



Transformations in the Israeli Colonial Project in the West Bank After October 7, 2023

This article examines the depth of the transformations that have taken place within the Israeli colonial-settlement project in the West Bank after **October 7, 2023**. It does not treat that date merely as a chronological starting point—beginning with the war and continuing beyond it—but rather approaches these developments within their **political context**, specifically in relation to the shifts that occurred in the Israeli state following the formation of the **extremist far-right government** in early **2023**.

These transformations are closely tied to the **coalition agreements** that led to the government's formation—particularly those involving the **Otzma Yehudit (Jewish Power)** party led by the extremist **Itamar Ben-Gvir**, who serves as Minister of National Security, and the **Religious Zionism** party led by the extremist **Bezael Smotrich**, who holds both the **Finance Ministry** and the position of **Minister within the Ministry of Defense**. These two posts, in particular, have had **profound ramifications** for the overall settlement enterprise.

Within this framework, the article explores how Israel has **exploited the fog of war and the ongoing genocide in Gaza** to accelerate the implementation of long-prepared plans—some of which had been shelved for years—while also inventing new colonial-settlement mechanisms justified under the pretext of “war” or “security measures.” In short, the occupying power has intensified these actions in a **race against time** to impose new realities on the ground and bring about sweeping **geopolitical transformations** across Palestinian territory.

1. Manifestations of the Dismantling of Military Administration in the West Bank

Under **international law**—specifically the **Hague Regulations of 1907** and the **Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949**—the West Bank is classified as **occupied territory** that must be administered through a **temporary military government** led by a military commander accountable under international law. What is occurring today, however, is the **transfer of powers from the military commander** (the military governor of the West Bank) **to Israeli civilian ministries and agencies**.

For example, Finance Minister **Smotrich** has taken control of the **Civil Administration**, allocating budgets directly for the benefit of settlements. Likewise, ministries such as Housing, Transportation, and Interior now allocate funding and planning resources that directly include settlements—treating the West Bank as though it were part of Israel's domestic administrative system rather than territory **outside its sovereign borders**.

A major milestone in these structural shifts came on **June 18, 2023**, when the Israeli government decided to **transfer planning authority** in the West Bank from the Defense Minister (then Yoav Gallant) to Smotrich, acting as Minister within the Defense Ministry. From that point forward, **settlement planning no longer required the approval** of the political leadership or the Defense Minister. Nor was the **Prime Minister’s consent** needed to expand settlements. As a result, once Smotrich approved a construction plan in the West Bank, it was sent directly to the **Higher Planning Council** without any military or political oversight or delay.

This effectively **unleashed unrestricted settlement expansion**, disregarding security or diplomatic considerations and perpetuating the **de facto annexation** of the West Bank. The shift also paved the way for the long-delayed approval of the **E1 settlement plan**, officially ratified on **August 20, 2025**—a project long described by Israeli officials as the **keystone** of the colonial-settlement enterprise and a decisive step toward the **eradication of the Palestinian statehood project**.

A particularly dramatic decision followed with the creation of a “**Civilian Deputy Head of the Civil Administration**.” On **May 29, 2024**, through **Government Decision No. 2195**, the settler **Hillel Roth**, formerly treasurer of the **Shomron Regional Council**, was appointed to the post. This newly established position now holds **full authority** over settlement and land administration—previously under military control—while leaving only limited civil responsibilities relating to Palestinian life in the hands of the army.

The term “deputy” is misleading, since the civilian deputy does **not report to** the head of the Civil Administration but instead to the **Settlement Administration** within the Defense Ministry. Though formally subordinate to the head of the Settlement Directorate, the deputy retains control over civilian departments handling areas delegated to Minister Smotrich. The deputy also oversees the **Inspection Unit**, which enforces planning and building laws and monitors “environmental protection” in **Area C**—a euphemism often used to justify demolitions of Palestinian structures.

2. Expansion of Settlement Planning and Demolition Policy

The results of these structural changes quickly became apparent through an unprecedented wave of settlement planning. According to data from the **Colonization and Wall Resistance Commission (CWRC)**, between **January and June 2025**, Israeli authorities reviewed (**deposited or approved**) a total of **165 master plans** for settlement expansion or new settlement creation—**124 in the West Bank** and **41 in occupied East Jerusalem**. These plans encompassed **8,685 housing units** in West Bank settlements and **8,865 in Jerusalem**, a significant increase compared to previous years.

In **2024**, Israeli authorities had reviewed **173 settlement plans**, involving **23,461 housing units** in total. Of these, **8,800 units** were approved for construction, while **14,661 units** were deposited for later approval—targeting **14,982 dunams** of Palestinian land.

However, the expansion of settlement planning was only **one side of the equation**. The other was the intensified campaign to **suppress Palestinian construction** under the pretext of “unlicensed building” or “protecting settler structures,” particularly in and around **illegal**

settler outposts. The Israeli government established a **new enforcement unit** within the **Israel Land Authority**, hiring **30 additional inspectors** to work alongside the existing 32 in the Civil Administration’s inspection division. Their primary mission is to **identify and accelerate demolition operations** of Palestinian structures, with the explicit goal of surpassing the demolition totals of 2024.

According to **OCHA** data, Israeli forces demolished **1,160 Palestinian structures** between **January and August 18, 2025**, compared to **664 demolitions** in the first half of 2024—a clear indicator of the **speed and intensity** with which the new Civil Administration is implementing its demolition policy.

