



## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

## The Settlements of Netanyahu: A Policy of Displacement and Division in Occupied Palestinian Territories

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## ARTICLE INFO

*Article history:*

Received 09-06-2025

Accepted 18-06-2025

Published 24-07-2025

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## ABSTRACT

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is one of the world's longest-running conflicts that has been continuing for several years. Every Israeli administration since 1967 has poured copious amounts of money into building and expanding settlements in the Occupied Territories, both in terms of the area they occupy and the population they house. Over 380,000 Israeli citizens currently live in West Bank settlements, including those in East Jerusalem, as a result of this policy. Benjamin Netanyahu has heavily influenced Israeli policy on the occupied Palestinian land. He has made several statements regarding the need for increased settlements in the occupied territories. Upon taking office as Prime Minister in 2022, Netanyahu declared that his government's main strategy would be to advance and foster settlement in all parts of Israel. He used various mechanisms to increase the settlements, which included building military outposts and providing high-level amenities to the Israeli people living in the settlements, and he was very keen to create an apartheid system there. His decision on settlements has caused tension with Palestinian leaders and sparked strong international criticism. Many nations and organisations see the spread of settlements as a threat to peace and a breach of international law. A forceful and assertive stance has frequently defined Benjamin Netanyahu's approach to Israeli settlements. Netanyahu's position reflects larger ideological and strategic considerations inside Israeli politics.

**Keywords:** Israel; Palestine; Settlement; Benjamin Netanyahu; Occupied territories

## INTRODUCTION

The issue of Israeli settlements has long been a contentious topic in Middle Eastern politics and international relations. Under Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, these policies have not only expanded but also drawn increased global attention. Settlement policy is a central element of Israel's strategic and ideological stance, influencing its domestic politics and international standing. Netanyahu's leadership has been characterised by a clear support for settlement growth, which he frames as both a historic right and a security necessity. This approach has garnered significant support within Israel, particularly among right-wing and religious groups, but it has also sparked widespread criticism and heightened tensions in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Israeli settlements refer to communities established in territories captured during the 1967 Six-Day War, including the West Bank and East Jerusalem. These areas are central

to the Israeli-Palestinian dispute, with Palestinians viewing them as part of their future state. While most of the international community considers the settlements illegal under international law, Israel disputes this interpretation, citing historical and security considerations. Netanyahu's policies have consistently emphasized Israel's right to build and expand in these areas, a position that aligns with the views of his political base and much of his Likud Party.

Since taking office, Netanyahu has overseen significant increases in settlement construction. Thousands of new housing units have been constructed in contested areas, and policies have been implemented to legalize previously unauthorized settlements. Netanyahu argues that these developments are vital for Israel's security and demographic stability. He also views them as a natural extension of Israel's connection to its ancestral homeland. This stance has garnered him widespread support among settlers



and nationalist groups, who view their presence in these territories as fulfilling a historical and religious mandate. However, this policy has not come without consequences. Palestinians regard settlement expansion as a direct threat to their aspirations for statehood, arguing that it fragments the land needed for a viable Palestinian state. The settlements have also been a major point of contention in peace negotiations, with many international leaders asserting that their continued growth undermines the feasibility of a two-state solution. Global organizations, including the United Nations and the European Union, have repeatedly called for a halt to settlement construction, viewing it as an obstacle to peace. In the context of U.S.-Israel relations, settlement policy has been a source of both alignment and disagreement. Different American administrations have adopted varying approaches, ranging from tacit approval to vocal opposition. Netanyahu's ability to navigate these dynamics reflects his broader strategy of balancing Israel's domestic priorities with the realities of international diplomacy. Netanyahu's settlement policies are emblematic of the broader challenges facing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As Netanyahu continues to rule Israel, the argument over his settlement program remains a microcosm of the region's larger challenges—balancing ideology, security, and the pursuit of peace.

