

## Nowhere to Go in Amona

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### ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Articles & Testimony

### Given the current state of Israeli politics and the settler movement, Netanyahu has dispiriting choices to salvage a no-win situation.

Since 1997, Israel's Supreme Court has tasked the government with evacuating all or parts of the illegal West Bank outpost called Amona. In 2006, the site became a symbol of the Israeli settler movement's power after 4,000 protesters [clashed violently \(http://www.jpost.com/Opinion/Mockery-of-law-467403\)](http://www.jpost.com/Opinion/Mockery-of-law-467403) with 10,000 police during an attempted demolition. Though Israeli forces succeeded in removing [nine buildings \(http://www.jpost.com/Opinion/Mockery-of-law-467403\)](http://www.jpost.com/Opinion/Mockery-of-law-467403), the rest of the community lived on and the government has not attempted an evacuation of a similar scale since. Settler advocates from the Jewish Home and Likud parties fill the ranks of Israel's conservative governing coalition, which is now faced with a difficult dilemma: Implementing plans to remove Amona could fracture the governing coalition and invite violence by Jewish extremists, but avoiding Amona's removal to satisfy the pro-settler constituency might [further anger \(http://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/06/world/middleeast/obama-israel-west-bank-settlements.html\)](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/06/world/middleeast/obama-israel-west-bank-settlements.html) the Obama administration and cast doubt on the Israeli government's ability to uphold the rule of law.

The most volatile possible outcome of the current impasse over Amona would be an escalation of the confrontation that occurred the last time the Israeli government attempted demolitions on the site -- the 2006 showdown between Israeli police and protesters resulted in over [two hundred injuries \(http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0.7340.L-3209330.00.html\)](http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0.7340.L-3209330.00.html). By illustrating the cost of removing Amona, the settler movement has [deterred further government settlement withdrawals \(http://old.crisisgroup.org/\\_media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Israel%20Palestine/89\\_israels\\_religious\\_right\\_and\\_the\\_question\\_of\\_settlements.pdf\)](http://old.crisisgroup.org/_media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Israel%20Palestine/89_israels_religious_right_and_the_question_of_settlements.pdf).

If the Israeli government moves to evacuate Amona again, violence by Jewish extremists may result. To be clear, such violence is far from inevitable and would likely involve only a tiny minority of the thousands of protesters who would come to Amona. Most would not risk alienating the Israeli public by attempting to harm soldiers or police. Rather, the threat would come from small radical groups such as the [Hilltop Youth \(https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/israel/2012-08-18/rise-settler-terrorism\)](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/israel/2012-08-18/rise-settler-terrorism) or anti-government militias that would emerge to contest the evacuation.

Jerusalem Post Editor-in-Chief Yaakov Katz, who covered the 2006 Amona clash, predicts that such extremists would "[use violence] because of the symbolism and what happened last time...to show the government they won't let this happen again." Militants could transform Amona's residences into fortresses and attack intervening Israeli troops. Intra-Jewish violence may turn some Israelis against the settler movement, but it would also raise the political costs of attempting any further settlement or outpost evacuations, even under a two-state agreement. Separately, Jewish extremists could attack Palestinian individuals and their property, eliciting retaliatory attacks that could turn the public against future demolitions for fear of rewarding terrorism.

That said, this Israeli coalition might not see the evacuation through. Amona residents' resolve to [resist relocation \(http://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/07/world/middleeast/west-bank-settlement-amona-israel.html\)](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/07/world/middleeast/west-bank-settlement-amona-israel.html) and settler movement disapproval scuttled efforts at a compromise that would have moved residents to a new settlement community near Shiloh. The government now appears poised to ask the Supreme Court for a [six-month extension \(http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0.7340.L-4866096.00.html\)](http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0.7340.L-4866096.00.html), which, if granted, would simply delay a showdown.

So now or six months from now, Netanyahu will be forced to choose whether to move Amona's residents. He faces challenges either way.

