



By: TA | AP Brief

Israel approves settlement project that could divide the West Bank



Israel gave final approval Wednesday for a controversial settlement **project** in the occupied West Bank that would effectively cut the territory in two, and that Palestinians and rights groups say could destroy hopes for a future Palestinian state.

Settlement development in E1, an open tract of land east of Jerusalem, has been under **consideration** for more than two decades, but was frozen due to U.S. pressure during **previous** administrations.

The international community overwhelmingly considers Israeli settlement construction in the West Bank to be illegal and an obstacle to peace.

Far-right Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich, a former settler leader, cast the approval as a rebuke to Western countries that **announced** their plans to recognize a Palestinian state in recent weeks.

"The Palestinian state is being erased from the table not with slogans but with actions," he said on Wednesday. "Every settlement, every neighborhood, every housing unit is another nail in the coffin of this dangerous idea."

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu rejects the idea of a Palestinian state alongside Israel and has vowed to maintain open-ended control over the occupied West Bank, annexed east Jerusalem, and the war-ravaged Gaza Strip — territories Israel seized in the 1967 war that the Palestinians want for their state.

Israel's expansion of settlements is part of an increasingly dire **reality** for Palestinians in the occupied West Bank as the world's attention focuses on the war in Gaza.

There have been marked increases in attacks by settlers on Palestinians, evictions from Palestinian towns, Israeli military operations, and checkpoints that choke freedom of movement, as well as several Palestinian attacks on Israelis.

More than 700,000 Israelis settlers now live in the West Bank and east Jerusalem.

The last geographical link between Ramallah and Bethlehem

The location of E1 is significant because it is one of the last geographical links between the major West Bank cities of Ramallah, in the north, and Bethlehem, in the south.

The two cities are 22 kilometers (14 miles) apart, but Palestinians traveling between them must take a wide detour and pass through multiple Israeli checkpoints, spending hours on the journey.

The hope was that, in an eventual Palestinian state, the region would serve as a direct link between the cities.

"The settlement in E1 has no purpose other than to sabotage a political solution," said Peace Now, an organization that tracks settlement expansion in the West Bank. "While the consensus among our friends in the world is to strive for peace and a two-state solution, a government that long ago lost the people's trust is undermining the national interest, and we are all paying the price."

Talk of a two-state solution was not a "high priority" for the Trump administration - Mike Huckabee

Asked about E1 in an interview with The Associated Press, U.S. Ambassador to Israel Mike Huckabee said talk of a two-state solution was not a "high priority" for the Trump administration and that there were too many unanswered questions about what a Palestinian state would look like.

The State Department did not immediately respond to requests for further comment.

If the process moves quickly, infrastructure work in E1 could begin in the next few months and construction of homes could start in around a year.

The plan includes around 3,500 apartments

that would abut the existing settlement of Maale Adumim. Smotrich also hailed the approval, during the same meeting, of 350 homes for the settlement of Ashael near Hebron.

Israel could, in theory, remove the settlement at some future date, as it did with its **ones** in Gaza in 2005, but that possibility appears extremely remote at present given strong support for the settlements among Israel's government and even some opposition parties.

Israel's government is dominated by religious and ultranationalist politicians, like Smotrich, with close ties to the settlement movement. The finance minister has been granted Cabinet-level authority over settlement policies and vowed to double the settler population in the West Bank.