### **JEWISH SETTLEMENT IN PALESTINE: A HISTORICAL ANALYSIS<sup>1</sup>**

Jewish settlements in historic Palestine, constructed initially by Jewish inhabitants, the Zionist movement before 1948, and later by the state of Israel, represent a significant and contentious aspect of Middle Eastern history. These settlements range from single-person outposts to expansive cities. The term "Jews" originates from the Biblical Hebrew word *Yehudi*, signifying "people of the Tribe of Judah" or "people of the Kingdom of Judah." Historically, the Jewish people have regarded themselves as the rightful owners of the land of Palestine, a belief deeply rooted in religious traditions, claiming it as the land promised to Abraham by God. This belief sustained their connection to the Holy Land through centuries, expressed in prayers, poetry, and cultural practices. However, the struggle between Arabs and Jews over Palestine transcends religious narratives and involves complex socio-political dynamics. The term "Palestine" is believed to have derived from "Philistine," an ancient people who inhabited the southwestern region of the area now recognized as Palestine. The land has been the site of numerous invasions and migrations, predating the birth of Christ. Early settlers included the Amorites, Aramites, and Canaanites, who migrated from the Arabian Peninsula around 3000 BCE. These groups established an advanced society and culture, earning the biblical name Canaan. According to the Bible, God appeared to Abraham and promised the land of Canaan to his descendants. Around

1800 BCE, Abraham and his tribesmen migrated from Mesopotamia (modern-day Iraq) to settle in Jerusalem. This migration, however, was fraught with tension, as the indigenous Canaanites viewed Abraham and his followers with suspicion, referring to them as "Ibrim." These early tensions foreshadowed centuries of conflict over land and identity in Palestine. Following Abraham's death, his followers relocated to Egypt due to unrest in Jerusalem. Around 1200 BCE, under the leadership of Moses, the Hebrews escaped Egypt and eventually entered Canaan, led by Joshua. The conquest of Canaan, characterized by violent clashes with its native inhabitants, is often described as the first instance of Jewish control over Palestine. King Saul established the first Hebrew state in 1020 BCE, succeeded by Kings David and Solomon. However, the unity of this kingdom was short-lived, collapsing after Solomon's death in 931 BCE due to internal tribal disputes. This collapse was interpreted by biblical texts as divine punishment for the Hebrews' failures. The Assyrians destroyed the northern Kingdom of Israel in 721 BCE, while the Babylonians conquered the southern Kingdom of Judah in 587 BCE, leading to the destruction of Solomon's Temple and the exile of Jews to Babylon. Subsequent invasions by Persians, Greeks, and Romans further altered the demographic and cultural landscape of Palestine. These invasions dispersed the Jewish population, with many settling in Babylon, Persia, and other regions. By 135 CE, after the Roman Emperor Hadrian suppressed Jewish revolts, most Jews had been exiled, marking the beginning of the Jewish Diaspora.<sup>2</sup>

### ***Islamic Conquest and the Crusades***

The Muslim Arabs conquered Palestine in the 7th century during a series of expansions that spread Islam across the Arabian Peninsula and beyond. Jerusalem, captured in 638 CE, became Islam's third holiest site after Mecca and Medina. The construction of the Al-Aqsa Mosque and the granting of "protected" status to Jews under Islamic rule allowed them to live, own property, and practice their religion, albeit with restrictions. Heavy taxes and limitations, however, impacted the social and economic status of non-Muslims. The First Crusade in 1099 marked a violent episode in Palestinian history. Crusaders established the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem, massacring non-Christian residents, including Jews who barricaded themselves in synagogues. Saladin's victory at the Battle of Hattin in 1187 allowed Jews to resettle in Jerusalem, but subsequent Crusader and Mamluk dominance kept the region in a state of flux. By the end of the Middle Ages, Palestine was impoverished, with its Jewish population dwindling.<sup>3</sup>

