West Bank Settlements: 
Frequently Asked Questions

What is a settlement?

“Settlement” is the term used to denote Israeli civilian communities built in territory conquered by Israel in the Six Day War of June 1967. This territory is comprised of the West Bank (including East Jerusalem), the Gaza Strip, the Golan Heights and the Sinai Peninsula. These towns, villages and neighborhoods have been a major issue in the peace process since 1967 and remain highly controversial.

Settlements in the Sinai were evacuated in 1979, following Israel’s historic peace agreement with Egypt and the return of the Sinai Peninsula to Egypt, and settlements in the Gaza Strip were evacuated as part of Israel’s unilateral “disengagement” from Gaza in 2005.

Therefore, today settlements only exist in the West Bank (including East Jerusalem) and the Golan Heights.

Are settlements illegal?

Most international lawyers consider settlements to be violations of Article 49, paragraph 6 of the Geneva Convention of 1949, which declares it illegal for an occupying force to transplant civilian populations into occupied lands. Israel’s High Court of Justice has refused to rule on the legality of settlements, while Israeli government attorneys have argued that the Geneva Convention does not apply to settlements.

Who built the settlements?

The Israeli government has directly and indirectly funded or subsidized the construction of settlements, spurring debate and controversy in the international community. In addition, settlements receive funding from outside sources, including non-profit organizations that fundraise for them in the United States.

Why do people move to settlements?

Some settlers move to the West Bank for economic reasons or because they seek to improve their quality of life. As a result of government investment and incentives, Israelis can enjoy a much higher quality of life in settlements than inside Israel, and at a much lower cost. Others are motivated by ideology. They view these territories as land that belongs to the Jewish people by divine decree. They believe that settling the West Bank hastens the coming of the Messiah. Others – mainly ultra-Orthodox Jews – moved to the
West Bank mainly because of the availability of cheap, segregated housing in communities that are exclusively ultra-Orthodox.

What are outposts?

Outposts are settlements built without official Israeli government sanction, typically after the mid-1990s, when the Israeli government undertook to stop approving new settlements. Unlike most settlements in the West Bank, outposts clearly violate Israeli law. However, some of the outposts have received funding from government agencies. At the request of then-Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, in 2005 Israel’s Government Attorney Talia Sasson produced a report on outposts, which – among other things – details how the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Housing and Construction spent state budget money to support outposts. Under the Roadmap Agreement, Israel is obligated to evacuate all outposts built since 2001, but so far only about a dozen outposts have actually been removed.

When did the settlement enterprise start and how did it develop?

Before the 1967 Six Day War, the West Bank (including East Jerusalem) was part of Jordan, the Golan Heights were part of Syria, and the Sinai Peninsula and the Gaza Strip were under Egyptian control. Israel conquered all of these territories during the Six Day War.

Shortly after the War, Israel started settling the West Bank. In late 1967, Israel’s Ministerial Committee for Settlements began to plan an official settlement map. Shortly thereafter, Israel established the settlement of Kfar Etzion in an area south of Jerusalem – a site targeted because before 1948 a Jewish community had existed there. A year later, religious-nationalist activists launched a drive to settle areas of the West Bank heartland, including in the north, around Nablus, and in the south, in and around Hebron. Hebron was particularly appealing to settlers because a Jewish community lived in Hebron before 1948 and because the city is viewed by religious Jews as the cradle of Judaism. These first settlements were justified chiefly by ideological reasons (settling historic Israel) but also by the argument that they contributed to Israel's defense (the need to create “strategic depth” to protect Israel's interior).

Under a Labor-led government, around 30 settlements were established in the West Bank between 1967 and 1977, home at the time to approximately 5,000 settlers, primarily in the Jordan Valley. However, under Prime Minister Menachem Begin of Likud (1977-1983), a new pattern emerged: settlements were established in the West Bank heartland and between the central ridge of the West Bank and the Green Line, kicking off a trend of accelerated construction. Dozens of such settlements were created during this period, along with settler-focused infrastructure, with the clear goal of ensuring that the West Bank would forever remain in Israeli hands.

What role did ideology play in the development of the settlement movement?

Ideological movements have long played a part in the growth of settlements. Gush Emunim, led by Rabbi Moshe Levinger, was the chief movement. Levinger encouraged settlement construction on the grounds that the land had been given to the Jewish people by God and that settling it would hasten the coming of the Messiah.

What was the defense rationale for building settlements?
Since the beginning of the settlement movement, many Israeli officials defended the settlements on the grounds that they were vital to Israel’s security. For example, in July 1967, almost immediately after the June 1967 War, then-Defense Minister Yigal Alon unveiled his plan to consolidate Israel’s hold on what he believed to be crucial areas of the West Bank. The “Alon Plan” called for Israel to retain the Jordan Valley and the eastern slopes of the mountain ridge running through the West Bank (an area sparsely inhabited by Palestinians), in order to protect against an Arab attack from the east. The plan also called for establishing Israeli settlements in these areas as a way of defining the land that would eventually be annexed to Israel. While the Alon Plan was never formally adopted by any Israeli government, it nonetheless became the framework for Labor Party policy vis-à-vis the West Bank during the 1970s and 1980s.