3. Revocation of Palestinian Authority Jurisdiction

In another escalation, on **June 28, 2024**, the Israeli Cabinet decided to **withdraw executive powers** from the **Palestinian Authority** in the **Jerusalem Desert area (classified as Area B)**—an area spanning **167 km²**, or about **3% of the West Bank**—and to begin demolishing what it termed “unauthorized Palestinian construction.” Under the **Oslo Accords**, the PA retained administrative and planning authority over Area B, making this decision a significant step in Israel’s **gradual reassertion of sovereignty** over areas previously transferred to Palestinian self-rule.

Since then, the CWRC has reported more than **30 demolition orders** targeting Palestinian structures in that area, under the pretext of preserving a “natural reserve.” Israeli estimates indicate that up to **3,000 structures** face demolition threats, based on official Israeli maps and planning documents.

This policy reflects an **inherently discriminatory enforcement pattern**: swift and systematic demolition of Palestinian construction, coupled with leniency—or outright protection—for illegal settler structures. The trend is evident in both the **dramatic increase in settler outposts** in recent years and the **decline in military intervention** to dismantle them. In 2025, army involvement has become largely **symbolic or complicit**, with soldiers occasionally conducting staged demolitions only for settlers to **rebuild immediately afterward**—as seen in the cases of the **Atara** and **Beitin** outposts north of Ramallah.

In 2022, settlers established 12 new outposts, most of which were pastoral in nature. This number rose to 18 new outposts in 2023, but in 2024, the figure surged dramatically to **51 new outposts** distributed across most Palestinian governorates, with a clear concentration in areas surrounding Palestinian Bedouin communities.

For example, in 2024, settlers established six new outposts in areas surrounding the *Masafer Yatta* communities, which are threatened with forcible transfer orders. In the same year, and near the arc of colonies surrounding these communities, settlers set up eight new outposts in the eastern Bethlehem area — six of them located within the boundaries of a nature reserve from which the Israeli occupation authorities had stripped the Palestinian Authority of planning powers. The establishment of these six outposts coincided with a decision by the Israeli government to take control of the reserve.

A dangerous precedent has emerged in the way the occupying state views and deals with settler outposts, particularly the pastoral ones. The so-called “Custodian of Government and Abandoned Property,” under the Israeli Civil Administration, announced the allocation of around **16,000 dunams** of land through six separate allocation orders from the governorates of Ramallah, Salfit, and the Jordan Valley. These allocations effectively authorize settlement activity in those areas — a major structural shift granting settlers’ behavior a veneer of legality and formalizing systematic land appropriation.

2. Systematic Expropriation of Palestinian Land

The decision of the Israeli Security and Political Cabinet on **May 11, 2025**, to revoke the procedures of “Palestinian land settlement” marked a dangerous turning point in the administration of occupied territories. Practically, this means abolishing any legal or administrative framework that previously gave Palestinians a limited opportunity to register or build on their land. The entire land and planning portfolio is now a tool in the hands of Israeli political and security institutions.

This decision paves the way for accelerating the demolition of Palestinian structures and halting construction permits, while simultaneously legalizing illegal outposts, expanding them, and linking them to Israeli infrastructure. This process undermines Palestinian urban development and deepens the system of spatial apartheid, entrenching de facto annexation of land for the long-term settlement project. The declared goal, according to the Israeli Defense Minister, is to **“reinforce, consolidate, and expand Jewish settlement in the West Bank,”** as stated in an official announcement.

Beyond its inherently permanent and sovereign nature, this move signals the imposition of sovereignty over occupied territories — a development that poses a serious national challenge requiring both local and international confrontation.

International law explicitly prohibits an occupying power from conducting land settlement procedures in occupied territories. According to international legal experts, such actions constitute **de facto annexation** and a blatant violation of international law, cementing land ownership in the name of the occupying state or settlers and permanently depriving Palestinians of future claims. Furthermore, the involvement of Israeli institutions — particularly the Civil Administration — in such settlement processes effectively strips Palestinians of property ownership in most of **Area C**.

In parallel, the scope of land confiscation and systematic expropriation has escalated to unprecedented levels over the past three decades, especially through “state land declarations.” Between **2013 and 2023**, Israel seized a total of **13,000 dunams** under the pretext of declaring them state lands. However, in just the year and a half following the outbreak of war, the figure rose sharply to **25,000 dunams** under the same designation.

These “state land” declarations have become a sword hanging over Palestinians’ heads, exploiting Ottoman-era land laws that remain selectively applied. In reality, the Israeli military systematically prevents Palestinians from accessing or cultivating their lands through military orders, later confiscating them under the pretext of abandonment.

Simultaneously, Israel has intensified its use of **land seizure orders for military and security purposes**. Data from the Colonization and Wall Resistance Commission (CWRC) shows that

in **2024**, the Israeli army issued 35 such orders, compared to **41** during just the first half of **2025**. These orders are used to justify temporary land takeovers for fencing, establishing watchtowers, expanding bases, or creating “buffer zones” around settlements — a pattern that emerged after the war in **October 2023**.

The idea of these “buffer zones” stems from a demand made by far-right Finance Minister **Bezalel Smotrich** in the early days of the war, urging Prime Minister **Benjamin Netanyahu** to establish buffer zones around West Bank settlements to prevent a repetition of the October 7 events. This policy quickly materialized: in **January 2023**, Israeli authorities issued an emergency military order seizing **31,886 dunams** of land from the village of *Deir Istiya* in Salfit Governorate for “security and military purposes,” surrounding the *Revava* settlement.

The danger of such military orders lies not only in confiscating the land marked in red on official maps but also in barring Palestinians from hundreds of additional dunams inside the designated perimeter under security pretexts. Since the implementation of this policy, the Israeli army has issued **24 orders** establishing “buffer zones” around settlements, effectively denying Palestinians access to thousands of dunams. If left uncultivated, these lands risk eventual permanent confiscation under the guise of “state land” or settlement expansion orders.

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