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DATA REPORT AUGUST 6, 2026

Is Settler Expansion Part of a Long-Term Strategy to Empty the West Bank of Palestinians?

The Palestinian census counted 2,881,687 West Bank residents in 2017. What the population record, Israel's own state reviews and its court rulings document.

West Bank | Settlements | Population Records | Official Documents | Court Rulings

The Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics counted 2,881,687 residents of the West Bank in its 2017 census, roughly equal to the 2,895,683 it had counted in the West Bank and Gaza combined twenty years earlier. A claim about emptying a territory of its population is, in the first instance, a claim a population count can be checked against, and the count in question is the Palestinian statistical authority's own. What the record does not settle is the narrower version of the claim, about land rather than people: no official statistical series measures territorial contiguity, and the bodies that publish material on enclaves and fragmentation are advocacy and intergovernmental organizations, named below.

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Key Findings

- The Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics counted **2,881,687** West Bank residents in its 2017 census, against 2,895,683 for the West Bank and Gaza Strip together in its 1997 census.
- The demographer Sergio DellaPergola recorded **418,900** core Jews living in the West Bank at the start of 2019, with a further 221,800 in the East Jerusalem neighbourhoods incorporated after 1967.
- Israel's Basic Law: Israel, the Nation-State of the Jewish People (2018) states in Article 7 that the state "views the development of Jewish settlement as a national value"; no document in the assembled record states reducing or removing the Palestinian population as an objective.
- The Sasson Report, published by Israel's Prime Minister's Office in 2005, found that of roughly 105 outposts examined, 61 stood at least partly on land not registered to the state or to Israelis.
- In Netiv Ha'avot (HCJ 7292/14), Israel's High Court of Justice ordered 17 homes built on privately registered Palestinian land removed, a ruling handed down on 1 September 2016 and complied with by March 2018.

Has the West Bank's Palestinian population fallen or grown?

The Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics counted **2,881,687** residents of the West Bank in its 2017 census, the third and most recent full enumeration it has conducted. Its 1997 census, twenty years earlier, counted 2,895,683 people in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip together. The West Bank alone in 2017 stood at roughly the size of both territories combined in 1997.

The 2017 round put the Gaza Strip at 1,899,291 and the two territories together at 4,780,978. Every subsequent total in the international series is a projection off that measured base rather than a count: the World Bank's World Development Indicators report about 5.29 million for the combined West Bank and Gaza economy in 2024, and the United Nations Population Division's World Population Prospects 2024 carries the State of Palestine forward on the same census foundation. The Palestinian authority itself was established after the Oslo Accords, so figures for years before 1997 have no census basis at all and are modelled or back-estimated. The population series for both peoples and the disputes attached to them rest on that same small number of enumerations.

Two scope points govern the West Bank figure. The Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics could not directly enumerate East Jerusalem in 2017 and used administrative estimates there, and Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics counts East Jerusalem residents inside Israel's national total, reporting the city as a single municipal population of just over one million at the end of 2023, 39.5% of it Arab. The same residents therefore appear in one series as West Bank Palestinians and in the other as Jerusalem residents of Israel.

Palestinian census counts, 1997 and 2017
RESIDENTS ENUMERATED BY THE PALESTINIAN CENTRAL BUREAU OF STATISTICS

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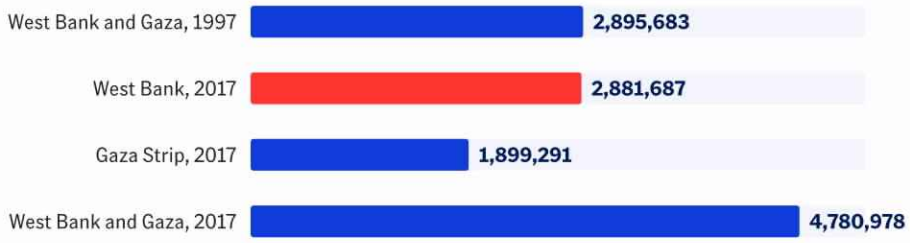

Source: Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, Population, Housing and Establishments Census 1997 and 2017 (final results). Official record.

