

Jewish Settlements in West Bank

Jewish settlements in the West Bank have drawn serious ire from the international community for their supposed illegality and, even worse, their purported impediment to advancing the peace negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians. While Israeli's debate vociferously the logic behind establishing communities in territory that may one day be ceded for the creation of a Palestinian state, the settlements merit is unquestionable - the right of Jews to live in the West Bank is clear and legal.

History

Jews have actually been living in Judea and Samaria, the area commonly referred to as the [West Bank](#), for hundreds of years - far longer than any Palestinian has lived in the area. In fact, the only time in recent history that Jews did not live in the area was between 1948 to 1967, when the occupying Jordanian government prohibited Jews from remaining in the West Bank.

After conquering the West Bank following the 1967 Six-Day War, [Israel](#) sought peace with its Arab neighbors for two decades before the first Jewish community was even established in the [West Bank](#). No Arab leader, though, was willing to negotiate at the time and Israel decided to allow the building of cities in the region.

Israel did not begin to build large numbers of settlements until after 1977. That is also when [Egypt negotiated peace](#). Israel froze settlement building afterward in the hope that other Arab states would follow Egypt's example. None did.

Israel built then allowed the building of more settlements in the 1980's and 1990's; [King Hussein](#) of Jordan, meanwhile, made [peace with Israel](#), and settlements were not an issue. Likewise, during the Oslo agreements in the early 1990's, Israel did not agree to dismantle any settlements or freeze construction and the Palestinians agreed.

In 2005, after several years of bloodshed, terror and stalled peace talks with the Palestinians, Prime Minister [Ariel Sharon](#) implemented his [disengagement plan](#) and completely withdrew every Israeli soldier and settler from the [Gaza Strip](#). Israel safely evacuated more than 8,500 Israeli settlers and destroyed more than 10 settlements.

Legality

Jews should have a right to live anywhere. To say they are not allowed to live there is the definition of anti-Semitism, discrimination and bigotry.

Neither the [Declaration of Principles](#) of September 13, 1993, nor the [Interim Agreement](#) contain any provisions prohibiting or restricting the establishment or expansion of Jewish communities in the [West Bank](#) or [Gaza Strip](#).

Additionally, [Settlements](#) do not violate the [Fourth Geneva Convention](#), which prohibits the forcible transfer of people of one state to the territory of another state that it has occupied as a result of a war. The intention of this protocol was to insure that local populations who came under occupation would not be forced to move. Jews are not being forced to go to the West Bank (nor are Palestinians being forced to stay or go); on the contrary, they are voluntarily moving back to places where they, or their ancestors, once lived before being expelled by others.

Moreover, to say that Israel illegally annexed the territory from its prior "owners" holds no water. The West Bank never legally belonged to [Jordan](#) and certainly not to the Palestinians, who were never the sovereign authority in any part of the land. The British, who controlled the land during the Mandate Period, withdrew any legal claims they had to the territory; the Ottoman Empire who held the area before the British no longer exists.

The question of the future status of [settlements](#) - whether they will be destroyed entirely, fall under Palestinian authority or be annexed to Israel - is the subject of final status [negotiations with the Palestinians](#). The fact that Israel continues to agree to discuss the matter illustrates a willingness to compromise on this issue.

"Consensus" Settlements

An estimated 80 percent of the settlers live in what are in effect suburbs of major Israeli cities such as [Jerusalem](#) and [Tel Aviv](#). Virtually the entire Jewish population believes Israel must retain these areas to ensure its security, and that they could be brought within Israel's [borders](#) with [minor modifications](#) of the [1949 Armistice lines](#). President Obama has reiterated his belief that Israel should hold on to these major population centers with the caveat that the Palestinians would receive equal land in return.

Of the 122 officially recognized West Bank [settlements](#), with an estimated population of 303,900 in 2010, more than 60 percent of the Jews live in just five [settlement](#) blocs (Ma'ale Adumim, Modiin Ilit, Ariel, Gush Etzion, Givat Ze'ev) near the [1949 Armistice lines](#). The Arab city of [Nablus](#) alone is larger than those six Jewish cities put together. It is inconceivable that Israel would evacuate large cities such as Ma'ale Adumim, with a population of more than 35,000, even after a peace agreement with the Palestinians. Even [Yasser Arafat](#) grudgingly accepted at [Camp David](#) the idea that the large [settlement blocs](#) would be part of Israel.

