

Israel's Legalization Of Settlements In Northern West Bank, Explained

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- Educate!



Above photo: Israeli settlers return to the illegal Israeli outpost of Homesh, December 23, 2021. Wajed Nobani/APA Images.

Israel is launching a political and military assault on the West Bank.

Its legalization of settlements in the north is a crucial part of the story.

Israel's offensive against the West Bank, both political and military, has concentrated on its northern part in recent months, mainly in Jenin and Tulkarem. Israeli military raids have become a daily occurrence, unleashing levels of violence that have not been seen there in two decades. Since the beginning of the year, Israeli forces have killed 149 Palestinians in the Jenin governorate, 117 in the Tulkarem governorate, and 31 in the Tubas governorate, most of them in the refugee camps of Jenin, Tulkarem, Nur Shams, and Far'a.

At the same time, the Israeli political establishment has launched a political offensive against the area, concentrated around the efforts to restart settlement expansion and colonization in a region that has been the least affected by Israel's land grabs over the years.

This process didn't start on October 7 either. The northern West Bank returned to the forefront of the news as far back as late 2021, when settlers north of Nablus began to go regularly to the evacuated site of what was once the illegal outpost of Homesh, almost halfway between Nablus and Jenin on the lands of the Palestinian village of Burqa.

Settlers tried to impose their presence in the village with the intent of rehabilitating the outpost, despite the fact that the villagers of Burqa had obtained a ruling from the Israeli Supreme Court in 2013 to reclaim their confiscated lands.

Then, in December 2021, a Palestinian gunman opened fire on an Israeli settler car on its way to Homesh, killing one settler and wounding another. Israel accused two brothers of the shooting — Ghaith and Omar Jaradat, aged 17 and 20, from the town of al-Sila al-Harthiyya north of Jenin. The Israeli army arrested both of them and destroyed their family's home, leaving nine people, including both of their elderly grandparents and three children, homeless.

The Return To Homesh And The Resurgence Of Armed Resistance

Homesh, along with three other settlements in the northern West Bank, had been evacuated by the Israeli army in 2005. They were never legalized under Israeli law, like many Israeli settler outposts in the West Bank, where Israelis are theoretically not allowed to settle. Under international law, all Israeli settlements are illegal.

But in January 2023, the Israeli government decided to legalize Homesh. Netanyahu requested that the Israeli Supreme Court allow settlers to stay in the outpost for three months until the legalization process was completed. Then-chief judge Esther Hayut noted that even if the law preventing Israelis from returning to Homesh was revoked, the legal issue remains that the entire outpost has been built on private Palestinian land.

As the months went by, Homesh increasingly became the spearhead of settlers' efforts to recolonize the northern West Bank. At the same time, Israeli army raids on the cities and towns of the area intensified, introducing airstrikes from July 2023 onward. As a result, Palestinian armed resistance groups developed their fighting capacities in Nablus, Jenin, and Tulkarem, growing their numbers and gaining significant popular appeal at a time when the official Palestinian leadership in the West Bank had all but institutionalized its capitulation to the occupation. The northern West Bank had practically become a war zone well before October 7.

Then, as the genocide in Gaza began, Israel's ongoing crackdown on the northern West Bank went into overdrive. Military raids became almost daily and included the systematic destruction of civilian infrastructure, like the bulldozing of streets and tearing out water pipelines and electricity networks. Jenin refugee camp was turned into a "little Gaza," and last April Israeli forces destroyed most of the infrastructure of Nur Shams refugee camp in Tulkarem during a 52-hour raid.

Simultaneously, Israel escalated its settlement-building offensive. In May, Israeli war minister Yoav Gallant declared the revocation of the unilateral Israeli disengagement law of 2005 for the northern West Bank, making it legal, under Israeli law, for Israelis to settle in Homesh and in three other outposts that were evacuated at the same time. These settlements included Kadim, built on lands of the Palestinian town of Qabatya; Ganim, built on lands of the Palestinian villages of Deir Abu Daif and Um al-Tut; and Sanour, built on lands of the Palestinian villages of Jabaa, Fandaqomiyya, and Sanour. The Israeli army declared the area a closed military zone in order to make security preparations before settlers could move in.

