

Jerusalem sprawl: West Bank settlement policy

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [April 19, 2005](#) issue

It was appropriate that the final U.S. blessing for the city of Ma'aleh Adumim was delivered to the Israeli government by Deputy National Security Adviser Elliott Abrams. You may remember Abrams as the State Department official who avoided serious punishment, including possible jail time, by pleading guilty to participating in the Reagan administration's illegal diversion of money gained from selling arms to Iran into aid for the "contra" guerrillas in Nicaragua. Let the *Washington Post* refresh your memory:

When Elliott Abrams stood in front of a federal judge in October 1991 and pleaded guilty to two misdemeanor counts of withholding information from Congress, few imagined he would ever return to government. At age 43, he had become one of the casualties of the Iran-contra scandal, detested by Democrats for his combative political style and mistrusted by human rights activists for playing down the crimes of right-wing dictatorships in Central America. (May 27, 2003)

A favorite go-to guy for the neoconservative, strongly pro-Israel community in Washington, Abrams survived the Clinton years—after being pardoned by the first George Bush for his Iran-contra lawbreaking—as director of the Ethics and Public Policy Center, a conservative think tank. He also honed his pro-Israel credentials by writing columns for beliefnet.com, including one in which he reacted to a delegation of Christian leaders after their solidarity trip to visit churches in the Middle East: "There they go again! The almost unblemished, unwavering record of hostility to the state of Israel on the part of mainline Protestant denominations has made it into a new century." For Abrams, an embrace of fellow Christians in Palestine can signify only "hostility" to Israel.

This is the diplomat George Bush sent to Tel Aviv to "discuss" Ma'aleh Adumim, a town that has long been the pearl in Israel's West Bank settlement crown. After

meeting with his old friend Ariel Sharon, Abrams issued the usual diplomatic double-talk, later reiterated by his boss, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, which states that the new housing plan was not in accord with U.S. preferences. It is routine for U.S. governments to disapprove of settlement activity, but it is also understood that the disapproval means nothing.

Check the news clips over the past few years on Har Homa, a one-time forest preserve south of Ma'aleh Adumim on the road to Bethlehem. The U.S. has objected to this Israeli project from the time it was a tree-covered mountain until today, when it has become a thriving Israeli settlement. Take it to the bank—the new housing will go forward.

Begun in 1973 as a collection of “illegal” family dwellings, the settlement was named Ma'aleh Adumim (from Joshua 15:6-18) a few years later, and approved as an official “residential area.” It became a government-sanctioned municipality in 1979. From its small beginning with 23 families, Ma'aleh Adumim has grown to a city of 33,500, including 3,500 residents for the newly sanctioned dwellings.

By naming Abrams as its delegate to confer with Sharon, the Bush White House is sealing as fact an earlier Bush statement that Israel may retain major suburban developments in any final peace agreement. To Meron Benvenisti, columnist for Jerusalem's *Ha'aretz* newspaper and a former deputy mayor of Jerusalem, approval of the housing blocs ends all hope for a viable Palestinian state.

This building bloc, says Benvenisti, “finally cuts off the northern West Bank from the southern part, and turns the Arab neighborhoods and villages of Jerusalem into isolated islands,” resulting in a “permanent map of the West Bank” that guarantees there will be no Palestinian contiguity.

A dedicated Israeli Zionist, Benvenisti also reminds his readers: “Since no serious Palestinian will accept a plan for a state without territorial contiguity, it is clear that the plan to link Ma'aleh Adumim to Jerusalem will torpedo any chance for the establishment of a Palestinian state as laid out by the road map.”

Will this continuation of the West Bank settlement policy ever register on the world's moral conscience with sufficient force to demand justice for the Palestinians? There is little room for optimism. Envy, not moral outrage, is a more likely response to promotional material on the Ma'aleh Adumim Web site. There you will read exultation over the ease with which residents may commute to work in West

Jerusalem on a recently completed highway featuring two 550-meter tunnels that reduce the commute to 15 minutes. No two-hour delays at Israeli army checkpoints for these hardy commuters.

And don't expect moral outrage to surface when Sharon travels to Washington in mid-April for yet another friendly chat with President Bush. Note instead the absence of criticism for Ma'aleh Adumim's latest expansion project. Headlines will focus on the "political courage" of Sharon, who will be applauded for ordering the removal of 8,000 Jewish settlers from unsafe and costly Gaza settlements, a gesture designed to strengthen his claim to the West Bank settlements.

Israel's settlement policy has long been in violation of numerous UN resolutions governing the treatment of land and people in occupied areas. But this does not bother the Bush administration, which is highly selective about the UN resolutions it supports. And it certainly doesn't bother Iran-contra veteran Elliott Abrams, who is no stranger to shadowboxing with the truth.