

The Israeli Government's Annexation Agenda

Settlement Watch Team, June 2024

On Sunday, June 9, 2024, an internal conference of the Religious Zionism Party was held at the "Shaharit Farm" outpost south of Qalqilia, with the participation of Ministers Smotrich and Strook, members of Knesset from the party, and an audience of approximately 100 participants. A recording of the conference has been acquired by Peace Now.

During the conference Minister Smotrich reported on a series of administrative moves by the government that have led to **the de facto annexation of the West Bank** and the transfer of management of all settlements matters from the hands of the military to civilian officials, a clear breach of international law.

Smotrich: "[We wanted that] it would be easier to swallow in the political and legal context, so that people wouldn't say that we are now doing an annexation, and sovereignty, etc., so we did not change the legal status of the land. The military commander is still the sovereign."

On the Prime Minister's support for the illegal agricultural outposts and the government's efforts to reduce the Palestinian presence in the Area C, Smotrich said:

"He is fully with us."

* In accordance with Israeli government measures targeting critics of its policies in the occupied territories, Peace Now clarifies that this year the majority of its funding came from foreign political entities as defined by the law, and they are listed at the website of the Associations Unit



The stage set of the conference: "Judea and Samaria - the protector of Israel; The ultimate goal: to prevent the establishment of a Palestinian state"

Summary of the main steps of the government:

1. **The completion of the annexation moves** - the completion of the process of transferring the power from the army to an administration under the minister, and the appointment of a "Civilian Deputy" who received the powers of the Head of the Civil Administration regarding the settlements.
2. **Illegal outposts:** creating a "legalization bypass route" for financing and providing services to 63 outposts; Allocation of NIS 85 million for the construction of security components in outposts in general.
3. **Expected moves by the government:** the legalization of the agricultural outposts; reforming the enforcement system against Palestinian construction; declaration of approximately 15,000 dunams of state land; promotion of plans in the settlements on regular basis.
4. **An addition of one billion NIS** for security needs in the settlements in 2024-2025; **and NIS 7 billion** for roads.

1. Completion of the annexation moves

Minister Smotrich began by presenting the overarching goal:

Smotrich: "We came to settle the land, to build it, and to prevent its division and the establishment of a Palestinian state, God forbid. And the way to prevent this is to develop the settlements."

According to Smotrich, the main effort now is "***in structural changes that will change the DNA of the system for many, many years.***"

The “Civilianization” of the Civil Administration - Minister Smotrich reported that the process of dismantling the Civil Administration (which is a Military body) and establishing a sort of new government ministry within the Ministry of Defense, called the "[Settlement Administration](#)", has been completed. The Settlement Administration is headed by a head of administration, whose role is equivalent to that of a director general of a government ministry (Yehuda Eliyahu - a long-time partner of Smotrich since the founding of Regavim, P.N.).

Appointment of a “Civilian Deputy” to the head of the Civil Administration - on May 29, 2024, Hillel Roth, who was the treasurer of the Shomron Regional Council and deputy director of Bnei Akiva, [was appointed](#) as a [Civilian Deputy](#) to the Head of the Civil Administration. This is a new position that now holds all powers related to settlements and lands (instead of the Head of the Civil Administration), and leaves the Military in charge of only managing certain matters related to the lives of the Palestinians. It should be noted that **the name "deputy" is misleading**, because the Civilian Deputy is not at all subordinate to the Head of the Civil Administration, but only to the Settlement Administration established in the Ministry of Defense. It seems that the more appropriate name for the position is the "**Governor of the Settlements**".

The transfer of legal powers from the military to government ministry. According to Minister Smotrich, the transfer of all settlement and land issues from the Military Legal

Adviser of Judea and Samaria (subordinate to the military prosecutor's office), to the legal advice of the Ministry of Defense, under Minister Smotrich, will be finalized by July 1, 2024. For this purpose, 26 legal positions were opened in the Ministry of Defense, 23 of which have already been filled. The deputy legal advisor of the Ministry of Defense is responsible for settlement issues, under him there are six departments, each with 4 lawyers (in areas such as: lands, law enforcement, planning and construction, etc.). Smotrich: *"The Military Legal Adviser has a military DNA; the legal department of the Ministry of Defense has a totally different DNA"*.

