

Turning Zeitoun into Shivat Zion: Israeli summit envisions Gaza resettlement

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Undeterred by the ICJ, ministers and settler leaders promoted plans to expel Palestinians and ‘return’ Israelis to Gaza at a major conference in Jerusalem.

The strangest sight at the “Conference for Israel’s Victory,” which took place on Sunday evening at Jerusalem’s International Convention Center, wasn’t the map depicting dozens of new settlements that Israeli settlers hope to establish throughout the Gaza Strip after the war is over. It was the moment when thousands of people danced around the hall singing celebratory songs — a rare spectacle in post-October 7 Israel, with most of the nation still mourning the victims of the Hamas-led attacks and fearing for the safety of the hostages in Gaza.



Israelis look at a giant map of the Gaza Strip depicting future Israeli settlements at the “Conference for Israel’s Victory” in Jerusalem, January 28, 2024. (Oren Ziv)

Yet for the conference’s participants — among them 11 cabinet ministers and 15 members of the coalition, who gleefully joined in the dancing — there is indeed something to celebrate. For them, October 7 and the subsequent war have presented an unprecedented opportunity to reconquer Gaza, and, if possible, to engineer the situation such that there will be no Palestinians left when the new settlers arrive.

Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich began his speech with some reservation toward the joy that predominated: “I must say that I have mixed emotions when it comes to the atmosphere in this hall,” he said, before adding immediately: “But there is something natural and healthy about what’s here, in the strength, in the joy, in the devotion to the Land of Israel, which has the potential to grant enormous strength.” National Security Minister Itamar Ben Gvir talked of “voluntary migration,” apparently understanding the need to moderate his language somewhat in light of the ongoing legal proceedings at the International Court of Justice (ICJ).

Despite the impressive turnout of ministers and Knesset members from Ben Gvir’s Otzma Yehudit, Smotrich’s Religious Zionist Party, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s Likud, and the ultra-Orthodox United Torah Judaism — four of the parties that make up the current coalition — the true stars of the conference were the head of the Samaria Council, Yossi Dagan, and the chairwoman of the major settler organization Nahala, Daniella Weiss. Before October 7, they had been busy in the West Bank, in [Eviatar](#) and [Homesh](#), where they received the government’s backing to re-establish

previously dismantled outposts. Since the start of the war, however, a new market has opened up for these eager entrepreneurs — and they don't plan on letting the opportunity go to waste.

As for the question of what will happen to the 2.3 million Palestinians who currently call Gaza home — a question posed by many of the foreign journalists who came to cover the conference — Weiss had an answer she repeated over and over again: “The Arabs will move.” She explained that, just as Israel “doesn't give them food” in order to pressure Hamas to release the hostages, so too should Israel “not give them anything, so they will have to move. The world will accept this.”



Israeli settler leader Daniella Weiss at the “Conference for Israel’s Victory” in Jerusalem, January 28, 2024. (Oren Ziv)

Experienced in the complex dynamics between the settlement movement and the Israeli government, Weiss smiled when she was asked about how Netanyahu will respond to last week's ruling by the ICJ that Israel must act to prevent genocide in Gaza. “The government will accede to pressure from the public,” she replied.

“October 7 changed history,” Weiss declared from the stage. “Gaza, the southern gate to Israel, will be wide open. Gazans will leave [the Strip] for all parts of the world, and the Jewish people will make the land of our forefathers flourish. Each and every clod of the Land of Israel that our soldiers have within their grasp gives us the necessary strength to fight against a cruel and eternal enemy. It is not to a foreign land that we are returning, but rather to the golden sands of our Gaza. There is no ‘day after’ — the day after is today, it's every day in which the Jewish people is victorious and returns to settle in Gaza.”

To that effect, a giant map of Gaza on the wall of the conference hall was marked with the locations of hypothetical new settlements — spanning all the way from Rafah in the south to Beit Hanoun in the north. There was a booth corresponding to each settlement where you could register as an interested settler, and the booth for where Gaza City stands today even suggested new names for all of the city's neighborhoods: “Zeitoun” will become “Shivat Zion”; Shuja'iyah will become “Gibor Oz.”

‘The Oslo Accords are dead — Am Yisrael Chai’

The organizers of the conference, it seemed, weren't especially bothered by the fact that their stance on expulsion and settlement completely contradicts the state's official line, as presented at The Hague. One of the videos exhibited at the conference was the [now-infamous clip](#) of soldiers waiting to join Israel's ground invasion of the Strip chanting “there are no innocents in Gaza,” which South Africa had brought before the ICJ as evidence of genocidal intent. The idea of “transferring” Gaza's Palestinian population was mentioned in nearly every speech.

When Ben Gvir stood up to speak, a few young audience members held up a banner that read, “Only transfer will bring peace.” Ben Gvir responded to them: “Yes, and also [there must be] a moral, logical, biblical, and Halakhic [Jewish religious law] solution, encouraging migration and

implementing the death penalty for terrorists ... to encourage them to leave.”



Israeli National Security Minister Itamar Ben Gvir speaks at the “Conference for Israel’s Victory” in Jerusalem, January 28, 2024. (Oren Ziv)

Communications Minister Shlomo Karhi was more direct: “There will never be a Palestinian state between the river and the sea ... We have an obligation to act, for our sake, and for the sake of the supposedly uninvolved [civilians in Gaza], for voluntary migration. Even if the war that was forced upon us turns the issue of voluntary migration into coercion to the point that they say: ‘I want to [leave].’”

