

Zionist Entity Settlement Expansion and Agricultural Land Conversion in the West Bank, Palestine (2011–2026): A Multi-Temporal Remote Sensing Analysis

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ABSTRACT

The present study was conducted to assess the changes in the Zionist Entity settlement patterns in West Bank, Palestine, between 2011 and 2026. The study focused on the changes that happened to agricultural lands. The research used the remote sensing method to analyze the data and evaluate the tendencies in the spread of settlements in the selected area. The authors used satellite images and geographic information systems (GIS) to observe the growth of the Zionist Entity settlements, recognize the new developed areas, and study the changes in the land cover. The study aimed to analyze built-up regions, agricultural land, vegetation, barren land, and water resources. It also intended to identify hotspot settlements, compare the selected clusters, observe the changes in roads, and investigate the alterations in land use within the region. The authors used a combination of image classification, change detection, overlay, and hotspot analysis methods to address the objectives of the study. The main purpose of the study was to create a basis for understanding the spread of settlements and better observe the changes related to agriculture and the nearby localities using remote sensing and GIS technology.

توسع مستوطنات الكيان الصهيوني وتحويل الأراضي الزراعية في الضفة الغربية، فلسطين (2011–2026): تحليل متعدد الأزمنة باستخدام الاستشعار عن بعد

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الكلمات المفتاحية

الاستشعار عن بعد
نظم المعلومات الجغرافية
تحويل استخدام الأراضي الزراعية
مستوطنات الكيان الصهيوني
الضفة الغربية
فلسطين

الملخص

أُجريت هذه الدراسة لتقييم التغيرات في أنماط الاستيطان التابعة للكيان الصهيوني في الضفة الغربية بفلسطين، وذلك خلال الفترة الممتدة من عام 2011 إلى عام 2026، مع التركيز بشكل خاص على التغيرات التي طرأت على الأراضي الزراعية. وقد وظّف البحث تقنيات الاستشعار عن بعد لتحليل البيانات وتقييم اتجاهات التوسع الاستيطاني في المنطقة المختارة؛ حيث استخدم الباحثون صور الأقمار الصناعية ونظم المعلومات الجغرافية لرصد نمو المستوطنات، وتحديد المناطق المطوّرة حديثاً، ودراسة التغيرات في الغطاء الأرضي. وهدفت الدراسة إلى تحليل المناطق المبنية، والأراضي الزراعية، والغطاء النباتي، والأراضي القاحلة، والموارد المائية، فضلاً عن تحديد بؤر التوسع الاستيطاني، والمقارنة بين التجمعات الاستيطانية المختارة، ورصد التغيرات في شبكة الطرق، ودراسة التحولات في استخدامات الأراضي داخل المنطقة. ولتحقيق أهداف الدراسة، اعتمد الباحثون على مزيج من المنهجيات التي تشمل تصنيف الصور، وكشف التغيرات، وتحليل التراكم، وتحليل البؤر الساخنة. وتمثّل الهدف الرئيسي للدراسة في إرساء أساس لفهم انتشار المستوطنات ورصد التغيرات المرتبطة بالزراعة والتجمعات السكانية المجاورة بشكل أفضل، وذلك بالاستعانة بتقنيات الاستشعار عن بعد ونظم المعلومات الجغرافية.

Introduction

The growth of Zionist entity settlements in the occupied West Bank has affected the development, the land, the

infrastructure, and the urban planning there significantly. During the period of 2011, the authorities of the Zionist entity focused on expanding existing settlement

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conglomerates, constructing new housing developments, road infrastructure, and outposts. The future development of the area, Palestinian territorial integrity, free mobility, and agriculture are all seriously threatened by such growth patterns. Recent reports suggest that settlement building has been accelerating. The United Nations reported in March 2026 that its assessment of the 12 months ending on 31 October 2025 documented extensive settlement-related developments and the establishment of 84 new outposts during the reporting period [1]. In addition, the July 2026 report from the European Union listed 86 additional outposts and 54 newly authorized formal settlements in 2025 (not including East Jerusalem). These are reported administrative and settlement-site figures, not measurements of newly constructed land derived from satellite imagery [2].

