

This Pro-settler NGO Has Been Shaping Israeli Policy for Years. Now, It's in Control

After years of outside influence, Regavim is now in the halls of power. With Minister Smotrich as its leader, its supporters in the government are now setting de facto policy in the West Bank. But its ambitions don't stop there



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Apr 27, 2023 7:02 pm IDT

On a chilly morning, a young man with a kippah and a map in hand stood on a hill overlooking the Palestinian villages of Shuqba and Rantis. The tightly packed dots on the map were in different colors.

Each dot represented a building constructed by Palestinians without a permit, the different colors standing for the years in which they were built. But for the man who held the map, [Menash Shmueli](#), who is Regavim's West Bank coordinator, it was more than a map of constructions.

It was also a roadmap to the fulfillment of the vision of the pro-settler NGO he belongs to, which was co-founded by Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich, and has since become government policy.

In the halls of the Knesset, and inside ministers' offices, it's not hard to encounter people who rose to influence within Regavim, an organization waging a total war on Palestinian construction in the West Bank. Its top representative is [Smotrich](#), who is also a minister in the Defense Ministry with responsibility over the Civil Administration, Israel's military government in the West Bank.

Finance Minister of Israel Bezalel Smotrich against a background of a Regavim map. Credit: Ohad Zwigenberg and Hadas Parush. Graphics: Masha Zur Gluzman

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From Regavim to pulling the strings



Bezalel Smotrich

Regavim founder

Today: Minister in charge of the Civil Administration



Yehuda Eliahu

Regavim co-founder

Today: head of Settlement Administration in the Defense Ministry



Yakhin Zik

Former operations director at Regavim

Today: chief of staff to the Negev and Galilee Development minister



Sraya Demski

Former Regavim board member

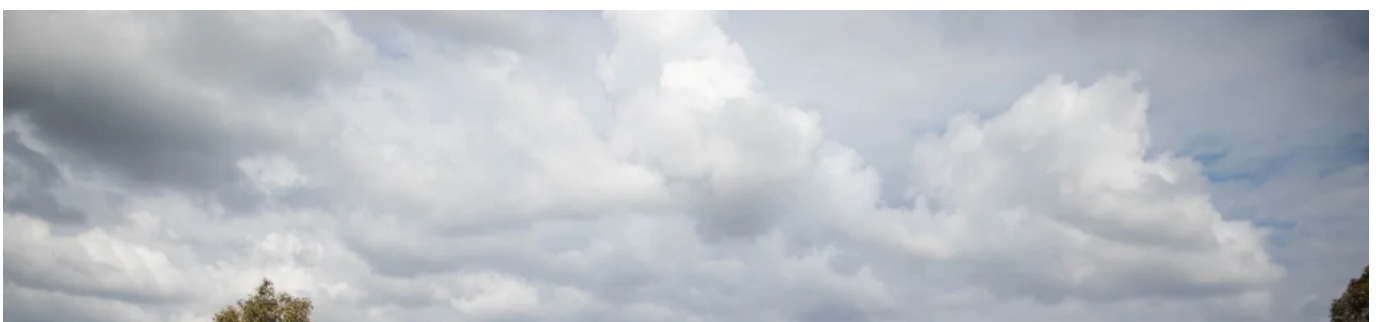
Today: Smotrich's chief of staff

Another prominent name in this regard is Yehuda Eliahu, also a Regavim co-founder and Smotrich's right-hand-man as head of the Settlement Administration ministry-within-a-ministry the latter is establishing in order to fulfill his policy within the Defense Ministry. It doesn't end there.

Yakhin Zik, the organization's former director of operations, is currently the chief of staff for Negev and Galilee Development Minister Yitzhak Wasserlauf. Sraya Demski, Smotrich's chief of staff, was until recently a member of the Regavim board.

Given these facts, it seems Regavim's operations are a factor in the government's agenda. One example is a document entitled "The Plow Line – A Plan to Halt the Palestinian Takeover of the Open Territories in Judea and Samaria," which was distributed to politicians ahead of the most recent election and outlined the organization's strategy in the West Bank.

The document included a range of recommendations for the next government, some of which found their way into Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's coalition agreement with Smotrich's Religious Zionism party, such as launching "the campaign for the open areas," a euphemism for Area C, the roughly 60 percent of the West Bank that contains Israel's settlements and a large Palestinian rural population.





being implemented.

