

Settlements

The term "settlements" refers to communities of Jews located in the lands taken by Israel in the 1967 War on the West Bank. (The Sinai, the Golan Heights, and East Jerusalem, also conquered by Israel in that war, have different histories and are treated differently from "the settlements." Israel also had 17 settlements in Gaza but removed them in 2005.) There are approximately 127 settlements and 105 outposts, ranging in size from tiny ones composed of a few mobile homes up to a few with populations of 20,000-30,000. Total population in the settlements and outposts comes to about 268,000 (2006). The larger settlements are located closest to the Green Line, the pre-1967 border. The total number of Palestinians living on the West Bank is more than two million.

The cost to Israel of building and maintaining settlements has been obscured, but in September of 2003, the Israeli daily Haaretz published a major study of the question. By putting together construction costs for infrastructure, subsidies for settlers to move to settlements, and many other costs, the newspaper concluded that the "nonmilitary" cost to Israel was on the order of \$560,000,000 per year. That is over 1% of the national budget, or about \$2,100 per settler. Military costs to protect the settlers, which are considerable and on top of the \$560,000,000, were not determinable. (These figures also include costs that were connected to the maintenance of settlements in Gaza.)

Israelis have moved to the West Bank for one or more of four principal reasons. Some religious nationalist Jews move there because they consider all the land from the Mediterranean Sea to the Jordan River to have been given by God to the Jews, and thus they feel the obligation to live on this land and control it. Some nationalistic Jews consider the land from the Mediterranean to the Jordan to be historically the home of the Jews, and thus they feel the obligation to reclaim this land. Still others consider living on the West Bank to be a matter of national security, enlarging the size of Israel and providing more protection against attack. And, finally, other Israeli Jews, a majority of the settlers, moved to settlements for economic reasons: they found there homes that are convenient to urban work centers, and they benefited from significant government subsidies to buy homes that would be unaffordable in Israel proper, with more open space and a better "quality of life" than in older Israeli cities and towns.

Israelis living inside Green Line ("Israel proper") have a wide range of opinion about settlements. Many express deep hostility toward settlements as obstacles to peace. Others sympathize with either the settlers' religious, nationalistic, or security feelings. And many Israelis have deeply mixed judgments. Though they may see the settlements as an obstacle to peace, they may also admire the courage of settlers willing to live according to their beliefs, seeing them as descendants of those Israeli pioneers who founded settlements to develop and defend the country, both before 1948 and after. Many Israelis worry that the settlers may be right and that removing settlements will only encourage and increase the number of the Palestinians who "really" want to destroy all of Israel.

Palestinian objection to settlements has been based on the conviction that the West Bank is Palestinian land. Palestinian tactics have included diplomatic pressure, legal action, and terrorist shootings and bombings. The interaction between settlers and Palestinians has included provocation and violence on both sides. Feelings of fear, distrust, and hostility dominate the relationships.

Whether the government should permit or encourage settlements has been a source of controversy since immediately after the 1967 war. Though every Israeli government since 1967 has permitted at least some settlement expansion, some have encouraged it more than others. Those opposed to settlements have argued that:

- the land should be kept available as a bargaining chip with the Palestinians,
- the settlements are illegal,
- the settlements interfere with the development of a Palestinian state,
- that the settlements interfere with Palestinian life and thus make it harder to establish a trust relationship with them, and
- that by angering Palestinians, settlements make security issues worse.

And some argue that creating settlements makes pullback harder or impossible. If pullback does not occur, they argue, Israel will have three terrible choices: to administer a huge and hostile Palestinian population; to allow the Palestinians to become Israeli citizens with the inevitability that Palestinians will become the majority within a predictable future; or to expel large numbers of Palestinians.

Settlements have expanded almost constantly in the last 35 years. Some governments built settlements as a matter of policy. Even governments that did not have such a policy (e.g. that of Ehud Barak, 1999-2001) allowed expansion, apparently with the thought that it would keep settlers satisfied as a political group while a peace agreement would remove these settlements eventually. In addition to supporting construction of new communities, governments also supported the creation of infrastructure among the settlements, including highways and tunnels. This infrastructure has strengthened settlements and also caused the expropriation of large sections of West Bank land.

The initiative of settlers produced settlement expansion even when governments objected. One tactic involved moving physical structures (mobile homes, tents) onto empty land and then refusing to move. When this resulted in a standoff between settlers and government orders to remove the structures, the resulting "compromise" left a new settlement community in place.

The policy of settlement expansion took a sharp turn in 2005 when the Israeli government under Ariel Sharon evacuated all settlers and closed all settlements in Gaza. Though much anxiety preceded the evacuation, it came off with little violence and no fatalities. The settlers, those from Gaza and those on the West Bank, and their supporters, are bitter about the evacuation, and fearful that it portends future withdrawals of settlers from the West Bank. Instability in Gaza, and rocket fire from Gaza into Israel, have been blamed by others on the fact that the withdrawal was unilateral, involving no negotiation with the Palestinian leadership.

The Israeli government makes the case that the settlements are legal under international law, since, they argue, there was no sovereign nation in place when this territory was conquered. This view is not shared by any other country or international organization. There are a number of arguments involved here. They revolve around interpretations of Resolution 242 of the UN Security Council, Article 49 of the Fourth Geneva Convention, and the Oslo Agreement of 1993 between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). Israel has not been successful at having its interpretations accepted by any official body outside Israel.

Settlements have been the subject of negotiation between Israelis and Palestinians, at Camp David and in Taba in 2000 and 2001, and, unofficially, in Geneva in 2003. Though Palestinians have insisted rhetorically that all settlements must be removed, the actual negotiations have focused on two questions: Which settlements can remain, and which Israeli land (how much and where) will be traded to the Palestinians in return for those settlements that do remain. The Camp David-Taba negotiations (2000-01) called for all settlements to be removed except for the largest (Ariel, Maale Adumim, Etzion Block) that are more or less near the Green Line; the Geneva Accord (non-official negotiation in 2003) came to a similar conclusion except that Ariel was removed.

The arguments about the settlements and defense have two parts. One is that the narrowness of Israel requires a defense structure at least along the Jordan River to protect against ground attack from the east. The counter argument is that military threats to Israel are no longer from advancing armies, but rather from missiles fired from afar. The second security argument is that the major ground threat to Israel comes from Palestinian terrorism. Settlements in this view are seen as a way to separate and weaken Palestinian society, and thus to better control terrorism as it emanates from the West Bank. The counter argument is that terrorism is stimulated by the presence of settlements.

US policy regarding settlements has been consistently opposed to their existence and their expansion, but no US administration has gone beyond rhetorical comment.

Prepared for Brit Tzedek by David Matz, director of the graduate program in dispute resolution at the University of Massachusetts at Boston.