**The End of the Two States Solution Is Just a Myth
Shaul Arieli ,Haaretz' 22/11/2019**

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U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo’s statement that the West Bank settlements are not necessarily “inconsistent with international law,” as UN Security Council resolutions and the International Court of Justice have determined, is — like the proposals for West Bank annexation raised by some Israeli lawmakers and cabinet members — a pathetic attempt to give political and legal validity to a demographic and territorial situation in which annexation of the settlements makes no sense.

Every year, Israel’s Central Bureau of Statistics discloses the truth about the settlements in the West Bank and in Jewish neighborhoods in East Jerusalem. This year, the disappointment for annexation adherents is greater than ever, thanks to the expectations stirred by Israel’s most messianic-ultranationalist government ever and the unprecedented support of the Trump administration. The figures again show that any annexation would harm Israel’s democracy and its Jewish identity, and that the settlements’ existence does not preclude a two-state solution — if and only if both sides and the U.S. administration have a sincere, responsible political will to achieve it.

Even after 10 years of Benjamin Netanyahu heading religious-Haredi-ultranationalist governments including ministers who ruled out a two-state solution and were capable of advancing the settlement enterprise, the situation on the ground is as miserable as ever, contradicting the myth they cultivate. Opponents of a final arrangement were not aided by housing ministers responsible for development plans; defense ministers responsible for issuing building permits and for not evacuating illegal outposts; justice ministers responsible for the nation-state law, the economic arrangements law; the Supreme Court override clause and the Ministerial Committee for Legislation resolution requiring every law to address the settlements; the education ministers responsible for removing content on peace and Zionism from the increasingly religious curricula or the finance ministers responsible for the unprecedented allocations for settlements.

Let’s start with the idea of a “united Jerusalem” that is “above our highest joys.” Well, it turns out that the Trump administration’s recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital and its relocation of the U.S. embassy did not unite the city, judging by data issued by the Jerusalem Institute for Policy Research (as of December 2017). Jerusalem remains split into an Arab city and a Jewish one, by population distribution. Of the 347,000 residents of West Jerusalem, 97 percent are Jewish. In the Jewish neighborhoods of East Jerusalem live 209,000 Jews and only 4,200 Arabs, half in Givat Shapira and nearly all the rest in Pisgat Ze’ev.

The mirror image is identical. The Arab neighborhoods and villages have 338,000 Arab residents and just 1,770 Jewish ones (0.5 percent of the total). This situation reinforces the feasibility of dividing the city – whose Jewish majority has declined to 62 percent, from 74 percent in 1967 – in accordance with the Clinton Parameters of December 2000, the basis for the talks in Taba in 2001 and Annapolis in 2008. That is, the 12 Jewish neighborhoods would be under Israeli sovereignty and the 28 Arab villages and neighborhoods would be under Palestinian sovereignty.

The Old City has 34,000 inhabitants, 11 percent of whom are Jews. Jews comprise 59 percent of the population of the Old City’s Jewish Quarter and 49 percent of the Armenian Quarter. The interspersion of Jewish, Muslim and Christian holy sites throughout the Old City, and in particular the Temple Mount, preclude partition. Special shared, international agreements on the administration of the Old City without altering the status quo on the Holy Places are necessary, as Ehud Olmert proposed in 2008.

And in Judea and Samaria? The territory’s Israeli population rose by 14,395 this year. At the end of 2018, the number stood at 427,000, less than 5 percent of Israel’s total population. This year the proportion of Palestinians in the population of Judea and Samaria rose to 87 percent, making any attempt at annexation a security, economic and social nightmare. This year, again, the growth rate for the Jewish population in the district was higher than for Israel as a whole, but the multiyear trends show that this is having no effect on the Palestinians’ demographic and territorial dominance (98 percent of the land in Judea and Samaria is owned by them).

First of all, the annual growth rate for Jews declined to 3.48 percent, from 3.52 percent. This is a continuation of a trend that began past 25 years ago, with the signing of the Oslo Accords, when the growth rate was close to 14 percent. Second, as has been the case since 1990, the growth can be attributed to ultra-Orthodox Jews, who account for 42.8 percent of the total rate; 85 percent of this population lives in the two largest Jewish towns in Judea and Samaria that are situated on the Green Line: Modi’in Ilit (pop. 73,080) and Betar Ilit (pop. 56,746). These two towns account for more than a third of the Israelis in the district (which comprises 128 settlements). They also hold the dubious honor of being among the poorest municipalities in Israel (out of a total of 255, ranked 7 and 10). In any Israeli and Palestinian proposal, these towns would be annexed to Israel as part of a final status accord.

Third, of the two, smaller, secular cities in Judea and Samaria: Ma’aleh Adumim (pop. 38,193) has for more than a decade been growing at a rate of less than 1 percent (including 64 Arabs who are registered as living there). Ariel (pop. 20,456) remains the smallest of the four cities, and has not seen any significant change in its population over the last two decades (and currently has 590 Arabs registered as residents).

The Netanyahu government can point to one “achievement” in its attempt to create an irreversible reality: the fact that 57 percent of the annual growth rate in Judea and Samaria this year occurred outside of the settlement “blocs” adjacent to the Green Line (not including Ariel and Kedumim, which are more than 20 kilometers from the Green Line). Until a decade ago, this figure had not exceeded 25 percent.

This change is connected with growth in the populations of Gush Emunim settlements over the years, which are deliberately outside of the “blocs.”

But this trend does not change the overall picture, because outside of the four cities, only a little more than half (55 percent) of the district’s population lives in the other 124 settlements. And nearly half of these locales (47 percent) have fewer than 1,000 residents. Only 10 of these settlements have more than 5,000 residents. Most of the Israelis live close to the Green Line.

Thus, the feasibility of a final status accord based on an exchange of 4 percent of the territory next to the Green Line was not seriously dented this year either. Israel would retain under its sovereignty 80 percent of the Israelis who live beyond the Green Line without overly harming the Palestinians’ territorial contiguity and fabric of life, or seriously hurting the Israeli communities within the Green Line that would have to relinquish some of their land as part of the territorial exchange.

This year, once again, the “Jewish people” voted with their feet against Jewish settlement in the West Bank. Only 20 percent of the annual growth rate there was due to migration from inside the Green Line to Judea and Samaria.

Nevertheless, unfortunately, the myth that the settlements have created an irreversible situation that precludes the two-state solution will not be easily dispelled. Many supporters of the two-state solution believe that it is no longer possible because of the settlements, yet they are not aware of their geographic distribution, location and size.

The American declaration does not contribute to the advancement of a diplomatic solution. Like the declarations regarding Jerusalem and the Golan Heights, it only distances the Palestinians and the Arabs from negotiations, with the backing of a majority of the international community.

97 percent of Israelis, who live inside the Green Line and in the “settlement blocs,” are being held captive, willfully or otherwise, to a small but influential, loud, organized and militant group in the Knesset and the government, and are not mustering the courage and the strength to say “enough.” Enough of dragging all of Israel into ultranationalism, racism, violence, fiscal irresponsibility, continued erosion of the rule of law, repeated and useless rounds of violence in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, and enough to making the country reviled throughout the world.