Who says expansion is designed to displace Palestinians?

It is often said that settlement expansion is part of a long-term strategy to empty the West Bank of Palestinians. Three bodies advance versions of that position under their own names and dates: B'Tselem in 2021, the European External Action Service in its report covering January to December 2024, and Amnesty International in a statement of February 2026. Each describes dispossession or loss of contiguity rather than a stated official aim.

B'Tselem, the Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories, wrote in its 2021 report on settlement policy that land is used to expand Jewish settlements while Palestinians are "dispossessed and corralled into small, crowded enclaves." B'Tselem is a monitoring organization with an explicit advocacy mission, and the enclave characterisation is its own analysis of the arrangement it describes.

The European External Action Service, the European Union's diplomatic service, stated in its settlements report covering 2024 that expansion is "further endangering Palestinian development and territorial contiguity, thereby undermining prospects for a two-state solution." That is an intergovernmental body's assessment of consequence, framed around contiguity and the two-state outcome rather than around population size.

Amnesty International said in February 2026 that Israeli measures were "deliberately designed to dispossess Palestinians" and to make annexation "an irreversible reality." The UN Human Rights Office issued a press statement in March 2026 titled around settlement expansion driving displacement in the West Bank. Both are statements of position by bodies with stated human-rights mandates.

What separates these formulations from the question's own wording matters for what can be checked. Dispossession of specific landholders, fragmentation of territory, and foreclosure of a future political settlement are claims about land, access and statehood. Emptying a territory of a people is a claim about how many people live there, and it is answerable from the enumeration in the section above. The sections that follow set out what Israel's own official documents, reviews and court rulings record on the settlement question, since none of the four bodies quoted here is an Israeli official source.

How many settlers live in the West Bank?

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The demographer Sergio DellaPergola, writing in the American Jewish Year Book, recorded **418,900** core Jews living in the West Bank at the beginning of 2019.

His decomposition places a further 221,800 in the East Jerusalem neighbourhoods incorporated after 1967, 23,200 on the Golan Heights, and 6,001,700 within Israel's pre-1967 borders.

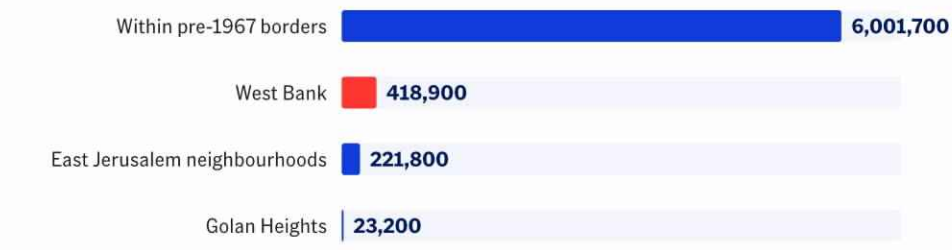
That is an academic demographer's territorial decomposition, not a government count.

Counts differ mainly because the counting conventions differ, and the conventions are documented. Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics folds settlers into Israel's national total: Hirsch-Hoefler and Ben Shitrit (2020) trace the sequence in the CBS Yearbook, with East Jerusalem moved into the general population count for Israel proper in the 1968 edition, a 1970 footnote adding settlers to Israel's total as "Israeli residents in the Administrated Territories," settlement localities counted among Israeli localities by 1983, and the separate territories chapter removed in 1997. B'Tselem publishes its West Bank count and its East Jerusalem count as separate series, the counterpart convention used by international monitors.

The two do not exhaust the territory either. The Central Bureau of Statistics excludes unrecognized outposts from its locality counts, and Peace Now documented about 121 of them in 2019 (Hirsch-Hoefler and Ben Shitrit, 2020). Localities that straddle the Green Line are placed differently by different counters: the same authors record Shani Livne assigned by the Central Bureau of Statistics to Israel's South District and counted by Peace Now and B'Tselem as a settlement.

