

Israel tightens its grip on West Bank

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Under the cover of the ethnic cleansing of 2.3 million Palestinians from Gaza, Israel has tightened its grip on the West Bank aimed at incorporating the whole of Palestine into a “greater Israel” that now encompasses parts of Syria and Lebanon.

Last week, the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) mounted its largest military deployment in the West Bank since the supposed ceasefire in Gaza in October, sending in hundreds of soldiers, along with armoured vehicles, to storm the town of Tubas, near Nablus. A military spokesperson said that “a broad counter-terrorism operation” would continue for several days. The military imposed a curfew on the town and some neighbouring communities, closed roads and forced some residents to leave their homes to make way for Israeli soldiers.

The IDF claimed that Tubas had “become a haven for terrorism”, and distributed leaflets threatening, “If you do not change this, we will act as we did in Jenin and Tulkarm”. This was a reference to the IDF’s assaults on the two cities earlier this year that caused widespread damage and permanently displaced 40,000 Palestinians. The Israeli authorities provided them with no alternative accommodation, nor did they offer any humanitarian assistance, while denying them the right of return to their homes.

According to an IDF statement on X, it aims to “reinforce control over the area” and prevent the reformation of armed resistance groups. Its real purpose is to enable the construction of a new “security” road and military checkpoint that—as past experience has shown—foreshadow a new Zionist settlement, by forcing the residents out of the area.

In another move, the IDF is constructing a new 22 kilometre, 50-metre-wide separation wall inside the Jordan Valley—at least 12km west of the border with Jordan. This involves demolishing homes, greenhouses, water systems and grazing infrastructure. Another site that has come under attack from both settlers and the military is Joseph’s Tomb, near Nablus, nominally under Palestinian Authority control, with settlers mounting ever larger and more frequent incursions.

In October, the Knesset—Israel’s parliament—voted to advance a bill declaring that “the laws, judicial system, administration, and sovereignty of the State of Israel shall apply to all areas of settlement in Judea and Samaria.” Israel has carved up the West Bank to such an extent that movement between the towns and cities is becoming increasingly difficult if not impossible, while

a significant and growing number of West Bank Palestinians already live under Israeli sovereignty, albeit without any of the rights of Israeli citizens.

In September, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced a plan to expand Israeli settlements in the West Bank that would effectively cut the Palestinian territory in half. The E1 plan, which includes building 7,600 homes in Ma’ale Adumim, at a cost of nearly \$900 million, would be built over a strategic tract of land separating the northern half of the West Bank from the south.

The plan aims to link Jerusalem to the Ma’ale Adumim settlement east of the city on land confiscated from the towns of Anata, al-Tour, Issawiyya, Aizariyeh and Abu Dis. The E1 settlements, in the centre of the West Bank, would link Jerusalem with the settlements in the Jordan Valley all the way to the border with Jordan. They would encircle the central hills of Ramallah and Nablus and the southern regions that include Bethlehem and Hebron.

Last August, Israel’s far-right Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich, who controls the West Bank’s civil administration, said the project would “bury the idea of a Palestinian state, calling it “Zionism at its best.” He added, “The Palestinian state is being erased from the table, not with slogans but with actions. Every settlement, every neighbourhood, every housing unit is another nail in the coffin of this dangerous idea.”

Netanyahu, speaking at the approval ceremony in September, said, “There will be more cities like Ma’ale Adumim”. He then gave notice that he intends to implement the Allon Plan, drawn up shortly after the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, saying, “Israel’s eastern front is not Ma’ale Adumim, but the Jordan Valley.” This means that Israel intends to annex the entire north-south strip of the West Bank that runs alongside the Jordan Valley as the ultimate guarantor of what the Israeli military intelligence describes as the state’s “strategic depth.”

Together, the Allon Plan and the E1 project will squeeze out the Palestinians.

While successive governments have approved the expansion of settlements that are now home to more than 700,000 Jews in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, Netanyahu has vastly expanded the settlements since returning to power in December 2022. At the head of Israel’s most far-right, pro-settler coalition, he launched his “final solution” of the Palestinian issue in October 2023.