Even in six months, pro-settler Ministers of Knesset (MKs) primarily from the Likud and Jewish Home parties may be forced to oppose any relocation by settler hardliners. The coalition could then fracture if Netanyahu goes ahead with relocation or following a tumultuous demolition, potentially toppling the government and triggering elections. Netanyahu may try to maintain discipline by giving these parties non-Amona concessions, which would likely be scorned internationally.

Netanyahu previously proposed [relocating Amona \(http://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Politics-And-Diplomacy/AG-weighs-relocating-Amona-settlers-to-abandoned-Palestinian-property-463506\)](http://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Politics-And-Diplomacy/AG-weighs-relocating-Amona-settlers-to-abandoned-Palestinian-property-463506) near [Shiloh \(http://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/06/world/middleeast/obama-israel-west-bank-settlements.html\)](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/06/world/middleeast/obama-israel-west-bank-settlements.html). But as with other relocation efforts, settlers rejected Netanyahu's move as going too far, the United States thought it [inappropriately created \(http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/1.745959\)](http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/1.745959) a new settlement, and the Israeli government's legal advisor believed it would not satisfy the Court's ruling. Moving Amona's residences into major settlement blocs might at least satisfy the Court and United States but would still necessitate an evacuation.

Alternatively, Prime Minister Netanyahu could use this crisis to reshape his coalition by bringing Opposition Leader Isaac Herzog [into the government \(http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0.7340.L-4863480.00.html\)](http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0.7340.L-4863480.00.html) and taking a broader stand against settlement building beyond Israel's security fence. This could [clear the way \(http://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Politics-And-Diplomacy/Herzog-Netanyahu-and-I-negotiated-labored-over-Arab-Peace-Initiative-454578\)](http://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Politics-And-Diplomacy/Herzog-Netanyahu-and-I-negotiated-labored-over-Arab-Peace-Initiative-454578) for larger moves on peace with the Palestinians. By choosing Herzog and movement towards peace, Netanyahu would win U.S. approval.

On the other hand, if Netanyahu prioritizes maintaining his coalition and appeasing the settlers, he may back proposed legislation that would **expropriate Amona's land** (<http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-1.743151>) from Palestinians and legalize the outpost. This would avoid an evacuation confrontation but also mark the first time Israel's government ignored a Supreme Court ruling. Failure to **enforce the rule of law** (<http://www.jpost.com/Opinion/Mockery-of-law-467403>) would damage Israel's democracy and diminish the credibility of future Israeli pledges to withdraw settlements for peace. The United States and other nations would likely take UN action. Specifically, failing to remove Amona could lead the United States to allow an anti-settlements resolution to pass at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). Netanyahu reportedly cited (<http://www.timesofisrael.com/pm-calls-obama-an-existential-danger-to-settlements-report/http://www.timesofisrael.com/pm-calls-obama-an-existential-danger-to-settlements-report/>) this danger when asking Amona residents and activists to avoid escalating the situation before President Obama's term ends.

Amona continues to serve as an interesting test case for the settler movement's power, the future of Israel's governing coalition, the country's rule of law, and the prospects of further outpost evacuations and other pro-peace moves. Netanyahu will likely preserve his space to maneuver while evaluating his options. He may find a new U.S. administration opposed to settlements but less willing to initiate UNSC action, perhaps altering his calculus. Keeping talks with Herzog alive gives Netanyahu a way to remain Prime Minister if an evacuation becomes necessary and leverage against hardliners threatening to defect.

**Recent history shows** (<http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-1.720355>) that Netanyahu will hesitate to choose Herzog unless he has no other way to avoid a coalition fracture. This makes moves towards peace, Amona's unconditional demolition, and fully satisfying the United States unlikely. Rather than risk losing power, most pro-settler MKs may eventually support moving Amona's residents to some mildly controversial settlement. Amona would still have to be evacuated, which could lead to violence that pressured hardliners to leave the government and complicated future settlement withdrawals. If the chance of violence seems high during the build-up to withdrawal, Netanyahu may legalize Amona and risk U.S. opprobrium. In short, Netanyahu has dispiriting choices to salvage a no-win situation.

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