

Middle Eastern politics & society

Israel approves legalisation of five West Bank outposts, says Bezael Smotrich

Measures announced by ultranationalist minister draw fierce criticism from Palestinians and Israeli leftwing



Israeli settlers march to the Evyatar outpost © Nir Elias/Reuters

James Shotter in Jerusalem YESTERDAY

Israel's ultranationalist finance minister Bezalel Smotrich said the security cabinet had approved the legalisation of five Jewish outposts in the occupied West Bank, sparking condemnation from the Palestinian Authority.

In a statement late on Thursday, [Smotrich](#) said the cabinet had also approved the advancement of further construction in Israeli settlements in the West Bank, which are regarded as illegal by most of the international community, and a series of sanctions against Palestinian officials.

The office of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and the finance ministry did not respond to requests to confirm that the measures had been approved. However, the Palestinian foreign ministry on Friday condemned them as “deliberate sabotage of the opportunity to implement a two-state solution”.

“The ministry views with extreme concern the Israeli government’s continued commitment to the crime of settlement expansion and deepening apartheid, with the aim of closing the door on any opportunity to create a Palestinian state,” the ministry said.

The measures announced by Smotrich also drew fierce criticism from leftwing Israeli politicians, with the new head of the Labour party, Yair Golan, saying they amounted

to “de facto annexation”.

“This annexation will harm the security of our citizens, the future of our children and will lead to the end of the Zionist dream,” he wrote on X.

But settler leaders reacted with jubilation to Smotrich’s announcement, which said the outposts to be legalised were Evyatar, Sde Efraim, Givat Asaf, Heletz and Adorayim.

“This is the only way to deal with people and countries who look at Jews living in their ancient homeland as a violent act,” said Simcha Rothman, a member of Smotrich’s Religious Zionism party, who lives in an outpost.

Palestinians seek the West Bank as the heart of a future state, but it has been occupied by Israel since the Six Day war in 1967. Over the past half-century, Israel has built more than 130 settlements in the territory, which have grown to house some 700,000 settlers.

As the settlements have grown, so has the political power of the settler movement, and Netanyahu’s governing coalition is dependent on the support of two far-right parties led by settlers — Smotrich’s Religious Zionism and Itamar Ben-Gvir’s Jewish Power — for its majority.

In an apparent quid pro quo for the legalisation of the settlement outposts, Israel’s Haaretz newspaper reported that Smotrich was also expected to unfreeze tax revenues that Israel had been withholding from the Palestinian Authority, and extend a crucial waiver to Israeli banks that provide correspondent banking services to Palestinian lenders.

Two people familiar with the situation on Friday said the waiver would be extended for four months.

Smotrich announced the measures earlier this year, in retaliation for the recognition of Palestine as a state by several countries, and the decision by the International Criminal Court’s prosecutor to seek arrest warrants against Netanyahu and defence minister Yoav Gallant over [the war against Hamas](#) in Gaza.

However, officials from the US and other countries have been pushing for Israel to reverse both steps, warning that the measures were undermining the PA’s ability to function, as well as endangering the [stability of the West Bank’s banking system](#).

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