

Settlers' Bust

By Michael Dahan | October 27, 2004

Much has been written in support of and against Sharon's planned disengagement from the Gaza Strip, to include the dismantling of the settlements in the Gaza Strip, isolated settlements in the northern part of the West Bank, and the redeployment of the Israeli army within the Gaza Strip; yet one crucially important aspect has been overlooked by most commentators: the precedent of dismantling settlements and its potentially transforming and cathartic affect on Israeli society.

Since 1967, Israel, under both Labor (the first settlements in the Gaza strip were established by Labor in 1971) and Likud governments has gone to great pains to populate the West Bank and the Gaza Strip with illegal settlements, investing roughly \$100 billion dollars in this illegal enterprise over the course of 38 years, resulting in the presence of approximately 240,000 Israeli settlers in these occupied territories (roughly 3.5% of the Israeli population). The settlers themselves and their representatives have accrued a disproportional amount of political power (perceived and de facto) over this time period, often being seen as second only to the Israeli army in their political power, prowess, and influence.

The settlers and their political collaborators on the right have managed to reach positions of influence within the Israeli public sector, particularly in the government units responsible for land administration within Israel proper and the territories (hence, for example, the difficulty in receiving hard data regarding the actual numbers of "illegal" outposts in the West Bank). In addition to this, many of the senior and middle level positions within the civil administration of the territories are held by settlers. Indeed, over the past 5 years the settlers and their cohorts have taken over more than a third of the Likud party central committee in a concerted effort to take full control of the party. Since the early 90s, the settlers and their supporters have waged what can only be termed a psychological war against Israeli politicians on the left and right as well as the Israeli public. The purpose of this psychological war? To strike fear and uncertainty into the hearts of Israeli citizens and decision makers, preventing them from reaching the only logical solution to the Palestinian/Israeli conflict—the dismantling of settlements, a return to the 1967 borders, a just resolution

of the Palestinian refugee issue and the creation of a viable Palestinian state.

A Civil War in Israel?

More recently, as the Knesset vote on Sharon's disengagement plan drew near, central figures among the settlers have been threatening civil war if Israel withdraws from the Gaza Strip. What is more, many prominent Rabbis on the messianic religious right have called on religious soldiers in the Israeli army to refuse to participate in the Gaza redeployment and the dismantling of settlements there and in the northeastern West Bank. Doing so, according to these figures, will lead to an irreparable rift within Israeli society and to civil war. (The settlers have adopted a peculiar messianic form of Judaism similar in many ways to millennial Christians. Menachem Begin, prior to the withdrawal from Sinai noted that the settlers' judgment has been clouded by messianic visions—a statement quoted by Sharon in his speech prior to the Knesset vote on the disengagement plan.)

In reality, this is not the case. The withdrawal from the Gaza Strip will not lead to civil war, nor will it lead to a rift, irreparable or otherwise, in Israel proper. All the polls and figures point to the fact that the disengagement plan is supported by at least 70% of the Israeli public. Indeed, there are few issues on the public agenda in Israel which receive such wide support. Just as Israel did not suffer from civil war with the dismantling of the settlements in Sinai, it is highly unlikely that this will be any different with Gaza and the West Bank. Israel has only gained in the past by relinquishing conquered and occupied territories and will continue to benefit from such actions in the future.

What frightens the settlers is that after 38 years of occupation their bluff is about to be called. Oddly

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enough, they are being forced by their former patron and supporter, Ariel Sharon, to show their hand to the Israeli public—and that hand is empty. For 38 years the settlers have managed to paralyze political leaders seeking to divest Israel of the settlements. Their supporters assassinated Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and they are now threatening Sharon with physical violence. Following the disengagement vote in the Knesset last night, graffiti appeared in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv calling for Sharon's death. For 38 years the settlers and their cohorts have managed to prevent the single most important decision facing the Israeli public and the political leadership of the country: To divest itself of the occupied territories.

Thus, the disengagement plan threatens to tear away the mask of the settlers' mythical power. It will put to the test the settlers' threats, and as in the fairy tale, it will quickly become clear that the emperor is naked. Once this is internalized by the Israeli public and the political leadership, the perceived political power of the settlers will dissolve like mist. Once the public and the political leadership see that settlements can be dismantled it will likely serve as a domino effect and the settlers' house of cards will quickly crumble. The settlers will then be forced to decide where to place their loyalty—with the messianic vision of "Greater Israel" and its attendant occupation and subjugation of the Palestinian people or with the state of Israel with defined borders minus the moral, ethical, and political quagmire of the occupation. Yet it remains to be seen whether Sharon will actually move forward with the redeployment and dismantling of settlements and

whether his government will be able to withstand the expected political upheaval in the coming months.

Former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak likes to credit himself with exposing Arafat's true intentions, rightly or wrongly. Ironically enough, Ariel Sharon, patron and key architect of the settlement enterprise will be able to credit himself in the future with exposing the true face of the settlers and their perceived power, and will make it easier for future Israeli leaders to dismantle the settlements and move forward towards a political agreement with the Palestinians.

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