



The Israeli Settlements and Palestinians

Much has been written and argued over the Israeli settlements that now exist on land that the International Community considers to be the “occupied territories” of the incipient Palestinian state. That state is supposed to include the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem. It is being argued that the existence of these Israeli settlements is the cause of the impasse between Israel and the Palestinians in their mutually stated aim of creating two states, living side by side in peace and security.



In 2005, then-Prime Minister of Israel Ariel Sharon believed in that vision and with the approval of the Israeli parliament ordered the dismantling of all 21 Jewish settlements in the Gaza Strip as the first step in reaching a peace agreement with the Palestinians. Those Jewish settlements included private homes, schools, synagogues, farms, businesses, hothouses, and small industries that actually provided Israel with the best produce available. Indeed, the unilateral dismantling of those communities, without any reciprocal gestures by the Palestinians, was traumatic for the settlers, and represented considerable economic loss for the Israelis. But they were willing to make that sacrifice in the interest of peace.

But the reaction of the Palestinians was not quite what the Israelis expected. First, all of the productive assets left behind by the Israelis were destroyed. Then the Gaza territory was taken over by the Hamas party, which saw their victory in Gaza as merely one step in an ongoing war to destroy Israel. They began their rocket attacks on towns and communities in Southern Israel, which they hoped would force Israel to abandon the land. However, the attacks had just the opposite effect. Israel had expected to achieve peace with Gaza, and instead they got war, which finally forced the Israeli Defense Force to invade Gaza in January 2009 to put a stop to the constant reign of terror.

The Israelis realized that they had made a terrible mistake at their own expense, and that any further withdrawal of Jews from the so-called occupied Palestinian territory would not take place without the approval of the Israeli nation.

As of 2010, over 327,000 Israelis lived in the 121 officially-recognized settlements in the West Bank, 192,000 Israelis lived in East Jerusalem and over 20,000 lived in settlements in the Golan Heights, captured from Syria during the 1967 war. Settlements range in character from farming communities and frontier villages to urban suburbs and neighborhoods. The three largest settlements, Modi'in Illit, Maale Adumim, and Betar Illit, could hardly be called settlements. They have achieved city status, with over 30,000 residents each.

Israeli policies toward these settlements have ranged from active promotion to removal by force. Since the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993, no new settlements have been established in the occupied territories.

It is obvious that no Israeli government can dismantle these settlements that now contribute greatly to the nation's economy. The government has still not been able to permanently resettle the Jewish residents of Gaza who were forced to give up everything in the interest of the state, but still keenly feel



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the pain of their loss. They had spent years building viable communities on the shore of the Mediterranean with its pristine beaches and gardens. Their farms and businesses had employed over a thousand Palestinians who lost their jobs when the Jews left. They have since formed their own association and have even built a museum to keep the memory of their achievements alive. Their experience indicates that most Israelis have resigned themselves to living without peace with the Palestinians for the indefinite future. And since the Palestinians will not accept Israel as a Jewish state, and insist that the “settlements” be dismantled, there can be no peace.

What should not be forgotten is the host of benefits that the Palestinians have gained through the Jewish return to the land of Israel. George Gilder writes in his article, “[The Economics of Settlement](#)”:

In the mid-19th century, before the arrival of the first groups of Jewish settlers fleeing pogroms in Russia, Arabs living in what became the mandate territory of Palestine — now Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza — numbered between 200,000 and 300,000. Their population density and longevity resembled today’s conditions in parched and depopulated Saharan Chad ... [T]he fact that some 5.5 million Arabs now live in the former British Mandate, with a life expectancy of more than 70 years, is mainly attributable, for better or for worse, to the work of those Jewish settlers.

The best authority we have of how Jewish settlement in Palestine improved the lives of the Arabs is Walter Clay Lowdermilk, an American expert on land usage, who made a study of Palestine beginning in 1939, and wrote a book about his findings in 1944, *Palestine, Land of Promise*. He wrote:

When Jewish colonists first began their work in 1882 ... the soils were eroded off the uplands to bedrock over fully one half the hills; streams across the coastal plain were choked with erosional debris from the hills to form pestilential marshes infested with dreaded malaria; the fair cities and elaborate works of ancient times were left in doleful ruins.

But all of that changed with Jewish colonization.

Gilder comments:

In draining swamps, leaching saline soils, redeeming dunes into orchards and poultry farms, in planting millions of trees on rocky hills, in constructing elaborate water works and terraces on the hills, in digging 548 wells and supporting canals in little more than a decade and irrigating thousands of acres of land, establishing industries, hospitals, clinics, and schools, the 500,000 Jewish settlers who arrived before the creation of Israel massively expanded the very absorptive dimensions and capacity of the country. It was these advances that made possible the fivefold 20th-century surge of the Arab population by 1940.

In 1948, after the British had ended their Mandate and left Palestine, and after the United Nations had offered its partition plan of two states in Palestine, one for the Jews and one for the Arabs, the Jews declared the independence of Israel. The Arabs rejected partition, and five Arab armies invaded Palestine in the hope of destroying the new Jewish state. But a desperate and courageous Jewish fighting force defeated the Arab attack. In the meantime, about 700,000 Arabs had fled or were driven out of Palestine, and the Jewish state had been able to expand its borders beyond the original partition.

Those 700,000 Arabs became the permanent clients of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA). In the 63 years since 1948, those Arabs have continued to live in refugee camps, supported by UNRWA. All of the refugees and displaced persons from World War II have been resettled in countries all over the world, including Israel, and their children and grandchildren lead normal, productive lives. Not so with the Arab refugees. They are waiting for the Jews to be driven into



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the sea so that they can return to their former homes, which in most cases no longer exist.

And in 63 years, despite Arab boycotts and continued hostility, the Jews have built a modern, high-tech society, with freeways and skyscrapers and a population of over seven million people, a million of whom are Arabs. The Arabs in Israel have a higher standard of living than Arabs in neighboring Islamic countries. Most Arabs are quite willing to live amicably with their Jewish neighbors. But the extremist haters of Israel will kill any moderate leader who tries to make true peace with the Israelis.

And today, Arab workers willingly help the Israelis expand their settlements. They know that the presence of those settlements means an improvement of life for them. Many Palestinians (some of whom are Christians, as well as Muslims) fear being ruled by their own Palestinian government. In Gaza, a Hamas dictatorship rules with an iron hand. But most of the Arabs in the West Bank want what the Israelis have: a democratic government, if they can get it.



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