

Passions High Ahead of Talks On Settlements

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The City of Ariel continues to draw the attention on the international media. The following Washington Post article relates to some of Ariel's strengths and unsurpassed successes. In *Towns Like Ariel, Many Competing Visions Collide*.

"I don't call Ariel a settlement; it's a gated community," Mayor Ron Nachman says. Israel contends West Bank towns such as Ariel should continue to build. (By Howard Schneider -- The Washington Post)

There is a growing backlash among Israelis against any extensive curbs on building in settlement communities such as Ariel, which is strategically located. (By Ariel Schalit -- Associated Press)

By Howard Schneider
Washington Post Foreign Service
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ARIEL, West Bank -- The scene from the Dr. Billye Brim Community Pool, named after the American pastor from Branson, Mo., who helped underwrite it, is decidedly suburban and removed from the international fray over Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank.

The modern design lets in ample sunlight and fresh air for swimmers doing laconic laps in the midafternoon, while sunbathers lounge on a courtyard of clipped grass spotted with white umbrellas. The more energetic pound away on treadmills in a swanky fitness center.

Yet it is here that the competing visions of the West Bank collide. Israel contends that towns such as Ariel, with a population approaching 20,000, should continue to build and grow; the United States insists on a freeze in settlement construction to help restart peace talks; the Palestinians demand that settlement efforts stop and the land be turned over for a future Palestinian state.

White House special envoy George J. Mitchell is slated to arrive in Israel this weekend for negotiations aimed at brokering at least a partial halt in settlement activity so that peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians can resume. But he does so as Israeli backlash grows against any extensive curbs on building in an area that has come to be seen not just as part of the national religious heritage but as a strategic buffer, a reservoir of cheap industrial land and a catch basin for suburban sprawl.

Israel may be willing to give up large parts of it in a peace agreement, as Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu outlined in a June speech. But until an agreement is reached, there's a push for development to proceed.

"I don't call Ariel a settlement; it's a gated community," said Mayor Ron Nachman, adding that he and others were "responding to the government's call" 32 years ago when they started the community on a hilltop deep in the central West Bank.

The Palestinians and much of the rest of the world regard the settlements as illegal under international law meant to prevent an occupying power from taking over land by moving people. Israel regards the area not as occupied but "disputed," and over three decades it has added people, buildings and infrastructure.

About 300,000 Israelis live in 120 authorized communities and dozens of unauthorized ones in the West Bank. The numbers do not include Jerusalem.

Ariel's location was chosen to help control the approach to Tel Aviv, a fact that adds to the complexity of the settlement project and helps explain why Obama's call to curb its growth sparked a strong Israeli reaction.

Israel occupied the West Bank, which was then under Jordanian control, during the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. The first settlements grew out of religious sentiment toward sites such as Hebron, where the biblical patriarch Abraham is thought to be entombed, and included efforts to reestablish a Jewish presence in areas where Jews had been forced to leave in the years before Israel's independence in 1948, said Yossi Klein Halevi, a senior fellow at the Shalem Center, a think tank closely allied with the Netanyahu government.

That attachment underpins many of the settlements -- the residents of largely secular Ariel note the nearby burial place of Joshua, Moses's successor, while many West Bank enclaves draw their rationale from the Bible. But strategic, economic and other concerns became the dominant validation for an undertaking that, over time, has become too big and complex to reverse.

The larger settlements were meant "to push the border back" and leave Israel with a wider, more defensible center, Halevi said. "That has very little to do with historical claim and nothing to do with religious sentiment. The rationale was

survival. That's why these urban centers speak viscerally to mainstream Israelis."

Israel has shown willingness to cede territory and remove people by force if necessary. The country dismantled settlements in the Gaza Strip four years ago and in the Sinai as part of the Camp David accords with Egypt in the 1970s.

But none of those was as rooted or politically and sentimentally attached to the country. Relying on statements made by then-President George W. Bush to then-Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, Israeli leaders now assume that several major settlement "blocks" -- not yet defined but presumably including Ariel and even larger communities -- will become part of Israel.

Although smaller or more removed settlements may be vulnerable, critics suspect that even as they talk about turning major portions of the West Bank over to the Palestinians, Israeli leaders will seek a way to avoid any large-scale pullback.

"The logic of the settlement blocks is that it gives the framework for Israel to stay in control," said Jeff Halper, head of the anti-settlement Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions.

Ariel's evolution shows the momentum at work. Although the town's population growth has slowed -- Nachman complains that Ariel has been suffering an effective "freeze" for years -- the broader enterprise continues to grow.

Over the years, the town has absorbed émigrés, housing 9,000 people from the former Soviet Union in the early 1990s, and been the hub of two industrial parks. The second is under construction, as part of plans that Nachman said are designed to turn Ariel into a regional hub of 60,000 people.

The town has drawn widespread support from Jewish and Christian philanthropies. Its public buildings are branded with family names such as Arison, Moscowitz, Ofer and those of other leading Jewish donors. The Billye Brim pool is inside the John Hagee Building, named after the controversial Texas televangelist.

The local hotel is a destination for Christian tour groups, and a higher-education facility is bidding to become the first Israeli university in the West Bank.

There is a high-tech business incubator, a laser research center and, on the outskirts of town, the new \$1 million Ariel National Youth Leadership Development Center. With a ropes course, climbing tower and plans for a zip-line, Nachman said, the expectation is that 40,000 Israeli youths will complete a leadership and team-building course there every year.

Those hopes were recently put in doubt. The facility was built without all the necessary approvals, and until last week a demolition permit had been pending against it. However, it was among about 450 projects that the Israeli government approved before Mitchell's trip and an expected announcement that -- at least for now -- construction in much of the West Bank will be stopped.