

# *Israeli minister reiterates calls for Palestinians to leave Gaza*

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Tel Aviv, January 2 (RHC)-- Israel's Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich has called for Palestinian residents of Gaza to leave the besieged enclave, making way for the Israelis who could "make the desert bloom." Smotrich, who has been excluded from Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's war cabinet and discussions of day-after arrangements in Gaza, made the comments while speaking to Israeli Army Radio on Sunday.

"What needs to be done in the Gaza Strip is to encourage emigration," he said. "If there are 100,000 or 200,000 Arabs in Gaza and not two million Arabs, the entire discussion on the day after will be totally different," he said.

He added that if the 2.3 million population were no longer there “growing up on the aspiration to destroy the state of Israel”, Gaza would be seen differently in Israel. “Most of Israeli society will say: ‘Why not? It’s a nice place, let’s make the desert bloom, it doesn’t come at anyone’s expense.’”

Sara Khairat, reporting for Al Jazeera from Tel Aviv, said Smotrich’s comments “tie into a narrative that many are starting to believe that Israel wants to re-occupy Gaza.”

“Pushing the idea that they want to push the Palestinians out”, Khairat said, would be reminiscent of scenes from the “Nakba” (catastrophe), the ethnic cleansing of Palestine in the wake of the 1948 war that accompanied the founding of the state of Israel.

Most Palestinians displaced after the Nakba ended up in neighbouring Arab states, and Arab leaders have said any latter-day move to displace Palestinians would be unacceptable. In a speech on Sunday, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas rejected any move to force Palestinians to leave their homes. “We will not allow displacement, whether from the Gaza Strip or the West Bank,” he said.

Smotrich, whose far-right Religious Zionist Party draws support from Israel’s settler community, has made similar comments in the past, setting himself at odds with Israel’s most important ally, the United States. But his views conflict with the official government position that Palestinians in Gaza will be able to return to their homes after the war.

Smotrich’s party, which helped Netanyahu secure the majority he needed to become prime minister for the sixth time almost exactly a year ago, has seen its approval ratings slump since the start of the conflict. Opinion polls also indicate that most Israelis do not support the return of Israeli settlements to Gaza after they were moved out in 2005 when the army withdrew.

Israel withdrew its military and settlers from Gaza in 2005 after a 38-year occupation, and Netanyahu has said it does not intend to maintain a permanent presence again, but would maintain security control for an indefinite period.

However, there has been little clarity about Israel’s longer-term intentions, and countries including the U.S. have said that Gaza should be governed by Palestinians.

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