

Israel Expands West Bank Settler Units: Where Demography Meets Geography

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Brief Analysis

Given how attuned Netanyahu's government is to political vicissitudes in Washington, the U.S. election results will likely determine whether Israel continues its trend of approving more construction outside the security barrier.

On October 14, Israeli authorities approved another round of settler units in the West Bank, and like previous interagency meetings held on the subject over the past fourteen months, the most significant approvals were granted for settlements outside the security barrier rather than inside it. Expansion outside the barrier could prove particularly complicating for a future two-state solution and, perhaps, for Israeli relations with the United States.

The area inside the barrier, which comprises roughly 10% of the West Bank, is home to 52 settlements and 358,405 settlers, or 77% of the entire settler population (85% if one includes Israelis living in East Jerusalem). Adding new units in this area tends to be less provocative and better preserves the viability of a two-state solution, since most of these settlements would likely become Israeli territory in any final-status peace deal involving land swaps with the Palestinians.

In contrast, adding units outside the barrier makes separation from the Palestinians more difficult. There are 78 widely scattered settlements outside the barrier with a population of 107,803, leading some observers to worry that a

tipping point has already been reached wherein separation and a two-state solution may be impossible. Whether or not that proves true, one thing is clear: the Trump administration's approach to the issue has given Israel more leeway to approve new units outside the barrier. Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's uncertainty about who will win the U.S. presidential election suggests that the recent unit approvals are an effort to take more provocative actions in 2020, since a potential Joe Biden administration would be less supportive of such moves in 2021.

THE PROCESS OF SETTLEMENT APPROVAL

In recent years, Israel has sought to streamline the approval process by holding meetings less regularly. This method also reduces the chances of diplomatically embarrassing moments, as happened when a regularly scheduled announcement of new housing units in East Jerusalem fell during a 2010 visit by Vice President Biden.

Approval for new units occurs in six stages. In the later stages, interagency discussions are held to approve what is known as "units for deposit," followed by a sixty-day period for legal challenges (which are rarely sustained) and then final authorization. Focusing on the deposit figures is a useful way of analyzing settlement trends and the priorities of the Israeli government, since the vast majority of units approved for deposit make it through to construction.

FAVORING CONSTRUCTION OUTSIDE THE BARRIER

In the five meetings held since August 2019, the number of units approved for deposit has skewed in the direction of more construction outside the security barrier. The ratio was 83% at the August 2019 meeting (1,306 units outside the barrier vs. 265 inside) and 67% at the October 2020 meeting (1,514 inside vs. 746 outside). Cumulatively, two-thirds of the units approved for deposit over the five meetings (5,096 of 7,673) were outside the barrier, despite only 23% of all settlers living in these areas.

These figures are especially salient when one considers that the total number of residential buildings in settlements outside the barrier stood at 16,241 in 2016, based on aerial imagery. (For aerial imagery of all settlements, see The Washington Institute's interactive mapping tool *[Settlements and Solutions](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/settlements-and-solutions)* (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/settlements-and-solutions>.) To be sure, "units" and "buildings" are not completely synonymous—the buildings number does not account for residences with multiple units. Yet the vast majority of buildings outside the barrier are presumably single units, not apartment buildings. Moreover, past practice favored construction inside the barrier, making the sharp swing in the other direction since 2019 even more conspicuous.

Uncertainty about the direction of the Trump peace plan also seemed to affect Israel's approval process over this period, particularly the number of units granted final approval (a later stage than approval for deposit). In the months leading up to the plan's announcement this January, Washington signaled Israel to avoid provocative steps that might negatively influence the Palestinians beforehand. Netanyahu's government appeared to follow suit—relatively few units outside the barrier were granted final approval in the last two meetings of 2019 (303 outside units vs. 469 inside that August; 207 outside vs. 512 inside that October).

