

## *The Gaza Riviera—from vision to reality: Israel’s blueprint for ethnic cleansing and annexation*

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Last week, Israel’s parliament, the Knesset, held a conference *The Gaza Riviera—from vision to reality*. Fascist lawmakers presented plans to ethnically cleanse the Gaza Strip of Palestinians, annex it to Israel and re-establish Jewish settlements there. This would include building two cities in Gaza, one in the north and south of the Strip, as well as a university campus, an industrial area, a commercial and tech park and a tourist district with beachfront hotels.

Attending the conference were government ministers, Knesset members, heads of regional councils, security personnel, bereaved families, relatives of hostages, rabbis, researchers and activists.

*[The sign in the Knesset pictured in the X posting reads: “Meeting of the Lobby for the Renewal of Jewish Settlement in the Gaza Strip: Topic: “The Gaza Riviera – From Vision to Reality”]*

The name of the conference stemmed from President Donald Trump’s February 4 announcement at a White House press conference with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu that the US would take over Gaza and “own it”, forcing the 2.1 million Palestinians living there to leave, and turn it into the “Riviera of the Middle East.”

Trump added, “If it’s necessary, we’ll do that, we’re going to take over that piece, we’re going to develop it, create thousands and thousands of jobs, and it’ll be something that the entire Middle East can be very proud of.” He had earlier called for the permanent resettlement of Gaza’s Palestinians in neighbouring countries.

Trump doubled down on his plans a week later at another press conference at the White House, this time with King Abdullah of Jordan, saying, “I believe we will have a parcel of land in Jordan, a parcel of land in Egypt, we may have some place else but I think when we finish

our talks we’ll have a place where they’ll live very happily”.

When asked whether he agreed with Trump’s proposal to remove the Palestinians from Gaza to Jordan and Egypt, Abdullah, squirming with embarrassment, replied that “Egypt and the Arab countries” had an alternative plan that would be revealed in due course: the Arab League’s \$53 billion reconstruction programme announced by Egypt in March that would leave the Palestinians in a Gaza governed by “technocrats”.

That such a conference could be held in Israel’s parliament, with barely a mention, let alone comment or condemnation, in the world’s media, indicates the degree to which ethnic cleansing and annexation after territorial conquest have become normalised, not just in Israel but in the centres of world imperialism. Under conditions where Washington is in the business of creating a “New Middle East”, it sets the tone for what future wars of conquest will mean.

Bezalel Smotrich, leader of the far-right Religious Zionism Party and Finance Minister who also holds a post in the Defence Ministry giving him de facto control over the West Bank, said “We will occupy Gaza and make it an inseparable part of Israel.” Eyal Zamir, chief of Staff of the Israel Defence Forces (IDF), had told him that the northern border of Gaza should be annexed “for security purposes.”

Smotrich said, “I truly believe there is a tremendous opportunity here,” adding that Israel would begin “with the northern border [area of the strip] and establish three communities there. We are already talking about it. Some call it a ‘security annexation’.”

He spoke of “a proposed plan to relocate Gazans to other countries,” that would “serve as a means of facilitating the settlement of the Strip” and of receiving “a

green light from the president of the United States to turn Gaza into a prosperous strip, a resort town with employment,” a reference to Trump’s statements at the White House last February.

He declared to cheers and applause, “That’s how you make peace.” It could bring “hundreds of thousands” of Israelis to Gaza and “solve the housing problem and cost of housing for us.”

Smotrich and other far-right politicians have repeatedly called for Israel to annex Gaza and re-establish settlements in the Strip. Speaking at the conference, he said, “For 20 years, we called it wishful thinking. It seems to me it is now a real working plan.”

Michael Sfard, an Israeli human rights lawyer, said, “This is a plan for ethnic cleansing. Under international law, this would amount to a crime against humanity because deportation is a war crime when committed on a small scale and a crime against humanity when it is committed on a massive scale.”

Daniella Weiss, leader of the far-right settler group Nachala that drew up the plans, said, “The Arab Gaza chapter is over” and “In Gaza, there will never be an Arab, international or American government”.

Limor Son Har-Melech, a lawmaker from the far-right Jewish Power Party, praised the settlers, calling them the successors of the Zionist leaders who established Israel in 1948. “We need to rebuild the Gaza Strip with Jewish cities”.

This was a reference to the settlements—established after the 1967 Arab-Israeli war when Israel seized control of Gaza – that were demolished after Prime Minister Ariel Sharon unilaterally “disengaged” from the Strip. Sharon had calculated that Gaza, which had become the scene of increasingly costly confrontations, would be easier to control without the presence of the settlements. It would also provide cover for US President George W. Bush to approve the expansion of the settlements in the West Bank. Netanyahu resigned from Sharon’s government in protest at the pull-out.

Har-Melech added that there needed to be “big and fortified cities all over Gaza... There is a thirst for return among the public. Not as a punishment but because this is where we live”.

Religious Zionist lawmaker Zvi Sukkot echoed Har-Melech’s remarks, saying Israel had “the power” to implement Trump’s “vision”. Sukkot was once an active member of The Revolt, the far-right terrorist group responsible for firebombing a Palestinian family home in the village of Duma in 2015, killing three people. These

included an 18-month-old, Ali Dawabsheh, who was burned alive in the fire and both his parents who died from their injuries.

While Netanyahu has repeatedly denied any plans to resettle the Palestinians in Gaza, Defence Minister Israel Katz has called for transferring the Palestinians to a “humanitarian city” in southern Gaza as what could only be a preparatory step for their expulsion. When speaking at the White House during his visit last month, Netanyahu claimed that the US and Israel were “getting close to finding several countries” who will take in Palestinians who would like to leave Gaza. He has rejected any ceasefire with Hamas that does not include Hamas’s surrender and the release of all living hostages and the bodies of the dead within weeks, threatening that otherwise Israel will begin annexing parts of Gaza.

In a recent radio interview, Orit Strook, a Religious Zionist lawmaker and Minister of Settlements and National Missions— who is one of the leaders in the settlement in Hebron – called for expanding military operations to all areas of the Gaza Strip, even if it risks the lives of Israeli hostages still held by Hamas.

“There’s an entire area the IDF has designated as a ‘do-not-touch zone’ because hostages are being held there,” she said. “You can’t win a war this way... I can’t make the kind of life-and-death arithmetic where one person’s life is worth more than another’s. We’ll do our best to avoid harming [the hostages], but this may indeed happen.”

IDF chief of staff Zamir warned the government that if it instructs the army to operate throughout Gaza City or within the refugee camps in the central Gaza region, then it must declare that bringing home the hostages is only “a secondary goal of the war”, as such operations would endanger the hostages and lead to more soldiers getting killed and a heavier burden on combat troops in both the regular army and the reserves.

Public opinion polls show that the majority of Israelis back an agreement with Hamas that would release all the hostages at once in exchange for an end to the Gaza war.



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