Response To Common Inaccuracy: Settlements are Peace Obstacle

Inaccuracy: Settlements are the main obstacle to achieving Israeli-Palestinian peace. Therefore Israel must agree to a settlement freeze prior before the Palestinians can be expected to engage in any serious negotiations.

Response

Settlements are an issue among many contentious issues to be negotiated, and is not the issue which has prevented an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement.

Settlements, along with final borders, security arrangements, Palestinian refugees, Jerusalem, foreign relations “and other issues of common interest” have always been considered “final status issues” — matters to be negotiated as part of a final peace Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement.

While settlements are an issue of deep concern to Palestinians, with an everyday impact on their lives, there are other issues that are similarly important for Israelis, including the Palestinian demand for a “right of return” for refugees and the status of Jerusalem. Other issues, including Palestinian terrorism, the lack of recognition of Jewish statehood, and Israeli policies that impact Palestinian quality of life have all contributed to the general low level of confidence among both Israelis and Palestinians of the other as a peace partner.

Serious, bilateral negotiation have been conducted without any “preconditions” regarding settlements. Indeed, in 2010, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu agreed to a 10-month “settlement freeze” in order to induce the Palestinians to resume
negotiations. The Palestinians refused to engage for much of that period, and only agree to a symbolic bilateral meeting in the 9th month of the moratorium.

The United States government has expressed criticism of Israeli settlement policy, yet recognizes that it is not the only barrier to achieving success in Israeli Palestinian negotiations. For example, on his March 2013 trip to the region, President Obama reiterated that that the issue of settlements can only be resolved in the context of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. As he said in his press conference with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas:

“The core issue right now is, how do we get sovereignty for the Palestinian people, and how do we ensure security for the Israeli people? And that’s the essence of this negotiation. And that’s not to say settlements are not important. It is to say that if we solve those two problems, the settlement problem will be solved. So I don’t want to put the cart before the horse. I want to make sure that we are getting to the core issues and the substance, understanding that both sides should be doing what they can to build confidence, to rebuild a sense of trust. And that’s where, hopefully, the U.S. government can be helpful.”

At the same time, many in the international community have expressed growing concern that the growth of settlements, especially in areas deep within the West Bank and outside of the main settlement blocs, are creating so-called “facts on the ground” which could physically impede the layout and borders of a future Palestinian state, and thereby undermine the viability of an eventual two state solution. The Trump Administration has said:

“While we don’t believe the existence of settlements is an impediment to peace, the construction of new settlements or the expansion of existing settlements beyond their current borders may not be helpful in achieving that goal.”
Successive Israeli governments have made clear that they would take similar steps regarding settlements in the context of mutually-negotiated agreement with the Palestinians and Israel has demonstrated that it has been willing to dismantle and resettle Israeli communities as part of a final peace agreement. The thriving Israeli town of Yamit in the Sinai desert was dismantled in 1982 as part of the Israel-Egypt peace agreement. At the negotiating table, including at Camp David and at Taba, successive Israeli leaders have presented peace proposals which include the dismantlement of numerous settlements, particular those in the outlying areas.