Israeli Settlement Activity in the West Bank and Gaza: A Brief History

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The impetus to claim and settle the areas known as the West Bank (Judea and Samaria) originated in the aftermath of Israel's surprising victory over Egypt, Syria, and Jordan in the Six-Day War in 1967 (Gazit 2003: 241). Before this war, there was virtually no domestic political pressure within Israel to expand the boundaries of the state. Herut, a right-wing party and the Likud party's predecessor, held to a traditional aspiration that the Jewish state should extend to "both banks" of the Jordan River, but by the mid-1960s only a small minority of Israelis held this view.

The Six-Day War's outcome surprised and elated Israelis, and laid the foundation for a fundamental change in attitude. Israel suddenly found itself with a vastly, unexpectedly enlarged territory, and various political and religious movements developed ideological, political, and financial resources to fill it. Immediately after the war, Israel annexed East Jerusalem, and there was a broad consensus that Jerusalem should become the undivided capital of Israel. Steps were taken to encourage Jews to move to these newly annexed neighborhoods of Jerusalem. However, our focus is on settlements activities in the West Bank and Gaza, not the new Jewish neighborhoods in Jerusalem proper.[1] One way to understand the history of the settlements is to distinguish two broad time periods: the period between 1967 and 1977, when the Labor party was in power, and the period since 1977, when Likud formed its first government.

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1967–1977 Settlement Activities

During this initial period, the government essentially viewed the territories as a bargaining chip that it would someday trade for recognition and peace. Nonetheless, some limited settlement activities were authorized based on two justifications: national security and historical claims arising from the location of Jewish settlements and communities that existed prior to 1948 (Gazit 2003: 241).

Israel's Ministerial Committee on the Settlements was led by Yigal Alon, who proposed what became known as the "Alon Plan." The idea was to create a string of settlements in areas that would safeguard Israel's future lines of defense, such as those settlements along the Jordan River Valley (an eastern line of defense). He also anticipated that these settlements might someday be annexed to Israel. In general, the government justified these early settlements on grounds of national security. Many of them began as military settlements, and most were located outside areas already inhabited by Arabs. In other cases, settlements were established under false pretenses, like "work camps" and archaeological excavations (Gazit 2003: 249).

The most influential movement promoting early settlement in the West Bank was Gush Emunim (Bloc of the Faithful), a right-wing national-religious movement formed in 1974 that became the driving force for settlement expansion. Gush Emunim was guided by the theology of a charismatic rabbi, Tzvi Yehuda Kook, and its membership mostly comprised politically and religiously zealous youth who belonged to the National Religious Party. This movement sought to incorporate all the territories into *Eretz Yisrael* (land of Israel in Hebrew) as an expression of its devotion to a religious mandate emanating from the Old Testament (Shafat 1994: 31).

From 1974 to 1976, successive Labor governments worked to restrain this movement. In 1974 and 1975, Gush Emunim attempted and failed seven times to settle an area near Nablus. Only on the eighth try — when the government's vigilance faltered because of internal conflicts within the Labor party between Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Defense Minister Shimon Peres — were they permitted to stay at a military base, which became an official settlement two years later. By 1977, 4,500 Israelis lived in thirty-six settlements established either at the government's initiative or with its acquiescence, thirty-one in the West Bank and five in the Gaza strip (Shafat 1994: 64; Lein 2002: 19).

The 1977 Watershed: The Rise of Likud

In 1977, the Likud party broke the Labor party's long-standing monopoly and formed its first government. The 1977 elections brought to power people who shared Gush Emunim's dream that there should ultimately be Jewish control of *all* of the land of Israel. However, while Likud was sympathetic to an expansionist vision, Prime Minister Menachem Begin's first

government was initially reluctant to implement Gush Emunim's program (Lein 2002: 14; Shafat 1994: 272).

Within Begin's government, Ariel Sharon, who served as minister of agriculture from 1977 to 1981, championed the expansion of the settlements and used his post to develop his own long-range plan for expansion. Sharon believed that it was important to prevent a large contiguous Arab territory from forming around the Green Line, which is the term for the boundary between Israel proper (established by the 1949 armistice that created the state of Israel) and the occupied areas of the West Bank and Gaza (the Green Line is so named because someone used a green pen to draw it on the map for the armistice agreement with Jordan). This goal was reflected in his choice of areas targeted as priority for settlement. While Gush Emunim and similar organizations were able to attract settlers with religious or nationalist motivations, Sharon went to great lengths to attract the general public to the settlements movement. By 1981, the number of West Bank settlers had nearly quadrupled, to more than 16,000 (Lein 2002: 14, 19).

