

# Zionist settlements expanding in West Bank and Gaza

Chris Marsden  
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The Peace Now organisation has issued reports detailing the expansion of Zionist settlements, despite pledges made by the Israeli government to halt their growth. The expansion is most significant in the Gaza Strip because of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's proposed "unilateral separation" initiative, which promises the removal of Israeli settlements there by 2005 combined with a land grab annexing half of the occupied West Bank permanently to Israel.

Even recently released Israeli government statistics are forced to acknowledge settlement growth, but downplay its true extent.

Currently, around 8,000 Jewish settlers occupy around 40 percent of the Gaza Strip, leaving 1.3 million Palestinians the remaining 60 percent.

According to Peace Now figures, in March, April and May an additional 455,000 square meters of construction and preparation of infrastructure took place in the settlements. Around 265,000 square meters were added to the settlements in the West Bank, and around 190,000 square meters in the Gaza Strip. Throughout the Occupied Territories, there are around 3,100 housing blocs being built, in addition to the preparation of areas for construction of thousands of further housing units.

Most of these settlement areas are widening to new agricultural lands.

As well as settlement activity, Peace Now documents the construction and expansion of smaller and illegal outposts—including more than 50 satellite photographs and other pictures showing construction work, land clearance, road and house building, etc.

Outpost growth has continued unchecked, and few outposts have been removed. And when one is removed, it is swiftly replaced somewhere else.

The settler population in the Gaza Strip rose about 4.3

percent during the past six months, from 7,820 in December to 8,153 in June.

When Israel accepted the US "road map" 14 months ago, it agreed to freeze settlement activity and dismantle settlement outposts that had been erected after March 2001. According to a government report, just 28 outposts fall into that category. But Peace Now lists 51 such sites, and also states that 45 outposts were built before March 2001.

The population in Gaza settlements slated for evacuation has grown, due to an influx of hard-line Zionists opposed to any withdrawal. The number of Jewish settlers at Netzarim in the central Gaza Strip, shown in a Peace Now aerial photo in March, jumped nearly 11 percent this year.

Only three outposts were dismantled in the last months, and two of these at Tal Binyamin and Ginat Arie, south of Ofra, were in fact moved by the settlers themselves to other locations, east of Ofra.

The construction of new roads is even more significant, as this often requires funding and cooperation from the government.

In January 2004, Peace Now's Settlement Watch team discovered a large road being constructed, to connect the Itamar settlement blocs and the Alon road and thereby create continuity between the settlements in the Jordan Valley and the northwest areas of the West Bank. Construction was temporarily halted due to adverse publicity, but it has resumed.

Peace Now states that its report is to counter the "disinformation, half-truths and lies" being spread by the Israeli government about its efforts to dismantle outposts and contain settlements. Dror Etke, the head of Peace Now's Settlement Watch Team, explained, "People are building up settlements and outposts every day in broad daylight. There's no way the government

doesn't know about it.”

He describes this as evidence of “a well-planned deal between the settlers and the Ministry of Defence.”

Sharon has expressed his determination to continue with his plans to withdraw from Gaza, but his move is a purely tactical one and does not indicate any intention to abandon the settlement activity that is central to his objective of creating a Greater Israel. Protecting just 8,000 settlers surrounded by more than a million Palestinians is a drain on the military when Sharon believes his forces are better deployed seizing permanent control of the West Bank and East Jerusalem.

The Gaza Strip will still be surrounded by the Israeli Defence Force and can be retaken if that is required. Nevertheless, Sharon has succeeded in antagonising his traditional allies amongst the ultra-orthodox Zionists, who consider settlement as a holy mission to establish Jewish control over “biblical Judea and Samaria.”

On July 25, tens of thousands of settlers and their supporters formed a human chain more than 50 miles long to protest the planned Gaza withdrawal. Israel's Interior Minister Tsahi Hanegbi recently warned of a “high risk” of an attack by right-wing extremists against Islamic holy places on Temple Mount or against Muslims there. Temple Mount, or Al-Haram al-Sharif (Noble Sanctuary) shelters the Dome of the Rock (Omar Mosque) and the Al-Aqsa Mosque, Islam's third-holiest place.

Hanegbi stated, “The risk of Jewish extremists and fanatics committing an attack against Temple Mount or the faithful in this most sacred place for Islam has never been so high” and would be designed to provoke “a chain reaction.”

“We have a considerable amount of disquieting information according to which it is not only academic ideas but concrete projects,” he added.

In the murky world of Israeli politics, it is difficult to discern where the activities of the far right end and provocations by the secret service Mossad begin.

The conflict with the far right can easily get out of hand, but Sharon has used it to lend political credibility to his claim to be pursuing peace and as a cover for his West Bank land grab. At any time, he could turn around and use the activities of his recent opponents to justify abandoning his promised withdrawal or even to blow up the conflict with the Palestinians to the point

where an all-out invasion of the West Bank could be carried out.

The Israeli government responded with a flat denial to the Peace Now report and its urging that settlement activity end. Sharon's main spokesman, Raanan Gissin, baldly declared, “There is no expansion of existing settlements,” adding that as for outposts, “everything that is unauthorized and illegal will be removed once the legal proceedings are over.”



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