

# *Israeli Official Describes Secret*

## *Government Bid to Cement Control of*

### *West Bank*

Israeli judges have long ruled that Israel's control of the territory is a temporary military occupation and complies with international law. A powerful minister's recent speech, caught on tape, suggested the government is trying to change that.

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An Israeli soldier at a guard post in the West Bank, in December. Avishag Shaar-Yashuv for The New York Times

By Natan Odenheimer, [Ronen Bergman](#) and [Patrick Kingsley](#)

The reporters reviewed a recording of a recent speech given by Bezalel Smotrich, a far-right Israeli cabinet minister spearheading efforts to cement Israeli control over the occupied West Bank.

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An influential member of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s coalition told settlers in the Israeli-occupied West Bank that the government is engaged in a stealthy effort to irreversibly change the way the territory is governed, to cement Israel’s control over it without being accused of formally annexing it.

In a taped recording of the speech, the official, [Bezalel Smotrich](#), can be heard suggesting at a private event earlier this month that the goal was to prevent the West Bank from becoming part of a Palestinian state.

“I’m telling you, it’s mega-dramatic,” Mr. Smotrich told the settlers. “Such changes change a system’s DNA.”

While Mr. Smotrich's opposition to ceding control over the West Bank is no secret, the Israeli government's official position is that the West Bank's status remains open to negotiations between Israeli and Palestinian leaders. Israel's Supreme Court has ruled that Israel's rule over the territory amounts to a temporary military occupation overseen by army generals, not a permanent civilian annexation administered by Israeli civil servants.

Mr. Smotrich's June 9 speech at a West Bank gathering may make that posture harder to maintain. In it, he outlined [a carefully orchestrated program](#) to take authority over the West Bank out of the hands of the Israeli military and turn it over to civilians working for Mr. Smotrich in the defense ministry. Parts of the plan have already been [incrementally introduced](#) over the past 18 months, and some authorities have already been transferred to civilians.



Israel's finance minister, Bezael Smotrich, addressing the relatives of hostages during a rally in Jerusalem this month. Menahem Kahana/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

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“We created a separate civilian system,” Mr. Smotrich said. To deflect international scrutiny, the government has allowed the defense ministry to remain involved in the process, he said, so that it seems that the military is still at the heart of West Bank governance.

“It will be easier to swallow in the international and legal context,” Mr. Smotrich said. “So that they won’t say that we are doing annexation here.”

Reporters for The New York Times listened to a recording of the roughly half-hour speech that was provided by one of the attendees, a researcher from Peace Now, an anti-occupation campaign group. A spokesman for Mr. Smotrich, Eytan Fold, confirmed he gave the speech and said the event was not a secret.

Mr. Smotrich, a far-right lawmaker, said Mr. Netanyahu was aware of the details of the plan, much of which was foreshadowed in a coalition agreement between their parties that allows the prime minister to remain in power. Mr. Netanyahu is “with us full on,” Mr. Smotrich said in the speech.

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If the government collapses, a future coalition could reverse the changes, but government moves in the West Bank have, in the past, usually remained in place through successive administrations.



New buildings at the Israeli settlement of Eli in the West Bank in December. Avishag Shaar-Yashuv for The New York Times

For many Palestinians, the speech itself is likely to be greeted with less surprise than the fact that Mr. Smotrich said the words aloud.

“It’s interesting to hear Smotrich in his own voice confirm much of what we suspected about his agenda,” said Ibrahim Dalalsha, director of the Horizon Center, a political analysis group in Ramallah, West Bank.

Still, Mr. Dalalsha said, the approach is not new.

Palestinians have said for years that Israeli leaders are trying to annex the West Bank in all but name, building settlements in strategic locations in a bid to prevent contiguous

Palestinian control across the territory. “It’s been going on since 1967,” said Mr. Dalalsha.

“Since way before Smotrich came to the scene,” he added.

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June 24, 2024, 3:42 a.m. ET 6 hours ago



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- An Israeli panel issues a warning to Netanyahu in a corruption case, and other news.
- Netanyahu says the war's intensive phase is nearing an end, but fighting will continue.

Israel seized control of the territory from Jordan in 1967 during a war with three Arab states.

Since occupying it, Israel has settled more than 500,000 Israeli civilians, who are subject to Israeli civil law, alongside the territory's roughly three million Palestinians, who are subject to Israeli military law. Roughly 40 percent of the territory is administered by the Palestinian Authority, a semiautonomous Palestinian-run body that relies on Israel's cooperation for much of its funding.

