

Israel's Netanyahu agrees to legalize West Bank settler outposts

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Netanyahu and Ben-Gvir

Israeli Prime Minister-elect Benjamin Netanyahu (left) and right-wing Knesset member Itamar Ben-Gvir (right) during the swearing-in ceremony for the new Israeli parliament the 25th Knesset in Jerusalem, November 15, 2022. [Abir Sultan/Reuters]

Ramallah, November 17 (RHC)-- Benjamin Netanyahu, currently tasked with forming a new Israeli government after his coalition won elections earlier this month, has pledged to legalise dozens of illegal settler outposts in the occupied West Bank, after a meeting with far-right, controversial politician Itamar Ben-Gvir.

The two met on Wednesday, during which they agreed to retroactively legalise the outposts within 60 days of the government being sworn in, according to Israeli media. Netanyahu's right-wing Likud party said in a statement after a meeting with Ben-Gvir's Jewish Power party that the two politicians made "significant advancements".

However, even if a deal has been made, there is no guarantee it would pass the required number of votes in Israel's parliament (Knesset) to be implemented. Among the outposts to be legalised under the plan is Homesh, a controversial settlement that was evacuated in 2005, located between the Palestinian cities of Nablus and Jenin. It lies on Route 60 – the main north-south highway in the occupied West Bank, which is used by Palestinians and Jewish settlers.

All Israeli settlements, including outposts, are illegal under international law. Israel however considers only outposts as illegal under its own laws, claiming that they were built by individual settlers or settler groups, and not by the government.

Dozens of reports by monitoring and rights groups have shown that the Israeli government provides infrastructure, support and funding for settlers to build outposts. In addition, the Israeli government has over the past few years retroactively legalised many outposts and has passed legislation that makes it easier to do so.

Netanyahu, who was unseated after 12 years in power in 2021, was formally tasked on Sunday by Israeli President Isaac Herzog with forming a government. His Likud party and ultra-nationalist allies including Ben-Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich of the Religious Zionism alliance received a clear majority in elections that took place on November 1 for the 120-seat Knesset.

Palestinians in Nablus say the plans are highly worrying, particularly given the already tense reality on the ground since last year, with an increase in settler attacks. "The resettlement of Homesh, in particular, will mean destruction for Palestinians on the Nablus-Jenin road," local journalist Shadi Jararah told Al Jazeera.

"Currently, there are near-daily settler attacks against Palestinians on the main road 60, and also on homes in Burqa," continued Jararah, referring to the Palestinian village next to Homesh. "The presence of settlers in Homesh, and on the main road to Jenin, will lead to higher tensions."

Jararah noted that due to the presence of settlements in the area, and increasing armed attacks on soldiers and settlers in the area since last year, the Israeli army has placed three checkpoints on the main road, along a distance of about 11 kilometres (6.8 miles), between the nearby settlement of Shavei Shomron, and the outpost of Homesh.

Since last year, the northern West Bank cities of Nablus and Jenin have emerged as hubs of armed resistance to decades-long Israeli occupation, with an evident increase in attacks on Israeli military bases, checkpoints, soldiers, and settlers. The attacks have also spread to Salfit, Hebron and Jerusalem over the past several weeks.

On Tuesday, an 18-year-old Palestinian man carried out a car-ramming and stabbing attack near the illegal settlement of Ariel in Salfit in the northern occupied West Bank, killing three Israelis, before he was shot dead by Israeli forces.

The outpost of Homesh was originally built in 1978 as an Israeli military base on private Palestinian land before it was handed over to settlers in 1980. It was then evacuated in 2005 as part of then-Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's "disengagement plan."

Legalising Homesh would mean an amendment in the 2005 Disengagement Law, to allow Jews to resettle the outpost. Despite the evacuation of the outpost, the Israeli army maintains a military base at the location, and settlers are allowed to access it, even while Palestinian landowners are forbidden from doing so.

In 2007, settlers established a religious school, or "yeshiva", at the outpost. The school continues to operate, and settlers are allowed to camp, and hold events and protests at the outpost, but are not allowed to have permanent homes.

Israeli settlements are fortified Jewish-only housing complexes built on Palestinian land in violation of international law. More than 700,000 Israeli settlers live in at least 250 illegal settlements in the occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem.

In their meeting on Wednesday, Netanyahu and Ben-Gvir also agreed to establish a religious school at the Evyatar outpost built on lands from the Palestinian village of Beita. Settlers left Evyatar last year.

In a separate meeting on Tuesday with Smotrich, and on the heels of the Ariel attack, Netanyahu suggested that the new government "take advantage of the opportunity," to recognise unauthorised outposts, a Likud source told Israeli daily Haaretz.

Israeli politicians have in the past regularly and publicly announced new illegal settlement activity in response to attacks by Palestinians. That is likely to expand in a government including figures such as Ben-Gvir and Smotrich.

Ben-Gvir is notorious for his harassment of families in the Palestinian neighbourhood of Sheikh Jarrah and for leading raids into the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound in occupied East Jerusalem. Last week, Israeli President Herzog's comments were overheard when he thought his microphone was off saying "the whole world is worried" about Ben-Gvir's positions.

The newly elected legislator has previously been convicted of incitement to racism, destroying property, and supporting a "terror" organisation – Meir Kahane's outlawed Kach group. Ghassan Daghlis, the head of monitoring of settlement activity in the northern occupied West Bank for the Palestinian Authority (PA), said he believes conditions will worsen for Palestinians across the West Bank under the new government.

"We expect this new government will make big decisions by legalising outposts, building settlements, annexing more land, creating contiguity between settlements. They also want to build more and expand settler roads to bypass Palestinian villages," Daghlis, who is from Burqa, told Al Jazeera.

In Burqa and the area of Homesh, he continued "we already live in a military zone, but this will lead to tension 24 hours a day." "The settlers already have power over the soldiers, they carry out attacks during the day, they hold rallies and shut down main roads in the hundreds," said Daghlis. "They did this before the election results, so you can imagine what it will be like now."

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