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## Position Paper



# Israel's Shifting Policies Toward the West Bank

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This position paper examines the Israeli government's policies and objectives vis-à-vis the West Bank since the beginning of Israel's genocidal war on Gaza in October 2023. The paper argues that the current administration is using the current situation to break with policies followed by the right-wing Israeli governments of the last two decades, and particularly since Netanyahu's return to power in 2009. Those governments have long rejected the Oslo Accords, but treated them as a *fait accompli*,<sup>1</sup> while continuing to expand Israel's settlements and extend its control over Palestinian territory (especially by attempting to annex land designated as Area C under the Oslo Accords). Simultaneously, they have kept a weak, shackled Palestinian Authority in place to manage civil and economic affairs in large Palestinian urban centers, in keeping with the "conflict management" approach implemented by Netanyahu's various governments, and the policies of "conflict minimization" and "economic peace" pursued under the short-lived Bennett-Lapid administration.

The current government is taking advantage of the situation created on October 7, 2023, to bring about a fundamental change on the ground in the West Bank, seizing the opportunity to implement the goals laid out when the present cabinet was formed. These goals include attempting to abandon the Oslo Accords status quo, advancing the process of weakening the PA economically, financially, and in security matters—possibly as a prelude to its complete dismemberment—expanding the settlements, further boosting the number of settlers, and *de facto* annexing Palestinian lands in Area C. While the events of October 7, 2023 did not bring about this shift on their own, they boosted this agenda and gave it a sheen of legitimacy within Israeli society, accelerating its implementation and the extent to which it is publicly expressed.

This paper traces the current government's policies toward the West Bank since October 7 and the launch of Israel's genocidal war on Gaza, including the increase in the Israeli Army's invasions of Palestinian towns and cities, the surge in the number of Palestinians killed, the bolstering of settlement activity and government support for settlers, changes in the way the occupation is administered, and the Israeli government's dealings with the PA.

## **Conflict Management and Maintaining the Status Quo (2009-2022)**

When Netanyahu returned to power in 2009, he adopted a strategy of maintaining the status quo, by freezing the negotiating process, reining in the PA, and following a policy of "conflict management." Researcher Antoine Shalhat quotes historian Aviad Kleinberg and his summary of Netanyahu's policies:

The approach of standing still, taking no actions, no decisions, and no responsibility, has turned into an ideology and a consecration of the status quo [...] Over time, the

main ally—perhaps the only ally—of Israel under Netanyahu has become time, which he believes works in its favor in subtle ways.<sup>2</sup>

Shalhat adds: "In fact, with every day that passes without Netanyahu taking any 'major action,' in keeping with this policy of stalling, Israel preserves its freedom of action in terms of establishing new facts on the ground in the Palestinian territories. Moreover, it helps create a new reality that makes it difficult to reach a [peace] agreement, a reality in which Jews can settle in all the occupied areas from the sea to the Jordan River."<sup>3</sup>

Mohanad Mustafa explains that the policies of right-wing governments toward the PA since Netanyahu's return to power stemmed from the conviction that Israel cannot realistically expel Palestinians from the occupied Palestinian territories, on the one hand, and a rejection of the idea of full annexation of the West Bank—along with its population—on the other.<sup>4</sup> These notions formed the basis of Naftali Bennett's so-called "Pacification Plan" in 2012, in which he presented his vision of a political solution with the Palestinians, based on the idea of conflict management, a temporary solution and the annexation of Area C of the West Bank, in parallel with granting the area's Palestinian inhabitants Israeli citizenship and self-government to the PA, it being understood that no Palestinian refugees would be allowed to return to the West Bank, even to areas administered by the PA, which would be recognized as self-governing.<sup>5</sup> This arrangement would allow the area's "Arabs" to move freely, improve the economic situation and remove the checkpoints, and would necessitate full economic relations between Israel and the PA, on the basis that "economic cooperation will create coexistence." Israel would retain security control over the West Bank. Bennett's plan also emphasized maintaining the separation between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