Smotrich: "The truth is that at first we thought of transferring it altogether from the Ministry of Defense. In the end, [we did it in a way that] it would be easier to swallow in the political and legal context, so that they wouldn't say that we are now doing an annexation and sovereignty, etc. So we did not change the legal status of the land. The military commander is still the sovereign. ...

We created a separate civilian system. There is a ministry within the Ministry of Defense. There is a minister. There is an administration which is like a government ministry. The head of the administration is equivalent to a CEO of a government ministry. ... There is a Deputy Head of the Civil Administration who is civilian, an employee of the Ministry of Defense, subordinate not to the Head of the Civil Administration, not to the commander of the central command, but to the Settlement Administration. All the authorities of the Head of the Civil Administration were delegated to him. ...

*The powers are in the hands of Hillel Roth, all the powers: he signs the orders, he convenes the Higher Planning Committee, he declares state lands, he signs the blue lines, he manages the Staff Officers, he issues tenders for personnel, he signs expropriations for roads, everything is in his hands. **All civil powers.***

2. Illegal outposts

Creation of a “legalization bypass route” for outposts declared as “sites under legalization”

The main agenda of the conference was the [cabinet decision from February 2023](#), which stated that certain outposts would be defined as "[sites under legalization](#)". In these outposts, the government will invest budgets, build public buildings, connect infrastructures and refrain from demolishing the illegal construction. All this despite the fact that none of these outposts are legal or completed a legalization process.

Recently, the Settlement Administration [compiled a list of 63](#) "sites under legalization". Minister Smotrich informed the group that in order to implement the decision, new military orders will soon be signed that will allow the government to build and finance those outposts.

He added that the budget for carrying out the works at these 63 outposts has already been allocated by the Ministry of Finance: ***"These sites are already budgeted. The Finance Minister and the Minister in the Defense Ministry are from the same party, so they know how to talk to each other, so somehow there are budgets."*** (A joke by Smotrich who serves as both the Finance Minister and the Minister in the Defense Ministry.)

NIS 85 million for security components in the outposts

At the conference, Minister Orit Stroom presented the approved budget under the heading: "Security components in the young settlement" in the amount of NIS 75 million for 2023 (to be implemented during 2024) and an additional NIS 10 million for 2024. This budget is intended for all the illegal outposts and not only for the outposts that are considered "sites under legalization". The budget is allocated through the Ministry of Settlement to the Settlement Division of the World Zionist Organization, which then gives it to the Regional Councils of Settlements to be implemented. The security components include infrastructure such as roads, construction of protected public buildings, and equipment such as solar panels, vehicles, cameras, drones and more.

3. Planned moves by the government in the settlements

Far-reaching changes that facilitates the systematic expulsion of Palestinians from Area C, and in other areas:

Legalizing the Farm outposts - Minister Smotrich described the significant role of [the farm outposts](#) in taking over lands and preventing Palestinian development. Smotrich said that legal work is being done in order to enable the legalization of those outposts so that they can be budgeted for and supported legally by the government. According to him, **"We are very close to the model of legalizing the farms."**

In this context, Smotrich reported that Prime Minister Netanyahu supports the moves: **"He is fully with us"** said Smotrich, and proudly told how he convinced him of the importance of the matter.

Smotrich: The farm outposts are a mega-strategic tool for the protection of lands. We did not invent the wheel. Always in the State of Israel, pasture has been the most effective tool for preserving lands. You take a farmer, a thousand head of cows, a dime and half an investment and it protects you 40,000 dunams. A tool that, like everything else in the settlements, started from the bottom up. We are very close to a model for legalization of these farms. There are still a few discussions, legal arguments, but I think that within a few months we will have a model that will allow us to legalize the vast majority of the farms. This legalization will of course pave the way for the government investment in infrastructure, like everywhere else, to bring them water, electricity, roads, grazing grants. It is mega-strategic.