### ***Ottoman Era and Early Zionism***

The Ottoman Turks captured Palestine in 1516, ushering in four centuries of rule. Initially, orderly governance under



leaders like Suleiman the Magnificent encouraged Jewish immigration. By the 16th century, Safed had emerged as a vibrant Jewish community, renowned for its thriving textile industry and intellectual pursuits. However, by the 18th century, Ottoman mismanagement led to widespread neglect, with taxation and land misappropriation exacerbating poverty. The late 19th century witnessed the birth of political Zionism, fuelled by rising anti-Semitism in Europe and the desire for a Jewish homeland. Leaders like Moses Hess and Leo Pinsker laid the ideological foundations for Jewish colonization in Palestine. The First Aliyah (1882-1903) saw approximately 25,000 Jews migrate to Palestine despite limited political organisation and resources. Early settlements relied heavily on financial support from wealthy benefactors, such as Baron Edmond de Rothschild. Theodor Herzl, often regarded as the father of modern Zionism, unified these fragmented efforts into a cohesive movement. His 1896 work *The Jewish State* and the establishment of the World Zionist Organization in 1897 formalised the goal of establishing a Jewish homeland in Palestine.<sup>4</sup>

### ***British Mandate and the Balfour Declaration***

World War I reshaped the geopolitics of the Middle East. The fall of the Ottoman Empire and the subsequent British Mandate over Palestine (1917-1948) marked a pivotal era. The 1917 Balfour Declaration signalled British support for a "national home for the Jewish people" in Palestine. This policy, however, conflicted with earlier promises to Arab leaders, such as those made in the Hussein-McMahon correspondence. Under the Mandate, Jewish immigration increased significantly, leading to demographic shifts and heightened tensions with the Arab population. The Second Aliyah (1904-1914) brought approximately 35,000 Jews, many of whom were inspired by socialist ideals. They established kibbutzim, self-defence organizations, and the city of Tel Aviv, laying the groundwork for a modern Jewish state. Arab resistance grew, culminating in violent uprisings during the 1920s and 1930s. The British attempted to mediate through policies like the 1939 White Paper, which restricted Jewish immigration. However, the rise of Nazi Germany and the Holocaust intensified Jewish migration efforts. By 1947, the Jewish population in Palestine had reached 630,000, compared to 1.2 million Arabs.<sup>2</sup>

### ***The Partition Plan and the Creation of Israel***

In 1947, the United Nations proposed the partition of Palestine into separate Jewish and Arab states, with Jerusalem under international administration. While Jewish leaders accepted the plan, Arab leaders rejected it, viewing it as unjust. The British withdrawal in 1948 left a power vacuum, and on May 14, 1948, the Jewish Agency declared the establishment of the State of Israel. The subsequent Arab-Israeli War (1948-1949) resulted in significant territorial

gains for Israel, which now controlled 77% of Palestine. Approximately 700,000 Palestinians became refugees, a displacement that remains a central issue in the conflict. Armistice agreements in 1949 solidified Israel's borders, but tensions persisted as Palestinians sought recognition and restitution.<sup>5</sup>

The 1967 Arab-Israeli War marked a turning point, solidifying Israel's military dominance but sparking moral and geopolitical controversies. Abba Eban, an Israeli statesman, labeled it a "moral tragedy," as Israel's control over territories with significant Palestinian populations grew. Post-war, Israeli policies sought to establish authority in these areas through settlements and restrictions, with substantial impacts on Palestinian autonomy. Initially, the Israeli government, led by Levi Eshkol, viewed the occupied territories as bargaining tools for peace, opposing civilian settlements. Yet, pressures from settlers and ideological groups led to the establishment of settlements like Kfar Etzion in the West Bank. Settlements served dual purposes: creating security buffers and asserting Israeli claims to strategically significant lands. The annexation of East Jerusalem and surrounding areas further cemented Israeli control.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, settlement policies evolved under various governments. The Alon Plan, formulated in 1967, proposed incorporating the Jordan Valley and parts of the West Bank into Israel while minimizing the annexation of densely populated Palestinian areas. Despite its strategic goals, the plan fuelled settlement expansion, with over 30 settlements housing 4,500 Israelis established in the West Bank by 1977. The Likud Party, under Menachem Begin, later shifted focus to other regions, intensifying settlement activities. Theological motivations also drove settlement expansion. Groups like Gush Emunim saw the 1967 victory as a divine endorsement of a "Greater Israel." They established settlements in Palestinian-populated areas, often without government approval, forcing subsequent recognition. Financial and logistical support from Likud governments bolstered these efforts, with figures like Ariel Sharon devising plans to annex and settle key territories.