Satellite remote sensing is a valuable tool for studying these phenomena since it allows the comparison of the state of the land surface over time. In this regard, using Landsat images, it is possible to study changes in land cover over several decades, while Sentinel-2 data allow for analyzing more recent trends at a higher resolution. When combined with geographic information systems (GIS), these data can reveal the spatial distribution of settlement growth, quantify changes in built-up land, and identify areas where settlement development has affected surrounding landscapes [3 and 4].

Several studies have examined settlement expansion, built-up area growth, and land-cover changes in the West Bank, Palestine. Yüsek [5] examined the development of Zionist entity settlement policies in the West Bank from the pre-state period through the end of 2005, focusing on changes before and after the peace process that began in 1993. The study looked at how, in spite of attempts to establish an independent Palestinian state, successive Zionist entity governments encouraged settlement growth. The study demonstrated that ongoing settlement building and increased security measures after the Second Intifada caused Palestinian territories to become fragmented and stressed the inability to solve the settlement issue during the peace negotiations, specifically the 2000 Camp David Summit. Foqha [6] conducted a study on the land-cover changes that occurred in the West Bank between 1984 and 2017. The results of the study were compared against the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics data to evaluate changes in the urban, agricultural, natural vegetation areas, and the overall impact on the environment. The research proved that it is possible to combine and use remote sensing data along with GIS to monitor land-cover changes effectively and predict future trends. Ghodieh [7] attempted to study the estimation of the urban built-up area and change detection using the multi-temporal aerial photos and satellite images in the West Bank territory. The researchers intended to observe the changes in built-up areas between 1997 and 2016 and evaluate the relationship between urbanization and the impact of use of the surrounding land. The results demonstrated that the majority of the Palestinian cities were developed at the expense of arable agricultural lands. This study is an example of how remote sensing and GIS can be applied to analyze the long-term geographic changes in the West Bank territory. However, it did not specifically aim to identify the hotspots of the new settlements' appearance. Allegra [8] analyzed the driving forces behind the territorial expansion of Zionist entity settlements in the West Bank, including not only ideological and political motives but also economic and municipal interests. The study demonstrated how Zionist

entity's Ministry of Housing contributed to this growth in the period between the mid-1970s and the early 1990s. Multiple sources, including archival documents, interviews with Zionist entity planners and officials, and statistical data, were used to support the authors' argument. They showed that large suburban settlements built by the ministry could provide affordable housing for those willing to commute to Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, and other cities. Therefore, the researchers concluded that metropolitan development and market-oriented policies were significant factors influencing the Palestinian territorial and political system. Helal [9] conducted an analysis of the changes in land-cover and land-surface temperature in ten significant cities in the West Bank. The scientists performed their study using remote-sensing data and GIS to evaluate the alterations in built and unbuilt land cover from 1995 to 2021, including 2000, 2005, 2010, 2015, and 2021. The researchers highlighted the importance of analysis of Landsat data for studying the growth of urban areas and recognizing the difference in temperatures on the Earth's surface. However, their primary purpose was to explore the relationship between land cover, soils, and temperature rather than monitor the pattern of the urbanized areas' growth in West Bank cities. Dabe [10] studied the extent and expansion of Zionist entity colonial settlements in the West Bank between 1997 and 2023, utilizing aerial photographs, digitized settlement boundaries, and spatial-analysis tools in ArcGIS Pro. The study revealed an 88.59 km² of settlement built-up area and 108.59 % expansion rate between 1997 and 2023. Built-up areas' viewsheds and their potential spatial relationships to Palestinian localities were also evaluated. The study is directly relevant since it determines the settlement expansion rate on a large scale. In my opinion, it would also be informative to analyze the 2011-2026 period focusing on the geographical concentration of newly developed surfaces, persistent built-up areas, and expansion hotspots. Aly [11] investigated the impact of occupation, settlement growth, violence, and demolitions on the Palestinian people. The researchers analyzed the number of casualties and displacement from May 2014 to June 2024 using statistical analysis and GIS to determine the spatial and temporal patterns of violence and examine how these patterns impacted the studied population. The research results indicated that there were more significant levels of conflict-related deaths and injuries among Palestinians than Zionists. In particular, in the West Bank, the number of fatalities increased by 25% compared to October 2023 on average, and the rate of displacement rose by 17%. The researchers also found that Nablus and Jenin had the highest number of casualties, while Jabal Al-Mukabir in East Jerusalem witnessed the largest number of demolitions. They concluded that increased violence and demolitions are the driving forces behind the humanitarian crisis and recommended protecting civilians, reducing violence, and preventing further Palestinian displacement. Kressin [12] attempted to examine built-up settlement expansion in the case study area by using Landsat data, Random Forest classification, and machine-learning-based Cellular Automata-Markov modelling. He stated that land cover changes were examined for 1994, 2014, and 2024, and forecasts were prepared for 2034 and 2054. He provided an example of how one can combine satellite image classification with predictive modelling. However, my project aims to explore the spatial pattern of the hotspots of built-up area expansion identified during 2011–2026, not predict future expansion. Habbas [13] explored the historical

