**When Rabin will rest in peace**

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Yitzhak Rabin would be turning in his grave at the variety of ―outside the box‖ proposals for a solution to the conflict doing the rounds these days. These include such ideas as ―there‘s no need to evacuate settlers,‖ ―enclaves under Israeli sovereignty‖ and a variety of confederations, federations, regional autonomies, shared homelands and the like. It‘s interesting to note that, close to the 22nd anniversary of former Prime Minister Rabin‘s assassination, the settlement enterprise outside of the ―settlements blocs‖ has been embraced by supporters of the two-state solution – whether politicians, grass-roots activists or experts.

Even if these proposals have a genuine desire to overcome what many perceive as an obstacle to a permanent solution, such suggestions – because of their impact on public consciousness – may actually contribute far more than the actions of the Netanyahu government to increasing the strength and size of the isolated settlements threatening the two-state solution.

The route of the West Bank separation barrier has been perceived in the public consciousness as, more than anything else, representing the border between Israel and Palestine if an agreement is reached. That is, to Israelis, the barrier draws a line between the settlements that can stay under Israeli sovereignty and those that will have to be evacuated.

As then-Defense Minister Ehud Barak said in 2007: ―When we build a fence, it is clear that there are areas behind the fence, and it is clear that when an agreement [is signed] these areas behind the fence will not be part of Israel.‖ In addition, the route of the barrier is perceived as enabling a final status agreement, even among the settlement leaders, as they themselves said when it was built: ―We tried to obstruct the plan to build the fence on the Green Line [the pre-1967 border], but if we‘re honest with ourselves, we couldn‘t obstruct it in a way that impedes the ability to establish a Palestinian state.‖

The recent declarations and proposals have led to several things: First, they mistakenly dismiss the argument that the isolated settlements are an obstacle to the agreement. Second, they may remove the threat of evacuation hanging over the heads of those who wish to spare their families this painful experience. Third, in light of the fact that the latest Central Bureau of Statistics data regarding the socioeconomic index found that 81 percent of settlers live in communities whose socioeconomic level is lower than it was five years earlier, these declarations could, paradoxically, increase demand for these communities, since they are now receiving significant tax reductions and economic benefits. Finally, these declarations eradicate the demand that Israel withdraw from settlements that are a slight distance from the Green Line, like Efrat.

The first absurdity of trying to find a solution to the conflict without evacuating these isolated settlements is the fact that most of them are located on hilltops and are the result of the activities of Gush Emunim‘s settlement movement, Amana – a movement that utterly rejects the two-state solution. These residents moved there despite the policy of the Rabin government. In 1979, Rabin wrote: ―We must not move Jewish settlers to the heart of the West Bank, densely populated with Arabs. Such dramatic settlement is flaunting and provocative to the Arabs and the United States, and there is no need or justification in terms of security.‖

Second fact: From the start, these settlements were intended to damage the contiguity of a Palestinian state, as was written in the 1978 plan devised by Matityahu Drobles, then head of the Settlement Division of the World Zionist Organization: ―The disposition of settlements must be carried out not only around the settlements of the minorities, but also in between them ... [because this] is the best and most efficient way to remove any shadow of a doubt about our intention to keep Judea and Samaria forever.‖

This policy worked. Fewer than 10,000 Israelis living in 15 isolated settlements south of Gush Etzion (not including Kiryat Arba) have dissected the Hebron district – where 750,000 Palestinians live – into dozens of Area A and Area B ―islands.‖ This was done for the sake of providing access roads to the isolated settlements of Area C, leading to a greater Israeli military presence along these roads, thus disturbing the Palestinians‘ lifestyle and any possible development plan.

As far as Gush Emunim was concerned, anything went in order to achieve this goal. Despite the promises of the Israeli government that settlements would be built only on ―state land,‖ a May 2015 report by the Regavim NGO found that at least 2,000 homes in these settlements were built on private, Palestinian-owned land. To these should be added the dozens of illegal outposts that continued to prosper and the intensified land grabs, despite a government decision to adopt the 2005 Talia Sasson report and evacuate them – and also despite the fact that this was one of the main recommendations of the 2012 report by former Supreme Court Justice Edmond Levy on the legal status of construction in the West Bank.

Third fact: All of these settlements are urban communities lacking agriculture or industry. In most of them, the primary employer is their local council. The smaller the settlement, the more its residents rely on the government for financial support. More than 80 percent of the isolated settlements have fewer than 1,000 residents each. That leads to one of two possibilities: fantasizing that the Palestinian state will fund its new Jewish citizens; or that Israel will fund the citizens of a foreign country.

Were they to recognize these three basic facts, would all of these ―outside the box‖ thinkers ever consider demanding that the isolated settlements remain under Palestinian sovereignty – or, worse, as Israeli enclaves? Do they wish to ignore the history of 100 years of conflict and all the recommendations for partition, given by all the international entities, and to sow with their own hands the seeds of the next round of violence? Do they believe the Palestinians will agree to this when, as far as they are concerned, they have already given up 78 percent of the Palestinian homeland?

Even Rabin‘s Knesset speeches to approve the Israeli-Palestinian Interim Agreement – given a month before his murder in 1995 – in which the future borders he sketched were extensive, not a single isolated settlement was mentioned. Nevertheless, any Israeli still wanting to live in a future Palestinian state would be able to do so via the standard procedures and laws of immigration.

The evacuation and relocation of Israelis from isolated settlements is a huge challenge, but far less than what most of the public thinks – and far less than the damage caused by leaving them in place. We shouldn‘t expect the Netanyahu government to act in this direction: its limit was reached with the evacuation of the illegal outpost of Amona in February, at a cost of 137.5 million shekels ($39 million) to the Israeli taxpayer, and by giving many millions to the lawbreakers in the illegal outpost of Migron.

Supporters of the two-state solution must stop seeking ―creative‖ solutions and act differently. Often, the most arduous road initially is also the best one in the long-term.

We can begin with changes in budgetary priorities, as Rabin decided in the government he established in 1992. He distinguished between ―security settlements‖ and ―political settlements‖; all the isolated settlements are in the latter group. His government acted to stop settlement growth, canceled contracts to build housing in the settlements, and refused to allow people to move into homes that had already been built there (Resolution 360, November 1992). From here, we can move onto a law providing compensation for evacuees that will significantly reduce the number of people needing to be evacuated. Those living in the Jordan Valley who answered the call of Rabin and Yigal Allon to found security settlements, and who are now more than 70, must be allowed to move back over the Green Line, which many of them want to do. The separation barrier should also be completed along security routes and Israel should declare it has no territorial claims east of it.

Finally, a gradual, moderate diplomatic process must be launched, with regional and international involvement to resolve the conflict by means of known parameters – which will include the evacuation of isolated settlements after preparations at the national level.

All of this will require public courage, determination and true faith in the path ahead. But maybe then and only then will Rabin be able to rest in peace.