

The Future of the Jewish Settler Movement, Post-Disengagement

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Brief Analysis

The impending Israeli disengagement from the Gaza Strip and four settlements in the northern West Bank threatens the ideological foundations of many settlers. This is particularly true for religious settlers, most of whom view Israeli habitation of the West Bank as the fulfillment of a biblical mandate initiated by the Hebrew patriarchs. The fact that Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, a prime architect of the settlement movement during his tenure as housing minister in the late 1970s, unilaterally proposed the disengagement epitomizes what many settlers see as their abandonment by the political establishment. They fear that Israel will eventually withdraw from most, if not all, of the West Bank. That prospect threatens to undermine the cause of the national-religious camp in Israel, which has championed the settlement movement above all else since Israel assumed control over the territories in 1967.

Origins of Religious Zionist Ideology

In the early twentieth century, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook established the theological basis for what became the *dati le'umi* (National Religious or Religious Zionist) movement. His son Tzvi Yehudah Kook continued his legacy through Israel's founding and the 1967 war. Both men attributed messianic significance to the settlement of the biblical Land of Israel. Whereas the elder Kook spoke of the creation of modern Israel in universally messianic terms, his son cast it in a nationalistically geared redemptive role. To this day, some combination of these two models, with particular emphasis on the latter, remains the *raison d'être* of many religious settlers.

For the most part, the initial settlement of the land that became modern Israel and the West Bank was not a religious venture. Secular Zionists dominated the first waves of *aliyot* (migrations) in the early twentieth century, and overwhelmingly secular governments approved and financed the creation of the hundreds of settlements that now populate the territories. Kook and his son believed that the hand of God guided the efforts of secular Jews in a process that would ultimately produce the messianic redemption. Accordingly, many settlers are theologically driven by the notion that settling the land constitutes an act on behalf of God insofar as it facilitates the redemption. Such views sometimes blind the settlers to the consequences of their efforts, most notably the Israel Defense Forces' occupation of the territories, also home to more than three million Palestinians.

The Role of the Territories in Religious Zionist Ideology

The rabbinic establishment within the settlement movement is marked by disparate views regarding the necessity of an Israeli presence in the territories. In either case, settler ideologues, hawk and dove alike, accord the territories a unique importance. On the political right, prominent activist Hanan Porat compared ceding the territories to the Palestinians as tantamount to forfeiting one's wife in order to save oneself; in other words, unthinkable. For those like Porat, a metahistorical sense looms over Israel, not to mention the territories, which are seen as both "homeland" and "holy land." On the political left, well-known rabbi Yehuda Amital, formerly of the dovish Meimad Party, compares withdrawal to the painful but necessary amputation of a diseased limb in order to save the larger, healthy body.

In general, withdrawal challenges the self-esteem of the settlers and the National Religious camp. Settling up to the frontiers of the territories gained in 1967, particularly biblical cities such as Hebron, became a source of pride for them. If disengagement is carried out in full, they will no longer see themselves as pioneers, encouraged by Labor and Likud governments alike to settle the territories, but rather as losers in a national experiment deemed politically unfeasible. This loss of purpose stems in no small part from the National Religious camp's precarious place in Israeli society, representing a compromise between the non-nationalistic sensibilities of the ultraorthodox and the irreligious sensibilities of the secularists.

In light of this background, the Gaza disengagement is not simply about evacuating 8,000 settlers. Government officials and private citizens are equally aware that success in Gaza could pave the way for further withdrawals from the West Bank, where the vast majority of settlers live and sentimental attachments to the land run strongest. In all cases, the same fundamental dilemma will sear the ideological underpinnings of the National Religious camp: a tug-of-war between allegiances to religion and the state, the movement's most prized ideals. The movement has long prided itself on equal allegiance to both, insofar as they are in service to God. Yet, given the political establishment's decision to uproot Jewish communities that many view as the fulfillment of a religious obligation, the movement is contemplating anew whether it can still strike a balance between state and religion. From the movement's perspective, the government's willingness to carry out a policy that reverses more than thirty-five years of tangible support is the most devastating aspect of the disengagement, especially for the more religious settlers.

In practice, this dilemma will manifest itself as a choice between obeying those rabbis who call for refusing evacuation orders and obeying the state's military orders to dismantle the settlements. At the very least, the movement hopes to inflict emotional trauma on the nation by resisting the disengagement and making the prospect of further withdrawals seem too painful to consider enacting. Hence, substantial civil disobedience will likely emerge throughout the summer among settlers and their sympathizers in Israel, with some seeking to halt even the Gaza disengagement.

Where Next for Religious Zionism?

Kook and his son explained the preeminence of secular Zionists in the founding of the state as the fulfillment of a spiritual mission that, for logistical reasons, religious Zionists could not initiate but were obligated to join. The current challenge for the Religious Zionist establishment is to place the disengagement in similar terms—that is, as a mission impossible to carry out but, in retrospect, ultimately necessary and spiritually significant. In particular, the establishment must explain the disengagement's seeming refutation of the religious mandate to settle the land. Popular leaders such as Rabbi Shlomo Aviner will likely call for patience. After all, Jews waited in exile for 2,000 years before they returned en masse to Israel. Regaining the territories in their entirety warrants more time than the thirty-five years that have elapsed since the Six Day War. Fringe figures in the Religious Zionist movement may reject this approach, instead adopting the extreme stance of resenting the secular establishment for losing faith in a God who has seemingly reneged on an avowed religious destiny.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Ari Fridman. ❖

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