**The March of Folly in the Settlements Continues**

**Shaul Arieli, Haaretz, October 15, 2020**

About two weeks ago Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu ordered the convening of the supreme planning commission of the Civil Administration, with the aim of approving extensive construction in Judea and Samaria – to the extent of 5,400 housing units in dozens of locales. Clearly this move – after having suspended planning of construction in Judea and Samaria this past February so as not to damage the agreements with the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain – is a political payment aimed at his survival.

However, this is yet another step in the march of folly of the continued construction in the [West Bank](https://www.haaretz.com/misc/tags/TAG-west-bank-1.5598977)[settlements](https://www.haaretz.com/misc/tags/TAG-israel-settlements-1.5598942). This is a tremendous waste of resources at the expense of Israeli society and deepens the illusion that it will be possible to dictate to [the Palestinians](https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/palestinians) a peace agreement and cessation of the conflict along with annexing all the settlements to Israel.

Few will attempt to explain the “logic” in the “Trump initiative” map that Netanyahu has warmly adopted – which saddles Israel and the Israel Defense Forces with building and securing a new border three times longer than all of Israel’s other borders – on security grounds that have become obsolete.

Many others will point to the main reason, which is the desire to prevent evacuation of any settlements or illegal outposts in order to thwart implementation of the two-state solution. This border stretches along an illogical route and to an illogical length in order to annex dozens of isolated and tiny settlements, creating 17 Israeli enclaves that are located inside the territory of Palestine that will be annexed to Israel. This hallucinatory border was born in order to bestow a political handout to the messianic-nationalists in Likud and to the right of it, who believe in the commandment to “inherit the land” and also in order to provide an answer to the fear held by part of the public of a “civil war” that would be ignited by forced evacuation of a large number of [settlers](https://www.haaretz.com/misc/tags/TAG-israel-settlers-1.5599154).

This situation is encouraging the opponents of a permanent status solution to continue to invest large amounts of state money in expanding the settlements in general and in particular the isolated settlements that impinge on Palestinian territorial contiguity.

Until the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993, most of the public saw nothing wrong with the settlements and even justified their construction because of the Palestinian refusal to recognize Israel on the basis of the international resolutions and to sign a peace agreement with it. Ever since Israel signed the Oslo Accords, which is based on United Nations Security Council Resolution 242, the significance of which is a return to the 1967 lines, it was clear to all the prime ministers and cabinet ministers that when the Palestinians satisfy Israel’s security requirements by means of functional arrangements, on the model of the agreements with Egypt and Jordan (as has indeed been done), the biggest challenge and obstacle to signing a permanent agreement will be the future of the settlements.

How, then, have the governments of Israel acted with regard to the obstacle of the settlements since the signing of the Oslo Accords? Have they, as the Palestinians claim, done everything in their power to make this obstacle even larger in order to increase the size of the territory annexed to Israel at their expense or, worse still – create a reality that will be perceived by the Israeli public as one that does not allow for any two-state solution at a reasonable national price? Or have they worked to reduce to the minimum the influence of this obstacle on the chance of reaching an agreement? We shall focus on this issue in Judea and Samaria as the Israelis were evacuated from the Gaza Strip in 2005, and in Jerusalem the two sides agreed in the past to divide East Jerusalem on a demographic basis.

In 1993, after 26 years of [occupation](https://www.haaretz.com/misc/tags/TAG-israel-occupation-1.5599102) and settlement, in Judea and Samaria there were 110,000 Israelis (2 percent of the total population of Israel), of whom 75 percent lived in the settlement blocs and adjacent to the Green Line. That is, under the working assumption of exchanges of territories, to which the Palestinians agreed, the challenge of the Israeli evacuation included only 27,000 people, or 6,500 families. This number constitutes about 0.5 percent of the population of Israel, or one third of the number of Palestinians currently living in Area C – to whom those who are demanding to annex them are also prepared to grant Israeli citizenship. Those were negligible numbers from the national perspective because during that decade Israel had absorbed one million immigrants from the former Soviet Union.

**Pos­­t-Oslo spurt**

How did the governments of Israel behave in the period between the signing of the Oslo Accords and the talks on a permanent status solution at the 2000 Camp David talks – seven years that were split between Prime Ministers Netanyahu, Yitzhak Rabin, Shimon Peres and Ehud Barak? They brought an additional 80,000 Israelis to Judea and Samaria (an increase of 73 percent). Of them, 62 percent were accounted for by immigration from within the Green Line. At Camp David, Barak proposed annexing 13 percent of the West Bank, with 156,000 people, accounting for 82 percent of all the Israelis in Judea and Samaria. That being the case, according to Israel’s position and under its responsibility, a future evacuation would include another 7,000 individuals or 1,700 families (an addition of 20 percent).

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By 2001, the number of Israelis in Judea and Samaria had risen to 201,000. On the backdrop of the second intifada, the number of those moving from inside the Green Line had plummeted to 30 percent of the annual increase in the number of Israelis in Judea and Samaria. At the Taba talks that year, Barak proposed annexing to Israel 6 to 8 percent of the territory with 145,000 Israelis (72 percent), which increased the number of expected evacuees to 56,000 – more than twice the number in 1993. The Palestinians proposed an annexation of 3 percent of the territory with only 96,000 Israelis and evacuation of the remaining 105,000.

