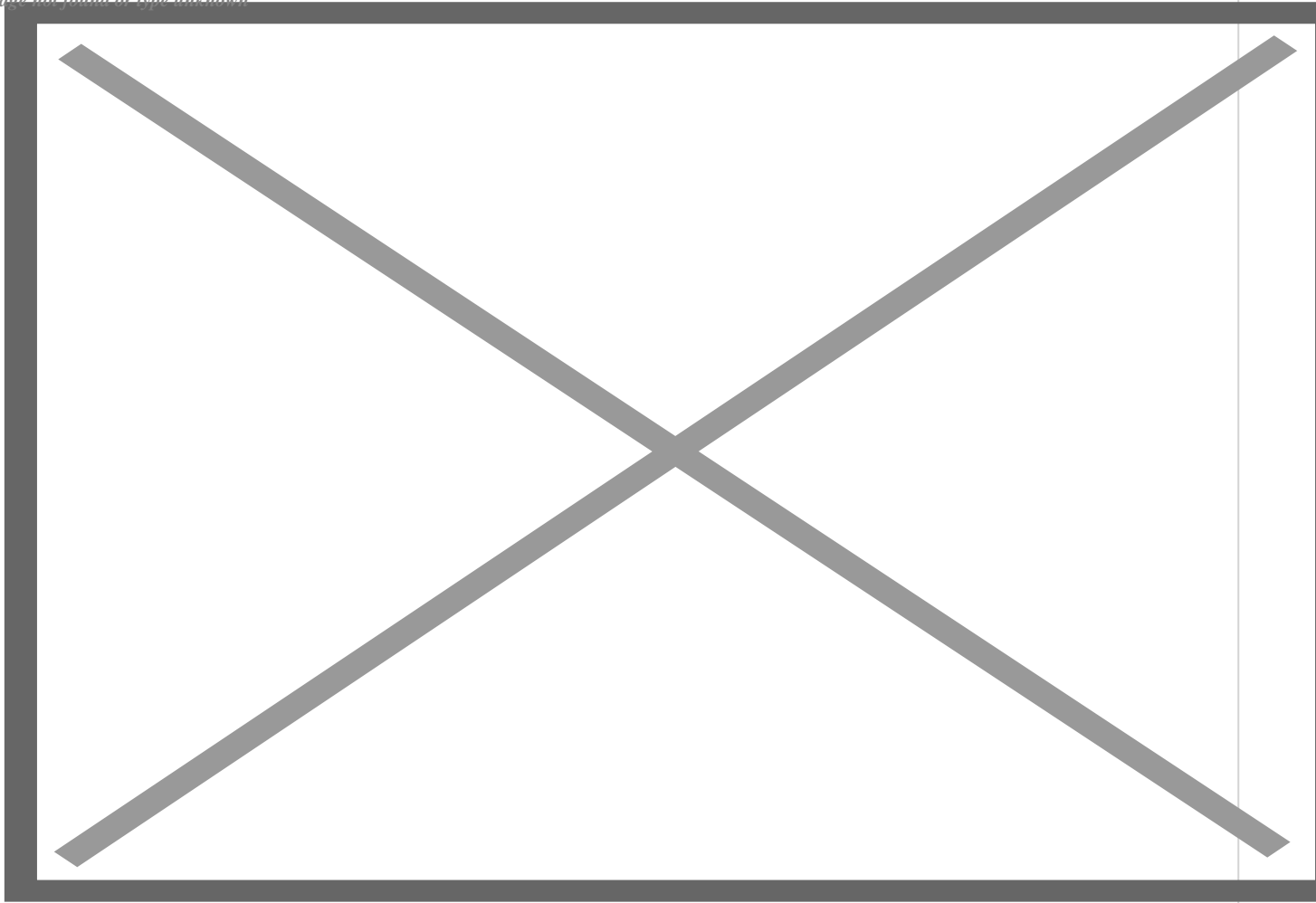


Israel to ramp up settlement expansion in occupied West Bank

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Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich [File: Ronen Zvulun/Pool]

Tel Aviv, June 19 (RHC)-- Israel's hardline coalition government has approved plans for thousands of new housing units in the occupied West Bank and given the far-right finance minister sweeping powers to expedite the construction of illegal settlements, bypassing measures that have been in place for 27 years.

On Sunday, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu ratified the move in the cabinet, allowing pro-settler Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich to bypass the six-stage process for building settlements, which are considered illegal under international law, said Al Jazeera's Imran Khan in West Jerusalem.

The deal between Netanyahu and Smotrich was on the cards for a while, Khan said, adding that it enables the finance minister to "effectively take over the entire illegal settlement-building process." Smotrich said: "We will continue to develop the settlement project and strengthen Israeli control of the territory."

The plans for the approval of 4,560 housing units in various areas of the West Bank were included on the agenda of Israel's Supreme Planning Council that meets next week. "This is incredibly alarming for the Palestinians," Khan said. Various factions expressed deep concerns that the entire West Bank may soon come under Israeli control.

To approve settlement activity is a "dangerous escalation to complete the annexation of the West Bank," the Palestinian foreign ministry said. Hamas, which has ruled Gaza since 2007, said this would only escalate tensions in the region, while Fatah warned that "the settlers will be removed from the West Bank as they were removed from the Gaza Strip".

Israel's hardline government – which includes ultra-Orthodox parties and a far-right ultranationalist religious faction – had put settlement expansion in the occupied West Bank at the top of its priorities.

Netanyahu's Likud Party pledged to "advance and develop settlement in all parts of the land of Israel – in the Galilee, Negev, Golan Heights, and Judea and Samaria" – the Biblical names for the occupied West Bank. The new push puts Israel on a collision course with its closest allies, including the United States, which opposes settlement construction in occupied territories.

Earlier, illegal settlements within the occupied West Bank came under Israeli military control. There were six phases in the construction process that were overseen by the Coordination of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT), the Israeli military's civil body that administers the West Bank. Objections could be made at any of the stages, by the international community or even by Israelis.

"The Americans made some objections, which stopped settlements from expanding. All of that has now just been taken away," said Khan, adding that "this is going to be very concerning for the international community."

Given that a lot of Smotrich's support is from people who live in the settlements, "he's unlikely to say no to any kind of expansion", said Khan. Since taking office in January, Netanyahu's coalition has approved 7,000 new housing units, many in the occupied West Bank. The government also amended a law to clear the way for settlers to return to four settlements that had previously been evacuated.

Nearly 750,000 Israelis live in 250 illegal settlements in the occupied West Bank, built on land captured by Israel in the 1967 Six-Day War.

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