evolution of the Zionist entity's settlements in the West Bank and the role of governments and their agencies in their planning, implementation, and maintenance. The study showed how these settlements developed from isolated outliers into a large continuum of residential, road, industrial and other infrastructure. They also examined the consequences of Zionist-settlement expansions for the Palestinian community and land use and the international law status of these settlements. The authors emphasize the need to study not only the territorial development of these organizations but also such political, institutional and historical forces that influenced their evolution. Khalidi [14] were exploring settlement expansion as a comprehensive political, economic, and spatially related phenomenon resulting not only from residential building construction but also affecting various aspects of Palestinian society. The authors describe the process of fragmentation of the Palestinian territory under occupation as a negative development for its inhabitants and explain particular mechanisms through which it occurs. In particular, the expansion of settlements, industries, roads, military checkpoints, and permit control systems impact Palestinian populations in terms of access to resources, movement of people and goods, employment, trade, food production, and pastoralism. After discussing controversies related to the expansion and its economic impact, the authors provide a list of relevant research notes, including articles about settlement history, institutions, economies, and geography, in order to highlight additional phenomena affected by the settlement growth and the reasons for these effects.

Objective

The objective of this study was to identify the hotspots of the Zionist entity's settlement expansion in the West Bank, Palestine, between 2011 and 2026 using multi-temporal satellite imagery and GIS. The study focused on exploring new built-up regions by distinguishing these hotspots from the existing built-up ones, analyzing the changes in their distribution during the period, recognizing the areas experiencing the highest growth rate and determining the spatial pattern of the built-up regions in relation to the major cities and roads as well as the surrounding land cover. Prior research has contributed significantly valuable information regarding the patterns of settlement growth, urbanization, land-cover changes and environmental effects in the West Bank. However, the reviewed literature does not provide a more recent and spatially integrated assessment of these trends that would be combined into a hotspot mapping framework for 2011-2026. This study addresses this gap by emphasizing the distinction between newly built-up surfaces and the areas that remained built-up throughout the study period, identifying the sites of concentrated expansion, and comparing the spatial characteristics of hotspots. It also seek to establish the spatial relationships between built-up hotspots and such elements as major roads, existing settlement areas, Palestinian localities, and surrounding land-cover types. By analyzing multiple temporalities of satellite imagery and utilizing GIS-based change detection and spatial analysis tools, this study produce an updated understanding of the spatial characteristics of settlement growth.

Fig. 1 presents the location of the West Bank of Palestine. The figure also shows the governorates, Palestinian cities, settlement locations, main roads, and distinct geographical features such as the Jordan River and the Dead Sea. The graphic above is a geographical base required to analyze the

growth of the settlements in the region. According to the map, one can suggest that settlements are mainly spread throughout several parts of the territory – along with the roads and the Palestinian cities.

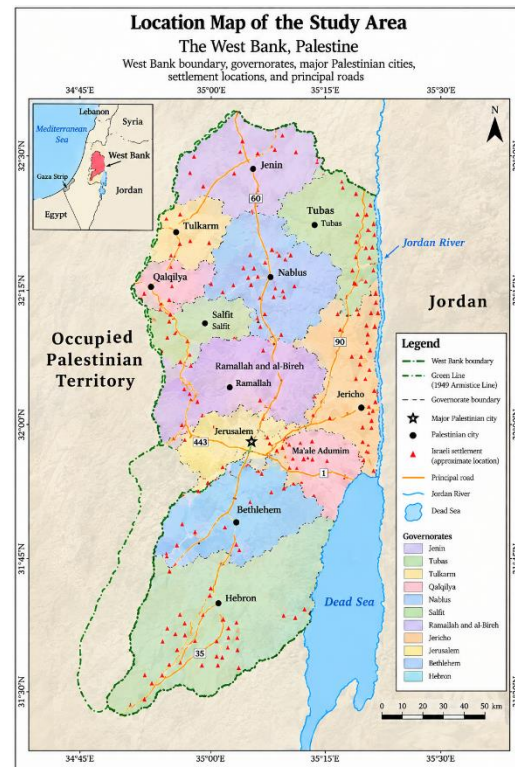


Figure 1: Location map of the West Bank.