By the 1980s, the government had adopted ambitious settlement targets, such as the "Hundred Thousand Plan," envisioning rapid population growth in the West Bank. Although population goals fell short, settlement expansion intensified, straining relations with the U.S. and impacting peace efforts. The 1993 Oslo Accords marked a significant shift, dividing the West Bank into Three Areas, designated as A, B, and C, with varying degrees of Palestinian control. However, Israeli policies continued to favor settlement growth, undermining peace negotiations. The Rabin government pledged to limit settlement expansion, restricting new developments to "natural growth." Yet, ambiguity in defining this term allowed continued expansion, including new settlements disguised as extensions of existing ones. Israeli



legislation further entrenched settlements, creating a dual legal system favoring settlers over Palestinians. Local governance mirrored Israeli structures, extending jurisdiction over vast areas and restricting Palestinian access. Incentives, such as financial benefits and infrastructure development, encouraged Jewish migration to settlements, deepening disparities. The planning system reinforced these policies, systematically denying Palestinians building permits while facilitating settlement growth. Designating large swaths of land as state property or military zones limited Palestinian development. The Oslo Accords' division of the West Bank into fragmented zones restricted Palestinian autonomy, with Area C—comprising 60% of the territory—remaining under full Israeli control.<sup>6</sup>

### **BENJAMIN NETANYAHU'S SETTLEMENT POLICY**

Netanyahu is the longest-serving prime minister in Israel's history, having served a total of over 17 years. He has played a significant role in shaping Israeli policy regarding settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. Benjamin Netanyahu's first term as Israel's Prime Minister, from 1996 to 1999, marked a pivotal period in Israeli settlement policy in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. His approach combined ideological commitments to territorial control with political pragmatism, navigating both domestic pressures and international opposition. Netanyahu's policies during this time significantly shaped the trajectory of Israeli settlement expansion and its implications for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Netanyahu's settlement policy was deeply rooted in the ideology of the Likud party, which emphasized the historical and religious connection of the Jewish people to the West Bank, referred to biblically as Judea and Samaria. Likud opposed the 1993 Oslo Accords, which had established a framework for peace between Israel and the Palestinians and viewed the West Bank as an integral part of the Jewish homeland.

Elected in 1996, Netanyahu's campaign capitalized on public scepticism toward the Oslo process, which many Israelis believed compromised their security. Although Netanyahu pledged to honour existing agreements, his government's policies reflected a commitment to expanding settlements to solidify Israeli control over strategic areas and maintain leverage in future negotiations. Netanyahu's government oversaw a marked acceleration in settlement activity. Settlements were extended not only as residential areas but also as strategic footholds to ensure Israeli dominance over contested territories. The Netanyahu administration prioritized settlement projects in areas critical to Israel's security and territorial continuity. Settlements around Jerusalem, such as Ma'ale Adumim and Givat Ze'ev, received significant attention for creating a buffer between the city and Palestinian-majority areas. The settler population in the West Bank grew substantially during

Netanyahu's term. Economic incentives, including tax breaks, subsidized housing, and infrastructure development, encouraged Jewish families to relocate to these areas. By 1999, the settler population had risen by tens of thousands.

