

Smotrich Spoke of Regulating 50 Settlements. Reality Tells a Story of Decline

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Among the signs that elections are approaching is Bezalel Smotrich's expected contribution: a propaganda campaign presenting achievements in strengthening the settlement enterprise in the West Bank. Prominent among the campaign slogans on social media is the declaration: *"Since the establishment of the current government, 50 new settlements have been established or regulated in Judea and Samaria."*

This is a public deception and an attempt to cross the electoral threshold using a national-messianic fantasy.

"50 new settlements" is a lie – a false display of settlement momentum. In reality:

- **19** of these are existing outposts, like Nofei Nehemia and Avigail.
- **7** are grazing farms, such as Malachei Hashalom and Sde Ephraim.
- **14** are existing neighborhoods within settlements, like Nofei Prat in Kfar Adumim and Kerem Re'im in Talmon.
- **10** are purely "on paper," such as the renewal of Sa-Nur and Ma'aleh Halhul.

In other words, no families were added, no houses built. This is an artificial bureaucratic maneuver designed to funnel billions under a new legal guise – platforms created to absorb yet more public funds, generously poured by the Minister of Finance, who effectively serves as Minister of Settlements.

To Smotrich's credit, it must be said that at least in the field of outposts, the current government has broken records. Since taking office, **79 new outposts** have been established, most of them grazing farms populated by single families or youths. Their impact is immense – expulsion of Palestinian communities, daily violence, hostile presence – but in demographic terms, their contribution is minimal. A few dozen families and some buildings or caravans amount to two or three apartment buildings in a city – no more.

Here lies the absurdity in declaring the establishment of new settlements: even the **long-established settlements in the West Bank are not growing**. According to the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS), the past three years (the tenure of the current government) have been the worst period in terms of Israelis' internal migration balance in the West Bank.

In the **four largest cities** – Modiin Illit, Beitar Illit, Ma'ale Adumim, and Ariel – live **43%** of the Israeli West Bank population (out of 513,000).

- A third of settlers live in Modiin Illit and Beitar Illit, both suffering **four consecutive years of negative internal migration**.
- In 2023, Modiin Illit lost **819 residents**, and Beitar Illit reached a peak abandonment in 2022 with **1,799 leaving**.

- Ma'ale Adumim has had **14 straight years of negative migration**, peaking with a loss of **920 residents in 2021**, and in 2024 its population even declined.
- Only Ariel recorded a minor positive migration of a few dozen in recent years.

The picture is similar in **14 local councils**, home to **22%** of settlers. In 2023, they recorded negative migration balances, led by Efrat (-210) and Kiryat Arba (-122). A similar trend continued in **11 councils in 2024**, and in the first quarter of 2025, **11 councils continued losing residents**, with Beit El joining the “abandonment champions.”

In practice, **two-thirds of Israelis in the West Bank live in settlements that are losing residents**. These were supposed to serve as centers of employment, culture, and education for settlers, but in reality, **62% work within Israel proper, study in Israeli universities and high schools, and enjoy the leisure culture of Tel Aviv and Jerusalem**.

In the six regional councils, which are responsible for **88% of settlements and 260 outposts**, only one – Mateh Binyamin – suffered negative migration in 2023–2024. In the second largest, Shomron, there was positive migration of about **800 residents**, perhaps due to its status as the leader in illegal outposts (~80). Yet even within these councils, **45 settlements recorded negative migration in Q1 2025**.

True, the Israeli population in the West Bank continues to grow at a rate of **~12,000 per year**, but this growth is **entirely natural increase**, and over half of it is in the ultra-Orthodox cities Modiin Illit and Beitar Illit, which are expected to be annexed to Israel in any agreement scenario. The number of residents there is almost equal to the total population of settlements and outposts in the six regional councils.

Adding to this is a painful fact: **42% of settlers are classified as socio-economic cluster 1 (the lowest), ten times the rate in Israel**.

Over the past decade, Israel has seen a rise in migration balances, until it halted with the Iron Swords war. In contrast, the West Bank has a **consistent decline**: international migration dropped from **900 to 300**, and internal migration collapsed from **4,000 to 1,900**. Iron Swords worsened the situation. A new study by the “Tamrur” group (Profs. Gilad Hirschberger, Sivan Hirsch-Hefler, and Moria Reshef) examined the war’s impact on physical threat perception among Israeli Jews. Findings showed that:

- While the **left tends to minimize the sense of threat**,
- The **right emphasizes it**,
- These gaps widened after October 7.

The sharp rise in threat perception occurred particularly among **West Bank settlers, enthusiastic supporters of settlement, who now feel less secure and thus are leaving**.

Thus, Smotrich and Itamar Ben Gvir, who block any ceasefire process, are in fact acting **against their own vision**. Their policies are **undermining the settlement enterprise**: settlements are not

growing, residents are leaving despite massive investments, roads, expulsions, and Israel's deteriorating international standing.

Bottom line: Smotrich's "50 settlements" are mere propaganda. **Reality tells a different story – of decline, abandonment, and a national-messianic dream fading away.**