



### While Eyes Are on Gaza, Israel is Moving Fast to Steal More Land in the West Bank

With much of the world fixated on Israel's horrific human rights abuses and war crimes in Gaza, there has been a notable increase in military operations, state-backed settler violence, unlawful land seizures, arbitrary arrests, and other violations in the occupied West Bank. Rights organizations have outlined how Israeli authorities are exploiting and intentionally using the focus on what is taking place in Gaza as an opportunity to commit egregious transgressions elsewhere, in the aim that they will fly under the radar. These groups have sought to document the undeniable phenomenon along with its blatantly systematic and calculated nature. In light of this, they have implored governments to prevent further violations from being committed by imposing sanctions, suspending arms transfers, and banning trade with illegal Israeli settlements. These and other potentially impactful mechanisms are needed to uphold international law and ensure accountability that is aligned with universally agreed upon standards of state conduct. Without them, violations will continue to go unchecked and are likely to worsen.

Following the onset of the Gaza War back in October of 2023, there were a record number of illegal Israeli land seizures in the West Bank last year. Watchdog organizations noted that this surpassed what was taken over the previous two decades combined and represented the largest unlawful land confiscation in more than 30 years. Alongside this, there has been a spike in both Israeli settlement expansion and violence against Palestinians in the West Bank. The latter has included killings, arson, property damage and theft, and the poisoning of water sources and crops, resulting in the forced displacement of Palestinians from their communities and generational homes. Alarming, Israeli security forces not only fail to stop this violence but have been found to actively protect the perpetrators who carry out attacks and even collaborate with them. It is the climate of impunity and enablement that allows this violence to persist and emboldens further criminal acts, especially in conjunction with attention being diverted to other places, which has given offenders more license to engage in this type of unethical behavior. Just a few days ago, an Israeli settler murdered Palestinian activist and teacher Awdah Hathaleen, whose work was featured in the Oscar-winning documentary "No Other Land." The perpetrator had been sanctioned by the United States under the Biden administration over past violence against Palestinians, but President Trump lifted those sanctions earlier this year upon his return to office. Despite visual evidence of the killing and the sanctions, Israeli authorities released him to house arrest.

During the past week, the Israeli Knesset has gone as far as overwhelmingly approving a motion calling for annexation of the occupied West Bank. While a non-binding and symbolic measure, the action demonstrates how pervasive and out in the open support for what would be a blatant violation of international law has become under the current Israeli government. With the vote, lawmakers are indicating their desire to pursue an illegal plan that in many ways is already in motion, given the de facto annexation that is taking place on a regular basis and at heightened levels since the onset of the Gaza War. As such, rights activists have pointed to how the Knesset vote simply signals the intent to formalize, normalize, and legitimize this at a point in time when the Netanyahu government is garnering increased condemnation for its actions in Gaza – which have sparked new calls for the recognition of a Palestinian state.

One of the latest of these came last Thursday, with French President Emmanuel Macron announcing that France would officially recognize Palestine as a state when the United Nations meets in September. In recent days following this, United Kingdom Prime Minister Keir Starmer expressed that the U.K. will also move to do so by September unless Israel agrees to a lasting ceasefire in Gaza, takes substantive steps to end the appalling humanitarian crisis there, and halts its plans to annex parts of the occupied West Bank, among other conditions. Canada and Malta have since joined the list of new countries to convey their plans to recognize a Palestinian state as well. The developments involving both France and the U.K. in particular – two of the major powers in Europe – mark a significant shift in position and ironically come while reports indicate that the Israeli government has presented a plan to annex parts of Gaza if a ceasefire agreement is not reached with Hamas. To date, more than 140 countries – including several in Europe – already recognize Palestinian statehood, but such moves from France and the U.K. would be noteworthy given their influence on the global stage and might potentially serve to further diplomatically isolate and add increased pressure on Israel and its primary backer, the United States.