



## Israeli Settlers Evicted from Occupied Areas Want Community Affirmation along with Compensation

Shai Dromi, Harvard University

In 2005, the government of Israel relocated approximately 9,000 Jewish settlers from 25 settlements in the Israeli-occupied Gaza Strip and the West Bank. The Israeli government offered monetary compensation to those it relocated, but the kind of compensation offered did not align with the settlers' sense of themselves as model Israelis and Zionists. Understanding the ideological significance settlers assign to their residence in the Occupied Territories could help in the design of compensation schemes for any future relocations. Regardless of the acceptability of settlers' beliefs to others, including other Israelis, settler ideas and actions have tremendous influence on Israeli politics – and thus affect the entire region and U.S. foreign policy as well.

### Why Jewish-Israelis Settled in the Occupied Territories – And Were Later Relocated

Jewish-Israelis have lived in Arab territories occupied by Israel since the early 1970s. Many religiously oriented settlers migrated to the Occupied Territories out of the belief that a Jewish presence there would contribute to religious salvation. Others of a more secular bent migrated in response to economic incentives and believed they were helping Israel secure its borders and protect itself from Palestinian attacks. As ethnic minority enclaves within majority Palestinian areas, these settlers have needed continuous protection by the Israeli military. Their presence effectively placed the surrounding Palestinian populations under martial law and exacerbated violent conflicts between Israelis and Palestinians. The realities of the settlements have also sparked bitter disputes between conservative Israelis, who support the settlers and continued Israeli rule over the Occupied Territories, and liberal Israelis, who favor withdrawal from all or most of those territories.

By the mid-2000s, the strategic, political, and social costs of maintaining and securing four secluded West Bank settlements along with 21 settlements spread through all of Gaza were becoming untenable. In 2003, the Israeli Prime Minister announced that he intended Israeli forces to withdraw from the Gaza Strip and parts of the West Bank. In a plan commonly known as the *Disengagement*, some 9,000 Israeli Jewish settlers were to be relocated out of those territories. During the legislative process, the Parliamentary Finance Committee met to discuss the implementation of the law and determine formulas for compensating those who would be relocated – and invited residents facing eviction to present their grievances and proposals.

### Settlers Facing Eviction Wanted More than Individual Compensation

Although the settlers targeted for relocation refused to cooperate with the Prime Minister's Office, some did speak with the parliamentary committee, which they saw as more balanced. Those who spoke up made it clear that, although they expected full recompense for homes and moving expenses, they resented attempts to "buy them out" of their community commitments. The proposed legislation granted evicted settlers, especially longtime residents, extra compensation for the emotional suffering involved in leaving their homes, but the settlers objected to the notion that their experiences could be captured by financial formulas. Settlers also objected to provisions that would give extra compensation to those who left voluntarily, because they saw this as violating their right to community mourning and protest.

A close look at their testimony makes it clear that settlers considered simple individual compensation inadequate because their identity and sense of purpose was grounded in communal residence in the Occupied Territories. Settlers worried that strong communal ties would be shredded by resettlement and pointed to the impossibility of relocating sites of high religious and social value, such as graveyards and synagogues. Some also expressed fears that they could lose their livelihoods, especially those who were either farmers or regionally situated industrialists.

Settlers slated for relocation clearly felt betrayed. Traditionally, they had believed they were playing a leadership role in building the Israeli nation, supported by a genuine national consensus. Their sense of

dignity and worth took a severe hit when the majority of the Israeli public registered approval of the Disengagement process.

- Settlers believed that they had made major self-sacrifices to establish new industries and agriculture to serve the nation and bring tax money into its treasury.
- Surrounded by hostile neighbors, settlers felt that they had suffered a disproportionate share of casualties from terrorist attacks.
- Seeing themselves as especially committed Israelis, settlers resisting relocation were jolted to be portrayed as lawbreakers and extremists in the media and by some Israeli politicians.

Once we understand their communal identity and sense of betrayal, it is not hard to understand why the settlers demanded more than individual financial compensation. They asked the Israeli state to preserve their communal lifestyle and take care of them through social programs and active investments, rather than relocate and compensate them family by family. What is more, the relocated settlers wanted public acknowledgment that they had been model citizens who made honorable sacrifices for Israel.

### **Learning from the Aftermath**

When the 2005 evictions finally arrived, settlers protested throughout the process but put up little violent resistance. Afterwards, however, many of those who were relocated found themselves in temporary housing, unemployed, and often suffering severe emotional distress.

The years following the Disengagement saw considerable radicalization of settler groups, and subsequent attempts by Israeli authorities to move settlers even small distances led to violence and sparked public outcries. My research suggests that future relocations should include stronger official efforts at community support and forms of redress that resonate with the settlers' own understandings of their role in Israeli society. Settler evictions in Israel will never happen easily, but addressing the strongly felt communal needs and values of the relocated settlers might yield better outcomes for all concerned.

**Read more in Shai M. Dromi, "Uneasy Settlements: Reparation Politics and the Meanings of Money in the Israeli Withdrawal from Gaza," *Sociological Inquiry* 84, no. 2 (2014): 294-315.**