- [Internal documents reveal Israeli settlers' dedication to ousting 'Arabs' from West Bank](#)
- ['Death to the Arabs' backers of settler violence now sit in heart of Israel's government](#)
- [For Israel's far-right finance minister, annexation trumps the economy](#)

A partial list would include the demolition of a Palestinian school that was built inside what the military had declared as a “firing zone”; turning the eviction of Khan al-Ahmar’s residents into a core issue for the right; demolition of “huge luxury buildings that were built in a strategic area in the eastern Etzion [settlement] bloc”; and changing the Civil Administration’s enforcement procedures regarding the demolition of Palestinian buildings.

The organization’s pride was also evident in a booklet it distributed to readers of the right-wing Makor Rishon newspaper, in which it celebrated the court’s decision to allow the eviction of Masafer Yatta’s residents, even though Regavim was not a part of the petition on the issue.

Another document distributed in the past year came from Regavim director Meir Deutsch. Entitled “Bedouistan” and published by the right-wing Sela Meir Press, it highlights the organization’s intense focus on the Negev. This is not something completely new. Under the previous government, Regavim also worked to obstruct the official recognition of Bedouin villages.

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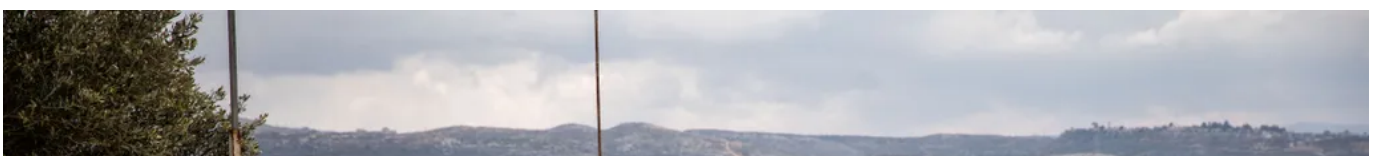
But the organization's work ultimately centers on the West Bank. This is what makes Smotrich's appointment as the one overseeing the Civil Administration so key. The administration within Smotrich's office that Eliahu heads is in charge of, among other roles, legalizing unauthorized settler outposts and the transferring authorities of the Civil Administration to government ministries, a step perceived in the international community as de facto annexation.

The coalition agreements promised that Eliahu's administration would have 12 positions, but so far only four have been approved. It is unclear whether this will be the final number.

Surveilling the area

Before entering [Shuqba](#) in a 4X4 vehicle, Shmueli covers his kippah with a baseball cap. Dozens of illegal structures have been built in Shuqba, he says. This is in Area C, where Israel is in charge of issuing Palestinian building permits – a rare occurrence. He points out a large building. "This building does not appear in the 2022 aerial photographs," he says.

He moves on to comment on a new soccer field that has been built in the village. It will make more people want to live near it, he says. "Don't they already have plenty of space in Areas B and A?"





Palestinians are able to build. This response ignores the extensive crowding in those areas, as well as the fact that Area C is not Israeli territory.

But Shuqba and Rantis are just two examples of many in the war Regavim is waging against Palestinian construction. Shmueli says that between the two villages lies what the military has declared Firing Zone 203. Although it is not an active firing zone, construction there is forbidden because of its classification.

Describing what he sees as a Palestinian plot to connect the villages, Shmueli says, “The first stage is to open a roadway that will connect the villages, to install infrastructure for electricity and water, then schools or playgrounds in the middle of the territory.”

In order to track Palestinian construction activity, the organization conducts surveillance in several ways. Regavim has drones that allow it to continuously monitor construction, including in places that are otherwise difficult to reach. Periodically, the organization also purchases aerial photos and employs a researcher to analyze them.





East Jerusalem. Accompanying us on this tour two months ago was Regavim spokeswoman Tamar Sikurel, of Kiryat Arba, the settlement next to Hebron. She noted with pride that the organization arranges 10–20 tours a month for journalists and politicians.

Residential construction is not the only thing that Regavim tracks. Another stop was made on the tour to see the construction of a solar energy farm near the village of Deir Abu Mashal. This, too, Shmueli says, is “part of the effort to establish a Palestinian state.”