The arithmetic point that follows from the two preceding sections is flat. Across the same decades in which the settler population in the West Bank reached the hundreds of thousands DellaPergola records, the Palestinian population enumerated by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics also rose, from 2,895,683 across both territories in 1997 to 2,881,687 in the West Bank alone in 2017. Both populations grew.

Core Jewish population by territory, start of 2019
SERGIO DELLAPERGOLA'S DECOMPOSITION, AMERICAN JEWISH YEAR BOOK



Source: DellaPergola, 2019, World Jewish Population, American Jewish Year Book vol. 119. Academic reference.

What do Israel's own reviews document about expansion?

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Israel's own state record runs in two directions, and both documents are named. The Sasson Report, commissioned by the government and published by the Prime Minister's Office in 2005, examined roughly 105 outposts and found **61** standing at least partly on land not registered to the state or to Israelis. It documented that government ministries, the Civil Administration and the World Zionist Organization Settlement Division had funded outposts no cabinet had approved.

The report's finding was procedural and internal: money and services reached construction that Israeli law and Israeli decision-making had not authorised. That is a government-commissioned review reaching a conclusion of unlawfulness under Israel's own rules, which is a different kind of statement from an outside body's assessment of intent. The same body of Israeli material on unauthorised construction, and what the courts did with it, is set out in more detail in Israel's own reviews and court records on outposts.

The second document ran the other way. The commission chaired by former Supreme Court justice Edmund Levy reported in 2012 that Israel's presence in the West Bank does not constitute belligerent occupation in the legal sense, and recommended mechanisms for the retroactive authorization of construction that lacked prior approval. The Levy Report was never adopted by the government and was never officially published; no official text of it exists in the public record, and it is nameable as a position taken by a government-appointed commission rather than citable as a government record.

Set side by side, the two reviews are the clearest Israeli documentary material bearing on the question. One found that state bodies had supported construction the state had not authorised. The other proposed changing the legal frame within which such construction is assessed, and was left unadopted. Neither addresses the size or presence of the Palestinian population, which is the subject of the claim under examination.

Does any official document state a depopulation objective?

No document in the assembled record states reducing or removing the Palestinian population of the West Bank as an objective. What Israeli law does state, in Article 7 of Basic Law: Israel, the Nation-State of the Jewish People, passed by the Knesset in 2018, is that "the State views the development of Jewish settlement as a national value, and will act to encourage and promote its establishment and consolidation."

That is a constitutional-level text, in the Knesset's own English translation, and it is an affirmative statement of settlement promotion. The Levy commission's 2012 recommendation of retroactive authorization sits in the same direction. The Sasson Report of 2005 documents state bodies funding construction outside the approval process. Each of these is on the official or state-commissioned record, dated, and quotable.

The absence sits alongside them, and it is an absence rather than a rebuttal. Searching the official record for a stated depopulation aim returns nothing in this material: not in the Basic Law, not in the two state reviews, not in the census and statistical releases of either statistical authority. That does not establish what any actor intends, and none of the bodies quoted in the second section above claims to be citing such a document. B'Tselem, the European

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External Action Service and Amnesty International each argue from effect and from pattern, not from a text.

The distinction is exactly where the question turns. A reader asking whether settler expansion is a long-term strategy to empty the West Bank of Palestinians is asking about an aim. The documentary record carries an official aim of Jewish settlement development, stated in law, and carries no official statement of Palestinian removal. The population record, from the Palestinian authority's own census, shows the Palestinian population of the West Bank higher in 2017 than the two territories combined in 1997. The formal legal treatment of Jewish nationality in Israeli statute, including the Basic Law quoted here, is examined separately in the laws described as Jewish supremacist and what they say.

Has Israel's high court restrained settlement on private land?

In Netiv Ha'avot (HCJ 7292/14), Israel's High Court of Justice ordered 17 homes built on privately registered Palestinian land to be removed. The petition was filed in November 2014, the ruling was handed down on 1 September 2016, and the structures were cleared by March 2018. The judicial remedy existed, was granted, and took roughly three and a half years from filing to compliance.

