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Who Are The Settlers?

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Above all else, the settlers are numerous and well-connected politically. There are roughly 7,500 of them in Gaza and 187,000 in the West Bank (if we take the West Bank to not include East Jerusalem), composing 0.6% and 17% of the populations in these regions, respectively. They have strong connections to the Sharon government – of the four parties in the governing coalition, only one (Shinui) does not have a strong ideological commitment to the preservation of the settlements. The settlers are also represented by the Yesha Council, a body whose purpose is to lobby the Israeli government on settler issues, and to assist in the implementation of security policies in the settlements.

These political connections seem to have yielded impressive results. Peace Now, an Israeli organization that advocates, among other things, a withdrawal from the occupied territories, claims that in 2001 the Israeli government spent 2.2 billion shekels in the settlements, including 200 million shekels in tax incentives for settlers. Peace Now claims that this is part of a concerted effort by the Israeli government to make settlement in the occupied territories as attractive as possible. However, the Yesha Council claims that this is untrue, and that Israeli settlers actually suffer under an unfair tax structure.

The difference in standards of living and employment between the Palestinian and Israeli populations of the West Bank and Gaza strip is enormous. The Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics states that the unemployment rate in the West Bank among settlers is 6.4%, compared to 50% in the West Bank and Gaza Strip for Palestinians – this is according to the CIA World Factbook. In fact, the West Bank has a lower unemployment rate than Israel as a whole, which as of the third quarter of 2003 had an unemployment rate of 10.7%.

It should come as no surprise that settlers express a very high level of satisfaction with their living conditions. (Especially when one considers that those who believe living in a settlement is unacceptably dangerous are not likely to move there in the first place.) Settlers are more likely than any other Israelis to own their homes – 81.4% of settlers own their own homes, compared to a national average of 74%. Over 51% of settlers are satisfied or very satisfied with their jobs,

compared to 42% for the average Israeli. Overall, 87.5% of settlers consider themselves satisfied or very satisfied with the area in which they live, compared to a national average of 81%. In particular, 13% more settlers say they are very satisfied with their area of residence than the national average. Israeli residents of the occupied territories enjoy some of the highest standards of living their country has to offer.

They're also very well-educated. 16.2% of them state that their highest level of education is an academic degree, compared to 13.4% as the national average. They're also almost twice as likely to have a second academic degree.

Most settlers are not extremely religious – but there is a much larger minority of religious and ultra-religious Jews in the West Bank and Gaza Strip than anywhere else in Israel. 14.9% of settlers consider themselves to be ultra-religious, and 25.6% consider themselves to be religious. The national averages for these are 4.9% and 8.3%, respectively. Only Jerusalem is comparable in terms of religious sentiment – 21.8% of Jews there are ultra-religious, and 17.6% are religious.

Ethnically, the settlers are more likely to have been born in Israel – 63.5% of them are – than the national average of 57.4%. There are fewer Asian and African immigrants in the settlements than in almost any other district. The fathers of the current settlers were ethnically pretty much the same as the rest of the country, save that 22.4% of them were European or American, compared to 12.5% for the rest of the country.

The size of settlements varies greatly – in the West Bank, it can be anywhere from a few hundred people to 16,000 in the case of Ariel. (Note that Ariel is not one of the settlements being considered for evacuation.) In Gaza, settlements range in size from only 61 residents to 2,400.

Convincing Israeli settlers to consent to relocation will be difficult. Their high standard of living makes it very difficult to create an alternative to the settlements that is particularly appealing, and the large minority of religious Jews makes it even more difficult on ideological grounds. Further, the high degree of education of the settlers means that if they were to be enticed to move, they would need to have access to jobs commensurate with their educations – simple unskilled work would not be adequate. The last hurdle to be overcome would be political – the settlers' groups such as the Yesha Council are very well-connected to the current government,

and would object strongly to the elimination of government incentives for Israelis to move to the settlements.¹

Nevertheless, relocation of a significant number of settlers seems likely as part of either a unilateral withdrawal or a long-term settlement. Certain Macro Projects could facilitate this. (See my paper: [The Negev Desert: A Viable Israeli Resettlement Option?](#))

Notes and References:

1. See Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics "2002 Social Survey of the Israel Central Bureau of Statistics", Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics, CIA World Factbook 2003, Haaretz, www.fmep.org.