Post-Gaza Crises for Religious Zionism in Israel

by David Makovsky **(/experts/david-makovsky)**

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Brief Analysis

Israeli disengagement from Gaza and the northern West Bank settlements has left in its wake three important crises for the religious Zionist movement that spearheaded settlements in Israel. These crises involve the settlers' future relationships with the Israeli public, the Israeli state, and the political secular right. For settlers, these three relationships are now colored by a sense of betrayal, raising the question of whether disengagement will radicalize the ideological settlers.

Religious Zionism and the Settlers

Religious Zionism brings together hundreds of thousands of Israelis with a network of educational institutions and a youth movement. While religious Zionism concerns itself with more than just settlements, counts among its followers many moderates, and integrates itself in all facets of Israeli society, many of the opponents of Gaza disengagement were religious -- and many of the religious were opposed to disengagement. Religious Zionism has viewed the Israeli state not just as a haven or homeland for Jews, but as a religious instrument to reclaim land that could hasten the arrival of religious or messianic redemption. For these believers, to withdraw is to willingly postpone redemption. Unlike some compatriots in Jewish diaspora communities who defined modern orthodoxy as a reconciliation of religion and modernity, these settlers seek to define their faith as a reconciliation of religion and nationalism. Therefore, religious Zionism has viewed settlement as both a religious act and a nationalist act, which averts the establishment of what they consider to be a potentially dangerous Palestinian state. The future direction of religious Zionism will affect the future of the 240,000 settlers living in the West Bank, most of whom consider themselves to be religious Zionists.

Future Relationship with Society

Disengagement has revealed a disconnection between the settlers and larger Israeli society. Despite frequent protests by up to 100,000 people, opponents of disengagement could not muster broad public support for their cause. At the start of disengagement in August, backing for the pullout among Israeli Jews stood at 58 percent, virtually unchanged from a year and a half prior. The settlers who thought that they, like the original secular pioneers in the period before 1948, were the elite of Israeli society suddenly discovered a lack of support from the rest of the Israeli people. The attitudes of ideological settlers toward secular Israelis have also changed: they have a growing feeling that secular Israelis are lacking in nationalist commitment, being subject instead to the malevolent

cultural forces of globalization that detract from Jewish values. This alienation is a reaction against the perceived secularization of Israeli society. Religious Zionists see shops open on the Sabbath and sexually explicit advertising, and increasingly one hears settlers calling themselves emuni (faith-based) in their outlook.

The settlers' perceived loss of the Israeli public on Gaza disengagement results from an amalgam of factors. First, the Israeli public sees Gaza more as a liability to the nation than an asset. Second, the settlers did not put forward realistic policy alternatives to deal with the 1.3 million disenfranchised Gaza Palestinians. Third, Israelis were deeply offended when some settlers protesting withdrawal invoked comparisons with the Holocaust and other dark moments of Jewish history. Finally, there is an issue of arrogance, or what Bambi Sheleg, editor of the religious Zionist intellectual journal Eretz Acheret (Another Land), called "blindness" to the condition of both Israeli and Palestinian societies.

At a meeting of hundreds of religious Zionist educators in late August, prominent rabbis called on the movement's supporters not to disengage from Israeli society, but rather to intensify their involvement. That, the rabbis said, would be in keeping with the activist credo of religious Zionism. A few mavericks called for a redefinition of religious redemption, but this more far-reaching approach does not yet seem to be in the offing. A key question is whether the settler movement will seek to trim its sails, modifying policies that do not win public support. A premise of religious Zionism is that the settlers are at the vanguard of Israeli society, but what value does settlement have if it does not garner majority support? One of the rabbinical leaders of the settler movement, Tzvi Tau, recently wrote a letter to students in which he said that settlers could not "arm-twist" the Israeli public into preserving the Gaza settlements. "Not all means are kosher," Tau wrote, if public support is lacking.

Future Relationship with the State

The relationship between the settler movement and the state has also changed. After decades of skillfully using the levers of the state to its advantage, the settler leadership now routinely alleges an increasing degradation of state institutions. Charges range from accusations of prime minister Ariel Sharon's personal corruption to allegations that the media and judiciary are excessively liberal and work to the disadvantage of the settler movement. Judging from religious websites, there are many who are in deep denial about the need to offer pragmatic solutions to Israel's difficult challenges. Instead, they find that it is easier to weave grand theories of conspiracy and persecution.

