

Frequently Asked Questions: Natural Growth

1) What is “natural growth” in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?

“Natural growth” is the term used by the Israeli government to refer to its perceived need to expand existing settlements, both within and beyond their borders, in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. The authorities claim that additional construction is necessary to accommodate the housing needs of growing Jewish families – including the desire of settlers’ adult children to settle in the same place.

The current impasse between Israel and the United States regarding settlements is centered on the question of “natural growth.” The US-backed 2003 Road Map to Peace, by then-Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, called for a complete settlement freeze. The Obama administration has said that it will insist that the current Israeli government abide by a complete cessation of construction, but the Netanyahu government has replied that the Bush administration allowed for exceptions to the “freeze.”

2) Is all settlement expansion for purposes of “natural growth”?

Not to date. According to Israel’s Central Bureau of Statistics, 63% of population growth in the settlements in 2007 resulted from “natural growth” (the excess of births over deaths) and 37% of the growth came from immigration (the excess of newcomers moving in over those moving out). Bottom line, there are today more than 50,000 additional settlers living in the West Bank than at the time that the Sharon government signed the Road Map to Peace in 2003.

Overall, the annual population growth in settlements, at 5.6 percent, far outstrips the Israeli average of 1.8 percent. The settlements’ disproportionately high level of state-supported building and other subsidized services compared with most regions of Israel has long been used a state-backed incentive to encourage Israelis with or aiming to have large families to relocate to these communities. It’s worth noting that within the internationally recognized borders of Israel, there is no such government commitment to provide economical housing for adult Jewish children wishing to remain in the community in which their parents live, nor to provide larger homes for expanding Jewish families.

3) Does Israel accommodate Palestinian “natural growth”?

On the contrary. For Palestinian families with Israeli residency in East Jerusalem, the government has a tacit policy of discouraging building for natural growth by denying building permits, as well as the routinely demolishing homes built without such permits. Palestinian communities on the West Bank are hemmed in on all sides by a long list of Israeli impediments: the security barrier, Israeli-only access roads, closed military zones, permanent road blocks, and of course the settlements themselves.

4) What is U.S. and Israeli policy on natural growth?

The U.S. and Israeli governments agreed to freeze “all settlement activity (including natural growth of settlements),” in Phase One of the Road Map to Peace, signed by Israel, the Palestinian Authority, the “Quartet” (the U.S., E.U., Russia, and the U.N.) in 2003.

According to Israeli officials, however, the Bush administration had an oral agreement with Israel that building could continue within the boundaries of certain settlement blocs – under the condition that no

new land was expropriated, no special economic incentives were offered, and no entirely new settlements were built. Former Bush administration officials have given conflicting accounts of these discussions. The Obama administration has said that it will not be bound by informal oral agreements for which Israel can produce no record. In reference to the signed Road Map agreement, the current administration insists that a “settlement freeze” means a complete cessation of all new building in settlements, with no exceptions.

In theory, every U.S. administration has opposed settlement construction since 1967, when Israel’s victory in the Six Day War left the West Bank and Gaza Strip under its control. The Johnson, Nixon, Ford and Carter administrations called settlements “illegal,” after which time there was no reference to their legality, as the American focus shifted to the fact that settlements present an obstacle to peace.

The biggest change to this approach came in 2004, under the Bush Administration: Then-Prime Minister Ariel Sharon requested and was given a letter from the President, stating that “in light of new realities on the ground, including already existing major Israeli population centers, it is unrealistic to expect that the outcome of final status negotiations will be a full and complete return to the armistice lines of 1949.” This was interpreted to mean that the U.S. government had accepted Israel’s future annexation of certain settlement blocs, though it is important to note the careful language employed: “*existing* major Israeli population centers” - not future construction.

5) Why is natural growth a problem in negotiating a final status peace agreement?

According to most formulations, the borders of a Palestinian state will follow the internationally recognized “Green Line” – the pre-Six Day War borders of 1967 Israel – with mutually-accepted territorial exchanges, in particular around the larger settlement blocs. The constant construction and expansion in these blocs – ostensibly to accommodate “natural growth” – is viewed as an attempt to predetermine the borders of any future Palestinian state, or, as it has long been expressed in Hebrew, “establish facts on the ground.” The more people, the more houses, the more roads, the harder it will be to negotiate changes around the borders – especially with regards to the inevitable evacuation of a number of settlements. The position of most of the international community is that Israel should not attempt to predetermine borders through the creation of facts on the ground.

6) Where does the U.S. Congress stand on natural growth?

A growing number of prominent U.S. Senators and Representatives, including several Jewish Congressmembers, have begun to openly express their concerns over Israel’s settlement policy. These include Jewish members of Congress such as Sen. Carl Levin, chair of the Senate Armed Services Committee, Rep. Howard Berman, chair of the House Foreign Relations Committee, and Rep. Henry Waxman, a senior Democrat, as well as the chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Sen. John Kerry. During Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s visit to the White House, several Jewish lawmakers met with the Prime Minister and expressed the opinion that “it was their responsibility to make him very, very aware of the concerns of the administration and Congress,” according to a congressional aide.

7) What is the Palestinian and Arab view of natural growth?

Both the Palestinians and the Arab nations view “natural growth” as an Israeli excuse to continue to illegally expropriate Palestinian land. They demand that “natural growth,” along with other types of

settlement construction, be stopped, as a precondition to peace negotiations and normalizing ties with Israel.

Moreover, it's important to remember that every home that Israel builds on the West Bank is a constant reminder to the Palestinians that their leadership has failed to achieve almost anything for them – that indeed, their daily lives are now more difficult than in the past, and more of their land gone. For the Palestinian leadership to get support from their own people, they will need to be able to show tangible improvement on the ground. Settlement expansion of any kind, including “natural growth,” will only damage the prospects of achieving this aim.

Resources for Information on Natural Growth:

Foundation for Middle East Peace. <http://www.fmep.org/>

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