Another part of the tour brought us to a site where Palestinian farmers had rigged up a makeshift connection to the Israeli national water company, and which was disconnected after Regavim activists pointed this out. Toward the end of the tour, Shmueli used a drone to show a trash fire in an area not easily accessible by car.



Solar panels near Deir Abu Mashal. Credit: Hadas Parush

Regavim is not the only group using drones for these purposes. In recent years, local authorities in the settlements themselves have set up their own “land departments” that monitor and report on Palestinian construction and other activity to the Civil Administration. These departments work in cooperation with Regavim, which acknowledges that it helped establish them.

They received a big boost under the previous government, which allocated 20 million shekels (\$5.5 million as of publication) in funding to these departments. The current government's National Missions Ministry, headed by the radical right-wing Minister Orit Strock, recently said it would allocate 40 million shekels to support these departments.

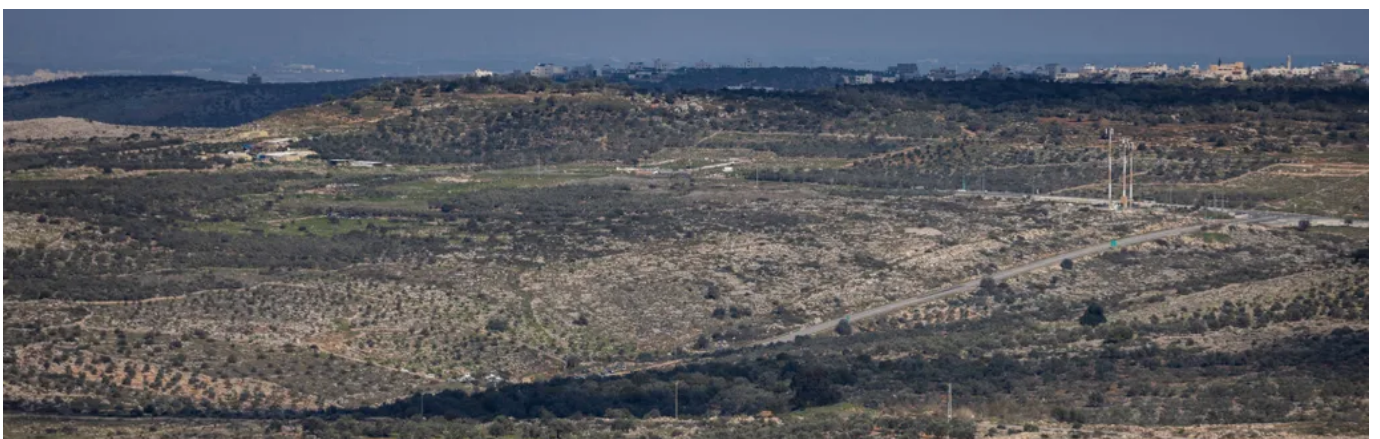
The settlements' reports to the Civil Administration have one goal: to halt Palestinian construction as early as possible. It seems to be working. "Regavim's influence has grown," says a former Civil Administration official. "It's a process in which you can see how the influence of European organizations or ambassadors has been replaced over the years by the influence of Regavim, which presents things in a one-sided way. It's essentially monitoring the Civil Administration's activities."

All the Civil Administration personnel with whom we spoke noted that Regavim's influence has grown in tandem with a decline in influence of left-wing organizations like Peace Now and Yesh Din. They also mentioned a decline in the influence of diplomats with experience dealing with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and in humanitarian aid in Area C.

The trends are obviously tied to the rise of the pro-settler right's political power. This shift was apparent even before the most recent election in November, which brought this power to unprecedented heights.

According to the former Civil Administration official, when Regavim representatives contact the administration with a complaint, "It demands a response, because when you have an inquiry, you have to address it." In such cases, he says, Palestinians' construction equipment could be confiscated, or a demolition order will be issued.

A former member of the IDF's legal consulting office meanwhile says that before Regavim got involved with the issue of Palestinian construction, inquiries about the issue were received only sporadically, and came from various sources. Now, it's become systematic, the source says – and officials sense that there's a guiding hand behind all of the complaints.





it. You receive inquiries from a politician or military figure asking why they say such and such. It certainly moved the attention and focus somewhere else and made [Palestinian construction in Area C] a main topic of conversation.”