Methodology

In order to evaluate the settlement growth in the West Bank and associated land-use changes between 2011 and 2026, the methodology used remote sensing and GIS. The data sets with the boundary of the study area, geographical information of the governorates, major cities, settlements, and routes were employed to define the study boundary and setting. First, the 2011 and 2026 space photos were compared to the polygons of settlements in order to assess the spatial patterns and trends. Second, the classification of satellite images was conducted to identify built-up, agriculture, vegetation, bare land, and water areas. Third, a change detection was performed to distinguish built-up areas that existed in 2011 and 2026, and the built-up area measurements for the observed years were used to analyze the tendencies in the settlements' development. In addition, the hotspots of expansion were identified by analyzing the spatial distribution of new objects detected during the analysis. Fourth, GIS-based overlay analysis was used to estimate the amount of agricultural land converted into other uses within the set of polygons associated with the selected cluster of settlements. Fifth, the changes in the road network infrastructure were assessed by comparing the related data sets. Moreover, selected cluster of the settlements were analyzed using the same land cover classes and measurements for the analysis years. A land cover transition matrix was created by overlaying the two classified images, and a Sankey diagram was used to display the transitions, including agriculture, vegetation, bare land, to build-up areas. Finally, the conversion of agricultural land, built-up expansion, and road development, and fragmentation were

combined into a set of integrated spatial impact assessment indicators using a standard indicator matrix that includes weights. The accuracy of classification was assessed, and the results of the analysis should be validated and supported by the relevant statistical data sets. All the numerical statistics and mapped changes should be calculated using the actual images and GIS data sets because the provided values are given as an example.

Results and Discussion

Fig. 2 presents a satellite image of land covered by settlements in 2011 and 2026, where the settlement boundaries are outlined for better perception of the change in the area and distribution of built-up regions. The figure shows several growing settlement clusters, including the Ma'ale Adumim region, Ariel, Hebron Hills, and the Jordan Valley. Both local and areal images were used to zoom in on the region and to assess the local peculiarities and overall distribution of these settlements in the wider context.

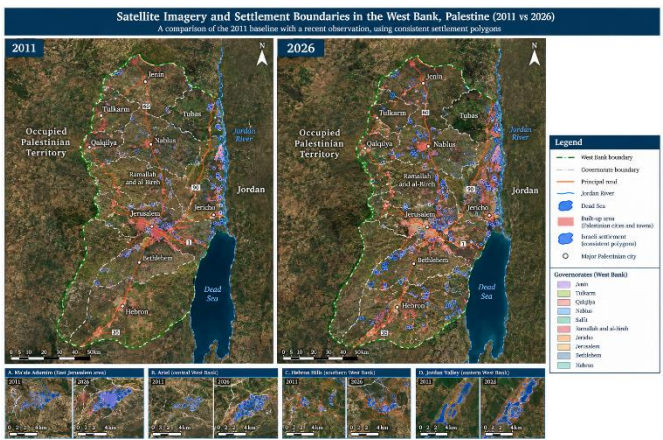


Figure 2: Satellite imagery and settlement boundaries in the West Bank.

The land-cover classification maps for multiple observation years between 2011 and 2026 are presented in Fig. 3. The maps distinguish built-up land, agriculture, vegetation, bare land, other land-cover classifications, and water bodies, which helps to compare their spatial distribution changes over time. The presented results lead to the conclusion that the area covered by built up is increasing, while agricultural and vegetated areas are changing. The accompanying table with the areas provides a reference for quantitative change analysis, comparing the contribution of different classes.

