**Israel's Settlement Movement Isn't Growing The Way You Thought It Was**

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Forget about alternative facts. We‘re now regressing to alternative analysis. In other words, we use facts but interpret them as we wish. The picture may be different but the country won‘t crash and burn.

Just before we adopt one of President Donald Trump‘s proposals for resolving the conflict, there‘s nothing like the increase in settler numbers in the second half of 2016. These figures in the Civil Administration‘s population registry reveal the deception and the real failure of the settlement enterprise.

This failure triggered desperate reactions by the messianicnationalist camp led by Habayit Hayehudi‘s Naftali Bennett, Uri Ariel, Ayelet Shaked and their friends in Likud. Habayit Hayehudi Knesset members tried to conceal the failure via various proposals: the land-grab law by Shuli Moalem, the annexation of Ma‘aleh Adumim by Yoav Kish and Bezalel Smotrich, the annexation of settlement blocs and Area C by Bennett, and the annexation of the entire West Bank by Tzipi Hotovely and Miri Regev.

Such measures are apparently aimed at legitimizing the settlers‘ situation, based on the claim that it‘s high time to do so, and that the settlers‘ presence across the West Bank is irreversible and has already defeated the Palestinians and their national aspirations. This false claim seeks to justify the flow of tens of millions of shekels to the land-grabbers of Amona and the tens of millions from the Education Ministry for school tours to settlements operated under that Zionist moniker ―Get to know the other and those who are different.‖ Then there are the millions more for boarding schools in Israel whose goal is to win hearts and minds.

And we haven‘t even said a word about the billions for infrastructure and security, or about the political, moral and social price Israeli society pays for these pipe dreams.

Betar Ilit and Modi‟in Ilit

But what do the statistics really show? They show that in the second half of 2016, the Israeli population in the West Bank grew by 7,053.

Sound impressive? But it turns out that 43 percent of them live in the ultra-Orthodox settlements of Betar Ilit and Mod‘in Ilit, and the vast majority due to natural growth. A third of Israelis living in the West Bank live in these two cities, which provide a cynical solution to the ultra-Orthodox community‘s housing crisis and whose residents see themselves as "settlers against their will.

In other words, the entire concept of ―bolstering the settlement enterprise‖ is based on the natural growth of these two ultraOrthodox cities, which account for 1.6 percent of the number of settlements. These are very poor cities, which are on the lowest, first rung of the Central Bureau of Statistics‘ socioeconomic ladder and are expected to be annexed by Israel under any land-swap scenario for peace.

For anyone who fails to grasp these facts, I‘ll repeat: The crowning glory of the settlement movement, that great startup for making Palestinians and their national aspirations disappear, is based on natural growth in two ultra-Orthodox cities to be annexed in any peace deal.

And what about their secular sister Ma‘aleh Adumim that the right wing is so enthusiastic about annexing? Its residents have for long been voting with their feet; their number decreased by eight during the second half of 2016. In other words, if you factor in natural growth, you realize that dozens of families left Ma‘aleh Adumim.

So maybe before they build in the E1 area east of Jerusalem, and instead of pouring money on cheap housing for poorer people pushed against their will to live in the territories, wouldn‘t it be better to divert these precious resources to constructing affordable housing inside Israel?

Anemic Ariel

And what about the remote Ariel, the capital of Samaria? It remains the smallest Jewish city in the territories; its growth accounted for just 4.5 percent of Israeli population growth in the West Bank in the second half. And regarding the other people moving to the West Bank, most have moved to secular settlements near the Green Line that will be annexed to Israel under a permanent agreement: Givat Ze‘ev, which ultra-Orthodox newcomers have made poorer, to rung 5 from rung 6; Alfei Menashe; Oranit; Har Adar and Efrat.

The messianic-nationalist centers are the ones that have lost residents and whose population has weakened. Beit El has declined by 34 residents and sunk to rung 3, Elkana has lost 50 residents and sunk to rung 7, Kiryat Arba six people to rung 2, and even the Jewish community in Hebron has lost a resident.

The numbers point to known processes that have gone on for two decades despite the efforts to stem them and hide them (at huge expense to the Israeli taxpayer). There has been a 60 percent decline in annual Israeli population growth in the West Bank. The sources of growth are now the other way around; it‘s no longer due to migration − 80 percent is natural growth. In other words, about half the increase in the West Bank takes place in two ultra-Orthodox cities, and the population continues to decline in some settlements, especially the more isolated ones.

The rational conclusion seems to be that the chances of ensuring the future of most Israelis living in the West Bank, including in East Jerusalem‘s Jewish neighborhoods, lies in a permanent solution that would leave 80 percent in their homes and under Israeli sovereignty. Therefore the residents of the blocs near the Green Line must demand such a solution.

Any solution involving the legalization of illegal settlements will only lead to violence and hurt the economy; the best people will abandon the more established settlements.

The billions Israel‘s messianic government intends to stream to the settlements will attract only weaker people whose chances of advancing economically are nil due to a lack of jobs in the settlements. They would join the Israeli workforce on the other side of the Green Line, or join the ranks of welfare recipients in the ultra-Orthodox cities.

The facts speak for themselves. The interpretation of the facts is another matter. You can always argue about it, but overdosing on fantasy pills and sliding into hallucinatory messianic trips aren‘t recipes for longevity. Israel would be better off overcoming the addiction and preparing for a two-state solution.