After it became clear that the Palestinian Authority would reject the plan, however, the shift to approving more units outside the barrier—and more units in general—became apparent. In January, 619 units received final approval outside the barrier compared to 167 inside. And in October, 2,374 received final approval outside vs. 314 inside. In all, final approvals since August 2019 have totaled 4,171 units outside vs. 1,462 inside the barrier, nearly a 3:1 ratio.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR ISRAEL'S SETTLEMENT STRATEGY?

In discussing areas that would likely fall under Israeli sovereignty in a future deal with the Palestinians, the Trump peace plan does not distinguish between settlements outside and inside the barrier, so Israel's unit approvals over

the past year align with the U.S. plan in a general sense. Yet part of the plan called on Israel to limit expansion in fifteen settler “enclaves” lying within territory that would become part of a Palestinian state if a peace deal is reached (while still receiving Israeli services). Specifically, the plan prohibits these enclaves from expanding outward for the next four years.

At the October 14 meeting, however, Israel authorized over 600 new units in these restricted enclaves, including final approval for 200 units in Asfar and 211 units in Yitzhar, and approval for deposit for 286 units in Bracha. It is unclear if this construction will occur within the enclaves’ existing boundaries or expand their footprint. Yet the decision to build in perhaps the most controversial areas of the West Bank—which would not be contiguous with the rest of Israel per the Trump plan’s map—shows the level of trust Netanyahu has that he will receive steadfast support from the current administration.

New units have also been approved in Ofra and Beit El, two of the largest Israeli population areas outside the barrier, located just northeast of Ramallah. Beit El has drawn special attention because it is considered an ideological founding flagship settlement and is near to the heart of U.S. ambassador David Friedman. More broadly, this year’s moves have reinforced concerns that the Netanyahu government is attempting to constrain large Palestinian communities in the Ramallah area. In January, nearby units were approved for deposit in Kochav Yaakov (160) and the outpost of Mitzpe Danny (180). And this month saw authorizations in Beit El (382), Geva Binyamin (357), and Eli (where 629 new units were approved for deposit in a settlement that had just 598 buildings in 2016).

As for the unusually long eight-month gap that preceded the October 14 meeting, the delay was largely a product of the COVID-19 outbreak and the suspense over whether Netanyahu would pursue annexations in the West Bank over the summer. The recent normalization deals with the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain **put an end to the annexation discussion (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/normalization-can-inject-new-life-into-the-arab-peace-initiative>)** for at least the next few years, but they also opened the door for renewed construction approvals. The Gulf agreements are widely popular in Israel, but part of Netanyahu’s base was unhappy that the deals came at the price of annexation, so the increase in approved units was seemingly done to appease this camp. As the practicalities of normalization come into focus, it will be interesting to see if they become a brake on Israel’s settlement expansion. So far, though, this is not evident.

The precise effects of the U.S. election cannot be predicted with certainty either—after all, Netanyahu’s past governments increased settlement activity during periods when Democrats held the White House as well, not just Republicans. Yet he was far more careful about specific locations in the former case; during the Obama administration, for example, new construction was largely limited to areas within the security barrier, leaving open the possibility of a two-state solution.

Should Trump win, the recent pattern of greater approvals outside the barrier is bound to increase. U.S. officials insist that their plan was just an opening bid and that they are awaiting a Palestinian counteroffer. But Netanyahu seemingly views the plan as a ceiling for Palestinian demands rather than a floor, and will presumably continue increasing settlement activity indefinitely if Trump is reelected. In that sense, U.S. voting results will likely determine whether the geographic scope of settlement expansion continues as it has during 2020.

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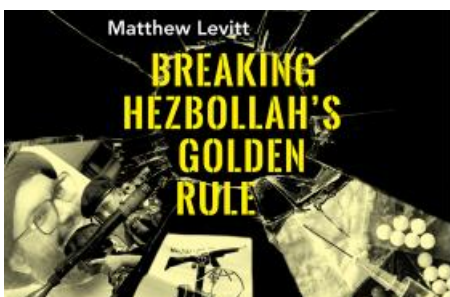
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