**What is the significance of the plan known as “the Roadmap” regarding settlements?**

In April 2003, the Quartet (the United States, European Union, United Nations and Russia) proposed a “Performance-Based Roadmap to a Permanent Two-State Solution to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict,” commonly referred to as “the Roadmap.” Among other things, Phase I of this plan called for an end to Palestinian violence and terrorism, and in parallel, for a complete settlement freeze (explicitly including so-called “natural growth”) as well as the immediate dismantling of settlement outposts that were constructed after March 2001. The Roadmap, which envisioned a peace agreement within a few years, remains a constantly-referenced document in peace efforts, although its sequence and timetable have been ignored.

**What is the significance of Israel’s disengagement from Gaza?**

In 2005 Israel implemented a unilateral disengagement from the Gaza Strip, evacuating all 17 settlements in Gaza and pulling out its military forces from the Strip. In addition, Israel evacuated four small, isolated settlements in the northern West Bank. Prime Minister Ariel Sharon’s chief of staff has suggested that the plan was intended to divert attention from the Roadmap. This was the broadest dismantlement of Israeli settlements in areas that Israel captured in 1967.

**What is the controversy regarding the “moratorium” on settlement construction?**

In November 2009, under pressure from the Obama Administration, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu agreed to a partial settlement “moratorium,” or slowdown. Under this moratorium, construction already underway before November 25, 2009 was permitted to continue, along with a number of other exceptions, mainly construction in East Jerusalem. The moratorium, which was ostensibly intended to show Israeli good faith as the Obama Administration attempted to re-start Israeli-Palestinian peace talks, was limited to 10 months, expiring on September 25, 2010. The moratorium was not immediately renewed, despite the Obama administration’s strong assertion that it should be renewed.

**What is the relationship between the West Bank barrier (the “wall” or the “fence”) and the settlements?**

In 2002, Israel began construction of a barrier intended to separate Israel from the West Bank. The Israeli government planned and constructed the barrier under heavy public pressure from Israelis who wanted an end to the phenomenon of cross-border
Palestinian suicide bombers. The barrier sparked – and continues to spark – controversy, largely because it does not follow the route of the Green Line. Instead, in many areas it cuts deep into the West Bank, de facto annexing settlements, settlement blocs, and adjoining land to Israel. The barrier has wide support within Israel, where it is seen as an important security measure that has succeeded in reducing terrorist attacks. Once completed, the barrier will extend from Beit Shean in the north to Arad in the south; the most controversial parts of the barrier are still under construction. The proposed route leaves 55 settlements and significant West Bank territory on the west side of the barrier, contiguous with Israel.

What about settlements in East Jerusalem?

Immediately after the 1967 War Israel annexed what had been the Jordanian municipality of East Jerusalem as well as much of the surrounding area, and combined this greater East Jerusalem with Israeli West Jerusalem to form the newly expanded municipality of Jerusalem. The international community, including the United States, does not recognize Israel’s annexation of this part of the West Bank, nor does it officially recognize Jerusalem as Israel’s capital. Israel has made large investments in establishing large Jewish-Israeli neighborhoods – also called settlements – in East Jerusalem. As a result, more than 180,000 Jews live in East Jerusalem today, alongside East Jerusalem’s 250,000 Palestinians. East Jerusalem was not included in Prime Minister Netanyahu’s 2009 settlement “moratorium.” East Jerusalem and the adjacent West Bank “settlement blocs” of Givat Ze’ev (extending to the edges of the Palestinian city of Ramallah) and Ma’ale Adumim (extending almost halfway to Jericho) are all on the west side of the Israel’s barrier in what is sometimes referred to as the “Jerusalem envelope.” This means that Palestinian East Jerusalem is separated and to an increasing degree sealed off from the rest of the West Bank.

What are settlement blocs?

“Settlement blocs” refer to areas in the West Bank where clusters of settlements have been established in relatively close proximity to one another, and which are home to the majority of settlers. In the current political context, the term “settlement bloc” has become a code name for those areas that according to the Israeli national “consensus” should become part of Israel under any future peace agreement. The settlement blocs are not clearly defined and do not have a distinct legal status. At present, the best indication of Israel’s definition of the blocs is the route of the security barrier. The barrier defines three blocs around Jerusalem (the Ma’ale Adumim bloc, the Giv’at Ze’ev bloc, and the Etzion bloc), as well as the Modi’in Illit bloc further northwest of Jerusalem. In addition, “fingers” in the route of the barrier delineate the Ariel bloc and the Karnei Shomron bloc.