

West Bank: What Does Revealing Landowners' Names Mean?



In what Israeli officials are hailing as a “revolution” in the West Bank, Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich and Defense Minister Israel Katz unveiled a sweeping set of new measures aimed at deepening settlement expansion and effectively burying the prospect of a Palestinian state.

The two ministers announced that the Israeli security cabinet had approved a series of decisions designed to entrench Israeli control over the West Bank by altering its legal and civil landscape, and by nullifying remaining laws from the Jordanian era. What are these decisions, and what do they mean for Palestinians?

Structure and Details of the New Policies

1. Unmasking Landowners to Facilitate Land Grabs

Perhaps the most alarming measure is the lifting of confidentiality on land registries in the West Bank. After decades of withholding such information, settlers, real estate firms, and intermediaries can now access the names of Palestinian landowners. This opens the door to intimidation, coercion, and pressure tactics.

In addition, an old Jordanian law from 1967 that prohibited land sales to non-Arabs has been nullified. Settlers can now buy land directly as individuals without

relying on registered companies or requiring prior approval from Israel's Civil Administration.

Israel also plans to reactivate the long-dormant "Land Acquisition Committee" to purchase "strategic" parcels for settlement expansion.

2. Seizing Planning Authority and Nullifying the 1997 Hebron Protocol

The Israeli government has taken full control over planning and construction in the Jewish neighborhood of Hebron and around the Ibrahimi Mosque, stripping those powers from the Palestinian-run municipality.

Until now, any construction modifications required joint approval from the Palestinian municipality and Israel's Civil Administration. Under the new measures, Israeli security authorities alone will issue permits, effectively annulling the 1997 Hebron Protocol and paving the way for rapid settlement expansion.

A separate decision establishes an independent municipal authority to manage Rachel's Tomb (Bilal Ibn Rabah Mosque) in Bethlehem, transferring control from the local Palestinian municipality to Israeli ministries.

3. Encroaching into Areas A and B — Undermining Oslo

The new policies go beyond Area C which is under full Israeli control per the Oslo Accords by extending Israeli authority into Areas A and B, which are nominally under Palestinian civil and security control.

Israel has granted itself powers to enforce laws related to water, the environment, and antiquities in these areas, and to demolish Palestinian homes deemed "illegal" or "damaging to heritage," according to the new directives.

4. Direct Settlement Channeling

Until February 8, land sales to settlers required a layered approval process involving the Israeli military, Civil Administration, and military courts. Now, that process has been streamlined. Land transfers will go through a bureaucratic procedure that strips land of its legal protections, no longer requiring military approval effectively creating a direct channel for settlers to acquire land with minimal oversight.

This further limits the Palestinian Authority's ability to protect private property.

The Israeli Narrative and Explicit Intentions

Smotrich described the changes as a deliberate effort to "bury the idea of a Palestinian state," presenting the new policies as part of "normalizing life" in the West Bank.

Defense Minister Israel Katz referred to the decisions as a “permanent strategic anchor” for Israel’s settlement policy.

The Yesha Council, the main settler umbrella organization, called these decisions the most significant in 60 years. Right-wing group Regavim praised the annulment of Jordanian laws and demolition permissions in Palestinian-administered areas, saying it would make land records “transparent.”

Yedioth Ahronoth reported that the Israeli government is racing to apply de facto sovereignty over the West Bank before the next elections, as the new measures will be legally difficult to reverse.

i24NEWS labeled the moves a “revolution” in civil administration, expanding Israeli authority into previously off-limits areas.

In contrast, left-wing Israeli organizations like Peace Now warned of a legal coup that enables mass land confiscations and undermines any prospects for a negotiated solution.

A Wider Strategy of Expansion

A report by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy contextualized the decisions as part of a broader plan to fragment Palestinian territorial continuity in Area C and preclude the establishment of a Palestinian state.

The same report noted that the Israeli government is planning to build over 3,400 housing units in the controversial “E1” area between Jerusalem and Jericho. Smotrich himself described the project as a way to “kill the idea of a Palestinian state” and achieve the goal of reaching “one million settlers” in the West Bank.

The Israeli Policy Forum echoed these concerns, citing a bureaucratic “revolution” led by Smotrich to replace military rule in the West Bank with direct Israeli civil control.

Demographic and Political Implications

1. Demography Under Pressure

Population data underscores the stakes. According to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, by the end of 2025, about 5.56 million Palestinians lived in the Palestinian territories, including 3.43 million in the West Bank.

In contrast, official Palestinian reports estimate the settler population reached 770,000 by the end of 2024, spread across more than 180 settlements and 256 outposts. Their numbers are steadily growing, aided by land grabs and legal cover.

A key goal of the settlement plan is to establish a massive settler bloc in the West

Bank and double the settler population to one million a goal Smotrich publicly stated while discussing the E1 plan.

2. Geographic Fragmentation and Entrenched Control

By extending Israeli control into Areas A and B, which comprise 40% of the West Bank's area, Israel is enabling demolitions and land seizures in regions previously under Palestinian governance.

The International Crisis Group warns that Israel is shifting West Bank administration from military to civilian control, making formal annexation a mere formality. This policy pushes Palestinians into isolated enclaves, stripping them of access to land and resources, and nudging them toward displacement.

The Washington Institute's report stresses that ongoing settlement activity is squeezing Palestinians in a vice grip, leading to forced displacement. Settler militias alone committed 440 attacks in the first half of 2025.

3. Economic and Social Fallout

Settlement expansion is also accelerating the confiscation of agricultural land and water resources, deepening the economic crisis in the West Bank.

A recent report by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics revealed that unemployment in the West Bank hit 28% in 2025, while GDP fell by 13% due to Israeli restrictions.

With home demolitions on the rise and more areas cordoned off, investment and development are grinding to a halt. This is fueling both internal and external migration and triggering demographic shifts under duress.

In the absence of meaningful international deterrence, 2026 appears poised for a volatile showdown over the future of the West Bank pitting an Israeli government accelerating annexation against a Palestinian population facing demographic and political erasure.