Reforming the enforcement against Palestinian construction - Smotrich presented a plan for far-reaching changes that will significantly increase the enforcement actions against Palestinian construction. According to him, the plan will be brought to the cabinet for approval (it is possible that this was one of the issues at the cabinet meeting on June 16, the continuation of which was postponed for a week). Smotrich explicitly stated that the purpose of enforcement against Palestinians in the West Bank is not a matter of rule of law but for a **"geo-political, strategic and security"** purpose.

The main changes in the enforcement mechanism are the significant enlargement of the supervision unit, and the establishment of a dedicated unit for enforcement in built-up areas, and a separate unit for enforcement in open areas. In addition, a special police force will be established to deal only with demolitions, similar to police units that operate in the north and south of Israel.

Smotrich: We are working now to implement a completely new enforcement system in the Civil Administration. It was agreed between the Minister of Defense and me that there is going to be a completely different concept of operation. There will be a unit that will enforce in built-up areas, there will be a unit that will enforce in open areas, there will be technological aids, there will be a dramatic addition of positions. Similar to the Directorate for Coordination of Enforcement Operations which operates in the North and the South of Israel, there will be a police unit whose entire job is to help enforce against illegal construction.

We approach this matter with the understanding that if anywhere else in the State of Israel there are certain purposes for enforcement: rule of law, equality, conservation of scarce resources, environmental considerations; In Judea and Samaria there is one great consideration and purpose, and it is, in the end, geo-political, strategic and security. I really hope that we are very close to the conclusion of this thing, to come to the cabinet for an orderly decision that will reassure the concept, the method and the purposes. We are budgeting what is needed at the same time.

Declarations of state lands - according to Smotrich, about 15,000 additional dunams will be declared as state lands this year (in addition [to about 10,000 dunams](#) already declared).

Promotion of housing units in the settlements on an ongoing and regular basis - Smotrich said that they will soon start promoting plans in the settlements on an ongoing basis. The Higher Planning Council (HPC) will meet regularly to approve plans and will

discuss plans that have reached the appropriate stage for discussion without waiting for prior approval from the political level.

According to Smotrich, [the government's decision from June 2023](#) that canceled the need for the approval of the Minister of Defense for each stage of the plan will be implemented soon. *"Our goal is to bring now a large amount of plans to the Higher Planning Council (HPC) to clear a table, and then start to work by bringing the HPC together slowly in small groups, without fanfare. We believe that at first there will be some shouting and very quickly this story will calm down."*

4. Additional Budgets

One billion NIS for security needs in the settlements in the years 2024-2025.

Minister Smotrich shared that in addition to the budgeting of the security elements for the outposts (85 million mentioned above) and in addition to the security grants that are regularly awarded to the local authorities in the territories, **a billion NIS has already been budgeted** for the years 2024 and 2025 through the Ministry of Defense "for security elements for the entire settlement". Smotrich emphasized that this is a great achievement, which was included in the base of the budget, after years in which they tried to get NIS 400 million for this purpose and failed.

NIS 7 billion for roads - Minister Smotrich said that he agreed with the Minister of Transportation on the allocation of NIS 7 billion in the next five years for the purpose of developing roads to the settlements.

*I tell you that really, this is the significant revolution: if in five, six, seven years it is possible to get anywhere in Binyamin, Samaria, the Jordan Valley, within fifteen minutes on a two-lane road, when Route 60 is like this along its entire length and Route 5 all the way to the Jordan Valley. You can arrive by car to a transportation center or hub in the Rehelim-Tupuh area, and from there access the mass transit infrastructure, and in another quarter of an hour you connect to the Gush Dan metropolis. This is a revolution: **this is how you bring a million people to Judea and Samaria.***