The timing of Netanyahu's approval of the E1 settlements, whose construction had been frozen for more than two decades amid fierce international opposition because it would end any possibility of a contiguous Palestinian statelet, was no accident. It followed declarations by a growing number of countries of their intention to recognise a Palestinian state, an empty gesture which Israel has denounced.

Netanyahu can green light the settlements because the US and the major European powers have supported him to the hilt as part of their broader efforts to gain control of the resource-rich Middle East and prepare for war against China.

The United Nations and the International Court of Justice (ICJ) have ruled that Israel's settlements in the West Bank are illegal under international law. Last year, the ICJ found that the expansion of the settlements was such that Israel had crossed the line into annexation in significant parts of the West Bank, leading it to issue an advisory opinion that Israel had unlawfully annexed parts of the West Bank. But neither the UN or the ICJ have done anything to ensure the dismantling of the settlements or to prevent their expansion.

Israel's tightening grip on the West Bank has been accompanied by a wave of settler violence against the Palestinians. They have gone on the rampage, burning cars, desecrating mosques, wrecking industrial plants and destroying farmland. According to the UN's humanitarian office, the number of attacks has surged, with settlers launching around eight attacks daily on the olive harvest during October, with attacks continuing last month.

Settlers have injured more than 1,000 Palestinians so far this year, double the rate of last year, and killed 21 people. This is in addition to at least 1,000 Palestinians killed by the military. According to the UN, settlers have forced at least 2,200 Palestinians from their homes, while the Israeli authorities have demolished the homes of more than 6,000 people.

They have done all this under the protection of the IDF and the police, and with the active encouragement of Israel's far-right coalition government. According to a TV *Channel 12* report citing police data, the number of police investigations into settler violence has plummeted since Itamar Ben-Gvir, the far-right Jewish Power leader took office as National Security Minister at the start of 2023—falling from 235 cases in 2022 to 150 in 2023 and 60 in 2024.

These few police investigations rarely lead to an indictment or conviction. According to Israeli rights group Yesh Din, fewer than 6 percent of all investigations into settler led to an indictment during the entire 20 year period to 2024. Just 3 percent of those investigations led to convictions.

President Mahmoud Abbas of the Fatah-dominated Palestinian Authority (PA), both widely despised by the Palestinians, has not lifted a finger to oppose any of Israel's expansionist actions. Functioning in his role as Israel's subcontractor in policing the Palestinians, Abbas has increased his collaboration with Israel and subservience to the US in a bid

to consolidate his own and Fatah's grip on power.

Abbas condemned the October 7 attacks and insists he wants an "unarmed" Palestinian state. His security forces targeted Palestinian fighters resisting Israel, killing more than a dozen Palestinians and arresting hundreds of others, paving the way for the IDF to launch its mass raids on the West Bank's northern cities earlier this year. He shut down Al Jazeera, which was reporting on the siege of Jenin, suspending its operations and accusing it of incitement, just months after Israel did so.

In February, to appease Tel Aviv and Washington, Abbas cancelled benefit payments to the families of Palestinian prisoners and those killed or wounded in Israeli attacks. This action followed a 2018 decision by the US to withdraw financial aid from the PA until such payments ceased.

In April, the 90-year-old Abbas named Hussein al-Sheikh, a Fatah time-server notorious for his close ties with Israel and widely seen as Israel's choice, as vice president of the PA and his successor. Last month, al-Sheikh met former UK Prime Minister Tony Blair—whom US President Donald Trump has indicated will run Gaza on his behalf—and a US official in Ramallah to discuss Trump's plan for Gaza.

Abbas recently met with French President Emmanuel Macron in Paris to present a draft of a new constitution and institutional framework for a "State of Palestine," signalling efforts to establish a "reformed" PA that—under U.S. President Donald Trump's peace plan—could eventually qualify to administer Gaza. Abbas has not released the draft.

Abbas insisted during a meeting in Ramallah with German Foreign Minister Johann Wadephul in August that any elections in Palestine "will not include political factions or individuals who do not adhere to the programme and commitments" made by the Palestine Liberation Organisation and the PA. A few weeks ago, he issued a "decree-law" imposing these regulations for local elections that will prevent Hamas, the most popular party, from taking part. Hamas for its part has said it will relinquish its rule in Gaza and it will support an interim administration of Gaza under the PA.



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