The court's earlier ruling in Ka'adan (HCJ 6698/95, March 2000) established a related principle inside Israel: the state may not allocate land on the basis of nationality, including by routing the allocation through a third-party body. The judgment concerned an Arab citizen couple seeking to build in a communal town established on state land through the Jewish Agency, and the court held that the state's obligation of equality is not discharged by delegation.

Both rulings are primary records, identifiable by docket number, and both cut against the disposition of land by the executive. In the West Bank context, Netiv Ha'avot is the concrete instance: a subset of a settlement neighbourhood, documented as standing on land privately registered to Palestinian owners, removed under a court order the state carried out.

What the two rulings measure is bounded. They record what one court ordered in specific cases and what the state then did, not the general rate at which private-land claims succeed, not the number of structures remaining, and not the disposition of the majority of settlement construction that is not on privately registered Palestinian land. The Sasson Report's finding that 61 of roughly 105 examined outposts stood at least partly on land not registered to the state or to Israelis (Prime Minister's Office, 2005) indicates the scale of the underlying question, while Netiv Ha'avot indicates what a granted remedy looked like in one case.

Can the population record settle the contiguity claim?

The census record answers one form of the claim and not the other. The Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics' count of 2,881,687 West Bank residents in 2017 directly addresses the claim of emptying, which is demographic. It cannot address the claim of fragmentation,

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which is spatial: a population can grow in number while the territory it lives in is divided into disconnected areas.

Those are two different measurements requiring two different instruments. Population is enumerated by censuses and carried forward by the World Bank and the United Nations Population Division in series that publish counts, projections and growth rates. Contiguity is not enumerated by any of them. No official statistical series in the material assembled here publishes a measure of territorial contiguity, of enclave counts, or of movement between Palestinian population centres.

The bodies that publish material on those subjects are the ones named earlier: B'Tselem, which maps settlements and describes enclaves; the European External Action Service, which reported on contiguity for the 2024 period; and the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, which publishes access and displacement material for the territory. Their outputs are monitoring and assessment products rather than national statistical series, and their contiguity claims are stated as analysis by the organizations that make them.

The practical consequence for a reader is a division of the question. Whether the Palestinian population of the West Bank has fallen is checkable against a census and has an answer. Whether the territory available to that population has been divided, and what follows from that, is measured by different bodies using different methods, and the answer depends on which body's mapping and definitions are used. Conflating the two makes the demographic record appear to settle a spatial claim it never measured.

Methodology and limitations

This report draws on four kinds of evidence, each labelled where it appears. Primary and official records: the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics censuses of 1997 and 2017, Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics releases, Basic Law: Israel, the Nation-State of the Jewish People (Knesset, 2018), the Sasson Report published by Israel's Prime Minister's Office in 2005, and the High Court of Justice rulings in Ka'adan (HCJ 6698/95) and Netiv Ha'avot (HCJ 7292/14). Compiled international statistical series: the World Bank's World Development Indicators and the UN Population Division's World Population Prospects 2024. Academic sources: DellaPergola's territorial decomposition in the American Jewish Year Book, and Hirsch-Hoefler and Ben Shitrit (2020) on Central Bureau of Statistics counting conventions, which is a think-tank publication and not peer-reviewed. Monitoring and intergovernmental positions: B'Tselem (2021), the European External Action Service (report covering 2024), Amnesty International (February 2026) and the UN Human Rights Office (March 2026), each cited for its stated position and not for a measured figure.

Four limitations bear directly on the figures above. First, 2017 is the most recent full Palestinian census, so every later total in either international series is a projection off that base rather than a count, and Palestinian figures before 1997 have no census basis. Second, East Jerusalem could not be directly enumerated in the 2017 census and administrative estimates were used, while Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics counts the same residents inside Israel's municipal total for Jerusalem, so the two series overlap in a way that forbids adding them. Third, settler counts vary by convention, not only by measurement: the Central

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Bureau of Statistics includes settlers in Israel's national total and excludes unrecognized outposts, B'Tselem publishes West Bank and East Jerusalem as separate series, and DellaPergola's figure is an academic estimate.