As the table shows, these are large communities with thousands of residents. Evacuating them would be the equivalent of dismantling major American cities the size of Maryland's capital, Annapolis, Juneau, Alaska, or Augusta, Georgia. On a proportional basis, compared to the total population of the country, these blocs would be the equivalent of U.S. municipalities with populations ranging from a half million (e.g., Boston, Denver, Seattle, Washington, D.C.) to 1.7 million (e.g., Philadelphia and Houston).

| Bloc Name | No. of Communities | Population | Approximate Area (sq. miles) |
|---------------|--------------------|------------|------------------------------|
| Gush Etzion | 18 | 54,939 | 10 |
| Ariel | 15 | 41,720 | 47 |
| Ma'ale Adumim | 6 | 40,210 | 28 |
| Givat Ze'ev | 5 | 12,916 | 3 |
| Modiin Illit | 4 | 51,773 | 2.2 |
| Total | 48 | 201,558 | 90.2 |

- **Ma'ale Adumim** is a suburb of Israel's capital, barely three miles outside [Jerusalem's](#) city limits, a ten-minute drive away. Ma'ale Adumim is not a recently constructed outpost on a hilltop; it is a 30-year-old community that is popular because it is clean, safe, and close to where many residents work. It is also the largest Jewish city in the territories, with a population of 34,324 (Dec 2009). Approximately 6,000 people live in surrounding settlements that are included in the Ma'ale bloc. Israel has long planned to fill in the empty gap between Jerusalem and this bedroom community (referred to as the E1 project). The corridor is approximately 3,250 acres and does not have any inhabitants, so no Palestinians would be displaced. According to the [Clinton plan](#), Ma'ale Adumim was to be part of Israel.
- The **Gush Etzion Bloc** consists of 18 communities with a population of more than 54,000 just 10 minutes from [Jerusalem](#). Jews lived in this area prior to 1948, but the Jordanian Legion destroyed the settlements and killed 240 women and children during Israel's [War of Independence](#). After Israel recaptured the area in [1967](#), descendants of those early settlers reestablished the community. The largest of the settlements is the city of Betar Illit with nearly 35,000 residents as of December 2009.
- The **Givat Ze'ev bloc** includes five communities just northwest of [Jerusalem](#). Givat Ze'ev, with a population of just under 11,000, is by far the largest.
- **Modiin Illit** is a bloc with four communities. The city of Modiin Illit is the bloc's largest with more than 46,000 people situated just over the [Green Line](#), about 23 miles northwest of [Jerusalem](#) and the same distance east of [Tel Aviv](#).
- **Ariel** is now the heart of the second most populous [bloc](#) of settlements. The city is located just 25 miles east of [Tel Aviv](#) and 31 miles north of [Jerusalem](#). Ariel and the surrounding communities expand Israel's narrow waist (which was just 9 miles wide prior to [1967](#)) and ensure that Israel has a land route to the Jordan Valley in case Israel needs to fight a land war to the east. It is more controversial than the other consensus settlements because it is the furthest from the [1949 Armistice Line](#), extending approximately 12 miles into the [West Bank](#). Nevertheless, [Barak's](#) proposal at [Camp David](#) in 2000 included Ariel among the settlement blocs to be annexed to Israel; the [Clinton plan](#) also envisioned incorporating Ariel within the new borders of Israel.

Would the incorporation of settlement blocs prevent the creation of a contiguous Palestinian state? A look at a [map](#) shows that it would not. The total area of these communities is only about 1.5% of the [West Bank](#). A kidney-shaped state linked to the [Gaza Strip](#) by a secure passage would be contiguous. Some argue that the E1

project linking Ma'ale Adumim to [Jerusalem](#) would cutoff east Jerusalem, but even that is not necessarily true as Israel has proposed constructing a four-lane underpass to guarantee free passage between the [West Bank](#) and the Arab sections of [Jerusalem](#).

Ultimately, Israel may decide to unilaterally disengage from the [West Bank](#) and determine which settlements it will incorporate within the borders it delineates. Israel would prefer, however, to negotiate a peace treaty with the Palestinians that would specify which Jewish communities will remain intact within the mutually agreed border of Israel, and which will need to be evacuated. Israel will undoubtedly insist that some or all of the “consensus” blocs become part of Israel.