

Liam Hamama, Policy Assistant | MAY 26, 2026

The international consensus on settler violence and illegal settlement construction in the West Bank has long been that they are the work of a small group of out-of-control extremist settlers whom Israeli authorities have failed to rein in. The reality today is far more alarming: **Settler attacks, illegal outposts and settlement expansion are all part of a systematic campaign by far-right elements in the Israeli government to seize territory from Palestinians, force them into vanishingly smaller enclaves and replace them with Israeli settlements that will eventually be annexed to Israel.**

Violent settlers are therefore not only allowed to terrorize Palestinian communities with impunity – they enjoy the [protection](#), and sometimes [active participation](#), of Israeli security forces as they do so. Illegal settlement outposts receive direct support through [government funding](#) and the [protection](#) of IDF soldiers.

There is a strategic logic behind this policy shift. In the [words](#) of Finance Minister and Minister in the Ministry of Defense Bezalel Smotrich, the highest-ranked civilian official in charge of the West Bank: **“The overriding principle for applying sovereignty [to the West Bank] is maximum territory with minimum Arabs.”**

The Israeli far-right’s campaign to annex as much of the West Bank as possible, therefore, operates along three interconnected lines of effort:

Line of Effort #1: Settler violence and home demolitions displace Palestinians from territory slated for annexation.

Line of Effort #2: New Israeli settlements are built to seize Palestinian land and sever territorial contiguity.

Line of Effort #3: Bureaucratic changes deepen Israel’s sovereignty over those settlements and formalize annexation.

Combined, these efforts aim to produce an outcome similar to the plan Smotrich [presented](#) in September 2025. Palestinians confined to six small, disconnected enclaves comprising just 18% of the West Bank, and Israel permanently controls the rest. This would leave no possibility for a future two-state outcome.



Smotrich's Plan: Yellow areas show proposed Palestinian enclaves

Line of Effort #1: Settler Violence and Home Demolitions Displace Palestinians

Smotrich's plan would annex 82% of the West Bank – including territory in which [some 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.

Given this plainly stated intent, the logic of the far-right government is not difficult to discern: for Israel to annex parts of the West Bank, those areas must first be cleared of Palestinians, preempting the need to extend citizenship to them after annexation. The military and police cannot directly remove them, as doing so would risk significant international backlash. Instead, the dirty work is carried out by armed settlers from whom Israeli authorities maintain a plausible distance, while still providing protection and impunity.

This method has been remarkably effective. Since this Israeli government entered office, [over 5,300 settler attacks](#) have displaced [59 entire Palestinian communities](#) – or 5,500 Palestinians.

The effort to drive out Palestinians follows a consistent, well-documented pattern:

Step 1: Settlers Establish an Outpost Near a Palestinian Community

Settlers identify a Palestinian community to target for removal and establish an outpost nearby – typically a farm used for shepherding or other agricultural purposes. In [many](#) cases, these are established with the knowledge and approval of the IDF.

Step 2: Government and Military Resources Are Allocated to the Outpost

Once established, several IDF soldiers are [sent](#) to guard the outpost; the government [funds](#) efforts to connect the outpost to roads and infrastructure, and [provides](#) key security equipment such as vehicles, drones, cameras and electric gates. The 2024 Knesset Budget [included](#) a 75 million NIS line item for illegal outposts and the latest budget [provided](#) an additional 50 million NIS.

Step 3: Outposts Become Launching Pads for Violence

Settlers from the outpost begin to harass the neighboring Palestinian community. Tactics include [physical assaults](#), [arson](#), [destruction](#) of crops, [theft and killing of livestock](#) and repeated [threats](#) of further violence. Increasingly, settlers have been [using live ammunition](#), with [at least 14](#) Palestinians killed by Israeli settlers in 2026 so far.

These attacks often take place while the Israeli military either stands by to ensure no harm is done to the settler assailants, or [actively participates](#). In a [February 2026 attack](#) on the village of

Mukhmas, IDF soldiers stood by as 30 armed and masked settlers opened fire on Palestinians, beat a 19-year-old Palestinian-American to death with clubs and stole 380 sheep. No Israeli soldiers were reprimanded for the incident, and Israeli authorities [have not](#) arrested or charged anybody in connection with the killing. A 20-year dataset demonstrates this is part of a broader pattern, as [94% of all investigations](#) into settler violence are closed without indictment.

