

# HOUSE HUNTERS

Israel's economic settl  
By Jamie Levin an

For Israelis willing to move to the West Bank, houses are now for sale in a hillside development in the expanding settlement of Eli. The Israeli government, which has occupied the West Bank for fifty years, considers the area disputed territory, though most countries, including the United States, view the settlements there—228 of them—to be a violation of international law. The first Jewish Israelis who moved to the West Bank after the Six-Day War were few in number and went mainly to reinforce Israel's borders against neighboring states. Later, they came with religious and ideological motivations. In 1974, the founding of Gush Emunim (“Bloc of the Faithful”), a messianic movement, brought settlers who established new Jewish outposts. The first Israelis arrived in Eli ten years later, naming the town after a biblical high priest. Gush Emunim is now defunct, but the group's development arm, Amana, continues to build around Eli. The construction of Eli Terraces Phase B adds close to 150 people to the town's population of nearly 4,000.

Jewish settlements in the West Bank are typically associated with Zionism, yet “quality of life” is the most commonly cited reason for moving to the Occupied Territory. As real estate in Israel's cities becomes increasingly expensive, these settlements offer an affordable alternative. In a recent Pew survey, nearly half of Jewish Israelis ranked the economy as the “biggest long-term problem facing Israel,” which is the same number who cited security. The nation's monetary frustrations reached an apex in 2011, when more than 300,000 Israelis—close to 4 percent of the population—took to the streets to protest the skyrocketing cost of living; the spark was a rise in the price of cottage cheese, but the focus of the movement soon turned to housing. Tent cities in the spirit of the Occupy Wall Street movement sprang up across the country. In response, forty-two Knesset members drafted an open letter to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in which they argued that building thousands of new homes in the West Bank could solve the problem. Since then, the discontent that the protests brought to the surface has continued to mount. Manuel Trajtenberg, an economist and Knesset member who headed a government commission to study Israel's socioeconomic problems, said, “In the past seven years, housing prices have gone up eighty to ninety percent. If it was critical then, it is a crisis now.”

Settlement developers have seized on Israel's economic angst, and many are pushing the quality-of-life sales pitch. At the start of the Oslo peace process, in 1993, 110,066 Israelis were living in West Bank settlements. That number has more than tripled, to 350,010. Hagit Ofran, a settlement monitor for Peace Now, estimated that two thirds of the Jews living in the West Bank moved there for primarily economic reasons. These settlers fall into two main categories, Ofran said. The fastest-growing segment in the West Bank is the ultra-Orthodox Haredim, a group that has been priced out of Jerusalem. The second segment is classic suburbanites: families looking for big houses, nice back yards, and reasonable commutes—all for an affordable price tag. “For too long, our image of the settlements has been stuck in the 1970s and the idea of the messianic settler living there for ideological reasons,” Sara Hirschhorn, a scholar of Israel studies at Oxford University, said. The latest marketing strategy is also inherently a political move, she noted; the Israeli government has long sought to subsidize these Jewish-only settlements as a means of furnishing territory beyond the pre-1967 border—also called the Green Line—as typical suburbs. (Palestinians are not permitted to live in these communities, but often provide cheap labor.) “They wanted to erase the Green Line by advertising the idea that your home in the West Bank is the same as your home anywhere else.”



# INTERNATIONAL

Settlers in the West Bank  
and Sarah Treleaven



In the ad, Eli is described as a “great place to grow up.” While the average three- to four-bedroom apartment in Tel Aviv costs \$850,000, a “giant” three-bedroom home in Eli starts at around \$210,000. The ad also promises a discount on purchase taxes, and there are many additional incentives not shown. According to a report from Peace Now, West Bank settlers pay lower property taxes than other homeowners and receive a disproportionate share of state benefits, including funding for education and municipal services. “The settlements are getting cheaper at a time when more and more Israelis are struggling with the high cost of living,” Stav Shaffir, a member of the Knesset and a former leader of the economic protests, said. The ad also boasts that Eli is “close to everything.” A network of highways—many of which bypass Palestinian population centers—runs through the settlements, making Eli just a thirty-five-minute drive from Jerusalem. (These roads are less convenient for Palestinians, who without notice may be prohibited from driving through.) Eli hosts a community center, classrooms, a day care, a swimming pool, and a library. For the observant, there are multiple synagogues, and for the secular, a new shopping center. Nitza Farkash, an American Israeli who has lived in Eli with her family for sixteen years, said that she might prefer to live in a city like Tel Aviv if it were more affordable, but she chose Eli because it offers good schools for her children and a short commute for her husband. “It has its advantages,” she said. “It’s calm and peaceful. We can get to wherever we need to go.”

The mundane economic concerns of Israelis tempted by lower housing prices—the same motivations that foster suburban sprawl everywhere—have dire consequences here. Eli and other nearby Jewish settlements bisect the West Bank, making the creation of a contiguous Palestinian state increasingly difficult to envision. Yehuda Lanzkron, the director of development for Eli, dismissed the possibility that the settlements could ever relocate to make way for Palestine. “There is no power or government in the world that can move such a big population,” he said. Recent polling has indicated declining support for a two-state solution among Jewish Israelis, and a majority no longer consider Israel’s rule over the West Bank to be a military occupation. About half of all Jewish settlers in the area live in consensus settlements, so named because the country aims to keep those territories in any future peace agreement with the Palestinians. (This “consensus” does not include the Palestinians, of course, who insist that permanent boundaries should be negotiated.) These settlements, which used to be clustered along the Green Line close to Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, have gradually inched deeper into the West Bank. Despite multiple construction freezes implemented by the Israeli government over the past twenty years, the building continues. The most recent freeze expired in 2010, and in June, Israel approved a \$20 million financing package for the settlements. From the beginning of 2009 until 2014, the Jewish population in the West Bank grew 23 percent—compared with 9.6 percent growth for the national population. Eli’s leaders hope the expansion will continue. “In twenty years, come to Eli and you’ll see big buildings with ten or more floors,” Ido Meushar, the mayor, said. “You’ll see towers of high tech, just like in Ra’anana. You’ll see a community ten times bigger that comes together to celebrate Independence Day. You will see exactly what is happening in other parts of Israel.”

Jamie Levin and Sarah Treleaven previously wrote for Harper’s Magazine on SodaStream, in the September 2013 issue.