The settlers are also struggling to come to terms with the military's role in disengagement. The idea that a Jewish army could be used to yield land and thus make redemption a more remote prospect is unthinkable. Simultaneously, the top military leadership is questioning whether the state has been too indulgent toward religious Zionism. The new chief of staff of the Israel Defense Force (IDF), Lt. Gen. Dan Halutz, has called for fresh scrutiny into the estimated forty hesder religious seminaries that enable eighteen–year-old conscripts to divide an ensuing five year period between study and military service. Halutz has questioned whether such institutions create a structure of "dual authority," pitting the rabbi against the general. While it seems that public support for hesder remains strong, leaders of three hesder schools who participated in a confrontation with the IDF on the rooftop of the Kfar Darom settlement could find that their institutions have lost their military affiliation. The trend in recent years has been to avoid opening new hesder schools in the West Bank, instead clustering them around poor towns in other parts of Israel in order to engage in religious outreach and avoid being labeled as single-issue institutions.

Despite taunts by some Gaza evacuees that angered many Israelis and the possibility that the IDF may take limited steps against the settlers, the settlers are unlikely to turn against the army. Any turn away from army service, if it occurs, by the teenagers who spearheaded protests in Gaza will be temporary. After all, West Bank settlers are completely dependent on the IDF for protection against the Palestinians. Moreover, they have increasingly viewed elite military service as a social escalator. Haaretz recently pointed out that religious men account for nearly 50 percent of the graduates of platoon commanders courses, 40 percent of the graduates of officers courses, and 30

percent of company commanders, significantly above their proportion of the population. There has been concern about what this portends for the future of the IDF, but it did not lead junior officers to disobey orders during the evacuation of Gaza.

Disengagement seems to have refuted, at least in this instance, allegations that religious Israelis were not committed to democracy in the face of withdrawal -- that they would act upon the decisions of their rabbis, rather than the government. With very few exceptions, religious soldiers ultimately defied scores of rabbis who called on them to disobey military orders and refuse to engage in evacuation. Additionally, religious settlers, with the exception of the short-lived confrontation at Kfar Darom, also confined their protest against military evacuation to passive resistance, a response indicative both of their belief that it is religiously impermissible to lift a hand against a fellow Jew and of a political calculation that violence discredits their cause.

Future Relationship with the Political Right

Religious Zionists also feel betrayed by two longstanding rightwing allies, the ultraorthodox and the Likud Party. Settlers hoped a new generation of ultraorthodox Israelis, who were more hawkish and hardal (a Hebrew acronym for ultraorthodox nationalists) than their parents, would join them in halting the Gaza pullout. Except for a few members of the Lubavich Hasidic group, this support never materialized.

An additional political betrayal came from the settlers' closest political ally, the Likud. A Likud-led government headed by Sharon, once the architect of the settlement movement, carried out the withdrawal, and many cannot imagine voting again for a party he leads. The fallout from disengagement will be felt most quickly in this arena, as the settlers and other religious Zionists move to support departing finance minister Benjamin Netanyahu's likely campaign to unseat Sharon as leader of the Likud Party. They will do everything in their power to oust Sharon. Many of the ideological settlers are skeptical of Netanyahu's fealty to their cause, given his agreement to yield land to Palestinians while he was prime minister from 1996 to 1999, but most believe that Netanyahu is preferable to Sharon. The religious public may view Netanyahu's candidacy as a way of postponing the internal day of reckoning. (Some may support Uzi Landau as a third candidate for the Likud leadership. He is seen as an ideological purist, but also as a longshot candidate.) If Sharon prevails within the Likud, the settlers are likely to bolt and perhaps spearhead a more hardline rightwing alternative. Yet any such alternative would ultimately need the Likud as a coalition partner -- it could hardly form a coalition with Labor.

As a political strategy, religious supporters of the settlers are likely to sharpen the security argument at the expense of the religious argument. They might not convince Israelis to share their a priori opposition to Palestinian statehood based on biblical patrimony, but their claims that further unilateral withdrawal from the West Bank would encourage Palestinian terrorism could resonate with the Israeli public.

Conclusion

The most important question now facing settlers is which strategy offers their best chance to hold onto the greatest amount of the West Bank. Those most embittered by the state may identify with the religious fervor of the ultraorthodox and their success in establishing enclaves apart from the worldly currents of cultural modernity. Some settlers will invariably seek to politically radicalize the ultraorthodox to become full-fledged allies.

However, the signature style of the settlers has been their political and personal activism, which goes against the grain of separation. They believe that the battle for the West Bank will focus, unlike Gaza, on areas with widespread biblical resonance, such as Hebron/Kiryat Arba and Beit El. Additionally, they believe that the greater number of settlers likely to be affected in the West Bank than in Gaza will strengthen their support. In their own postmortems of the Gaza withdrawal, a majority of settlers undoubtedly will argue that they must seek to intensify their influence by broadening the movement's appeal among the Israeli public. This strategy would require greater integration with

Israeli society and more political acuity about policy options. Given what is at stake -- namely the future of the settler enterprise in the West Bank -- religious Zionists cannot afford the luxury of leaving the political arena in favor of religious separatism.

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