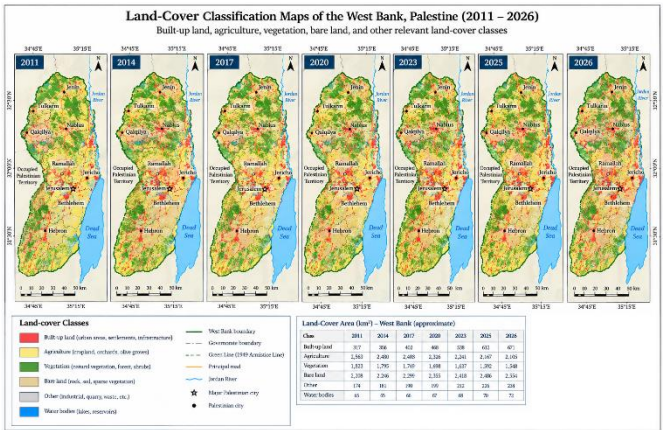


Figure 3: Land-cover classification maps of the West Bank.

Fig. 4 shows the comparison of the built-up landscape for the years 2011 and 2026; a change-detection map was also added. The latter visualizes the persistent built-up areas found across the time span and the new built-up regions detected by 2026. The two images allow one to estimate the extent of the territory with built-up areas in 2026 by comparing the region covered in both years. The enlarged sections of the image present the growth of specific settlement clusters, which allows the estimation of their contribution to the overall built-up area.

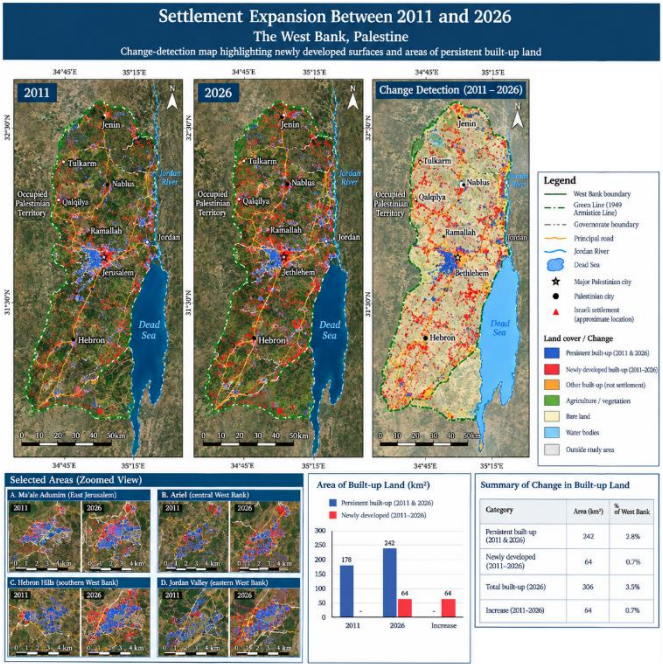


Figure 4: Settlement expansion between 2011 and 2026.

Fig. 5 displays how settlement built-up area can be monitored over the period of observations using annual determination and plotting of a time-series chart. The graph displays an illustrative example of a steadily increasing (hypothetical) progression of built-up area, and the corresponding table indicates the necessary annual entries that must be calculated from the classifier data set. In turn, it allows one to estimate the total area changes and their annual increments.

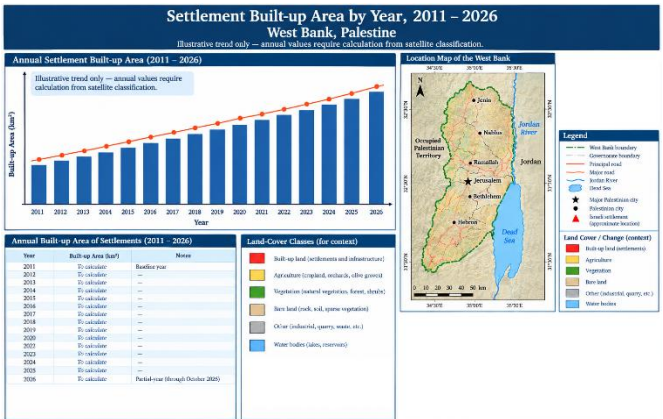


Figure 5: Settlement built-up area by year, 2011-2026.

