



By: TA | AP Insight

Can the outcome of Israel's election change its policies towards the Palestinians?



Even if Tuesday's pivotal elections in Israel mark the end of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's decades-long political career, his legacy in the Israeli-occupied West Bank — of **massive settlement expansion**, the displacement of tens of thousands of Palestinians and the empowerment of **armed settler extremists** — will likely endure.

Israelis are deeply divided over **Netanyahu's leadership** and moral character, but they largely support settlement expansion and are opposed to a Palestinian state.

So while Netanyahu's opponents have vowed to crack down on settler violence and remove the most contentious outposts, they are mostly against a two-state solution, **seen internationally** as the only realistic way to resolve the conflict.

"There shouldn't be any illusions," said Mairav Zonszein, senior Israel analyst at the International Crisis Group.

"At best, (a new government) would be able to slow down the extremely crazy acceleration that we've seen in the last four years of every aspect of Israel's aggression in the occupied territories and inside Israel itself."

The military stands down in the face of settler violence

One legacy of Netanyahu's nearly unbroken 17-year rule — the longest of any Israeli leader — is that large groups of armed settlers now routinely defy the Israeli military as they rampage through Palestinian communities, drive people from their homes and seize ever larger swaths of their land.

Hamas' Oct. 7, 2023, attack out of Gaza turbocharged the process. Netanyahu's opponents could bring in more troops and authorize stricter measures, but the genie may already be out of the bottle.

Netanyahu's government has distributed thousands of firearms to the settlers, who have

allies in the military and security forces.

Some extremist settlers have become like sheriffs — making **arrests, killing Palestinians** they say posed a threat, summoning security forces and driving Palestinian families from their homes.

This is an army that fights in Lebanon, Gaza and in Iran — they can't control 150 or 200 settlers? - Mahmoud Tubasi

The Palestinian Tubasi family was forced out in July after settlers besieged their hilltop home in the West Bank village of Jalud for 19 days.

The settlers cut off their water access and their electricity, and threatened to "barbecue" them if they didn't leave, said Mahmoud Tubasi, 60, the patriarch.

An Israeli court ordered the military to bring the family back, but that hasn't happened.

Troops aborted their latest mission soon after it began, when a mob of over 150 armed settlers quickly assembled, scaled the walls of the home and set a car on fire.

Troops threw Tubasi and his family into an armored jeep and drove them away as settlers torched the place.

They now live in relatives' houses in the valley below their gutted and blackened home, around which settlers still roam.

Israel's military did not respond to a request for comment.

"If they wanted to evacuate them, of course, 100%, they can do that," Tubasi said. "This is an army that fights in Lebanon, Gaza and in Iran — they can't control 150 or 200 settlers?"

The process is repeated across the West Bank

Under Netanyahu, settlers have established over 250 rustic camps across the territory, focusing particularly on areas where Palestinian herding communities have dwelled for decades.

The outposts allow the settlers to effectively run Palestinians off **vast rural areas** by attacking shepherds, taking over water resources and grazing their own herds, all under the eye of Israeli troops.

Dror Etkes, a researcher with an Israeli anti-settlement group, says the outposts have allowed the settlers to seize effective control of around a fifth of the West Bank.

The settlers' explicit goal is to prevent the establishment of a viable Palestinian state

Israel captured the territory, along with Gaza and east Jerusalem, in the 1967 Mideast war. The Palestinians want all three territories for their future state.

Since 2023, the strategy has forced at least 127 Palestinian herding communities off their land, according to data gathered by Etkes' organization, known as Kerem Navot, and B'Tselem, another Israeli anti-settlement group.

The departures have cleared nearly the entire eastern flank of the West Bank, along the border with Jordan, of Palestinians.

The settlers' explicit goal is to prevent the establishment of a viable Palestinian state.

'The story is over'

Netanyahu's opponents say they will go after the most violent settlers and dismantle outposts — which are illegal under Israeli law.

But they will not evacuate the over 100 new settlements Netanyahu's government legalized, including 44 that were formerly

outposts.

Nor will they remove settlements dating back decades, many of which now resemble fully developed suburbs.

Most of the international community views all Israeli settlements as illegal and an obstacle to a two-state solution.

The story is over. There will be no massive dismantlement of settlement - Dror Etkes

Israel views the West Bank as the biblical and historical heartland of the Jewish people and says its future status should be decided by negotiations — which have not been held in over a decade.

Even if some outposts are removed, many Palestinians seeking to return would find their homes burned and looted, and would continue to face threats from nearby settlers.

"The story is over. There will be no massive dismantlement of settlement," said Etkes. "It's now a full and prouder-than-ever apartheid regime."

Amnesty International and other major rights groups accused Israel of the international crime of apartheid even before the Oct. 7 attack and its aftermath. Israel denies the allegation.

Netanyahu's opponents promise modest change

The politician most likely to replace Netanyahu as prime minister is retired general Gadi Eisenkot, a political centrist.

He hopes to form a majority coalition with three other parties spanning Israel's political spectrum and without Arab-led parties advocating a two-state solution.

Beth Oppenheim, an Israel analyst for the

European Council on Foreign Relations, said the opposition has “struggled to formulate a convincing alternative” to the right's new security strategy of “aggressively preempting threats, maintaining complete freedom of operation and imposing buffer zones.”



Gadi Eisenkot would allow settlement growth in the other 60% of the territory, which is under direct Israeli military rule

Palestinian attacks, like a shooting on Friday that killed two Israeli soldiers, and efforts on the right to cast the Israeli left as enemy sympathizers, have taken their toll. “The net effect is that talk of ‘peace’ and compromise has become politically toxic,” Oppenheim said.

Eisenkot does not support a Palestinian state but is open to limited self-rule in the 40% of the West Bank currently administered by the Palestinian Authority under agreements reached in the 1990s.

He would allow settlement growth in the other 60% of the territory, which is under direct Israeli military rule.

He has also vowed to empower Israeli troops and paramilitary Border Police to crack down on settler violence.

Eisenkot “is interested in lowering the friction in the West Bank and interested in definitely lowering the sanctions and the intention for sanctions by European countries,” Zonszein said. “He’ll do kind of the minimum necessary to get the maximum effect.”

Eisenkot's prospective allies include left-wing politicians who oppose settlements and have

favorable a two-state solution, but they have agreed to set those positions aside to form a coalition to oust Netanyahu.

Israeli leaders have long balanced their ambitions in the occupied territories with demands from Washington aimed at resolving the conflict.

But they are unlikely to face any significant pressure from U.S. President Donald Trump, who endorsed Netanyahu and has long backed his policies.