Israel’s annexation of the West Bank is almost complete

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5 August 2025

While the European states have announced they may recognise a Palestinian state in a cynical effort to placate mounting popular revulsion over the Gaza genocide, Israel’s Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s fascist government has already ensured the impossibility of establishing such a state.

After nearly two years of war, Gaza lies in ruins, its people are starving, and Israel is preparing for invasion and annexation. Less well reported is that annexation of the West Bank, illegally occupied along with East Jerusalem, Gaza and Syria’s Golan Heights since the 1967 Arab Israeli war, is almost complete.

Netanyahu and his Likud party are the political descendants of Jabotinsky’s Revisionist Party that had insisted on the Jewish right to sovereignty over the whole of the “Land of Israel”, including Mandatory Palestine and Transjordan (now Jordan). They opposed the 1993 Oslo Accords that were supposed to usher in a bifurcated Palestinian state alongside Israel.

Committed to a “Greater Israel” policy, Netanyahu and his co-thinkers supported Israel’s occupation of the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza and the expansion of Zionist settlements. In October 1995, he addressed right-wing rallies baying for the blood of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, one of the signatories to the Accords. Weeks later, Rabin was assassinated. During his first premiership 1996-99, Netanyahu stymied negotiations begun by the previous government and delayed or refused to implement provisions of signed agreements.

Some 10 years later, Netanyahu opposed Prime Minister Ariel Sharon’s Disengagement Law authorising the pull-out from Gaza in 2005 and resigned from his cabinet. Sharon had calculated that Gaza would be easier to control without the presence of the settlements. The pull-out was massively unpopular with the ultra-nationalists and fuelled the growth of Israel’s far-right settler movement.

Following Hamas’ surprise victory in the January 2006 Palestinian elections, due to hostility to Fatah and the Palestinian Authority’s (PA) role as Israel’s subcontractor, and an attempted coup by Fatah in May 2006, Hamas took control of Gaza.

Branding Hamas a terrorist organisation, Israel blockaded the enclave, turning Gaza into an openair prison. It would periodically “mow the grass” to suppress the Palestinians through massive ground invasions and bombing campaigns that have killed tens of thousands.

Netanyahu’s support for Hamas as a counterweight to the Palestinian Authority

Netanyahu, prime minister for almost all of the period since 2009, did everything he could to sabotage any possibility of a Palestinian statelet, including exacerbating tensions between President Mahmoud Abbas’s PA based in the West Bank and Hamas in Gaza. He told Israeli journalist Dan Margalit in 2012 that it was important to keep Hamas strong, as it served as a counterweight to the PA.

He turned to Qatar to finance Hamas’ operations in Gaza, part of his strategy of “buying quiet”, with the petro-state reportedly sending $30 million per month to help operate Gaza’s power plant, provide welfare and support the government.

The *Jerusalem Post* quoted Netanyahu as saying in 2019, “Whoever is against a Palestinian state should be for transferring the funds to Gaza, because maintaining a separation between the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank and Hamas in Gaza helps prevent the establishment of a Palestinian state.” He offered Palestinians in Gaza daily travel permits to work in Israel where wages were higher, increasing the number to 20,000 a day in 2023 from 3,000 in 2021.

In December 2023, at a press conference he boasted, “I’m proud that I prevented the establishment of a Palestinian state”. He added, “You and your journalist friends have been blaming me for almost 30 years for putting the brakes on the Oslo Accords and preventing the Palestinian state. That’s true.”

He has refused to countenance Hamas or the PA ruling Gaza after the war, saying that either scenario would be “a reward” for October 7.

Netanyahu turns to fascistic forces to control the West Bank

Since returning to power in December 2022 with the help of the ultra-nationalist Religious Zionist Party and theocratic Jewish Power, after an 18-month period in opposition, Netanyahu has all but completed the process of annexing the West Bank.

Netanyahu gave Religious Zionist leader Bezalel Smotrich the Finance Ministry and control of the Settlement Administration inside the Defence Ministry that hands him de facto control over the West Bank. Itamar Ben-Gvir, Jewish Power leader, was given the Interior Ministry.

The government retroactively legalized ten outposts and allowed settlers to return to privately owned Palestinian land in the northern West Bank, outlawed under the 2005 Disengagement Law. It took control of archaeological sites across the West Bank and allocated funds to turn Sebastia into a biblical tourist attraction, tasking the settlers with heritage preservation and giving them a new source of revenue.

Smotrich allocated almost $1 billion for road infrastructure, including a segregated highway dubbed the “apartheid road” that would divert Palestinian vehicles away from the main settlement areas, made $70 million available for illegal outposts in the West Bank and developed plans for an industrial zone and settlement expansion. He approved the largest number of West Bank housing units since 1993, while freezing $80 million for Arab municipalities within Israel and funds for education

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programs in East Jerusalem.

The annexation of the West Bank under the cover of the Gaza genocide

The government seized the opportunity presented by the Palestinians' October 7, 2023 attack, the result of multiple provocations by Israel, to wage all-out war on the Palestinians in the name of Israel's "existential" crisis and "national security".

