

# [***Who are Israeli settlers and why are they so controversial?***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6B7P-3181-DY7V-G009-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Byline:** By Abbas Al Lawati, CNN

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**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; The White House has set its sights on Israel's settlers, a controversial movement that has grown in power over the years and is seen by the outside world as a major impediment to peace between Israel and the Palestinians.

On Thursday, the State Department announced the first round of [*sanctions targeting Israeli settlers*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/01/politics/west-bank-settlers-executive-order/index.html) accused of perpetrating violence in the West Bank. The sanctions block their financial assets and bar them from entering the US.

The sanctions mark one of the more significant moves Biden has taken to critique Israel since the Israel-Hamas war started on October 7, when the Palestinian militant group launched an attack on Israel, killing 1,200 people and taking more than 250 hostages.

Israel's subsequent assault on Gaza has so far led to the death of more than 27,000 Palestinians in the territory. Much less in the public eye, during that period, at least 370 Palestinians have been killed in the occupied West Bank, including 94 children. Almost all of them were killed by Israeli troops, but [*settler violence*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/19/middleeast/west-bank-settler-attacks-israel-cmd-intl/index.html) in the West Bank has also jumped sharply since the war began, with settlers burning cars, destroying infrastructure and assaulting and killing Palestinians.

Since the war, the White House has doubled down on a longstanding US position supporting the establishment of an independent Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza, which Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu rejects.

Only four settlers were targeted in the US move. But there are 700,000 of them living in the West Bank and, according to the international community, the presence of every one of them there is illegal. The Palestinians want the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza for a future state, a position that is supported by much of the rest of the world.

Here's all you need to know about Jewish settlers and why they're so controversial.

What are West Bank settlements?

During the 1967 war, Israel captured the West Bank and East Jerusalem from Jordan, the Gaza Strip and the Sinai Peninsula from Egypt, and the Golan Heights from Syria. Soon after, it began establishing Israeli communities in those territories.

Today, it retains control of East Jerusalem, the Golan Heights and the West Bank, and imposes a land and maritime siege on Gaza. Those territories are considered by the international community as occupied by Israel.

The West Bank is home to [*3.3 million*](https://www.pcbs.gov.ps/site/lang__en/881/default.aspx#Population) Palestinians and it is where the bulk of Jewish settlements are. Israel has continued to expand settlements over decades despite signing a series of peace agreements with the Palestinians in 1990s called the Oslo Accords that envisaged the establishment of an independent Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza as part of a negotiated resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

There are [*146 settlements*](https://peacenow.org.il/en/settlements-watch/settlements-data/population) dotted throughout the West Bank (excluding East Jerusalem), many of which encroach on Palestinian villages and, in some cases, privately owned Palestinian land. Some are built in close proximity to Palestinian population centers and one, [*in Hebron*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/23/middleeast/israel-palestine-west-bank-hebron-collective-punishment-intl/index.html), sits in the heart of a Palestinian town. In East Jerusalem, there are [*14 Israeli neighborhoods*](https://peacenow.org.il/en/settlements-watch/settlements-data/jerusalem), which the international community considers illegal.

The prevalent view among the Palestinians and Israel's allies in the West is that the settlements are a major obstacle to peace, making a contiguous, whole Palestinian state in the West Bank impossible.

Who are the settlers?

Settlers are Jewish Israelis who live in the Israeli-occupied territories, mostly in communities built by the Israeli government. Many of them are ideologically driven and believe they have a divine right to live on the land as stipulated by the bible, though other settlers opt to live in the West Bank because it offers a lower cost of living and the Israeli government subsidizes housing costs. There are more than 450,000 Jewish settlers in the occupied West Bank.

Settlers in the West Bank fall under Israeli civilian rule and have their own road and transportation networks, while Palestinian residents fall under Israeli military rule, are forced to go through Israeli military checkpoints, and are largely barred from entering Jewish settlements. The dual system - one for Jews and one for Palestinians - has been criticized by Israeli and international humanitarian groups as being a [*system of apartheid*](https://www.cnn.com/2022/02/01/middleeast/israel-apartheid-amnesty-intl/index.html), a charge Israel strongly denies.

Many of the [*settlers are armed*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/14/middleeast/israel-guns-hamas-far-right/index.html) and some have engaged in [*deadly attacks against Palestinian*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/06/15/middleeast/huwara-west-bank-settler-attack-cmd-intl/index.html) civilians. Since the start of the Israel-Hamas war, at least eight Palestinians have been killed in settler attacks.

The influence of settlers in Israeli ***politics*** has grown tremendously over the years. The current Israeli coalition government includes two settler-backed parties, both of whose leaders live in the West Bank and have pushed for the expansion of Jewish communities in occupied territory.

Calls for [*Jews to resettle Gaza*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/17/middleeast/israel-far-right-gaza-settler-movement-cmd-intl/index.html) have also picked up steam since the start of the Israel-Hamas war, supported by some Israeli ministers, but Israel has said its official position remains that it does not plan to re-occupy or settle the territory.

How much of the West Bank does Israel control?

After Israel signed the Oslo Accords with the Palestinians, an interim Palestinian government was established in the West Bank and Gaza, known as the Palestinian Authority (PA), based in the city of Ramallah. That treaty split the West Bank into three areas: A, B and C. The PA formally retains full administrative and security control of Area A, which accounts for 18% of the territory. In Area B, which makes up 22%, the PA has administrative control while Israel has security control. And in Area C, which is 60% of the West Bank, Israel retains full security and administrative control.

What are settlement outposts?

While all Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank are considered illegal under international law and by much of the international community, Israel distinguishes settlements it has authorized from those it hasn't. The vast majority of settlements are built by government order, but some unauthorized settlements, known as settlement outposts, have been established by ideologically- driven Israeli civilians with the hope that they will one day be authorized by the government. Israel occasionally cracks down on them, but it [*often retroactively legalizes*](https://peacenow.org.il/en/settlements-watch/settlements-data/population) them once they grow into communities.

There are [*144 outposts*](https://peacenow.org.il/en/settlements-watch/settlements-data/population) in the West Bank, according to Israeli rights group Peace Now. More than [*20,000 Israelis*](https://israelpolicyforum.org/west-bank-settlements-explained) live in them, according to the Israel Policy Forum.

What is the legal status of settlements?

The settlements are illegal under international law. The Fourth Geneva Convention, which concerns civilian populations during a time of war, states in Article 49 that, "The Occupying Power shall not deport or transfer parts of its own civilian population into the territory it occupies."

United Nations Security Council resolution 2334, [*which the United States did not veto*](https://www.cnn.com/2016/12/26/politics/understanding-unsc-resolution/index.html), and was passed in December 2016, reaffirms this position. It states that settlements have "no legal validity" and constitute "a flagrant violation under international law." The resolution references previous Security Council resolutions 242, 338, 446, 452, 465, 476, 478, 1397, 1515, and 1850. Of these, 465, 476, and 478 established that settlements have "no legal validity" in 1980.

Israel, along with a few legal analysts, disputes that settlements are illegal.

In 2012, the Israeli government, under the direction of Prime Minister Netanyahu, published the Levy Commission Report, which summarized this legal position. The report rejected the applicability of the Fourth Geneva Convention to the West Bank, arguing that the West Bank was never a legitimate part of any Arab state.

"Consequently, those conventions dealing with the administration of occupied territory and an occupied populations [sic] are not applicable to Israel's presence in Judea and Samaria (West Bank)," the report read.

This is not a position that any country or international forum has accepted.

By Abbas Al Lawati, CNN

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