Bennett's plan has similarities to the "conflict minimization" approach popularized in the last decade and theorized by Micah Goodman, who argued that the territories occupied in 1967 amount to a "trap" for Israel, which can neither annex them—for fear of creating a demographic imbalance—nor withdraw from them, out of fear for its security. Thus, he argues, the solution lies in "conflict minimization":

The more we minimize control over the Palestinians, the more we minimize the occupation. Direct Israeli withdrawal from the daily lives of the Palestinian population, and the removal of restrictions on freedom and movement, will reduce the extent of Israeli control and occupation over the Palestinian population [...] These plans will not end the occupation, but can contribute to reducing it, rolling back Israel's control over the civilian population; they will not lead to a final resolution, but to attaining existential security.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, the Israeli right dealt with the Oslo Accords as a *fait accompli* that could not be completely ignored, but one around which they could maneuver and establish facts on the ground in many aspects, including by seeking to annex Area C, expanding the settlements and increasing the settler population, and by weakening and reining in the Palestinian Authority—without completely dismantling it.

These convictions were manifested in the policies of the Bennett-Lapid government (2021-2022). Researcher Saher Ghazawi argues that from the start, this administration rejected any initiative to return to negotiations or efforts toward a political settlement to the conflict. It even went as far as flatly refusing to lay out a specific vision regarding the Palestinian issue in general or the PA in particular,<sup>7</sup> while avoiding the latter's collapse and maintaining the status quo by granting it economic facilities facilitating the concept of "conflict minimization" through security coordination and economic cooperation with the PA.

Despite all this, right-wing Israeli governments have treated the Oslo Accords as an inescapable reality, maintaining their security and economic dealings with the PA while weakening and fettering it. Concurrently, they have adopted policies aimed at improving the economy, as a form of conflict management or minimization and as an alternative to reaching a political solution and respecting the natural rights of the Palestinian people. Thus, they have worked to avoid an end to the occupation and the establishment of a Palestinian state. According to Walid Habbas and Abdul-Qader Badawi, the current Netanyahu government continued with this "conflict management" approach right up until October 7, 2023, tightening its grip on security and *de facto* or *de jure* annexing Area C.<sup>8</sup>

However, on October 7, 2023, the situation changed. Now, the government is seeking to settle the Palestinian issue for good.

## **After October 7: Attempts at Decisiveness**

With the October 7 attacks, Israel's government—composed of far-right parties including the Religious Zionism Party led by Bezalel Smotrich and the Jewish Power Party led by Itamar Ben-Gvir, and with growing support within the Likud Party—spotted an opportunity to change Israel's approach to the PA and the West Bank. This shift could amount to the revocation of the Oslo Accords, a break with the "conflict management" or "conflict minimization" approach and a move to settle the conflict and impose a solution unilaterally, based on the vision and convictions of the extreme right-wing settler movement, preventing the establishment of a Palestinian state, expanding the settlements, and annexing Area C to Israel. Moreover, the current government has not ruled out the possibility of dismantling the PA entirely, or at least tightly restraining its

ability to manage day-to-day affairs and the economy, or to provide civil services to Palestinian citizens, as it battles for its own survival.

The intentions behind these shifts in how right-wing governments deal with the status quo in the West Bank and vis-à-vis the PA have been clear since the formation of the current government, Netanyahu's sixth. The founding agreements of the coalition made it clear that the issues of the occupation, settlement policies, and abuse against the Palestinian people in the occupied territories would be particularly explosive, especially as its policy on the settlements and civilian control in the West Bank were assigned to Smotrich.

Under the agreement between Likud and Religious Zionism, the latter's chief was appointed as adjunct to the minister of defense, with a mandate to appoint the head of the Coordination of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT) and the head of the occupation's Civil Administration. These two positions are extremely important and concern everything related to the West Bank, the management of the daily life of both Palestinians and settlers, relations with the PA, and the economy.<sup>9</sup> The coalition agreement also included the transfer of the Settlement Department, the army's preparatory colleges and the National Service to the "National Tasks" portfolio, which was assigned to Orit Strook of the Religious Zionist Party, with a very large budget.<sup>10</sup>

The government has already made many moves to implement these policies on the ground in the West Bank, in several spheres, as the following sections will explain.