Likud won a second victory in 1981, and during its second administration (1981 to 1984) the settlement project was further institutionalized through the use of both governmental agencies and nongovernmental Zionist organizations such as the Jewish Agency (JA) and the World Zionist Organization (WZO). This institutional support transformed the expansion of settlements from an essentially entrepreneurial, activity driven by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) into a state-sponsored project involving substantial subsidies to encourage Israelis to move to settlements. For example, in 1983 the WZO collaborated with the Ministry of Agriculture to develop a plan to attract 80,000 new Israelis to twenty-three new communities by 1986. This goal was not achieved within the specified time frame — in part because from 1984 until 1990 Likud and Labor shared power — but an expansionist course had been set, and between 1984 and 1990, the number of West Bank settlers increased from 35,000 to more than 78,000 (Lein 2002: 19).

Not surprisingly, the Likud governments in the 1970s and 1980s actively sought to erase the distinction between Israel proper and the occupied territories from Israel's collective psychology. For example, the Ministry of the Interior began referring to the West Bank territories as "Judea and Samaria" in official announcements and changed "settlement" in government publications and documents from a neutral word to one evocative of Biblical claims of redemption. After 1969, the Green Line appeared on no official Israeli maps, and the terms "West Bank" and "occupied territory" were forbidden to be uttered on state radio. These changes and other similar ones were the marks of an administration committed to its vision of a greater Israel. Later Likud administrations explicitly sought to create new "facts on the ground" in the territories through an ambitious

government-sponsored settlement project. Likud's intent was to ensure that no future Israeli government would find it politically possible to withdraw from the West Bank as part of an overall settlement (Lein 2002: 14).

Settlement Expansion during the 1990s

Ironically, during the 1990s, a decade dominated by the Oslo Peace Process that began in 1993, the number of West Bank settlers grew from 78,000 to nearly 200,000. In 1992, the Labor party came to power again led by Yitzhak Rabin, who promised to significantly reduce the amount of governmental resources going to settlements. As part of the Oslo process, in 1995 Israel officially committed not to "initiate or take any step that will change the status of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip pending the outcome of the permanent status negotiations." The Labor government also promised the United States that it would not establish new settlements or expand existing ones, except as necessary to accommodate the "natural growth" of the local population. The government's internal guidelines reiterated as much but made an exception to allow new settlement construction in "the Greater Jerusalem area and in the Jordan Valley." The Labor government took advantage of the vagueness of the wording: "Greater Jerusalem" was interpreted liberally, and the "natural growth" clause allowed Israel to build considerably without provoking the United States. A number of settlements were constructed as "new neighborhoods" of already existing ones. In fact, between 1993 and 2001, the number of housing units in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank (excluding East Jerusalem) rose from 20,400 to 31,400 — 54 percent in eleven years, with the most significant increase under Labor Prime Minister Ehud Barak in 2000 (Lein 2002: 15).

The Settlements Today

There are now 231,000 settlers living in more than 175 settlements in the West Bank and Gaza Strip in addition to those who live in the annexed portion of Jerusalem. The settlers fall into three main demographic groups:

1. Secular or traditional settlers who live in towns and communal settlements. Many of these settlements are close to the Green Line, and it is widely believed that they will remain in territorial Israel as part of a future peace deal with the Palestinians. This group constitutes approximately 50 percent of the total settler population.

2. National-religious settlers, who reside mostly in communal settlements that tend to be further away from the Green Line. This group initiated the settlement movement and is considered to be the most ideologically committed to the project. Individuals from this group dominate the political leadership and public representation of the settler movement. These settlers represent about 25 percent of the settlers.

3. Ultra-orthodox settlers who reside in large towns near the Green Line. These settlers represent about 25 percent of the total number of settlers and have been the fastest-growing group of settlers in the last few years. In 2002, 50 percent of new settlers were from this group.

While the political affiliations of these three groups do vary, a higher proportion of settlers vote for right-wing parties than is true for Israelis on the whole (Shragai 2003, 2004; Lein 2002: 19; Suan and Shefer 2003).

NOTE

1. In this narrative and for the most part in this conference, we do not discuss the settlements in Jerusalem itself. By the time of Likud's victory in 1977, there were 50,000 Israelis living in settlements in the annexed portions of East Jerusalem. As of 2001, there were more than 170,000. One reason for not focusing on these settlements is that, even during the 2000 Camp David talks, it appeared that the Palestinians were prepared, as part of an agreement, to accept that these Jewish neighborhoods would remain part of Israel proper.

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