pressure has reportedly resulted in Israeli promises to [create](#) a dedicated unit in the Defense Ministry to deal with violent settlers and to [sanction](#) Israelis who build

outposts in Area B. However, unless the Administration sustains this pressure until Israel's security forces begin cracking down on violent settlers, the ultimate casualty will be not only the Palestinian communities being driven from their land, but the viability of long-term peace.