

Argument

Everything You Know About Israeli Settlements Is Wrong

Israel's recent annexation of 1,000 acres of land in the West Bank doesn't change anything on the ground, and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has actually been remarkably constrained in settlement construction.

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On Aug. 31, Israel laid claim to 1,000 acres of land in the West Bank. The land is in Gush Etzion -- an area predominantly populated by Jews since before 1948 and one that both American and Palestinian leaders recognized in past negotiations would remain part of Israel in any future agreement. With its new formal status as "state land," the area is legally open for new construction.

The knee-jerk condemnations immediately followed. U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry called Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to try to convince him to reverse the decision, which the State Department termed "counterproductive." The British foreign secretary deplored Israel's "particularly ill-judged" decision, while the Palestinian Authority threatened that it "will lead to more instability ... inflam[ing] the situation." The *New York Times* quoted an official with the dovish Peace Now organization as saying it could be the single largest annexation of land in decades.

So is Israel vastly increasing the pace of settlement activity, making the establishment of a future Palestinian state less and less likely?

The short answer, and the right answer, is no. Just as Israel was being denounced far and wide for settlement expansion, Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics released one of its regular reports on settlement activity. What it reveals is that Israel's actual settlement construction pace has reached a historical low. Only 507 housing units were approved for construction by Netanyahu's government in the first six months of 2014, a 71.9 percent decrease from the same period in 2013, with about one-third of those being built inside

the major blocks that it is understood Israel will keep in any final status agreement. For a population of over 300,000 Israelis living in the West Bank, that pace of construction does not even allow for natural population growth, much less rapid expansion.

Only in 2010 did Israel build at a slower pace -- 738 units for the whole year -- and that was the year of a nine-month construction moratorium imposed by Netanyahu at the request of the United States. This partial freeze, by the way, produced no Palestinian concessions and no progress in the "peace process" whatsoever.

What's Netanyahu doing? His government's pattern in recent years is clear: build energetically in the major settlement blocks and in Jerusalem, while restraining growth beyond the West Bank security fence in areas that may become part of a future Palestinian state. Netanyahu doesn't come out and say this clearly for a simple political reason: The settler lobby would condemn it and indeed is already threatening him with political revenge for restraining settlement growth. British and U.S. diplomats, as well as the American and European press, may be fooled by Palestinian and Peace Now complaints that Bibi is gobbling up Palestinian territory, but the settlers live in those places and know better -- construction is slowing down.

Netanyahu is trying to avoid a confrontation with hawkish members of his coalition and his right-wing political base in the Likud party. Going too far on curbing settlements might lead Avigdor Lieberman and Naftali Bennett -- his two main right-wing rivals, and the foreign and economy ministers, respectively -- to leave the current government, a scenario that would force Netanyahu to assemble a new coalition using a very weak hand. If that scenario played out, Netanyahu would also be challenged by the diminished support within his own Likud party, which could at some point oust the prime minister from his political home more or less as then- Prime Minister Ariel Sharon was in 2005. While this pressure from the right and the settler movement may be behind his move in creating new "state land" in Gush Etzion, Netanyahu has notably maintained his policy on constraining settlement construction beyond the fence line.

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At the end of the day, the annexation is a symbolic move. Those lands are going to remain Israel's no matter what: They are populated by some 20,000 Israelis, adjacent to the pre-1967 border, and were recognized in previous negotiations as part of the areas Israel would keep and for which it would swap Israeli land elsewhere. Most recently, the leaked "napkin map" of the 2008 negotiations between Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas marked all 1,000 acres as falling under eventual Israeli control.

Netanyahu, meanwhile, is playing a losing game, as the settlers know how little was changed by his action and that he continues to slow settlement construction outside the major blocks. But meanwhile, foreign leaders and journalists do not know the facts, so Netanyahu gets condemned for a vast expansion of settlement construction that does not exist.

It's a lose-lose situation for Bibi, as nasty attacks from settler leaders coincide with those from prime ministers, foreign ministers, and presidents across the globe. The Israeli prime minister deserves credit, under these circumstances, for sticking to what he has said and appears to believe: Israel must build where it will stay, in Jerusalem and the major blocks, and it is foolish to waste resources in West Bank areas it will someday leave.

At this point, the mindless refrain on settlement construction seems to have assumed a life of its own. But anyone who's serious about addressing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict should ignore the speeches and the rote condemnations, and study the numbers. The vast expansion of Israeli settlements in the future Palestinian state is simply not happening.

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