Inspired by Peace Now

Regavim was founded nearly 17 years ago, and if Yehuda Eliahu is to be believed, it was actually inspired by a court petition filed by Peace Now against the Harasha unauthorized outpost, which Eliahu helped to found. “We said: ‘Let’s do the same thing they’re doing – but from the opposite side,’” he said in a 2017 interview with the right-leaning Arutz Sheva.



Toward the end of the tour, Shmueli used a drone to show a trash fire in an area not easily accessible by car. Credit: Hadas Parush

He says he and Smotrich simply filed a petition against illegal construction in a Palestinian village, and the rest is history. By 2021, the organization was employing dozens of people and receiving about 4 million shekels (around \$1 million) in donations annually, with an additional budget of 366,000 shekels from local authorities.

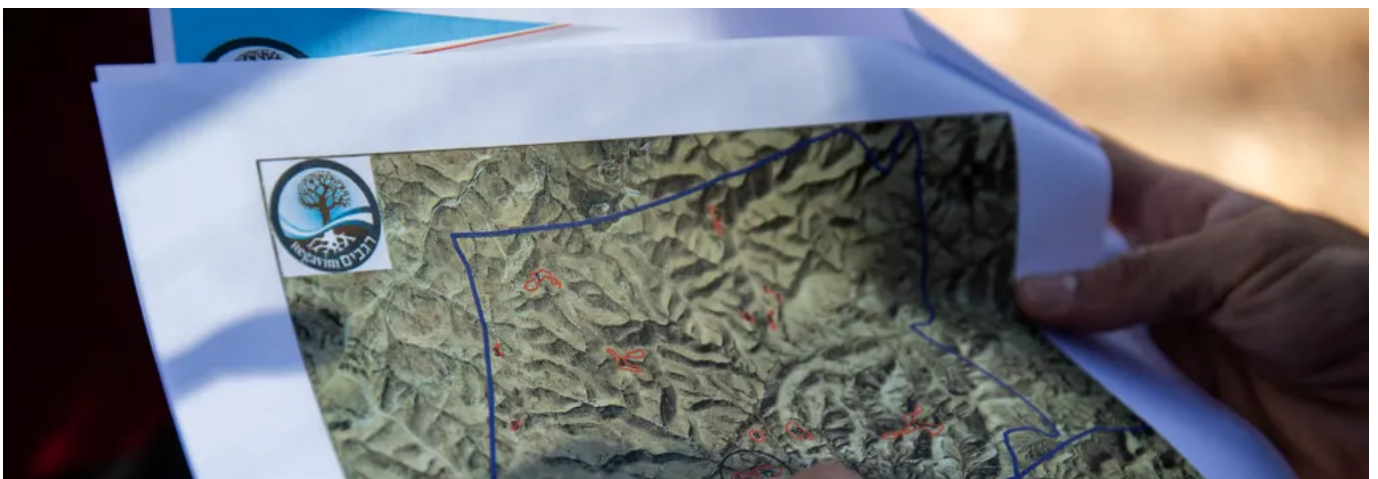
Most importantly, it has obtained broad political influence that is clearly evident and that goes beyond the actions of the Civil Administration. Regavim now essentially functions as part of an entire ecosystem that it helped to create. There is a series of subsidiary foundations, which have sprouted their own offshoots.

One example is Shomrim Al Hanetzach (meaning “guarding eternity”), a subsidiary that broke off from Regavim that independently inspects Palestinian construction at archaeological sites in the West Bank. In 2021, together with the Shiloh Forum (created by the Kohelet Forum), it published a “national emergency plan” against alleged destruction of antiquities in the West Bank.

Indeed, the recent coalition agreement with Otzma Yehudit included a pledge to establish “a national emergency plan to prevent antiquities theft and to strengthen heritage infrastructure in the West Bank,” with a 150-million-shekel budget allotted to the Jerusalem Affairs and Heritage Ministry for this purpose.