### ***Netanyahu's right-wing political perspective***

Benjamin Netanyahu, the head of Israel's Likud party, represents a right-wing nationalist philosophy that has had a significant impact on Israeli politics, including its attitude on the conflict between Israel and Palestine, national identity, and regional security. His political career has been defined by policies that are consistent with the ideological aspirations of Israel's far right. Although Netanyahu openly supported a two-state solution at a 2009 address at Bar-Ilan University, his deeds have continuously undercut it. His government increased settlements, opposed Palestinian independence along the 1967 boundaries, and placed stringent preconditions on discussions. Netanyahu's governments strongly encouraged settlement expansion in the West Bank, including places deemed illegal under international laws. He pledged, and in some cases went towards, annexing areas of the West Bank, particularly during his coalition with conservative and religious-nationalist groups. Netanyahu endorsed the 2018 Jewish nation-state Law, which proclaimed Israel to be the sole nation-state of the Jewish people. Critics believe that this entrenched prejudice against Arab people while elevating Jewish primacy in civic identity.<sup>7</sup>

### ***The Har Homa Controversy***

One of the most contentious settlement initiatives during Netanyahu's tenure was the construction of Har Homa, a new settlement in East Jerusalem. Announced in 1997, Har Homa was designed to house thousands of Jewish residents and strategically connect Jewish neighbourhoods in Jerusalem to surrounding settlements. The project sparked intense opposition from Palestinians, who viewed it as a violation of the Oslo Accords and a deliberate effort to alter the demographic balance of East Jerusalem. The international community, including the United States, criticised the plan, arguing that it undermined prospects for peace. Despite this, Netanyahu defended the project, framing it as essential for the security and unity of Jerusalem.<sup>8</sup>

### ***Hebron Agreement and Settlement Policy***

Although Netanyahu's government reluctantly signed the 1997 Hebron Protocol, which transferred 80% of Hebron to Palestinian control, it simultaneously worked to strengthen the Jewish presence in the city. Infrastructure investments and heightened security measures for settlers in Hebron underscored Netanyahu's dual strategy of fulfilling international obligations while maintaining a strong Israeli presence in contested areas.<sup>8</sup>



### *The Wye River Memorandum*

In 1998, Netanyahu signed the Wye River Memorandum, an agreement brokered by the United States that required Israel to withdraw from certain parts of the West Bank. However, Netanyahu's government delayed implementing these provisions, citing Palestinian non-compliance with security commitments.

During this period, settlement activity continued unabated. Netanyahu argued that maintaining and expanding settlements was crucial for Israel's security and negotiating position. This approach reflected his belief that settlements were not merely residential areas but a strategic tool for asserting Israeli sovereignty over disputed territories.<sup>9</sup> The Allon Plus Plan, announced in 1997<sup>10</sup> by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, aimed to secure Israeli control over significant parts of the West Bank. It proposed annexing 60% of the territory, including the Jordan Valley and settlement blocs around Jerusalem, while dividing Palestinian areas into four disconnected enclaves. Netanyahu emphasized security and settlement expansion, limiting Palestinian self-rule. The plan significantly reduced the land available for a contiguous Palestinian state, undermining hopes for a viable two-state solution.<sup>10</sup>

