

West Bank – exactly those parts that already fell under the control of the settlements and the Civil Administration and were regarded as belonging to the Jewish people.

With Israel's master plan for the West Bank unfolding before his eyes, Shehadeh recounts in one of his memoirs how he came to realize that he and other Palestinians in the occupied territories might have realized earlier what was happening to them had they listened to the warnings from Israel's Palestinian citizens, who had already suffered the same treatment at the hands of a Jewish state:

They would tell us: 'You don't know a thing about Israel. We can tell you what is coming: land expropriations, biased zoning that will strangle your towns, and unfair taxation that will impoverish you.' And we would look with condescension at them and think they had lived for so long under Israel that they had become colonized, unable to think beyond their narrow claustrophobic reality.⁴⁰

Goals of Colonization

Ariel Sharon's 'disengagement' in 2005 removed 8,000 settlers from twenty-one colonies in Gaza and a handful more Israelis from four isolated and unviable settlements in the northern tip of the West Bank. Despite the fanfare of publicity that greeted the withdrawal, the evacuees were survived by the overwhelming majority of the settlement population: 270,000 living in 120 official colonies in the West Bank; a few thousand settlers in more than 100 tiny outposts, usually land-grabbing extensions of the settlements that lacked official recognition but were secretly supported by both the army and government; and nearly 230,000 settlers living in the Jewish neighbourhoods of East Jerusalem, the Palestinian half of the city annexed to Israel since 1980.⁴¹ Today, these half a million settlers and the army that protects them control 60 per cent of the West Bank. The remaining ghettos – islands of Palestinian land surrounded by a sea of Israeli-controlled territory – are nominally ruled by the Palestinian Authority, a kind of Palestinian government-in-waiting created by the Oslo agreements of the mid-1990s.

Shortly after the Gaza evacuation, Sharon advised his Likud Party of the urgent need to expand the surviving colonies in the West Bank without attracting attention: 'There's no need to talk. We need to build, and we're building without talking.' Indeed. In the year of the disengagement, the settler population actually grew, with an estimated 14,500 new settlers in the West Bank more than making up for the loss of the 8,000 from Gaza. Dror Etkes, an expert on the settlement enterprise, warned in the wake of the disengagement that Israeli officials were seeking to pre-empt any final peace agreement being considered by the US: 'They don't know how long they've got. That's why they're building like maniacs.'⁴² In 2006, 27 per cent of all the apartments purchased by Israelis were situated in the West Bank.⁴³ And in the first half of 2007, the settler population grew by 5.5 per cent, several times the rate of increase inside Israel proper.⁴⁴ In places like Ma'ale Adumim and Ariel, the settlements have evolved into proper towns, numbering tens of thousands of inhabitants and strategically located to destroy any chance of a territorially coherent Palestinian state emerging. The half a million settlers, nearly a tenth of Israel's Jewish population, with ties to friends and families on the other side of the Green Line, are a powerful constituency that few Israeli politicians choose, or want, to confront.

As we have seen, the colonization of the occupied territories was far from accidental: for four decades it followed the general outlines proposed by Allon and Dayan in 1967. However, over time officials grew more confident that more specific and brazen goals of settlement could be achieved. An idea of their thinking was offered by the World Zionist Organization, an unaccountable quasi-governmental body overseeing settlement policy in the occupied territories on behalf of the state in a role mirroring the activities of the Jewish National Fund inside Israel's borders. In 1978, in the immediate wake of Israel's agreement, under US pressure, to return the Sinai to Egypt, the WZO drafted a report on the settlements, the Drobless Plan, named after its principal author, Mattiyahu Drobless. Hoping to avert any danger that a similar agreement would be repeated with the occupied Palestinian territories, Drobless asserted bluntly that 'settlement

throughout the entire land of Israel' – that is, including the West Bank and Gaza – was 'our right'. An amended version of the plan was issued two years later that was even clearer about the aims of settlement. Israel was in 'a race against time' and must concentrate on 'establishing facts on the ground. ... There mustn't be even a shadow of a doubt about our intention to keep the territories of Judea and Samaria [the West Bank] for good'.⁴⁵ Drobless envisioned a million settlers in the occupied territories by 2013, an ambition that may have looked deluded at the time but today looks less unrealistic.⁴⁶

The report offered a strategy for how to settle the land – one, as the Middle East expert David Hirst notes, that

was expressly modelled on techniques which, since 1948, had been applied to the organized remnants of the Palestinian community in the original Israel, despoiling yet more of their land and villages, fragmenting them geographically, paralysing them politically and reducing them to a condition of abject dependence on the Jewish economy.

Settlement, Drobless suggested, should be not only *around* Palestinian communities, to contain them, but also *between* them, 'in accordance with the settlement policy adopted in Galilee', to fragment them.⁴⁷ The settlements, and the infrastructure needed to integrate them into Israel proper, would break up the continuity of the Palestinian living space, preventing the emergence of any future Palestinian state. Or, as Sara Roy observes, settlement was designed 'to normalize and institutionalize land expropriations by eroding the 1967 borders making territorial retreat difficult if not impossible'.⁴⁸ Sharon gave voice to precisely this ambition on a helicopter flight over the Gaza Strip in 1980 when he was agriculture minister. Accompanied by the Israeli military governor of Gaza, who wanted to know how he was supposed to contain the Palestinian refugee camps below, Sharon replied: 'I want the Arabs to see Jewish lights every night 500 meters from them.'⁴⁹ The Palestinians had to be made to accept that Jewish dominion in the occupied territories was an irreversible fact of life. In the different context of the second intifada, but expressing much the same sentiment, Chief of Staff Moshe Ya'alon

called for Israel's invincibility to be 'burned into the Palestinian and Arab consciousness'.⁵⁰