Step 4: Displacement

The systematic effort to make Palestinian communities' lives economically and physically impossible eventually forces them to leave, as [at least 59](#) communities have done since 2023.

Home Demolitions as a Tool for Displacement

The other mechanism by which the Israeli government has been displacing Palestinians from territories it hopes to annex is home demolitions. Israel justifies these on the grounds that the structures lack a building permit. But Israel controls the permitting process in Area C – the roughly 60% of the West Bank where it has full control over security and civil affairs – and since 2000 has issued fewer than 250 permits for the [approximately 300,000](#) Palestinians who live there.

Since the current government took office in December 2022, it has carried out an [unprecedented](#) 5,202 demolitions in the West Bank, displacing over 9,400 people. More than [850](#) of those demolitions took place in Areas A and B, areas that are supposed to be under the civil control of the Palestinian Authority. Most recently, Minister Smotrich [signed](#) an order to evacuate and demolish the entire village of Khan al-Ahmar.

Line of Effort #2: Expanding Settlements to Seize and Hold Territory

Alongside the effort to displace Palestinians, Smotrich and his allies have moved to establish a permanent Israeli presence in as much of the West Bank as possible. Smotrich has fast-tracked approval for a [record 50,000](#) new settlement housing units and authorized the creation of [more than 100 new settlements](#).

Construction has concentrated on strategic chokepoints that sever Palestinian territorial contiguity and create the disconnected enclaves depicted in Smotrich's map. The clearest example is E-1, a settlement bloc east of Jerusalem approved by the Israeli government last August. If built, E-1 would close off the central corridor between the northern and southern West Bank. It would also cut off East Jerusalem – the prospective capital of a future Palestinian state – from the rest of the West Bank. Smotrich [hailed](#) the project as a “significant step that practically erases the two-state delusion,” adding that “every settlement, every neighborhood, every housing unit is another nail in the coffin of the Palestinian state.” Tenders for E-1 construction are scheduled to open for bids on

June 1, 2026, despite [significant international opposition](#) and petitions against the settlement project that remain pending before the District Court.

Line of Effort #3: Bureaucratic Changes that Deepen De Facto Annexation of the West Bank

The Israeli government has also approved a series of administrative and legal changes that erase the distinction between settlements and sovereign Israeli territory. Smotrich [described](#) these steps as a "de facto sovereignty revolution" designed to normalize the reality of annexation well before it is formally declared.

Transferring Authority Over Settlements to Political Officials

Under international law, the occupying military – not civilian officials – is required to administer occupied territory. Smotrich has [upended](#) this arrangement in the West Bank. He created a parallel civilian bureaucracy within the Defense Ministry that reports directly to him, bypassing the military chain of command.

Treating Settlements as Normal Israeli Cities

Smotrich has also overseen several steps that collapse the distinction between settlements in the West Bank and cities inside Israel. He [removed](#) the requirement that the defense minister approve settlement construction, making settlement planning functionally indistinguishable from municipal planning in Israeli cities – enabling the [dramatic acceleration](#) in settlement construction in recent years.

In February, Israel's security cabinet [revoked](#) a Jordanian-era law that had barred non-residents from buying land in the West Bank. Settlers no longer have to find creative ways around this restriction, and can now buy land directly, as they would in Israel proper. The same cabinet decision [made](#) West Bank land registries public, further easing the land purchase process.

Taken together, these bureaucratic changes are designed to make Israeli-controlled parts of the West Bank function as though they are annexed – even before a formal declaration is made.

If these three lines of effort are allowed to continue unchecked, Palestinians will be progressively displaced from the vast majority of the West Bank, confined to disconnected enclaves. Any kind of long-term peace between Israelis and Palestinians would be rendered effectively impossible. This is the [explicitly stated objective](#) of the Israeli government, and it is executing it methodically.