From 2009 to 2016, the Netanyahu period coincided with Barack Obama's presidency, whose administration took a critical stance on settlement expansion. This created a challenging diplomatic environment for Netanyahu. In response to U.S. pressure, Netanyahu announced a 10-month partial freeze on settlements in November 2009. The freeze applied to new construction in the West Bank but excluded East Jerusalem and ongoing projects. Netanyahu framed the move as a goodwill gesture to encourage peace talks with the Palestinians, though it was met with scepticism from both sides. Palestinians criticized the freeze for excluding key areas, while many in Netanyahu's coalition opposed any halt to settlement activity. After the freeze ended in 2010, Netanyahu resumed settlement construction. His government focused on reinforcing major settlement blocs near the Green Line, including Ma'ale Adumim, Ariel, and Gush Etzion. These areas were seen as strategically important and likely to remain under Israeli control in any future peace agreement. Netanyahu's government approved significant construction projects in East Jerusalem, which Israel considers part of its undivided capital, but Palestinians claim as the capital of a future state. Projects in neighbourhoods like Har Homa, Gilo, and Ramat Shlomo drew sharp criticism from the international community, particularly the Obama administration. Tensions between Netanyahu and Obama reached a climax in December 2016 when the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 2334, which declared Israeli settlements a violation of international law. The resolution passed after the U.S. abstained rather than vetoed it. Netanyahu condemned the resolution and accused the Obama administration of orchestrating it,

deepening the rift between the two leaders. Donald Trump's presidency marked a significant shift in U.S. policy toward Israel and settlements. Unlike Obama, Trump adopted a more supportive stance, which emboldened Netanyahu to further expand settlement activities. During Trump's tenure, Netanyahu's government approved thousands of new housing units in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. The pace of settlement construction accelerated, with plans advancing for projects in both major blocs and isolated areas. Notably, Netanyahu's government pushed forward plans for construction in the contentious E1 area near Ma'ale Adumim, a move widely criticized for potentially undermining the territorial contiguity of a future Palestinian state. In January 2020, the Trump administration unveiled its Middle East peace plan, dubbed the "Deal of the Century." The plan proposed allowing Israel to annex up to 30% of the West Bank, including the Jordan Valley and major settlement blocs<sup>11,12</sup>. Netanyahu quickly announced his intention to move forward with annexation. However, the plan was put on hold as part of normalization agreements with the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and other Arab states. While annexation did not materialize, the episode underscored Netanyahu's commitment to consolidating Israeli control over key parts of the West Bank. In a major departure from previous U.S. policy, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced in 2019 that the Trump administration no longer considered Israeli settlements to be inconsistent with international law<sup>13</sup>. This statement provided Netanyahu with significant political cover to continue expanding settlements.<sup>14</sup>

Netanyahu faced increasing domestic political challenges during the period from 2019 to 2021, including multiple elections and the formation of unstable coalition governments. Settlement policy became a key issue in his efforts to maintain support from right-wing and settler constituencies. Netanyahu's government took steps to retroactively legalize unauthorized outposts, small settlements built without official approval. This move was seen as a way to appease settler leaders and expand the Israeli presence in the West Bank. Infrastructure projects were made to support settlements, including roads, water systems, and public services. These projects aimed to integrate settlements more closely with Israel proper and facilitate their long-term viability. Netanyahu's reliance on right-wing and religious parties in his coalitions further shaped his settlement policies. Parties like Yamina and the Jewish Home pushed for more aggressive settlement expansion and the application of Israeli sovereignty to parts of the West Bank. Between the years 2022 and 2024, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's administration increased settlement activity in the occupied Palestinian territories (OPT), using a variety of strategic measures to support the growth. After establishing his administration in December 2022, Netanyahu prioritised settlement development in the West Bank. The coalition



agreements openly expressed their goal to "advance and develop settlement in all parts of the land of Israel," including the West Bank. This promise includes intentions to legalise several outposts previously considered illegal under Israeli law and to annexe areas of the occupied territories, consistent with the goals of his ultranationalist friends.<sup>15</sup> The administration took steps to legalise previously unauthorised colonies and expand existing settlements. In June 2024, Israel made its largest land acquisition in almost three decades, transforming nearly 1,270 hectares in the Jordan Valley into state territory, perhaps for settlement purposes. This effort sought to consolidate and extend settlement blocs, therefore strengthening Israel's position in important West Bank locations.<sup>14</sup>