For the settlement drive to succeed in fragmenting the Palestinians and disabuse them of any hope of ever attaining statehood, Israel required a large number of Israelis to move from the safety of their homes inside Israel to a more uncertain life in the occupied territories. Despite Israel's long-term intentions, its formal position was that the settlements were only temporary and might one day be dismantled as part of a peace agreement. Apart from in the case of East Jerusalem, which had been annexed to Israel, the undecided status of the West Bank and Gaza explained the reluctance of the wider Israeli population to settle in the territories in the first decades of occupation. Israel therefore invested huge sums of money on the settlements, making them attractive to families who needed cheap housing or a better quality of life away from the overcrowded centre of the country.

Subsidizing the Settlers

A report by the B'Tselem human rights group during the second intifada noted that Israel had 'carried out a vigorous and systematic policy aimed at encouraging Israeli citizens to move to the settlements. One of the main tools serving this policy is the granting of benefits and significant financial incentives to settlers.' Much of the money had been funnelled either through the settlers' local councils or by classifying the settlements as 'national priority areas'. In these areas, settlers received a reduction on their income tax, special loans at discounted rates, greater expenditure on their local schools and subsidized housing and transport, while businesses were eligible for large grants.

The total amount spent by Israel on the settlements will probably never be known, as the figures have been buried deep in the general budgets of government ministries. This was done to avoid both international censure and the likely outcry from ordinary Israelis appalled at the waste of public money. However, in 2003 the *Ha'aretz* newspaper did try to estimate the additional cost of the settlements

to the Israeli taxpayer after excluding all military expenditure. It admitted that its calculations were intentionally ‘very conservative’, that it had not factored in the whole period of the occupation and that it had excluded the half of the settler population that lives in East Jerusalem. Nonetheless, it found that at least 50 billion shekels (\$12 billion) had been spent on benefits for the settlers over and above what would have been spent on them if they had remained inside Israel.⁵¹ Given that for much of the occupation there were no more than a few tens of thousands of settlers in the occupied territories, it was a truly astounding sum.

The other factor encouraging Israelis to move into the occupied territories, paradoxically, was the signing of the Oslo peace agreements in the mid-1990s that established the Palestinian Authority under the leadership of Yasser Arafat. During the short, seven-year period of Oslo, the number of settlers doubled to some 200,000. Raja Shehadeh sheds some light on this strange phenomenon. The Declaration of Principles, approved by the Palestinian leadership in Tunis, was

achieved at the price of keeping the settlements out of the jurisdiction of the Palestinian Authority. ... With one blow, political expediency led to the acceptance [by the Palestinian leadership] of all the illegal changes we in the Occupied Territories had been struggling to nullify for two decades.⁵²

Or as the Foreign Ministry’s legal adviser, Alan Baker, himself a settler, told an Israeli newspaper in 2003:

It was resolved – and the Palestinians agreed – that the settlements’ fate would be determined in a future peace agreement. After we signed those [Oslo] accords, which are still legally in force, we are no longer an occupying power, but we are instead present in the territories with their [Palestinian] consent and subject to the outcome of negotiations.⁵³

Israelis came to believe, and were encouraged to think by their leaders, that, with the signing of the Oslo Accords, the settlement blocs had received Palestinian acceptance and international legitimacy.

A sign of the extent to which Israeli society and the wider international community had allowed themselves to be deceived by the legal facade of the settlement enterprise recently came to light. *Ha'aretz* revealed in October 2006 that a secret report on the settlements had been compiled by General Baruch Spiegel, special adviser to the defence minister. Military sources described its contents as 'explosive'.⁵⁴ Following the newspaper's investigation, an Israeli group, Peace Now, petitioned the courts under the country's Freedom of Information Act to force the government to publish the details. Officials countered by arguing that publication would 'damage the state's security and foreign relations', a presumed reference to the fact that the report's findings would embarrass the United States, whose billions of dollars in aid had been secretly siphoned off to prop up the settlement drive. Only later, in early 2008, was information from the report leaked to Peace Now. It showed that more than a third of the 120 colonies in the West Bank had been built on private Palestinian land, officially seized temporarily and out of military necessity. It further revealed that 19 of these 44 settlements had been built after 1979 when the cabinet took a decision, in the wake of the Elon Moreh case, to build on 'state land' only. The list of the settlements included many of the largest and most famous, including Ariel, Efrat, Kiryat Arba, Ofra, Beit El, Psagot, Kedumim and Shiloh. Peace Now pointed out that the data showed many of the settlements were illegal even according to the perverse rules laid down by Israel. A legal source warned improbably that the courts might demand that the state hand back the land on which these settlements were built to their Palestinian owners.⁵⁵

The brief bout of soul-searching in Israel prompted by these revelations allowed Israelis to avoid pondering the deeper purpose of the settlements. It was left to an Israeli journalist, Amira Hass, to offer a dissenting view:

The exaggerated concentration on private ownership feeds into the Israeli denial of the fact that the Palestinians' right is to all of the territory that has been occupied. Not as private individuals, but rather because they constitute an indigenous national group in this land.⁵⁶