Fourth, an absence is recorded rather than filled. The Levy commission's 2012 report was never officially published or adopted, and no official text exists in the public record; it is named here as a commission's stated position, not cited as a government record. Settler-population figures published by the European External Action Service and by news organizations were not carried, because this report cites population figures only to statistical authorities and to the named demographic literature. No measure of territorial contiguity is cited, because no official statistical series publishes one.

Conclusion

Is settler expansion part of a long-term strategy to empty the West Bank of Palestinians? On the plain demographic reading, the Palestinian statistical authority's own record answers it: 2,881,687 residents counted in the West Bank in 2017, a figure that on its own approaches what the same authority counted across the West Bank and Gaza together in 1997. Over the same decades, DellaPergola recorded 418,900 core Jews in the West Bank at the start of 2019. Both populations rose.

The documentary record is equally specific about what is and is not stated. Article 7 of the 2018 Basic Law commits the state to encourage and promote Jewish settlement, in those words. The Sasson Report of 2005 found 61 of roughly 105 examined outposts on land not registered to the state or to Israelis, a government-commissioned finding of unlawfulness under Israel's own procedure. The High Court ordered 17 homes at Netiv Ha'avot off privately registered Palestinian land, and they came down by March 2018. Nowhere in that material is a Palestinian population target, a removal objective, or a stated demographic aim for the territory. B'Tselem, the European External Action Service and Amnesty International argue from pattern and effect, and each says so in its own name.

That leaves a live and measurable question the census cannot reach. A population can grow while the land under it is divided, and the claim about enclaves and contiguity is a claim about geography that no national statistical series counts. Which raises the harder matter for anyone weighing the words in circulation: when a claim about emptying a territory travels as shorthand for a claim about fragmenting one, what does the substitution do to the argument, and to the people it describes on either side of it?

Frequently Asked Questions

How often has the Palestinian population actually been counted?

Three times. The Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics conducted censuses in 1997, 2007 and 2017, the authority itself having been established after the Oslo Accords. Every figure for the territory before 1997 is modelled or back-estimated, and every total after 2017 in the World Bank and UN series is a projection off the 2017 base.

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Why do settler population figures differ between sources?

Because the counting conventions differ. Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics folds settlers into Israel's national total and excludes unrecognized outposts, of which Peace Now documented about 121 in 2019 (Hirsch-Hoefler and Ben Shitrit, 2020), while B'Tselem publishes West Bank and East Jerusalem as separate series. DellaPergola's 418,900 for the West Bank at the start of 2019 is an academic estimate on his own territorial decomposition.

Which residents are counted twice between the Israeli and Palestinian series?

East Jerusalem residents. Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics reports Jerusalem, including the neighbourhoods annexed after 1967, as one municipal population, over one million at the end of 2023 and 39.5% Arab. The Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics used administrative estimates for the same area in 2017. The two series must never be summed.

What was the Sasson Report and who commissioned it?

It was a government-commissioned review published by Israel's Prime Minister's Office in 2005, examining roughly 105 West Bank outposts. It found 61 standing at least partly on land not registered to the state or to Israelis, and documented state ministries, the Civil Administration and the World Zionist Organization Settlement Division funding construction no cabinet had approved.

Why is the Levy Report not cited as an official document here?

Because it was never officially published or adopted. The commission chaired by former Supreme Court justice Edmund Levy reported in 2012 that the presence does not constitute belligerent occupation and recommended retroactive authorization, but no official text exists in the public record, so it is named as a commission's position rather than cited as a government record.

Which bodies publish material on territorial fragmentation?

B'Tselem, the European External Action Service and the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs publish mapping, assessment and access material bearing on enclaves and contiguity. Those are monitoring and intergovernmental products with their own definitions, not national statistical series, and no official statistics office publishes a contiguity measure.

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