In 2005, Israel executed a unilateral withdrawal from Gaza, resulting in the dismantling of its settlements after 38 years of habitation by settlers in the region. In the wake of the Gaza war in October 2023, certain Israeli factions have suggested the expulsion of Palestinians or the establishment of conditions that would facilitate their exodus from the region, alongside a new initiative for the resettling of the Gaza Strip.<sup>16</sup>

Netanyahu is heavily reliant on proponents of the resettlement for electoral support, despite his repeated claims that it is not the government's strategy nor its intention to relocate Israeli Jews to Gaza. The Atlantic claims that Netanyahu "may try to do it anyway."<sup>17</sup>

## MECHANISMS

Benjamin Netanyahu has continuously used political, judicial, and administrative procedures to further Israel's West Bank settlement programs. His initiatives demonstrate a deliberate strategy to enhance Israel's power while navigating internal and international constraints. Netanyahu's technique has relied heavily on legal frameworks and bureaucratic processes to justify settlement development. Using Israel's planning and zoning standards, his government allowed new construction projects, frequently presenting them as required for supporting "natural growth" within existing settlements. This phrase has enabled Netanyahu to sell his policies as pragmatic and non-controversial, even when they result in major territorial expansion. In addition to legal measures, Netanyahu has used political coalitions to strengthen support for settlement plans. His coalition administrations frequently featured parties with strong ideological support for the settlement movement, such as those supporting religious Zionists. These collaborations guaranteed that settlement expansion remained a top issue on the national agenda. By merging with pro-settlement forces, Netanyahu gained the political capital needed to face internal resistance and international censure, notably from the European Union and the UN.<sup>15</sup>

Financial incentives have also been a major factor in Netanyahu's settlement program. Under his leadership,

the Israeli government allocated substantial funds for infrastructure development in the West Bank, including roads, utilities, and schools. These initiatives improved the quality of life for settlers and promoted further migration to these locations. Furthermore, Netanyahu's administration extended tax breaks and subsidies to settlers, establishing economic incentives that attracted both ideological settlers and those driven by practical factors, such as affordable housing. Another process is Netanyahu's expert use of language and framing. He has constantly depicted settlements as important to Israel's security and historical identity. Netanyahu has won widespread popular support for the settlement project by emphasising the strategic imperative of controlling the West Bank's highlands and evoking biblical links to the region. This narrative has resonated with many Israelis, reinforcing the conviction that settlement development is both a security necessity and a moral imperative. Internationally, Netanyahu has taken a dual policy of deflection and engagement. On the one hand, he has attempted to deflect criticism by emphasising Israel's commitment to peace and desire to speak with Palestinians. On the other side, his administration has methodically undercut the feasibility of a two-state solution by increasing settlements in regions essential to the geographical continuity of a future Palestinian state. This strategy has been most visible in the expansion of settlements surrounding the city of Jerusalem, such as those in the E1 region, which effectively segregate Palestinian neighbourhoods and hinder the idea of East Jerusalem serving as the capital of a Palestinian state. Netanyahu has used incrementalism to execute settlement programs. Rather than seeking large-scale annexation, which may spark a massive international response, his administration has prioritised incremental, smaller-scale acts that, when combined, have a major impact. This involves retrospectively approving outposts, gradually expanding existing communities, and designating new territory as "state land" to facilitate future development. These processes frequently go unnoticed, making it difficult for detractors to question them adequately.

## CHALLENGES

Netanyahu faced many challenges in implementing settlement policies in the occupied Palestinian territories

- **International Opposition and Legal Challenges**

One of the most significant challenges to Netanyahu's settlement policies was the widespread international condemnation of Israeli settlements, which are considered illegal under international law. The UN consistently opposed settlement expansion, citing violations of the Fourth Geneva Convention. Resolutions like UN Security Council Resolution 2334 (2016) called for an immediate cessation of settlement activities, placing diplomatic pressure on Netanyahu's government. The EU was a persistent critic, warning that settlements undermined the viability of a two-state solution.