## **Increase in Killings and Violence**

The most prominent shift in this government's dealings with the West Bank was the significant increase in military incursions, killings, arrests, and Israeli settler attacks on Palestinian communities. In 2022, 224 Palestinians were killed by Israeli occupation forces in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. In the West Bank alone, 171 people were killed, the highest annual toll since 2005. This number spiked particularly sharply due to Operation Breakwater, which was launched by Israel at the end of March 2022 and continued into early 2023. Accordingly, 2023 also broke records in terms of the number, scope, and severity of incidents of settler violence against the Palestinian population. Nearly 1,200 such incidents were recorded, including individual attacks involving hundreds of settlers against Palestinian communities.<sup>11</sup>

Since the outbreak of the war on Gaza, settlers have unleashed an even more rampant campaign of violence. Between October 7, 2023, and the end of May 2024, they carried out at least 900 attacks against Palestinians in the West Bank; in related incidents, some 43,000 trees were vandalized, 500 Palestinians injured and at least 31 people killed.

Mass attacks by settlers in the West Bank also surged. In April 2024, more than ten Palestinian villages and towns were attacked. This brutal, organized campaign of violence also serves as an overt means of preventing Palestinians from accessing their agricultural land.<sup>12</sup>

The same report, produced by Israeli civil society groups opposed to the occupation, reads: "settler violence is practiced under almost complete impunity granted by the police; police investigations of settler violence are characterized by systematic negligence, and the vast majority of cases (about 94 percent) do not lead to indictments. We found no indication or information that any indictments were filed after the attack by settlers in Hawara and Zaatara in February 2023, in which a Palestinian was killed, or in the killings of at least 10 Palestinians by settler gunfire since October 7, 2023. This situation is a direct result of the directives of National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir, who denies the existence of Jewish ideological violence and pursues a policy of non-enforcement of the law against settlers."<sup>13</sup>

## **The Settlement Monster**

Since the Oslo Accords, supporting the settlement enterprise in the West Bank has not been a controversial issue in Israeli society, nor among political parties in general. Successive governments have provided full-throated support to the settlements and to settlers on all levels, contributing to the expansion of settlements and a marked increase in the number of their residents. Since the Second Intifada, and especially following Netanyahu's return to power in 2009, the settlement project in the West Bank has turned into a massive, nearly irreversible undertaking that essentially amounts to pulling the rug from under the feet of the "two-state solution."<sup>14</sup>

According to data from the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics, in 1991 approximately 100,000 settlers lived in the West Bank (excluding East Jerusalem). By 1996, this had risen to approximately 155,000, and to 205,000 by the turn of the millennium. When Benjamin Netanyahu returned to power in 2009, the number was around 300,000. By 2021, it had risen to 450,000—an increase of 50 percent over 14 years,<sup>15</sup> under a string of Netanyahu governments that included, at various times, the Labor, Yesh Atid, and the Blue and White parties in their ranks.

Reports by the Israeli organization Peace Now, which monitors settlement policies and expansion, show that the Netanyahu governments implemented unprecedented policies of deepening and expanding settlements and increasing the number of settlers, especially since the October 7 attacks.