In contrast to the politicians, who were at least somewhat cautious in their choice of words, other speakers were much more blunt. Rabbi Uzi Sharbaf is one of the leaders of the movement to resettle Gaza. Head of the settler group Harchivi Makom Aholech, which works to take over Palestinian property in Hebron, he was sentenced to life in prison for terror attacks with the Jewish Underground in the 1980s before being released after seven years.

At the start of the conference, he declared: “We need to reflect on how so many Jews could be brutally killed in just a few hours on [October 7]. Is there just a security problem here? Many say, justifiably, that the worldview must change after the massacre. But it is not just the approach that needs to change; we need to go up a level, a floor, as a nation, as a state. Let’s stop talking about parts of the Land of Israel. What is [Areas] A, B, and C? What is the north of the [Gaza] Strip? The entire Strip, the whole land, is part of the Land of Israel.”

The head of the Samaria Regional Council, Yossi Dagan, was one of several speakers who drew a connection between the “disengagement” of 2005 — in which Israel dismantled all of its settlements in the Gaza Strip along with a handful of small settlements in the northern West Bank — and the massacre carried out by Hamas.



Israelis dance and wave flags at the “Conference for Israel’s Victory” in Jerusalem, January 28, 2024. (Oren Ziv)

“After October 7, it’s clear to everyone that where there are settlements there is security, and where there are no settlements there is terror,” Dagan said. “The Jewish people ... is in a rare [state of] unity in this war for its life, for the existence of the State of Israel. We must say this loud and clear. Oslo, and the expulsion of the disengagement, brought this Holocaust upon us. I say, and repeat after me: ‘The Oslo Accords are dead — Am Yisrael Chai [the people of Israel live].’” The audience

roared his words back in response.

The head of the Kiryat Arba Council, Eliyahu Liebman, whose son Elyakim was kidnapped to Gaza while he was guarding the Nova music festival, declared that the hostages had been taken in order to enable the return to Gaza: “This evening, we remember ... all the heroes who have fallen, been wounded, been kidnapped, so that we, God willing, will return quickly to settle Gush Katif and northern Shomron.”

Liebman, apparently unaware of the details of the proceedings at The Hague, invoked the biblical mandate to eradicate the enemies of the Israelites. “The *parashah* [portion of the Torah] we read this Shabbat ends with: ‘I will wipe out the memory of Amalek from the earth.’ We, in this generation, are fighting Amalek.”

After the deliberations at the ICJ, Israel will have a hard time claiming that the ideas expressed at the conference don’t represent official policy. In the pamphlet that was distributed to the audience, the message was even clearer than in the speeches. On the question of how Israel should treat the Palestinian population in Gaza, the lawyer Aviad Visoli — a prominent [Temple movement](#) activist — wrote: “Nakba 2, meaning the mass expulsion of the Arabs of Gaza, is also justified by the laws of war.”

The plan to resettle Gaza may seem far-fetched, and it’s true that Netanyahu and the security establishment may present an obstacle — especially amid [increased international scrutiny](#). But it’s important to remember that in the meantime, the expulsion of Palestinians and the settlement of Jews in their place is moving forward at lightning speed in the West Bank, where at least 16 Palestinian communities have been [expelled by settlers](#) — with the full backing of the army — since October 7.

Outside the conference, near the Central Bus Station, someone had spray painted the slogan of the movement: “Returning to Gaza.” The joy of the conference was rooted in the conviction that this return will ensure the security of the Jewish people and of the State of Israel. But someone else had seen the graffiti and inserted their own, less optimistic message: “Returning *to die* in Gaza.”

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P.S.

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A version of this article was first published in Hebrew on Local Call. Read it [here](#).

- Oren Ziv is a photojournalist, reporter for Local Call, and a founding member of the Activestills photography collective.
- Our team has been devastated by the horrific events of this latest war - the atrocities committed by Hamas in Israel and the massive retaliatory Israeli attacks on Gaza. Our hearts are with all the people and communities facing violence.

We are in an extraordinarily dangerous era in Israel-Palestine. The bloodshed unleashed by these events has reached extreme levels of brutality and threatens to engulf the entire region. Hamas' murderous assault in southern Israel has devastated and shocked the country to its core. Israel's retaliatory bombing of Gaza is wreaking destruction on the already besieged strip and killing a ballooning number of civilians. Emboldened settlers in the West Bank, backed by the army, are seizing the opportunity to escalate their attacks on Palestinians.

This escalation has a very clear context, one that +972 has spent the past 13 years covering: Israeli society's growing racism and militarism, the entrenched occupation, and an increasingly normalized siege on Gaza.

We are well positioned to cover this perilous moment - but we need your help to do it. This terrible period will challenge the humanity of all of those working for a better future in this land. Palestinians and Israelis are already organizing and strategizing to put up the fight of their lives.

Can we count on your [support](#)? +972 Magazine is the leading media voice of this movement, a desperately needed platform where Palestinian and Israeli journalists and activists can report on and analyze what is happening, guided by humanism, equality, and justice. Join us.

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