Gaza Disengagement:

Ideological and Political Challenges for the Settlement Movement

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

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Brief Analysis

Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon's decision to disengage from Gaza and parts of the northern West Bank beginning this summer has earned him the ire of the 8,000 people living in the twenty-five settlements scheduled for evacuation. It has also generated opposition among the quarter-million settlers living in the remainder of the West Bank and their sympathizers within Israel proper. This PeaceWatch seeks to analyze the ideological and political challenges that disengagement poses to these settlers. Future PeaceWatches will examine other aspects of disengagement, including the challenge that settlers pose to disengagement.

Origins

The settlement movement was founded in the wake of the June 1967 Six Day War, during which Israel defeated the armies of Egypt, Jordan, and Syria. As a result, the amount of territory under Israeli control tripled, broadening to include east Jerusalem, the West Bank, Gaza, Sinai, the Golan Heights, and other areas. Amid Arab predictions that Israel would be eliminated altogether, religious Zionists viewed the victory as nothing short of miraculous, proof of the divine hand determining history in their favor. The religious Zionist movement was transformed in the process, incorporating nationalism as a key part of its agenda. The 1967 war enabled religious Zionists to take center stage in modern Jewish history for the first time. Previously, Zionism had been a largely secular enterprise, but the war allowed religious Zionists and the settlement movement to cast themselves in the same honored role of pioneer that secular Jews had held during Israel's formation. Indeed, the settlements erected in the territories after 1967 were often compared to the makeshift villages built by secular Zionists in the 1930s in their race against both the British mandatory power and Palestinian nationalism. It is no accident that the earliest patrons of the settlement movement were former leaders of secular Zionism, such as Yigal Allon and Yisrael Galilee.

This nationalist impulse was coupled with a captivating religious ideology, which advocated the resettlement of the biblical "Eretz Israel" (Land of Israel) as a prerequisite to religious redemption and the arrival of the messiah. The ideological origins of the settlement movement can be traced not only to classic Zionism but also to one of religious Zionism's seminal thinkers, Abraham Isaac Kook, the first chief rabbi of Israel's prestate period. While other ultraorthodox Jews viewed Zionism as heresy, Kook gave it religious legitimacy. He did so in no small part by

emphasizing Jewish nationhood as an article of Jewish faith, describing secular Zionists as unknowing religious instruments in the reestablishment of the Land of Israel and the promotion of a Jewish renaissance. The role of secular elements in these endeavors was consistent with Kook's belief that he was helping to create a model society that would be in the vanguard of the civilizational march toward moral progress. Similarly, the post-1967 settler movement led religious Zionists to believe that they were no longer the handmaidens of secular Israelis, limited to the margins of society with influence over only mundane issues. Rather, they had become a force capable of shaping Jewish national and religious destiny.

Years after Kook's death, his son Zvi Yehudah embraced the settler movement as an embodiment of his father's ideology. Yet, the younger Kook stripped this ideology of its positive valuation of secular culture and universal pluralism, instead focusing almost exclusively on religious nationalism. Zvi Yehudah's rabbinical seminary, Yeshivat Mercaz Harav, became both the intellectual bastion of the settlement movement and its manpower depot, generating a continuous supply of young religious settlers. These settlers viewed themselves as the vanguard of Israeli society and believed they were guided by manifest destiny. In their eyes, the symbolic resonance of a determined few seeking a return to biblical patrimony would trump any potential opposition to their cause.

The settlement movement found allies in the Israeli establishment, benefiting from various events and political rivalries that it maneuvered to its advantage. One early ally was Ariel Sharon, who, while serving as head of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) Southern Command in the early 1970s, became convinced that establishing settlements in southern Gaza would be helpful in the event that Egyptian tanks swept through the Sinai. Later, Sharon came to view settlers as instruments for thwarting the formation of a Palestinian state. The movement was also bolstered by the aftermath of the 1973 Yom Kippur War. The Israeli government and military were accused of being unprepared for the war, leading to the rapid decline of both the political elite (based in the Labor Party) and the military generals, despite the latter having achieved exalted status after the 1967 war. Religious Zionism and the settler movement stepped into the vacuum left by these old elites. At first, they played a balancing role in the post-1973 rivalry between Labor leaders Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres. (Labor established the major settlements of Ariel and Maale Adumim during this period.) Once Menahem Begin came to power in 1977, they formed a strategic alliance with him and the Likud Party coalition.

This alliance would prove to be another turning point in the settlement movement, as demonstrated by the subsequent growth in the number of settlers. In 1977, there were about 13,000 settlers in the territories, but since then the number has grown to nearly a quarter million. Before 1977, settlements had been built in limited, strategic locations in the West Bank to allow for future territorial compromises with the Palestinians. After 1977, however, the movement adopted a new approach that included building settlements in areas adjacent to densely populated Palestinian cities, coupled with the expansion of suburban housing communities adjacent to Israeli cities near the pre-1967 Green Line. The latter measure was an attempt to broaden the settlers' base of support to include middle-class Israelis. Indeed, the majority of settlers would eventually consist of less ideologically driven Israelis. Nevertheless, leadership of the movement has remained in the hands of the ideologues. Such individuals have long headed the settler organization Yesha (an acronym for Judea, Samaria, and Gaza), which is also influenced by ideological rabbis.

Opposition to Gaza Withdrawal

Given that they may be disproportionately affected by future Israeli disengagement, ideologically driven settlers have vociferously opposed the planned withdrawal from Gaza. Sharon believes that he has the Bush administration's blessing for retaining settlement blocs adjacent to the Green Line, where an estimated 176,000 settlers—the bulk of the settlement movement—live on 8 percent of West Bank territory. Yet, the ideology of the most extreme settlers prompted them to establish remote communities in the heartland of the West Bank, away from the Green Line.