Another offshoot of Regavim is Lev Bagalil (“heart in the Galilee”), whose publicity materials state that its goal is to achieve a Jewish demographic majority in the Galilee. On its Twitter page, the group (which was registered as an independent NGO in 2015) boasted that the coalition agreements called for an expansion of the admissions committees for joining Jewish communities.

Besides the other organizations it has spawned, Regavim also collaborates with organizations that share its goals and ideologies, like the Shiloh Forum and the Kohelet Forum. Like the latter, Regavim also backs the coalition’s plan to subjugate the judiciary and is involved in organizing pro-government protests to counter the popular mass protests against the plan.





residents. But even though the Palestinian village has become famous, particularly among right-wing politicians who want to be associated with evicting the residents, it's only one small piece of the puzzle for Regavim.

“It's just one of a thousand places and one of 150 petitions that we have filed against smaller or larger [residential] communities,” Deutsch says. “Khan al-Ahmar is a small symptom of a much larger phenomenon.”

Ironically, on this point, at least in a way, even the lawyers representing Palestinians would agree: Even without demolishing Khan al-Ahmar, Regavim has managed to significantly impact the reality in the West Bank.

“Regavim uses terms like ‘rule of law’ and ‘governance’ to prevent a Palestinian presence in Area C,” says attorney Haitham Khateeb of the Society of St. Yves, an organization that represents Palestinians whose homes are threatened with demolition. Khateeb says there has been an intensification of methods used by the authorities against Palestinian construction, with at least some of the reason for this being Regavim's work.





Administration, an attempt by Palestinians to get the school retroactively authorized, and a petition by Regavim to have it demolished.

Six years after the affair began, a ruling was recently handed down. “The two petitions came before the same judge several days apart,” Khateeb says. “He denied our petition but granted Regavim’s petition, and also went so far as to order that the school be demolished within 60 days.” The judge issued an immediate order to close the school, attended by dozens of children.

The petition against the school in Jubbet ad-Dib is part of a broader effort by Regavim against schools. In 2021, the organization published a report on the topic, asserting that schools are being used as a tool for taking over Area C. Regavim further said that schools were being used to permanently settle “a nomadic population,” and that there was no genuine need for them.



The remains of Palestinian homes destroyed by Israel in the South Hebron Hills. Credit: Alex Levac

But structures that are already built and standing are just one focus for Regavim. Another focus is what could be built in the future. To this end, Regavim has filed a petition calling on the Civil Administration not to consider any building proposals whatsoever that are submitted by the Palestinian Authority or Palestinian local

officials, without exception (although such a thing only happens very infrequently, anyway).

Among Regavim's ambitions for the future are: revoking the "disruptive use order" that allowed the uprooting of a vineyard in the settlement of Shiloh (and caused a minor uproar in the government about a month ago); the assignment of designated police units to enforce laws against illegal construction in the West Bank (similar to an existing one in the Negev); and convening a Knesset session on the EU's involvement in anything that happens in Area C.



A Regavim tour in Khan al-Ahmar, featuring MKs Yuli Edelstein and Danny Danon. Credit: Ohad Zwigenberg

Deutsch says he has only met once with Smotrich so far since this government was formed, while previously, he says, he had an open invitation to the offices of ministers Ze'ev Elkin and Ayelet Shaked in the previous government. "But a lot of the things we want to see advanced appeared in [the government's] plan," he says, "so we hope they keep their word."

Illegal, but it's OK

Although Regavim fights against illegal Palestinian construction, some Regavim employees live in illegally built homes themselves – Eliahu, for example, is one of the founders of the Harasha still- unauthorized outpost, and according to a report by the Kerem Navot organization, a demolition order was once issued for his home.

Avraham Binyamin, Regavim's policy director, and Regavim lawyer Boaz Arazi, both live in buildings for which demolition orders were once issued. In 2017, Haaretz also found that Smotrich's house in the settlement of Kedumim was built in violation of the law and the settlement's official planning.

Asked about this, Regavim said in a statement, "Many of the – supposedly – illegal buildings in the Israeli sector (including buildings in which Regavim employees live) are buildings that were built with the support of Israeli governments, by means of direct funding for construction of the buildings– and in some cases, state institutions were the ones that sold the houses to the families. Regavim works for and supports recognition of these buildings, which are home to thousands of families – who were completely unaware of the absence of the necessary construction permits."

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