This is clear from the following data, gathered by Peace Now since October 7, 2023:<sup>16</sup>

- At least 25 new settlement outposts have been established, most of them agricultural outposts or "farms," in a process that systematically seizes land and expels Palestinians from the area.
- Dozens of roads, estimated at dozens of kilometers in length, were laid in order to establish new settlement outposts and seize additional lands.
- 24,193 dunams in the West Bank were declared "state land," amounting to nearly half of the area declared as state land since the Oslo Accords.
- Plans were laid out to establish 8,721 housing units in the settlements.
- The cabinet approved the establishment of five new settlements: Evyatar, Givat Assaf, Efrayim, Adorayim, and Nahal Heletz. All were illegal outposts that will now become official settlements.
- Three outposts were classified as "neighborhoods" of existing settlements, according to plans approved by the Supreme Planning Council.
- 70 illegal outposts were recognized as eligible for a budget and for connection to infrastructure. Minister Smotrich ordered government ministries and other authorities to begin funding 70 illegal outposts, to build public buildings in them and to connect them to water and electricity networks and other infrastructure.
- A plan was published for the establishment of a new settlement in Hebron, north of Kiryat Arba, comprising 234 housing units.

## **Settlement Financing**

- According to The Platform's report, the state budget has prioritized investments in settlements and exempts them from budget cuts, especially since the start of the war on Gaza. For example, the Ministry of Transportation allocates approximately 20 percent of its infrastructure construction budget to the West Bank. Millions continue to be invested in agricultural activity in illegal settlement outposts.<sup>17</sup>
- The government added 302 million shekels (\$80 million) to the budget of the Ministry of Settlements, allocations to the Settlement Division and to settlements.
- The government allocated 7 billion shekels (\$1.8 billion) for paving roads in the settlements.



- It allocated 409 million shekels (\$108 million) for special projects in the settlements, despite the reduction in the government's overall budget due to the war.

## **Rapid Steps Towards Annexation**

Many reports by research centers and anti-occupation groups indicate that the policies of the current government, since its formation, have aimed to implement a creeping annexation of the West Bank, strengthen the occupation and expand the settlements, perhaps even paving the way for the complete dissolution of the security arrangements in place in the West Bank since the Oslo Accords. Since its formation in late 2022, the government has taken a series of steps regarding its control over the West Bank, including appointments, transfer of powers, administrative directives and budget allocations, in a manner that amounts to transforming the system that Israel oversees in the West Bank.<sup>18</sup>

Among the government's most prominent steps in this regard are the following:

- Transferring powers related to the settlements from the army to the head of the Civil Administration, under the authority of Minister Smotrich;
- Transferring the position of legal advisor to the Civil Administration from the army to a group of legal experts working under the authority of Minister Smotrich;
- Assuming executive powers in some parts of Area B, which under international agreements are subject to the Palestinian Authority.

These steps give effective control to Smotrich and his Religious Zionism Party, the representative of the settlements within the government, and means transferring the powers and responsibilities of the Israeli Army in the occupied territories to a civil administration, in contravention of international law, which holds the army responsible for administering any territories under its occupation. This amounts to a comprehensive change in the government's dealings with the occupation and with the Palestinian population, which are now subjugated to the agenda of the Religious Zionism Party. A report by Human rights group Zulat found that "the fundamental difference between the policy of this government and its predecessors is that it has crossed the Rubicon from creeping annexation or de facto annexation, to a process of overt annexation, based on practices of racial segregation (apartheid) and principles of Jewish supremacy."<sup>19</sup>

## Continuing to Weaken the PA

In addition to strengthening the settlement enterprise and increasing the number of settlers, the government is clearly working to weaken the Palestinian Authority, most prominently through the steps taken by Smotrich. The minister has not hidden his efforts to translate the project of resolution and annexation into reality on a daily basis—indeed, he boasts about it. Last June, an audio recording was leaked in which Smotrich, at a meeting with a group of settlers, explained in detail his plan to strengthen Israeli control over the West Bank and abort any attempt to make it part of a Palestinian state.<sup>20</sup> This included the development of a clear plan to gradually wrest control of the West Bank from the Israeli Army and hand it to civilian employees—under Smotrich's command at the Ministry of Defense.