These settlers, who currently number approximately 63,000, view themselves as targets for future disengagements.

For this and other reasons, many settlers and their sympathizers—who number in the hundreds of thousands—believe that Gaza withdrawal is wrong and have organized antidisengagement demonstrations that have drawn nearly 100,000 people. They believe that uprooting fellow Jews from their homes and "retreating" from the land will stall religious redemption. Religious Zionists, along with their youth movement, Bnei Akiva, have made connection to the land a primary vehicle of Jewish identity. In their minds, disengagement is part of a wider effort by Westernized Israelis to "de-Judaize" Israel; the Gaza withdrawal initiative therefore constitutes a communal loss of faith. In many ways, these individuals view themselves as the last Zionists. They often complain that secular Israelis no longer sufficiently sacrifice for Zionism, but are instead steeped in individualistic, mindless consumerism and other facets of globalization. (In contrast, religious Jews now make up a disproportionate part of the IDF's junior officer corps; according Israeli researcher Yoram Peri, they view such service as a nationalistic duty.)

Religious Zionists view disengagement as not only a political miscalculation by the Israeli cabinet, but also a religiously impermissible act. In speeches and leaflets, orthodox rabbis routinely refer to the disengagement as hurban—a term for destruction normally used only in reference to Judaism's two ancient temples. Moreover, religious Zionists point to passages from the biblical books of Joshua (chapter 15, verse 47) and Judges (chapter 1, verse 18) as proof that Gaza is part of the inheritance of the tribe of Judah. (In reality, Gaza has been a diverse seaside trading center for much of its existence, falling under the sovereignty of the Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Romans, Byzantines, Arabs, and Ottomans for various stretches of time. The Hasmonean dynasty of Judea only held the area for about forty years, between 96 and 57 B.C.—about as long as modern Israel's post-1967 control over the territory. It should be noted, however, that Gaza has been home to at least a tiny Jewish community for the better part of 2000 years. Politically speaking, the majority in Israel currently favor a two-state solution, and Sharon himself has called Israel's control over Gaza and the West Bank an occupation. Much of the settler leadership tends to believe the 3.5 million Palestinians in the territories should either have limited local autonomy or be encouraged to leave voluntarily.)

Many settlers also feel betrayed by their principal patron, Ariel Sharon. Besides encouraging the settlement movement's very establishment, Sharon more recently opposed Labor standard-bearer Amram Mitzna's 2003 campaign plank of disengagement from Gaza. Their sense of betrayal was deepened by the fact that Gaza settlers were prime targets of Palestinian mortar fire during the violence of 2000–2004. They also feel let down by the solid national support for disengagement and the failure of their calls for a national referendum. (It should be pointed out that Menachem Begin did not have a national referendum for yielding Sinai to Egypt in 1978, despite running on a "no territorial concessions" plank the previous year.)

In addition, many settlers fear the political precedent of the Gaza withdrawal. In their eyes, if the very architect of the settler movement, Sharon, can turn on them, then there are few political obstacles to future disengagements reaching much deeper into the West Bank. Hence, they will likely attempt to make this summer's disengagement as traumatic as possible in the hope of preventing additional withdrawals. This does not mean engaging in combat with the IDF soldiers who will enforce the Gaza disengagement. The leaders of the settlement movement have already said that such actions are religiously impermissible; the IDF is a sacrosanct, citizens' army, and targeting it would be politically suicidal.

Implications

Because so many settlers view Gaza disengagement as both heresy and a threat to their movement, one cannot exclude the possibility of an extremist disregarding official settler pronouncements of nonviolence and attempting a radical action to avert the withdrawal (e.g., political assassination; attempted bombing of the Temple Mount). In addition, many rabbis are urging religious soldiers not to participate in the evacuation. More moderate rabbis have

argued that implementing the disengagement—an initiative approved by both the cabinet and the Knesset—is a test for Israeli democracy, and that failure to see it through could spark a descent into anarchy. For its part, the IDF leadership has expressed confidence that the withdrawal will not be halted due to religious nonparticipation. Nevertheless, the disengagement will likely involve massive civil disobedience by both the settlers and their sympathizers, who will seek to infiltrate Gaza throughout the summer as a sign of solidarity.

The longer-term question is whether settlers who feel particularly betrayed will seek to disassociate themselves from the mainstream of Israeli life. According to Aviezer Ravitsky, a Hebrew University philosopher who has written extensively on the worldview of the settlers, "There is a whole generation of people whose struggle over the completeness [of] the land is the focus of [their] identity, and [who identify] the Torah and Judaism with the process of advanced redemption. These two things—the completeness of the land and the process of redemption—are about to suffer a blow, and disengagement is only the beginning." As a result, Ravitsky added, their alienation will deepen.

Curiously, one byproduct of this crisis is that many prominent secular Israelis who shunned the settlers in the past have recently undertaken efforts to reassure them of their connection to the greater Israeli society. Some religious settlers may in fact be coming around to this view. In a recent roundtable discussion between religious thinkers sponsored by the Israeli daily Yediot Ahronot, Rabbi Avi Gisser of the Ofra settlement sounded an unusual minority note for the settler leadership, declaring, "Our task as educators is to change the concept that says our actions are creating an irreversible reality. We have to get used to the thought that there are certain actions above our power, and we must rely on God that he knows how to run his matters." Whether the settler movement can adjust its worldview will indeed be determined in the months and years ahead.

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