

Land battle: Settlements and Middle East peace

by [Lara Friedman](#) in the [November 2, 2010](#) issue



Downtown Hebron, West Bank. Steel mesh screens protect pedestrians from garbage dumped from settlers' second-floor windows. Photo by [Sven-Christian Kindler](#), licensed under [Creative Commons](#).

If peace talks between Israelis and the Palestinians break down completely, the sticking point is likely to be expanded Israeli settlements in the West Bank. Indeed, settlements have for the past two years been the focus of attention from U.S. negotiators. That's a contrast to past peace efforts, when the dominant issues were Palestinian violence and terrorism or Israeli security.

Why this shift? The reason is surprisingly mundane. Violence and terror are no longer the problem they once were. The Palestinian Authority, with support from the U.S., has done an excellent job getting the West Bank under control, including clamping down on Hamas and other Palestinian rogue actors. Israel's controversial security barrier has proven effective at stopping terrorists from entering Israel. And activists on the West Bank have shifted toward nonviolent protests.

As a result, attacks inside Israel emanating from the West Bank are almost nonexistent. Attacks on Israelis inside the West Bank are likewise rare.

With violence and terror no longer crowding out other issues, settlements naturally take precedence. Why? Because the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a conflict over land. For some Israelis and Palestinians, it is over all the land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. For them, the peace process has no meaning, because in their zero-sum worldview there is no possible agreement with the other side.

For most Israelis and Palestinians, however, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is over the future of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. And expansion of Israeli settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem makes this conflict ever more intractable.

First, settlements represent ever-expanding facts on the ground that render a two-state solution difficult—and eventually impossible. Settlements break up the West Bank into Palestinian islands, preventing development and obstructing normal Palestinian patterns of life. It is inconceivable that a Palestinian state could be created, let alone thrive, with these settlements in its midst.

Second, the nonstop construction of settlements extinguishes hope among Palestinians that Israel is serious about ever ending the occupation, and it undermines the credibility of Palestinian moderates who reject violence and tell their people that negotiations with Israel are the correct path to statehood.

Third, from the perspective of those of us who care deeply not only about Israeli-Palestinian peace but also about Israel's future, settlements are an existential threat to Israel as a Jewish democratic state. If Israel does not end the settlement enterprise and achieve a peace agreement that enables it to get out of most of the West Bank, Jews will soon become a minority in the area under Israel's control. Israel will be then forced to choose between being a Jewish state and a democratic state.

Apart from their impact on the two-state solution, settlements are a huge liability for Israel. The route of Israel's "separation barrier," for example, was clearly gerrymandered to accommodate settlements, lengthening and contorting Israel's lines of defense, grabbing Palestinian land and causing misery for the nearby Palestinian population. If the barrier had instead followed the internationally recognized 1967 border, Israel's security would have been better served and Israel would have been spared international condemnation and delegitimation.

Likewise, settler extremists are increasingly brazen in their willingness to use violence to promote their agenda, including attacks on Palestinians and their property, on Israeli soldiers, police and peace activists. As a result of the need to focus so much energy on protecting settlers and curbing settler violence, Israel's army is increasingly being transformed into a police force, and its ability to adequately organize and train for its primary mission—to fight real external threats—is being eroded.

Settlements are also an economic burden to Israel. They drain Israel's budget, with the government funding settlement-related construction and providing substantial incentives to settlers, including income, education, housing, tax and transportation benefits.

Moreover, settlements are a tremendous moral burden for Israel at a time when Israelis are increasingly concerned with what they see as an international effort to delegitimize their country. The continued expansion of settlements, coupled with the outrageous behavior and rhetoric of settlers, only feed international criticism and condemnation of Israel and promote this delegitimizing trend.

Then there is the issue of Jerusalem. No two-state solution is viable that does not involve recognition of Jewish Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and Palestinian Jerusalem as the capital of Palestine. Settlements now encircle and cut through East Jerusalem, making it difficult—though still not impossible—to draw a line separating Jewish Jerusalem from Palestinian Jerusalem. New settlement activity in the heart of Palestinian neighborhoods of East Jerusalem could soon make such a line impossible. Settlement activity in these most sensitive areas—near the Old City and its holy sites—threatens to transform a difficult but resolvable territorial conflict into a zero-sum religious struggle.

Past Israeli-Palestinian negotiations suggest that most settlers—who live in blocs adjacent to the 1967 border—could remain where they are as part of a land-swap deal. This is one of the ironies of the settlement enterprise: Israelis who moved to the settlements primarily seeking a better quality of life will probably be able to stay under a peace agreement, while the hardcore settlers—those who for ideological reasons moved deep into the West Bank and into the heart of Palestinian neighborhoods of East Jerusalem—would likely be required to leave.

Such a solution, however, is predicated on an end to settlement activity until peace negotiations are complete—both to stop creating facts on the ground that complicate a future agreement and to preserve the credibility of the political process that could lead to such an agreement.

Settlements are not the only issue or necessarily the most important issue that must be dealt with in order to achieve peace, but it is the most urgent issue. Unlike the other permanent status issues—security, borders, refugees—the settlements in the West Bank and Jerusalem are not static. Every day, more facts on the ground are being created. Allowing this ever-changing status quo to continue is inimical to peace and the two-state solution.