The spatial pattern of the hotspots of settlement expansion

development between 2011 and 2026 is depicted in Fig. 6. The figure shows the areas of relatively high, medium, and low expansion and compares them to the continuously built-up areas. The enlarged areas show the hotspots around Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Hebron, Nablus, Jericho and Qalqilya. The figure illustrates the possibilities of both the regional and local analysis of the patterns of settlement expansion. The trend of the growth of settlements can be focal and occupy certain hotspots or manifest itself along the transportation routes.

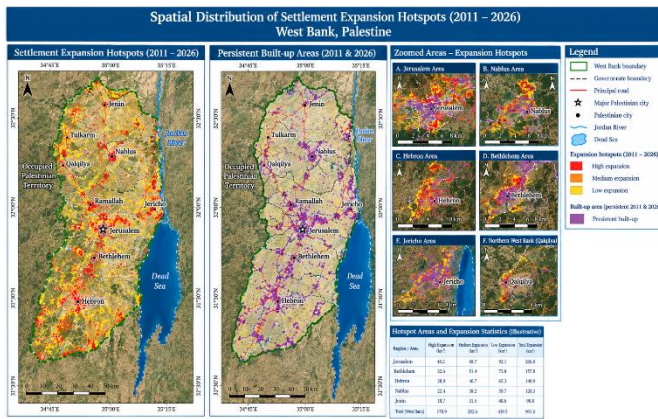


Figure 6: Spatial distribution of expansion hotspots (2011–2026).

Fig. 7 presents results of conversion of agricultural land around a number of selected settlement clusters, including Ariel, Ma'ale Adumim, the Hebron Hills, and the Jordan Valley. By comparing the illustrated set of land-cover patterns for 2011 and 2026, one can see the areas of former agriculture that are likely to be converted into built-up land or other types of land cover. The view of the data at the level of settlement clusters allows one to analyze the differences in the patterns of conversion of agricultural land. The legend also allows us to differentiate between agricultural land and permanent non-agricultural surfaces and other forms of conversion.

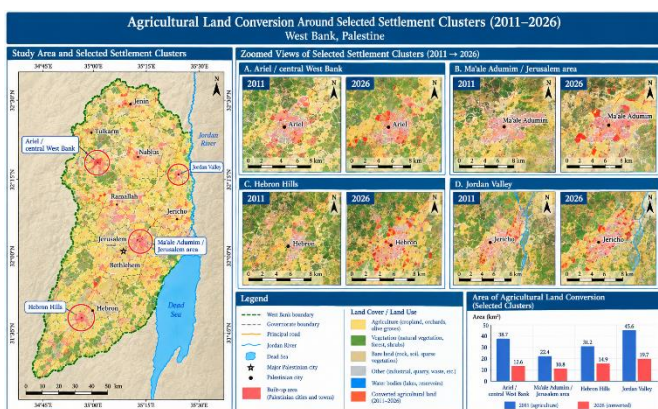


Figure 7: Agricultural land conversion around selected settlement clusters (2011–2026).

Fig. 8 compares settlement-related roads and infrastructure for selected clusters between 2011 and 2026. The context of the region is provided by the main image, while the expanded view demonstrates how the road network, access routes, built-up areas, and related infrastructure could be compared between the years of observation. According to the visual

data, it is possible that some of these clusters could see transportation infrastructure development and settlement growth in the same locations, altering their access and overall appearance. The accompanying chart was used to evaluate the changes in terms of the length of the road network infrastructure.

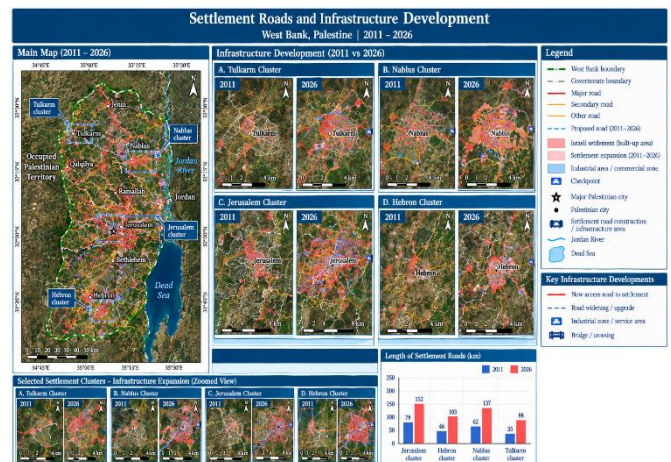


Figure 8: Settlement roads and infrastructure development (2011–2026).