On September 9, journalist Nahum Barnea published a report in *Yedioth Ahronoth* about the steps Smotrich is taking on the ground to annex the occupied Palestinian territories and to weaken the PA. Barnea explains that over the 20 months of the current government's term, Smotrich brought about a radical shift in the situation of Jews and Palestinians in the West Bank. This included pushing toward the collapse of the PA by preventing the transfer of clearance funds and deducting large sums from those funds under various pretexts, thus harming the PA's security services,<sup>21</sup> preventing Palestinian workers from crossing the Green Line into Israel for work, and attacking the Palestinian economy, already devastated since the start of Israel's genocidal war on Gaza.

Journalist Avi Issacharoff—speaking from a position of concern for Israel's interests—has argued that the current government has not learned anything from the failure of its strategy of strengthening Hamas and weakening the PA, which it had followed up until the October 7 attacks. The government has continued to follow the same policy in the West Bank of weakening the PA. Issacharoff argued that "the direct result of these steps will be to strengthen Hamas in the cities of the West Bank, along with other elements supported by Iran, while weakening the Palestinian Authority."<sup>22</sup>

In a confirmation of this policy/approach, Issacharoff points out that a number of Israeli security officials have warned that Smotrich is leading a clear, openly declared policy of dismantling the PA, by exploiting his position at the Ministry of Defense and as Minister of Finance to implement this in a deliberate manner.<sup>23</sup> Issacharoff explains that Smotrich's key tools for weakening the PA are financial pressure and punishment, which has weakened the Palestinian security services. He has also prevented the entry of Palestinian workers to work in Israel since October 7 last year, which has sent unemployment in the West Bank surging to approximately 33 percent, along with a 30 percent decline in trade activity, and deprived the PA of approximately 70 percent of its budget, which comes from clearance funds (taxes Israel collects on its behalf).

Zulat's report, published a month before the October 7 attacks and in the week that marked 30 years since the Oslo agreements, stated that the current government "has been implementing a clear and active policy of annexing the West Bank in recent months, with the aim of strengthening the occupation, and possibly to the point of preparing the ground for the complete cancellation of the security arrangements signed under the Oslo Accords."<sup>24</sup>

## Conclusion

The intentions of the current Netanyahu government regarding the Palestinian question have been clear since the administration was formed. It has declared that it will prevent the establishment of a Palestinian state, expand settlements in the West Bank, seek to annex Area C, maintain the complete separation between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and weaken the Palestinian Authority—albeit without fully dismantling it. In fact, the government even passed a resolution in the Knesset opposing the establishment of a Palestinian state. Proposed by Minister Gideon Saar's "New Hope" Party in mid-June, the motion holds that "the establishment of a Palestinian state in the heart of the Land of Israel would pose an existential threat to the State of Israel and its citizens, perpetuate the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and destabilize the region."<sup>25</sup>

Since October 7, 2023, reality has shifted, and with it the government's approach to the occupation and colonization of the West Bank. What used to be implemented in secret, or through maneuvering and evasive methods, is now implemented flagrantly and in the open, and even boasted about. This includes policies aimed at the de facto annexation of Area C, at creating a new demographic, security, and geographic reality in the West Bank, and an increase in settler violence under the protection of the army and security services. All of these tools aim to empty large geographical areas of Palestinian residents, particularly in Area C, and to establish geographical continuity between settlements, outposts and settlement farms, while preventing geographical continuity between Palestinian towns, and thus foreclosing any future possibility of establishing a Palestinian state.

The Zionist project used many of these tools before the Nakba of 1948, paving the way for Palestinian population's expulsion from their country. However, perhaps the most prominent shift in the government's policies toward the West Bank since the events of October 7, 2023, is that it no longer rules out the possibility of dismantling the PA, whose existence right-wing governments since 2009 had treated as a *fait accompli*. It is possible that the current government is waiting for the right conditions to see this through, including an end to its genocide in Gaza and war on Lebanon, so that Israel can determine the future of the West Bank unilaterally, providing those wars are concluded in keeping with Israel's wishes. The absence of serious international or Arab opposition

to Israeli policies, its war of extermination in Gaza, its incursions and killings in the West Bank, and the expansion of the settlements, can only encourage the Israeli government to implement this agenda without any hindrance.

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