Around the same time, Israel legalized five other settlement outposts across the West Bank, and later carried out the largest land grab of Palestinian land in thirty years, confiscating 13 square kilometers in the Jordan Valley in a single move. The Minister of Settlements in the Israeli cabinet, Orit Strook, said in early July that “the past months were like a time of miracles for the settlement movement.”

Smotrich Plans To Annex The West Bank

The 2005 disengagement law was passed when Israel withdrew from various settlements, including Gaza and the above-mentioned four settlements in the northern West Bank. When Israel’s assault on Gaza after October 7 began, settlers started demanding the resettlement of the strip, so when the disengagement law was revoked, it signaled that Israel’s war on the Palestinians in Gaza was to extend in different forms to the West Bank. In other words, the resurging settler movement in light of the post-October 7 Israeli assault put both the West Bank and Gaza in the same category.

The legalization of settlements in the West Bank came as part of efforts led by Israel’s hardline Finance Minister, Bezalel Smotrich, to accelerate the West Bank’s annexation. Most of Israel’s settlement moves have been concentrated in Area C of the West Bank, specifically in the Jordan Valley area, which has effectively already been *de facto* annexed.

But the northern West Bank is different. Being a haven for the bulk of the armed resistance, in contrast to Area C in the central and southern West Bank, the northern West Bank is anything but annexed. This is why a settlement advance in the north, even if minor, will count as a significant achievement for the settler agenda and for Smotrich personally.

The settlers are billing the aggressive settlement policy as a security measure, a way of creating a more “stable” Israeli presence in an area where armed resistance has continued to thrive. The rationale is that, as the settlements expand, so will the concomitant military infrastructure to support them, hence allowing larger and more direct military action to take place in the area. The ultimate goal would be to create a reality similar to the one experienced by other parts of the West Bank, where the Israeli military and settler presence are intimately intertwined and play a joint role in cutting through Palestinian lands.

The U.S. Vision

An important element in these Israeli plans is the green light given by the U.S. In late June, Israel decided to release \$260 million of the Palestinian Authority’s withheld customs money. In May, as Israel’s war minister, Yoav Gallant, revoked the disengagement law for the West Bank, Smotrich announced that he would not allow a single dollar of the Palestinian customs money to be transferred to the PA. The move exacerbated the PA’s financial crisis, leading several analysts to predict its financial collapse.

In late June, Smotrich agreed to release part of the money for the previous three months in exchange for the Cabinet approving the settlement measures he had proposed — mainly the legalization of five settlement outposts, including those in the northern West Bank. According to media reports, the agreement was between other Israeli ministers and Smotrich during a late-night meeting in late June.

However, other media sources quoted unnamed Western diplomats as saying that the release of the PA’s tax funds and the approval of the settlements’ legalization was the result of a U.S.-Israeli agreement aimed at preventing the collapse of the PA. Although the U.S. had criticized Israel’s steps

to legalize settler outposts in previous months, Israel couldn't complete the legalization without U.S. approval.

Throughout the years, especially since the Oslo Accords, the U.S. has publicly considered the settlements illegal but has never taken any significant step to stop their expansion. While the Biden administration has officially reversed the Trump-era recognition of settlements as legal, even imposing sanctions on several individual settlers known for their role in violent attacks on Palestinians, Israeli settlements are funded by Israeli governmental funds with U.S. approval. Settlements are even supported by U.S.-based organizations and U.S. private citizens.

The unblocking of PA money was seen as a sign that the U.S. vision for the war's aftermath would be a period of stability in the West Bank, which the PA would play an important role in safeguarding. Crucially, the PA's role would extend to the northern West Bank, where it would have to help contain the spread of armed resistance.

And as a part of this entire vision, at no point is the stopping of settlement expansion considered as an option.

What we see is the emergence of a holistic Israeli colonial strategy: it is launching an assault on the West Bank by making bold land grabs, using military power to suppress resistance in the northern West Bank, and using settlements as a spearhead for its annexation strategy. And all with a tacit U.S. stamp of approval.

- Gaza, Genocide, Israel, Palestine, Settlements, Settler colonialism