At the talks in Annapolis in 2008, after seven more years that were split between Prime Ministers Ariel Sharon and Ehud Olmert, the number of Israelis in Judea and Samaria had soared by 90,000 (an increase of 44 percent relative to 2001) and had reached 291,000. Of them, 32,000 were accounted for by immigration from inside the Green Line (36 percent). In the negotiations, Olmert proposed annexing 6.5 percent of the West Bank with 211,000 Israelis and evacuating 80,000 settlers – three times more than what Israel was slated to evacuate in 1993. In the Palestinian proposal, the number of Israelis who were to be evacuated rose to 176,000.

**The Netanyahu decade**

An entire decade under Netanyahu increased the number of Israelis in Judea and Samaria by the end of 2018 to 428,000 – 47 percent more than there had been at the time of the Annapolis talks. Their proportion in the total population of Israel was 2.5 times higher than in 1993 and stood at 4.8 percent. It must be stressed that during the decade under Netanyahu, despite the relative quiet, the rate of immigration from within the Green Line to Judea and Samaria gradually dropped to 20 percent of the total increase while the natural increase in Judea and Samaria – half of that in the [ultra-Orthodox](https://www.haaretz.com/misc/tags/TAG-ultra-orthodox-1.5598962) towns of Modi’in Ilit and Betar Ilit had gradually risen to account for 80 percent of the total increase.

Ultra-Orthodox – or Haredi – society, which had only 6,000 of its members living in Judea and Samaria in 1993 (5.5 percent of all the Israelis there) had become the motor for growth for the settler population. In 2018, their number reached 150,000 (35 percent of the population of Israelis in Judea and Samaria) and within a decade it is expected to account for half of all the Israelis in Judea and Samaria. More than half the permits for new housing units (2,929) will be allocated to the Haredi town of Betar Ilit.

If we examine Olmert’s proposal in 2008 in light of the current situation, Israel would now be required in accordance with its position at the time and under its responsibility, to evacuate 114,000 Israelis. That is, a number greater than the total number of Israelis who were living in Judea and Samaria in 1993, and 4.2 times the number of Israelis who would have been required to evacuate in 1993.

From this analysis it emerges that Israel, under all its prime ministers, has chosen a policy that has led to magnification of the obstacle entailed in evacuating Israelis, by having encouraged immigration, construction and expansion of the settlements as a whole and in particular the isolated settlements outside the major blocs. The prime ministers did this for different reasons: Barak believed a permanent status solution could be achieved during his time in office and therefore there was no significance to an addition of thousands of evacuees, and Netanyahu saw the increase in the number of settlers as a tool to destroy a two-state solution and persuade the public that it is possible to impose on the Palestinians autonomy that is only cultural.

Since the Oslo Accords the number of Israelis living in Judea and Samaria has increased by 289 percent while the population of Israel as a whole has increased by 68 percent. In other words, in the 26 years that elapsed between the Six-Day War and the Oslo Accords, the number of settlers increased by an average of 4,000 annually and in the 27 years since the accords, by an average of 12,000 people annually. Israel has preferred the settlements even over East Jerusalem, where the number of Israelis in 1993 was 115,000, compared to 218,000 in 2018 (an increase of 89 percent).

In the past decade under Netanyahu, most of the construction has been in the isolated locales and the government has also approved billions of shekels to improve the access roads to them. In the context of the new authorizations, nearly 2,000 homes have been allocated to the isolated settlements deep inside the Palestinian area, among them Eli (629), Shiloh (141), Har Bracha (286), Pnei Kedem (120) Einav (181) and Shim’a (21).

Had Israel suspended expansion of the isolated settlements, it would face less of a challenge in negotiations to evacuate the inhabitants of those settlements, who would constitute a smaller portion of the Israeli population in Judea and Samaria. The number of inhabitants in the 17 Israeli enclaves in the Trump plan – which in any scenario will destroy Palestinian contiguity and had been intended for evacuation by Ariel Sharon in the context of the disengagement plan – was 5,100 in 1993, and had more than tripled by 2018, reaching 16,400.

**Two-state solution still feasible, but costlier**

Despite all these moves, this policy, which is totally lacking in national responsibility, has failed to create a demographic and spatial reality that could dictate to the Palestinians the Trump initiative or any other proposal that is not based on a 1:1 exchange of territories — or prevents territorial contiguity in the Palestinian state and damages the fabric of the lives of its inhabitants.

Nor has this policy succeeded in changing the policy of the Arab countries, including those with whom we recently signed agreements, or of the international community. All of them still see the 1967 lines as the basis for the future border of Israel, with 1:1 exchanges of territories. Moreover, this policy has not succeeded in eliminating the possibility of the two-state solution, because Israel can keep under its sovereignty 80 percent of the Israelis who are living beyond the Green Line on less than 4 percent of the territory of the West Bank, and it has the ability to absorb the evacuees with respect to housing and employment.

The policy of expanding the settlements in Judea and Samaria was and remains hideously costly to the state of Israel with regard to its security, economy and society. Most of the security forces in the West Bank are invested in guarding the settlements and the roads to them, as well as in preventing “price tag” terror against Palestinians by Israeli extremists. And year by year, Israel has had to increase its subsidizing of the settlers, whose ranking is gradually dropping to the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder. As time goes by, this policy is not achieving anything but rather is raising the price we are paying today and will have to pay in the future.