

Israel tightens grip on West Bank to “bury the idea of a Palestinian state”

Jean Shaoul**12 February 2026**

Israel’s far-right security cabinet has approved sweeping measures expanding the Zionist state’s power in the occupied West Bank, marking the start of formal annexation.

The changes include publishing land registries, repealing restrictions on land sales to Israeli settlers, reviving a state land-acquisition mechanism for land purchases, extending Israeli enforcement into Palestinian Authority-administered Areas A and B, shifting authority in Hebron settlements to the Civil Administration, and creating a special municipal body to oversee Rachel’s Tomb in Bethlehem.

As the West Bank is not formally part of Israel, but under military rule, the security cabinet’s decisions do not require legislation. They function as direct orders to the military and were determined by the security cabinet, not the full cabinet.

Israel’s push to annex the West Bank is inseparable from its broader project of driving the Palestinians from land it claims as exclusively its own through policies of genocide, expulsion, and displacement.

Bezalel Smotrich, finance minister and de facto minister of the settlements, who has long called for Israel to annex the territory, said the government was “burying the idea of a Palestinian state”. He called it a historic day for the settlements of Judea and Samaria. Energy Minister Eli Cohen, the Yesha Council which represents Israeli settlements, and Yossi Dagan, head of the Samaria council, welcomed the moves as steps towards full Israeli sovereignty over the West Bank.

Making the land registries public will allow settlers to identify Palestinian landowners and purchase land directly. A Jordanian-era law prohibiting transfers to non-Palestinians will be overturned.

The registries were previously classified to prevent forgery and fraud and protect the abandoned property of Palestinians who left the West Bank. Their publication will make it easier for settlers to stake false claims on Palestinian land, a tactic already widely documented, and to increase land grabs across the territory.

It will give the settlers enormous power, free from government intervention, to approach Palestinians with

offers to buy their homes and land, paving the way for the establishment of outposts inside Palestinian cities and towns and the inevitable deployment of Israeli forces to “protect” them—as in Hebron’s Old City, where the Palestinians are subject to strict Israeli military control, house raids, arrests, surveillance and daily settler violence and harassment.

The measures also extend Israel’s ability to carry out demolitions and prevent Palestinian development from Area C, about 60 percent of the West Bank designated under the Oslo Accords as fully under Israeli military control, to the rest of the West Bank: Area A (18 percent) where the Palestinian Authority supposedly has full control, and Area B (20 percent), where the PA shares control with the Israeli military.

Since the start of the war, Palestinian communities in Area C have been systematically displaced from their homes at unprecedented rates. The 100,000 Palestinians living there are banned from building, and demolitions and displacements are a regular occurrence. Israeli settlements have been expanding.

Henceforth, the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) will be able to enforce regulations on so-called unlicensed buildings in Areas A and B, citing heritage, archaeological, environmental and water-related concerns. With the West Bank full of archaeological sites, this provides a pretext for confiscating Palestinian land, demolishing buildings, closing waste treatment facilities without viable alternatives, sealing wells and taking over heritage sites.

The security cabinet has approved an Antiquities Bill that would establish a “Judea and Samaria Heritage Authority” with sweeping control over archaeological sites in the West Bank, a move expected to target 13 major Palestinian heritage locations. In 2023, Israel seized land in the Palestinian town of Sebastia—home to Canaanite, Roman, Byzantine, and Islamic ruins that generate vital local tourism revenue. Since then, settlers have repeatedly stormed the area, and Israeli authorities are reportedly planning to establish an Israeli-run archaeological site that would strip Palestinians of both access and income.

In a particularly provocative move, the security cabinet has stripped the Palestinian Authority of its powers of administration over the Cave of the Patriarchs—the burial site in Hebron, revered in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—in the area within the city that is home to 700 settlers, and over Rachel's Tomb in Bethlehem, transferring them to Israel's Civil Administration. This will allow Israel to expand the settlement, build new settlements in the city and implement changes at the site without approval from Hebron municipality. For the Palestinians, they will be subject to more restrictions on building or enlarging their homes and more demolition orders for existing ones.

These measures follow years of economic attacks on the PA, including withholding substantial tax revenues collected by Israel on the PA's behalf, suspending permits for more than 100,000 West Bankers who worked in Israel or the settlements, and imposing movement restrictions via hundreds of checkpoints, causing a major fiscal crisis.

These actions, stepped up after the start of the Gaza genocide, have led to the worst economic contraction of the Palestinian economy in its history, according to UNCTAD. By the end of 2024, GDP had fallen back to 2014 levels, with per capita GDP falling to 2008 levels.

Since taking office in January 2023, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's fascist government has expanded the settlements at the fastest level since the United Nations began tracking such data in 2017. Nearly 47,390 housing units were advanced, approved, or tendered in 2025, up from around 26,170 in 2024; itself more than double the annual total between 2017 and 2022. This has been accompanied by a huge expansion of settler-only infrastructure across the West Bank, including roads, bridges and other projects to integrate settlements directly into Israel.

According to OCHA, more than 1,000 Palestinians—at least 230 of them children—were killed in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, since the start of the assault on Gaza as a result of Israel's military raids and relentless settler violence carried out with the support of the military. At least 33,000 Palestine refugees remain forcibly displaced by an Israeli military offensive on the northern West Bank that has continued since January 2025.

Israel's latest measures constitute a blatant violation of the 1993 Oslo Accords that were countersigned and witnessed by the United States, the Russian Federation, the European Union, Egypt, and Norway and subsequently endorsed by the UN in several resolutions.

Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas condemned the moves and called on the international community, particularly the UN Security Council and the US, to "intervene immediately and take decisive action to halt these dangerous Israeli decisions." His plea as usual fell

on deaf ears. The response to Israel's latest plans, a reiteration of Smotrich's plan to annex 82 percent of the West Bank last September, went no further than the usual handwringing.

Trump issued a pro forma statement reiterating his nominal opposition to formal annexation that has done nothing to deter Israel, saying a "stable West Bank keeps Israel secure" and aligns with his administration's regional peace plans.

Egypt, Indonesia, Jordan, Pakistan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates denounced the changes, saying they would "impose unlawful Israeli sovereignty" in the West Bank and "inflame violence, deepen the conflict and endanger regional stability and security".

The European Union called the measures "another step in the wrong direction" and said sanctions were "still on the table", including the possible suspension of some parts of the EU-Israel trade agreement. The UK said it "strongly condemns" the Israeli measures as "inconsistent with international law" and called "on Israel to reverse these decisions immediately."

Not one of the European powers or regional states that attended the Sharm el-Sheikh summit and discussed the agreement supposedly to end the genocidal assault on Gaza based on Trump's plan for a "Riviera of the Middle East", much less its signatories—Egypt, the United States, Qatar, and Turkey—have done anything to stop Israel's daily violence against the Palestinians.

Israeli attacks have killed more than 72,000 Palestinians in Gaza—with 574 killed and 1,518 injured since the October "ceasefire"—while some 80-85 percent of buildings have been damaged or destroyed. Israel has allowed through far less aid than agreed under the deal, leaving Palestinians struggling to survive.

Within Israel, there was hardly a murmur of dissent from the opposition parties.



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