For decades, Israel's Supreme Court has described Israel's rule over the territory as a military occupation, overseen by a senior general, that complies with the international laws that apply to occupied territories. The current ruling coalition disputes the term "occupation," but it also publicly denies the West Bank has been permanently annexed and placed under the sovereign control of Israel's civilian authorities.

"The final status of these territories will be determined by the parties in direct negotiations," the prime minister's office said in a statement in response to Mr. Smotrich's speech. "This policy has not changed," the statement added.

Mr. Smotrich's speech suggested otherwise.



Israeli settlers peering through a car's tinted windows to see if Palestinians were inside it as the vehicle traveled near the village of Wadi as Seeq in the West Bank in December. Sergey Ponomarev for The New York Times

In particular, he pointed to one change under which military officers no longer oversee most of the process by which Israeli settlements are expanded, land is expropriated and roads are built in the West Bank. Those roles are now overseen by “a civilian working under the defense ministry” who does not work for military commanders, he said, but in [a new directorate that Mr. Smotrich supervises](#).

Even as international pressure grows to declare a Palestinian state that would encompass the West Bank and Gaza, Mr. Smotrich's comments suggest that Israel is quietly working to firm up its control over the West Bank and make it harder to disentangle from Israeli control. Diplomats have been trying to reach a “grand deal” for the Middle East that would both end the Israeli war with Hamas in the Gaza Strip and improve Israel's ties with other nations in the region. Saudi Arabia, for one, says it will recognize Israel — but only if Israel in turn permits Palestinian statehood.

Mr. Smotrich's speech suggests just how distant that prospect may be as he moves to merge governance of the occupied West Bank with governance of the state of Israel.

Mr. Smotrich's speech "fundamentally undermines the longstanding argument of the state of Israel that the settlements are legal because they are temporary," said Talia Sasson, a former senior official in Israel's justice ministry who led [an influential government inquiry](#) in 2005 into the government's support for illegal settlements.

The speech made clear just how powerful Israel's once-marginal settler movement has become.

Mr. Smotrich is a longtime settler activist who once worked outside the Israeli establishment to build settlement encampments that are considered illegal even under Israeli law. As a religious hard-liner, he believes the West Bank — which Israelis refer to by its biblical names, Judea and Samaria — was given to Jews by God.

As a lawmaker over the past decade, Mr. Smotrich attracted attention for regularly making extremist comments, including his call to [destroy a Palestinian town](#); his [support](#) for segregation between Arabs and Jews in maternity wards; and his [backing](#) for Jewish landowners who will not sell property to Arabs.

Since late 2022, Mr. Smotrich has gained extraordinary influence over government policy. That is when his party joined Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's coalition, helping it secure a small majority in Parliament.



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An aerial view of the fence along the 1948 line separating Palestinian village Hable, left, and Israeli Matan, West Bank, in December. Sergey Ponomarev for The New York Times

Mr. Smotrich used that leverage to persuade Mr. Netanyahu to assign him both the position in the defense ministry as well as the finance ministry, a role that Mr. Smotrich has used to block funds for the Palestinian Authority.

“My goal — and I think of everyone here — is to first and foremost prevent the establishment of a terror state in the very heart of the land of Israel,” Mr. Smotrich said in the recorded speech.

Mr. Smotrich said his main achievement has been to place many of the military’s duties in the West Bank under civilian control. While the army has often turned a blind eye to settlement expansion and even guards unauthorized settlements from Palestinian attack, soldiers have also sometimes destroyed settler encampments built without government permission and barred Israeli activists from entering the West Bank.

To counteract that influence, Mr. Smotrich said, the government has:

- Given civilians greater control over settlement construction plans as well as oversight over the lawyers who decide legal issues in the settlements.
- Stripped the army's top commander in the West Bank of the ability to block settlement construction plans.
- Secured nearly \$270 million from Israel's defense budget to guard settlements in 2024-2025.
- Moved closer to establishing a new security squad that could more speedily demolish Palestinian buildings in the West Bank that have been built without Israeli permission.

To some extent, Mr. Smotrich's comments appeared to be an attempt to defuse criticism from his own base about his record in office. Settler activists say that the military still too often stops them from building [new settlement outposts](#), and that Mr. Smotrich has not done enough to intervene.

"Fifteen years ago, I was one of those running on the hills, erecting tents," Mr. Smotrich told the settlers in his speech. Now, he said that his behind-the-scenes work will have far more impact than the construction of any single settlement encampment.

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