Smotrich sought to equate Abbas's PA in the West Bank with Hamas. He deemed virtually all PA activity "hostile" to justify withholding tax revenues upon which the PA depended, imposing sanctions and extending Israel's enforcement powers beyond Area C. While the Oslo Accords designated Area C (60 percent of the West Bank where about 200,000, less than 10 percent of the Palestinians, live) as under full Israeli military control, Area A (18 percent) would be under full Palestinian control and Area B (22 percent) under joint Israeli and Palestinian control.

Smotrich said, "We need to understand that there is no big difference between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority. The Arabs are the same Arabs, and the land is the same land. The sea they want to throw us into is the same sea."

While slashing public spending to channel money to the war, Smotrich made another $105 million available to West Bank settlements for "security" purposes, $20 million to go directly to illegal outposts, and initiated legislation granting them additional revenue.

Ben-Gvir armed vigilante groups and the violent settler gangs became, de facto, another arm of the state, carrying out daily attacks on the Palestinians to drive them off their land, with the full protection if not active support of the Israel Defence Forces (IDF).

The United Nations has recorded more than 1,400 attacks by settlers against Palestinian communities since October 2023 and $76 million in direct agricultural damage in the first year of the war. According to the Israeli NGO Peace Now, there are now 134 illegal outposts and 136 settler farms on Palestinian land in the West Bank.

Last week, Defence Minister Israel Katz confirmed that the government had approved the construction of 22 new West Bank settlements including new communities, and the legalisation of several outposts, a move he said was aimed at "preventing the establishment of a Palestinian state that would endanger Israel". This is in addition to the 450,000 settlers in the West Bank, 220,000 in East Jerusalem and a further 100,000+ on Palestinian land on the Israeli side of Sharon's infamous Separation Barrier. Smotrich hailed the announcement, saying "The next step — sovereignty!"

The government stopped the 150,000 Palestinians (22 percent of the Palestinian workforce) from working in Israeli establishments, typically in construction and agriculture in Israel, the settlements and industrial zones. The IDF set up hundreds of roadblocks leading to hours-long delays, mounted mass search and arrest campaigns, demolishing 1,400 homes and displacing at least 42,000 Palestinians from refugee camps in the cities of Tulkarem and Jenin. According to Palestinian government figures, at least 1,012 Palestinians have been killed, including at least 196 children, and nearly 7,000 injured in the West Bank, including occupied East Jerusalem, by settlers and the army since the war on Gaza began.

The economic consequences have been devastating. According to the UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, total losses in the commerce and industry sector in the West Bank are estimated at US$1.3 billion. Unemployment rose to 35 percent in 2024.

According to the anti-poverty NGO World Vision's recent report *The Unseen Crisis,* 74 percent of families are now living below the minimum standard of living, up from 21 percent just one year ago; 70 percent of children are frequently skipping meals and 9 percent have dropped out of school;. There has been a 950 percent increase in the number of families reporting that a member had gone a full day without eating since 2022.

These conditions have forced some to seek work illegally in the settlements with all the risks of super-exploitation and arrest. Ben-Gvir has ordered the prisons to reduce the food rations given to Palestinians in Israeli jails and to worsen their conditions. More than 10,000 Palestinians are in Israeli detention, including around 3,600 without charge or trial.

Smotrich has initiated a raft of new regulations and submitted legislation for the Knesset to approve. These include: the reclassification of any unregistered land in the West Bank as belonging to the Israeli state, enabling Israel to claim vast tracts of Palestinian land while voiding Palestinian registration; the application of Israeli civil law to the West Bank, effectively dissolving Israel's internationally recognised borders; direct purchase of land by settlers from Palestinians without military approval; expansion of the city of Jerusalem's boundary to include the surrounding settlements within Israel; and the official designation of the West Bank as Judea and Samaria.

In practice, the West Bank is under full Israeli control. It has been annexed in all but name.

Abbas and the Palestinian Authority

None of this could have gone ahead without the complicity of Abbas and the PA, which has the largest per capita police force in the world. Instead of using it to support the Palestinians against violent settlers and Israeli military incursions, the PA has suppressed any expression of opposition to Israel.

Abbas repudiated the October 7 incursion, saying that "the policies and actions of Hamas do not represent the Palestinian people''. He later withdrew his statement, but his attacks on Hamas have continued.

In January, when the ceasefire deal between Israel and Hamas was announced, Abbas declared that the PA was ready to assume "full responsibility" in post-war Gaza. Under Egypt's $58 billion scheme, Gaza's reconstruction would be carried out with the Palestinians remaining in the ruined enclave, in contrast to US President Donald Trump's "Riviera of the Middle East" based on the expulsion of the Palestinians, and under the "technocratic" management of the Palestinian Authority.

Abbas lambasted Hamas as "sons of dogs" in an angry speech in which he demanded the group release the remaining hostages, disarm, and hand over control of Gaza in order to end the war with Israel.

It is these conditions that brought thousands of Palestinians onto the streets for the first time last week in coordinated action across the West Bank against the war in Gaza and in support of Palestinians held in Israeli prisons, with one of the largest marches in Ramallah. Protesters carried photos of Palestinians killed or imprisoned by Israel, as well as photos showing the famine in Gaza. Such is the widespread anger that the PA was forced to give government workers the day off to attend the demonstrations.

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