Twenty Years Demolishing Amona

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Articles & Testimony

While the vast majority of Israeli settlers prefer a political solution, several radical subsets could threaten violence during the Amona evacuation or other attempted outpost removals.

The Israeli Supreme Court has ruled that authorities must remove the illegal Amona outpost near Ofra by the end of 2016. That may sound definitive, but the court has ordered Amona's demolition three times since 1997. In 2006, an attempt to remove 35 families resulted in over 200 injuries from violent clashes between 4,000 protesters and 10,000 police. Riot police faced opposition with barbed wire and thrown stones, while investigators found nail-spiked potatoes and acid nearby. Police razed nine structures and the community has regrown to 40 families. Fearing escalatory violence, Israel has not attempted a comparable evacuation since, making Amona a symbol of the settler movement's power.

Activists have again organized to oppose Amona's removal, forcing Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to petition for a six-month demolition extension after settlers advocates rejected a plan to relocate the outpost. The Bayit Yehudi Party and some Likud members threatened to bring down the government unless Amona is legalized, not removed, leaving Netanyahu at an impasse. Once again, the Israeli government's ability to enforce rulings has been thrown into question over the fate of under 50 families living in Amona.

The vast majority of settlers prefer a political solution, but a radical subset threatens violence there and elsewhere. The legacy of intra-Jewish violence makes that tiny minority especially threatening. Even mainstream settler leaders have drawn on this resonance to enhance their political clout. That is why the government started preparing for Jewish violence directed against Palestinians and Israeli officers during Amona's currently scheduled evacuation in December. And it is why preparation for potential future evacuations should start now.

Surrounding Amona or future settlement evacuations, there are three groups who have resorted to violence in the

past and may pose a violent threat in an evacuation scenario. First, the so-called hilltop youth could stall a withdrawal via "price tag" attacks on Palestinians or Israeli officers. Hilltop youth are young coed Israelis generally from Israel proper who are disaffected with mainstream Israeli society. Numbering a few hundred, hilltop youth reject societal norms by growing long hair, donning unique thick wool kippot and indulging in drugs. Though they are not supported by a formal institution, niche positive rabbinic and public perceptions buoy them, a loose network inside Israel supports them and yeshivas such as Yitzhar's Od Yosef Chai often serve as pipelines into their ranks. Hilltop youth's influencers, such as Rabbi Yitzhak Ginsburgh, became convinced that the state was not a vehicle of religious redemption in the wake of the Gaza withdrawal, and now celebrate violence as "self-affirmation" that can undermine the state.

The second set of potentially violent individuals comes from the margins of ultra-Orthodox society. So-called Shababnikim live secularly as outcasts from Orthodox life, according to an Israeli government source, by socializing with women, going to public entertainment venues and watching television. While these men reject traditional Orthodox lives, their paltry non-religious educations deny them the skills to make it in the secular world. Shababnikim become listless, dabbling in petty crime and drug use.

Some go further, engaging in terrorist attacks against Palestinians. The kidnapping and murder of Muhammad Abu Khdeir, which helped set off the 2014 Gaza War, presents one example. That murder was supposedly in retaliation against the Palestinian killing of three Israeli boys, but its improvised nature hints at a well-executed crime of opportunity stemming from boredom rather than an ideology. Surely a baseline level of hatred toward Palestinians exists, but the choice to use violence is opportunistic. Motivated by settlement withdrawals, Shababnikim could again seek these opportunities.

The final risk emanates from more "grown up" organizations that resemble the Jewish Underground. These small groups would consist of well-trained, well-armed, highly motivated men living in the West Bank and Israel proper. They could organize to launch a devastating attack against the Temple Mount, protect settlements against Palestinians or oppose state efforts to reduce settlement presence. No underground organizations exist today, but they have emerged in response to a government initiative before.

These groups could draw on the manpower and resources possessed by the 2,000 settlement self-defense volunteers with automatic weapons, bulletproof vests and communications equipment across the West Bank. Many have armored vehicles, ammunition and advanced weapons training. Groups of veterans trained and equipped by the state are highly unlikely to turn against Israel en masse, but individual squads could defect or cells could break off from squads and take equipment. The far-right Lehava organization also runs summer camps that teach youth martial arts and how to resist interrogation, which could provide recruits or serve as a template for a militant group.