European countries also pushed for boycotts of products originating from settlements. While U.S. support fluctuated, Netanyahu faced significant pressure from the Obama administration to freeze settlement activity. Even under the Trump administration's favourable policies, Netanyahu encountered challenges when his plans for annexing parts of the West Bank risked alienating Arab allies.

#### ● Domestic Political Constraints

Netanyahu's coalition governments included parties with diverse views, often complicating his ability to implement settlement policies without sparking internal disputes. Right-wing and religious parties in his coalitions strongly supported aggressive settlement expansion, while centrist factions and some public figures advocated caution to avoid international backlash. While many Israelis supported settlement activity, a significant portion of the population viewed unchecked expansion as a threat to Israel's international standing and future peace prospects.

#### ● Palestinian Resistance

Settlement expansion was met with fierce resistance from Palestinians, who viewed it as a direct attack on their territorial aspirations and rights. Settlement activity often triggered protests, clashes, and cycles of violence between Palestinians and Israeli forces. These incidents heightened regional instability and drew international attention. Settlement policies contributed to the collapse of peace negotiations, leaving Netanyahu's government without credible dialogue with the Palestinian Authority. This further entrenched the conflict.

### IMPACT OF SETTLEMENT POLICY

One key consequence of Netanyahu's settlement policies was the systematic loss of Palestinian territory. As Israeli settlements grew, significant portions of the West Bank, including valuable agricultural land and water supplies, were taken for settlement development. This not only curtailed Palestinians' access to land for cultivation and development but also disrupted traditional livelihoods and uprooted people. Access to resources such as water grew more uneven, with Israeli settlements frequently obtaining preferential access while Palestinian communities experienced water scarcity and limitations. The growth of settlements, along with the building of Israeli highways and the separation barrier, has divided Palestinian lands into isolated enclaves. This territorial separation makes it more difficult for Palestinians to retain territorial continuity in the West Bank, which is essential for the sustainability of a future Palestinian state. Areas like the E1 corridor in Jerusalem, where Netanyahu's government has pushed settlement construction, are especially sensitive because they threaten to sever the link that connects the northern and southern areas of the West Bank.

Netanyahu's actions have contributed to Palestinian displacement via home destruction and forced evictions. Palestinian homes and constructions were frequently demol-

ished on the pretence of not having legal licenses, which are notoriously hard for Palestinians to obtain under Israeli governmental rule. Palestinian residents in East Jerusalem were evicted to make room for Jewish settlers, which fuelled tensions and triggered Palestinian relocation, resulting in a cycle of turbulence and insecurity, with many families having to live in poor conditions or rely on foreign charity. Netanyahu's settlement policy has damaged Palestinian faith in the peace process. The ongoing construction of settlements, which Palestinians and many of the international community see as illegal under international law, convinced many that Israel was not dedicated to a two-state solution. This impression instilled hatred, rage, and disappointment among Palestinians, resulting in rising tensions and occasional outbursts of violence.

### CONCLUSION

Benjamin Netanyahu's settlement program in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) has sparked controversy, reflecting a larger ideological and political goal. The growth of Israeli settlements under his leadership has sparked extensive criticism from the international world, which sees these acts as breaches of international law and a serious barrier to the two-state solution. Despite repeated censure from the United Nations and other global players, Netanyahu's administration has continued to prioritise settlement expansion, claiming security concerns and historical land rights. The program has substantially transformed the demographic and geographical environment of the West Bank, widening differences and escalating tensions between Israelis and Palestinians. It has also weakened faith in peace talks and increased Palestinians' humanitarian concerns, including limited access to land and resources. While Netanyahu supporters claim that these settlements boost Israel's security and sovereignty, detractors say they deepen occupation and perpetuate conflict cycles. Finally, the settlement strategy reflects the regional battle for land, identity, and self-determination. Addressing the settlement issue is a critical and urgent requirement for resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

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