**Bennett, the Battle for Judea Has Been Decided
Shaul Arieli, Haaretz' 17-12-2019**

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The imaginary “Kingdom of Judea” envisioned by Naftali Bennett and his pals from Gush Emunim, in all its transformations, has fallen. The truth is, it never really arose after its destruction following the failed Bar Kochba revolt.

The defense minister has known this for some time. His decision to expand the Jewish enclave in the old city of Hebron – by adding a neighborhood lying on the rooftops of stores in the former and now abandoned Hebron wholesale market – will not change reality, a gloomy one in his eyes. It will only increase the price Israel will have to pay one day for its restoration to sanity.

Just like the process of enhanced religiosity he sowed among Israeli pupils as minister of education, he is now sowing the seeds of the next calamity. He’s laying a minefield for anyone who may try and renew the diplomatic process, setting up a different kind of relationship with the Palestinians on the day he and his cronies, together with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu – who appointed Bennett as payment for services, devoid of any security or national considerations – will release Israel from the ultranationalist-messianic chokehold they have over it.

Despite 52 years of Israeli occupation and the tens of billions of shekels invested, as well as an unbroken 10 years of a nationalist-messianic government headed by Netanyahu, a renewed Kingdom of Judea never really got off the ground.

In the area between the Etzion Bloc and the Green Line (1967 border) to its south (the Palestinian Hebron district), there are currently 800,000 Palestinians. Among them, according to Central Bureau of Statistics figures for December 2018, there are 9,980 Israelis, living in 15 tiny settlements belonging to the Hebron Hills Regional Council. To these one can add the Kiryat Arba Regional Council, in which 7,323 people live (fewer than last year).

In other words, for every Israeli living in this area there are 47 Palestinians, a demographic ratio of 98 to 2 in favor of the Palestinians. Most of the area is designated as Area A or B, according to the Oslo Accords designation, meaning that it is under Palestinian jurisdiction. The rest, Area C, consists mainly of narrow corridors providing access to these settlements.

Whereas the Arab population in this area contributes 40 percent to the Palestinian Authority’s GDP, the Jewish population, lacking any significant agricultural or industrial areas, is situated in the lower ranks in the socioeconomic scale devised by Israel. Most people there work within the Green Line.

In general, the two populations, Israeli and Palestinian, are affiliated with religious and extremist organizations and parties. Support for Hamas and Islamic Jihad is higher in these areas than in other parts of the West Bank, with most Israelis in this area voting for nationalist-messianic parties to the right of Likud in the last election.

Thus, the battle over Judea, which was futile to begin with, has been decided. Not “in blood and fire Judea shall rise,” but for much less heroic reasons, grounded in reality. Most Israelis who live within the Green Line understood that it would be wrong, for diplomatic, security, economic and social reasons, to settle in the midst of a Palestinian population in the Hebron hills. Bennett knows that in the city of Hebron itself the battle has long been decided.

It happened even before the renewed battle commenced, when followers of Rabbi Tzvi Yehuda Kook took over the Park Hotel there during the Passover holiday in 1968. At their head were Rabbi Moshe Levinger and the campaign’s instigator, Elyakim Haetzni, who “knew” what the people of Israel wanted and what its attitude to the rule of law was: “It was clear to us that the nation wishes to return to Hebron, and if the government doesn’t, it should be faced with a fait accompli. Even though I’m a meticulously law-abiding citizen, in this matter… we couldn’t accept any other ruling and decided to create facts on the ground. We had no hesitations.”

The 800 Jews now living in a city with 230,000 Palestinian residents attest to how much “justice” and “wisdom” there were in claims made by Haetzni and his associates.

So, what did Bennett decide to do? To add to these few Jews a few hundred more, in order to exact a stiffer price from a future government which will hold different political positions. In the short term, the planning and construction will pose a greater challenge for security forces – which already have to post one soldier for almost every Israeli living in Hebron – when they have to contend with the expected Palestinian response to this plan.

Perhaps Bennett believes that in the thick of battle it will be possible to do more than the IDF is currently doing to protect settlers in this part of Hebron. The IDF is already using extreme measures against Palestinian residents, including shutting down stores and businesses, closing off streets to traffic, with some streets closed to pedestrians as well.

In the long run, the idea is to create a diplomatic and social challenge for a different future government which will seek to resume the diplomatic process and negotiate a two-state solution, which will involve the evacuation of Israelis now living in isolated houses in the heart of Palestinian neighborhoods, maintaining a violent and hostile relationship with their neighbors. It is not something new or surprising to note that in earlier negotiations with the Palestinians, the Jewish settlements in the Hebron area were never included in any Israeli offer to swap territories, due to the demographic reality described here.

The seeds of calamity embedded in the projected new neighborhood, to be situated above the wholesale market in Hebron, are just the beginning. Anyone wandering the streets of Hebron these days can observe the full intent through signs hung up at every corner by Jewish residents: “From the Old City to Nofei Mamre [a distant neighborhood in the city], since our holy city Hebron only wishes to grow,” or “a fundraising campaign for saving the next batch of houses in Hebron.”

It must be explained to the people of Israel, who eschew visiting the city of our forefathers, that the intention is to create a contiguity of houses linking the main street in the pre-1948 Jewish quarter with Kiryat Arba to the east. This plan ignores the 90,000 Palestinians who own thousands of houses and 1,350 stores in this area. The chances of carrying this out within the confines of current Israeli law are the same as those of creating Jewish contiguity between Kiryat Arba and Be’er Sheva or the Etzion Bloc, namely zero.

However, Bennett’s declaration shows us that there is no limit to the social and moral callousness of the legal advisers in the Defense Ministry, who wrote the legal brief that legitimized the planning of a neighborhood on the rooftops of stores in that marketplace. These are stores that were owned by Jews until 1948 but where, since then, Palestinians have enjoyed protected tenancy rights.

According to the legal opinion, the stores may be demolished and then rebuilt, with no intention of reopening them. That way, a Jewish neighborhood can be built based on the claim that these stores have anyway been closed for 25 years. The defense minister and his carefully picked assistants don’t care that these stores were closed following the massacre perpetrated by Baruch Goldstein on Muslim worshippers at the Cave of the Patriarchs on Purim, 1994. Nor does it matter to them that Israel under Netanyahu signed the Hebron Protocol in 1997, which allows Palestinians to reopen the market on Shuhada Street, letting traffic through there again.

In this racist spirit, all the next government has to do, assuming it is made up of the same parties as the previous one, is to impose Israeli law on the area called Hebron II, controlled by Israel according to the Hebron Protocol. This law will include the “present absentee” law, which will overnight render Palestinian residents of the city “absentees.” Their property will be confiscated by Israel’s government and no High Court of Justice will be able to prevent it.

The temporary refugee status enforced on tens of thousands of Palestinians who lived in this area, who looked for temporary dwelling in parts of Hebron that were under the rule of the Palestinian Authority, hoping to make a living and move away from the humiliations and threats doled out by settlers enjoying the protection of the IDF, will become permanent, anchored in Israeli law.

Israel will continue to declare itself the only democracy in the Middle East, a law-abiding country, while Oded Revivi, the mayor of Efrat, will continue publishing articles about the parallel universe in which he coexists peacefully with the Palestinians, ignoring the fact that the relationship is akin to that of a rider and his horse.