Any of these groups turning their guns on Palestinians or Israelis during an evacuation would have calamitous results. Attacking Palestinians could produce retaliatory terrorism that elicits state intervention and ends settlement removals. Palestinian terrorism during the 1990s had this effect on the Oslo process. Intra-Jewish violence, even if limited, could call into question the coherence of Israel's polity by crystallizing the dispute between statists and religionists. On the other hand, intra-Jewish violence might galvanize public opposition to settler advocates. This could translate into support for broader settlement removal. However, Israeli society will be highly polarized during settlement withdrawals, which will limit its ability to coalesce against extremists.

Violence by fringe pro-settler extremists frightens Israelis across the political spectrum. History-conscious Israelis fear that fighting would weaken and destroy Israel like the ancient civil wars that opened the door for Roman conquest of Palestine and ended Jewish sovereignty until 1948. Each major violent clash between the state and right-wing dissidents throughout Israel's history -- Amona 2006, the 2005 Gaza withdrawal, the 1948 Altalena incident -- has raised the specter of fratricidal intra-Jewish war.

Settler advocates capitalize on these concerns. The core of mainstream settlers' political power lies in their choice to vote for politicians willing to economically subsidize, militarily guard and support with infrastructure the West Bank settlement enterprise. When the government contemplates outpost or settlement removals, pro-settler extremists invoke the threat of intra-Jewish violence to bolster their political power. Prior to the 2009 settlement freeze, even mainstream settler leaders from the Yesha Council threatened to respond with more violent "Amonas" than unpleasant "Gazas" while Kiryat Arba's widely respected chief rabbi told his followers that, "If they use violence against us, we have to use it against them." Settler leaders amplify moderate Israelis' concerns by threatening internecine strife, giving a violent minority of a minority real power in debates over evacuations even when they are not discussed explicitly.

For some settler leaders, the removals of even small outposts serve as opportunities to set a precedent and teach the government a lesson about the high political and perhaps physical costs of the next evacuation. Settler leaders also have their own political incentives to oppose demolitions. Sounding pacifying notes would risk losing credibility to hardliners. Further, they may believe opposing removals offers the best option for preventing the settler movement from fracturing. After all, Jewish terrorists such as the Jewish Underground and hilltop youth emerged in the wake of the Egyptian peace treaty and Gaza withdrawal.

Mainstream settler leaders rarely condone violence, but their opposition to state withdrawals helps enable extremists. A significant majority of settlers and their leaders subordinate religion to the state, view it as a vehicle of redemption and fear intra-Jewish violence. They also know that the political support and government largesse they rely on could be jeopardized by backing violence. Yet private and public leaders still decry evacuations, hold large protests and occasionally call for violence. This gives violent radicals political cover by making violence seem acceptable.

While mainstream settler leaders are unlikely to endorse violence against a right-wing government at Amona, Israel's defense institutions could still take steps to constrain radical groups at Amona and future evacuations including those that would accompany the implementation of a two-state solution. First, Israel could study past withdrawals to draft plans. Determining troop requirements and assessing likely threats will diminish potential violence. An especially important issue will be limiting access to evacuation sites by non-resident protesters and keeping those protesters away from other sites after they have been evacuated once.

Second, Israeli officials could expand outreach to the settler community. Conversations with far-right leaders have already won condemnations of acts including assassinating the prime minister or officials, which could limit extremist violence. Building broader trust could help prosecutors gather evidence and witnesses when prosecuting Jewish terrorism. The current indictment rate of 7.4 percent creates a culture of impunity that reduces Israeli forces' ability to deter violence during withdrawals. Reintegrating hilltop youth and Shababnikim into society via the army or social services will also dry up a pool of potential militants.

Finally, the Israeli government could think through strategies for making any withdrawal as legitimate and fair-seeming as possible. A national referendum or unity government would demonstrate more societal support than a simple parliamentary majority or executive decision. Prepared compensation packages and plans for their administration would allay concerns about moving. Policymakers could also mobilize withdrawal supporters to avoid getting crowded out of public debate. If right-wingers perceive high public support for withdrawal, it will strengthen moderate non-violent settler voices, increase the likelihood of intra-Jewish violence consolidating the public against extremists and create resiliency following Palestinian terrorist attacks.

Political concerns may lead Israel's right-wing coalition to avert a showdown over Amona, denying extremists a symbolic opportunity for violence. But conceding to settlers' clout and radicals' weapons would cast further doubt on Israel's ability to implement withdrawals now and under a two-state deal.

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