

# Israel: Documents show Defence Ministry planned West Bank land grabs

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Recently released documents show that Israel's Civil Administration, part of the Defence Ministry, has long earmarked up to 10 percent of the West Bank for new settlements or the expansion of existing ones. This is in contravention of international law, which bans the construction of towns and villages by the occupying power on territory captured in war.

Under the 1993 Oslo Accords, which was supposed to lead to a separate Palestinian state on the West Bank and Gaza, with minor land swaps between Israel and the Palestinian Authority (PA), Palestinian land was divided up pending the final agreement into three areas: Area A, under PA control; Area B, under joint Israeli and PA control; and Area C, under Israeli control.

But according to *Ha'aretz*, the Civil Administration has for years been identifying and mapping land in the West Bank and naming these parcels of land after existing settlements. It had marked out 569 parcels of land, equal to about 155,000 acres, 90 percent of which is in the area designated under Area C, with the remaining 10 percent in areas A and B.

The maps confirm that Israel had no intention of implementing the Accords. Rather, as has been clear for years, Israel used the Oslo process and the so-called interim period to provide a cover for settlement expansion and to torpedo plans for a Palestinian state.

*Ha'aretz* said that since the late 1990s, 23 of the settler outposts, constructions not authorised by the Israeli government, were built on land included in the Civil Administration's list.

This process continues, with the government trying to legalise an additional three—Shvut Rahel, Rehelim and Hayovel—despite having agreed to remove them under the Road Map, brokered by US president George W. Bush in 2003.

The documents were released under a Freedom of

Information (FoI) request brought by the Israeli NGO Peace Now and refute any notion that the ultra-nationalist settlers that established these outposts are rogue outfits acting on their own behalf.

As Dror Etkes, who filed the FoI request said, it demonstrates that the settlers had access to the Civil Administration's database and that the government was deeply involved in the systematic violation of international law.

The documents also contradict the government's claims made in the Supreme Court and the International Court of Justice at The Hague that the so-called Security Wall was routed in accordance with Israel's security needs. The maps make it clear that the route was designed to take advantage of the available land and thus enable the settlements to expand.

The names and locations of the land parcels indicate that they are earmarked for the expansion of existing settlements such as Immanuel Mizrah, Elkana Bet, Beit Aryeh Gimmel and Tekoa Sheet'hei Mir'ey, even though in some cases they are quite far away from them. As yet, only a small part has been officially allocated to the settlements.

Not only have the maps been updated in the last 10 years, more than 90 percent of the land parcels in Area C are east of the Security Wall, and much of it is designated as "state land", implying, despite the Civil Administration's denials, the government's ongoing intention of seizing even more Palestinian land for the settlements.

The documents were released as Israeli security forces—amid much publicity—evicted 15 settlers from a house in Hebron who did not have proof of permission to buy the property from its owners.

This action was a show, aimed at demonstrating that Israel is acting on outposts. At the same time, however,

the government is defying a Supreme Court order to demolish the illegal Ulpana settler outpost in the West Bank. Prime Minister Benyamin Netanyahu has asked the attorney general to find a way of preventing the demolition. He intends for his government to grant formal status to three other illegal outposts, Bruchin, Sansana and Rechelim.

Last week, the government issued tenders for the construction of 872 housing units and 4 commercial units in Har Homa, and 180 homes in Givat Ze'ev. By expanding Har Homa, the government seeks to block access to Bethlehem and the southern Palestinian suburbs of East Jerusalem, thereby preventing the Palestinians from establishing their capital in East Jerusalem.

These announcements came just days after the UN Human Rights Council voted to send its first-ever delegation to Israel/Palestine to "investigate the implications of the Israeli settlements" on the Palestinian people.

The resolution was carried by a large majority, with only the US voting against it.

The Netanyahu government has refused to allow the UN mission to enter Israel and the West Bank, or even reply to calls from the UN human rights commissioner Navi Pillay. "We will not permit members of the human rights council to visit Israel and our ambassador has been instructed to not even answer phone calls," a Foreign Office official said. Israel is also threatening sanctions against the PA.

Only the US ambassador to the UN in Geneva spoke up in support of Israel, cynically claiming that the decision would harm efforts to restart the talks between Israel and the Palestinian Authority—talks stalled more than three years ago due to Israel's refusal to halt settlement construction.

The economic situation in the West Bank is bleak. Last month's report from the World Bank pointed to a stagnant economy and an official unemployment rate of 16.6 percent in 2011. The PA, which is dependent upon external aid for all but US\$200 million of its US\$1.5 billion budget for security and essential public services, faces bankruptcy due to the failure of donors to fulfil nearly half of their pledges, and its inability to borrow more. Israel's refusal to lift restrictions on access to

land, water, raw materials and export markets makes economic life all but impossible.

The situation deteriorated sharply last September, when the US cut off funding to the PA after Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas sought Palestinian statehood at the UN, and Israel delayed payment of transfers of import taxes on goods from other countries. The World Bank expects that the situation in 2012 will deteriorate further.

As Israel's economic repression of the Palestinians intensifies, so has its belligerency. The Israel Defence Forces' chief of staff, Benny Glantz, said that in future any rockets fired from Gaza or Egypt's Sinai would be met with an attack on Hamas, which controls Gaza, irrespective of which militant group was responsible for the launching. Any rockets fired from Lebanon would result in attack on Hezbollah. Glantz added that Israel would respond swiftly against Tehran if there were any terrorist attacks by Iran's agents overseas.

Last month, the Israeli government intensified its deadly air strikes on Gaza. Israeli drones killed Zohair al-Qaisi, the secretary of the Popular Resistance Committees, and his military attaché, Mahmoud al-Hannani, in a planned execution. Its purpose was to provoke Palestinian reprisals that could then serve as a pretext for further acts of war.



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