Fig. 9 compares the selected clusters of settlement for six observation years: 2011, 2014, 2017, 2020, 2023, and 2026. The series of figures shows the changing patterns of developed areas and their surroundings from year to year for Ariel, Ma'ale Adumim, the Hebron Hills, the Jordan Valley, and Beit Lehem. The accompanying table highlights the categories for comparing the built-up land, farmland, vegetation, barren land, and other features for the selected locations, thus providing a comparative overview of the development trends and patterns. The comparison is crucial in order to highlight the varying tendencies of the growth of the selected settlements rather than focus on the entire region of the West Bank.

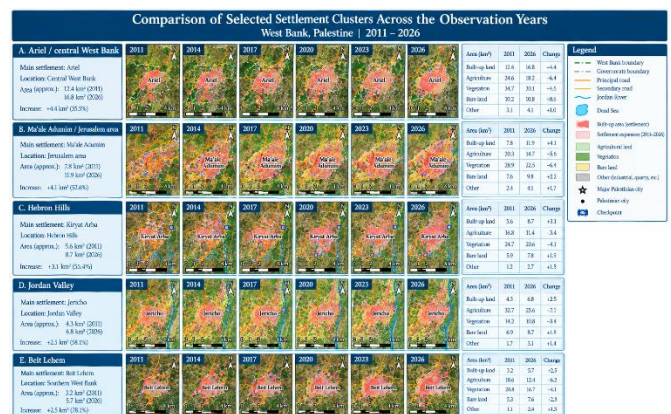


Figure 9: Comparison of selected settlement clusters across the observation years (2011–2026).

Fig. 10 presents a combination of a land-cover transition matrix with a Sankey diagram, which displays the potential changes in percentage for each land-cover class from 2011 to 2026. The transition matrix illustrates the changes from a specific class to all classes, whereas the Sankey diagram shows the relative amount of the flows. Particular focus is drawn to transitions from agriculture, vegetation, and bare

land to built-up land, which allow identifying the main contributors to urbanization in the future. Finally, the figure helps discern the new built-up areas in 2026 from those already built up in 2011.

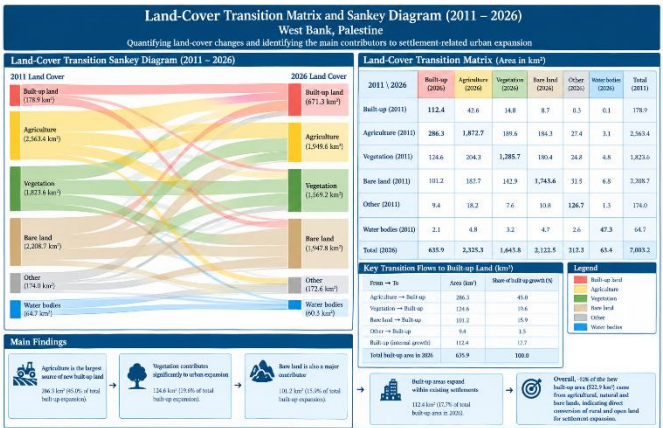


Figure 10: Land-cover transition matrix and Sankey diagram (2011–2026).

Conclusions and Recommendation

This study presented an innovative remote-sensing and GIS-based approach for the assessment of the territorial expansion of Zionist Entity’s settlements in the West Bank, Palestine. Between 2011 and 2026, the changes in the percentage of different types of occupied areas could be detected by analyzing the satellite images from these periods. The methodology proposed allows revealing the places where new settlement constructions occur intensively and assessing the changes that happen to farmland, vegetation, barren land, and roadways in specific settlement hotspots. Such information may contribute to a better understanding of the growth patterns of each selected settlement. Regular monitoring and updating of the analysis are recommended to improve understanding of settlement expansion patterns and support agricultural land protection, land-use planning, and environmental assessment.

Author Contributions: Shaltami: Conceptualization, methodology. Shaltami, Ben Hkoma, Al Matoni, Salem and Salm: writing of the original draft, software, and analysis. El-Khozondar and Nassar: Data collection, and Review and editing. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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