**The settlers return home to Israel**

**Shaul Arieli, Haaretz, August 19, 2021**

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"This reality has been clear for years, even to the supporters of the settlements. For a very long time now, most of the political right has known that it is no longer possible to talk about annexing and enforcing the law. "In the current state of affairs, such an aspiration is not in the realm of the possible", Prof. Vered Noam, winner of the Israel Prize in Talmudic Studies ("The End of the Yellow Time", "Dot" 61) wrote in an article in 1992. This, Noam continued in the article, due to the price involved, "granting a defined civil status to almost two million Arabs", which threatens the Jewish majority and the Jewish identity of the State of Israel.

Thus, as early as 1978, the then Prime Minister Menachem Begin devised the autonomy plan, in order to win a "dowry" (most of the territories) without the "bride" (the Palestinians), in the language of Levy Eshkol. Naftali Bennett and Ayelet Shaked continued along this line, and in 2012 launched the "The Stability Initiative" which includes the annexation of Area C, where few Palestinians live. Benjamin Netanyahu, who served as architect of President Donald Trump's 'vision of peace' launched in 2020, has once again tried to establish a limited Palestinian autonomy.

This truth about the inability to annex the West Bank seems even more true today. The mutual recognition between Israel and the PLO, the Oslo Accords and the establishment of the Palestinian Authority in 1993-1994, as well as the sweeping international recognition of Palestine as an observer state at the UN in 2012, and the position of the Joe Biden administration - all will not allow this. Israel once again has two options for preserving Jewish hegemony: to control the territories and maintain an apartheid regime or to separate from them into two states.

The Israeli public, aware of the choice, supports by a small majority the two-state solution, but for more than a decade has no longer believed in its feasibility due to what it perceives as two obstacles: one, the lack of a Palestinian "partner" (A matter I have dealt with extensively in other articles), and the perception that the expanding settlements have changed the situation in the West Bank irreversibly.

The public, the vast majority of whom do not bother to cross the Green Line, has for many years been bombarded with fake News by the settler right, that ignores the data published annually by the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS). This month, the region's demographic data for the end of 2020 were released, and they are once again bursting the bubble that the settlement is a successful enterprise. The settler leaders themselves and the political right no longer believe in this bubble, but they continue to maintain it in desperate moves of undemocratic legislation, in silence in the face of violence against Palestinians, and in futile attempts to thicken isolated settlements, devoid of any demographic and spatial influence.

Once again, the CBS showed the continuation of the trends of the last decade in the 46 large settlements in the West Bank, those with a population of more than 2,000. For the first time since 1967, we are witnessing a negative general migration balance in these settlements. The number of Israelis who left these settlements in 2020 is 1,040 greater than the number of those who moved to them. In all four Jewish cities, where 44% of the Jewish population lives in the Judea and Samaria district, there is a negative migration balance: in Modi'in Illit, the largest city with an ultra-Orthodox population - minus 815. In its ultra-Orthodox sister, Beitar Illit, the second largest city in Judea and Samaria - minus 442. The third largest city, Ma'ale Adumim, with a mixed population, holds the record - minus 853. Ariel, the smallest city - minus 327. It should be noted that the population of Ariel includes no less than 573 Arabs, followed by Ma'ale Adumim with 73 Arabs.

The natural increase in the whole of Judea and Samaria, which stands at 10,546 people, together with immigration from abroad of 568 people, compensates for the negative migration balance, and puts the annual increase at 10,074 people. However, this is an increase of only 2.46% - the lowest since the beginning of the settlement in 1967! And the sole source, for the first time, is in natural growth.

The sources of natural growth also reinforce the picture of failure. 53% of the total natural increase in these 46 settlements was in the two ultra-Orthodox cities. This allows them to offset the negative immigration and continue to enjoy high annual growth - 3.1% in Modi'in Elite and 3.4% in Beitar Illit. These two cities, whose residents already constitute about 35% of all settlers in the West Bank, are ranked at the bottom of the socio-economic ranking and rely entirely on government assistance. In contrast, in the two cities where the birth rate is much smaller, Ariel and Ma'ale Adumim, the number of residents decreased in 2020 due to a negative increase, 4.7% - and 0.8%, respectively.

Large cities are not alone in the list of settlements with a negative migration balance. No less than 21 settlements are characterized by a negative migration balance - that is, 54% of the large localities in the West Bank.Localities such as Neve Daniel and Mitzpe Jericho suffer from an annual increase of 0%. In the localities of Elazar, Kfar Ha'oranim, Beit El and Alon Shvut, there was a decrease in the number of residents.

The full data on all settlements, which will be published soon, are not expected to change the gloomy picture, because in the 46 large localities live about 88% of the population, and in the remaining 82 small and isolated settlements, live about 12% (in about half of the settlements, in each one live less than a thousand inhabitants).

Partial data that has already been published shows that in 25 settlements (20% of all settlements) there was a negative annual increase in 2020. In the "strategic" Jordan Valley and the northern Dead Sea, which cover a third of the West Bank, only 7,618 Israelis live in 26 settlements, each with an average population of less than 300. In the Hebron Mountains, the demographic balance between Jews and Arabs is 50: 1, and from Nablus north to the Jezreel Valley, only 5,634 Israelis live in eight small settlements.

Contrary to the above data, the Bennett-Lapid government this week approved a meeting of the Supreme Planning Committee in Judea and Samaria, which is expected to approve the construction of 2,200 new apartments in the West Bank, many of them in isolated localities, on the grounds of "natural growth" (an unclear concept). The government must understand and internalize that this year too, after a decade of clear right-wing governments and support from the Trump administration, the data show that all attempts to revive the settlements, at a cost of tens of billions of dollars needed by the Israeli public in the Green Line, were doomed to spatial and political failure. The settlements do not demographically and spatially threaten Palestinian dominance, nor the two-state solution; They become the "backyard" of the State of Israel, to which the poor and supported ultra-Orthodox population and the Messianic-nationalist settler population are paved. These two populations are a security, economic, moral and political burden on Israel, without any future expectation, except in the framework of a permanent settlement, in which Israel will be able to retain most of the settlers under its sovereignty.