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New settlement planned for former Gaza settlers

Defense Ministry approves plans for new settlement in Jordan Valley, for 30 families evacuated from Gaza.

By Nadav Shragai, Yair Ettinger, Nir Hasson and Haaretz Correspondents

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The Defense Ministry has approved the building of a new settlement in the northern Jordan Valley, outside of the West Bank separation fence, which will house families evacuated from Gaza settlements.

The site of the planned settlement will be a former installation of the Haredi branch of the Israel Defense Forces Nahal infantry brigade.

The plans, approved Monday, include the construction of 30 houses intended for families who were evacuated from Gush Katif as part of the disengagement from Gaza in August 2005.

The settlement, to be named Maskiot, will include 20 families from the former Gaza settlement of Shirat Hayam and another 10 families from other settlements in Gush Katif.

Jordan Valley Regional Council leader Dubi Tal said Tuesday that

construction is expected to begin in two weeks. Nonetheless, it is not certain when families will begin moving to the settlement.

Emily Amrusy, a spokeswoman for the Yesha Council of Settlements, said 42 of the 1,700 families evacuated from the Gaza Strip had moved

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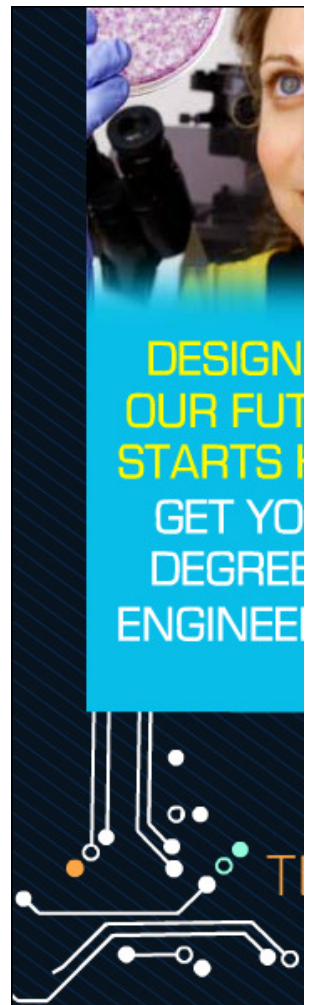
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to the West Bank and were living in temporary housing.

"The explanation [for the low numbers] is that most of the families wanted to live in southern Israel to be close to working places and relatives," she said.

She said the government had promised to build "a neighborhood" for Gaza evacuees in Maskiot and they planned to move into caravans at the site to await the construction of permanent housing.

The plan for the new settlement was first approved during the tenure of former prime minister Ariel Sharon by his then-senior aide Ilan Cohen, but approval was delayed pending approval by the defense minister.

In the past, Maskiot was an installation of the Haredi branch of the Nahal infantry brigade. The installation was later abandoned, and today most of its buildings are empty and are used for pre-army preparatory programs.

In May, GOC Central Command Yair Naveh, who is the overall West Bank commander, approved the expansion of the territory of four settlements, Beitar Illit, Givat Zeev, Ornit, and Maskiot. Maskiot is the only one of the four located outside of the separation fence.

The proposal to approve the expansions was received by former defense minister Shaul Mofaz, and was met by opposition from his successor Amir Peretz. Nonetheless, the plans remained on the table, pending approval.

Shirat Hayam was one of the more ideologically-driven settlements in Gush Katif and was the last settlement founded in Gush Katif. Shirat Hayam was founded in 2000 in response to a terrorist attack on a school bus transporting children from the settlement of Kfar Darom.

"We want to move together as a group, and carry on the legacy of our community. The place to do this is the [Jordan] Valley," said Avinadav Vitkon, an evacuee from Shirat Hayam.

"Of course we're worried about a future evacuation, and we do have mixed feelings, but this seems to be our fate, we see this as a challenge," he added.

Another Gush Katif evacuee, Yossi Hazot, on Wednesday stated that "We aren't moving to the Jordan Valley just to be evacuated in two years, but, also not to prevent a future evacuation. I expect that the Jordan Valley will remain in our hands for many years. Some say the Jordan Valley is a question mark, in which case, we are the exclamation point."



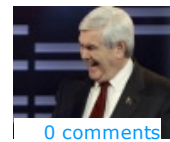
An expanse of the Jordan Valley, looking east from Israel toward Jordan. (Archive)



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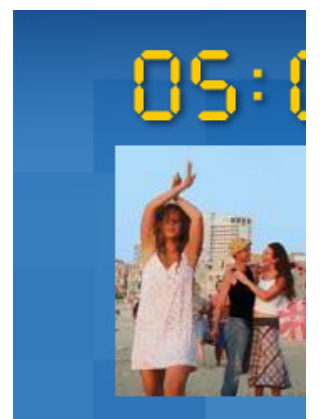
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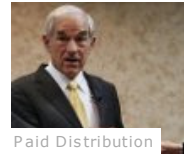
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