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The Silent Victory of the Israeli Settlers' Movement

AMI PEDAHZUR

The spring of 1984 was devastating for Gush Emunim (Bloc of the Faithful), the ideological vanguard of the Jewish settlers' movement in Israel's occupied territories. Following a lengthy investigation by the Shabak (General Security Service), police arrested 29 activists, many of whom were prominent figures in the movement. The charges were severe. A group known as the Jewish Underground had planned and executed terrorist attacks against Palestinians since 1980. The arrests and subsequent trials caused a rift within Gush Emunim and marked the beginning of its downfall. Nonetheless, the group's demise did not undermine the implementation of its vision. In fact, it paved the way for the single most significant process in Israel's contemporary history: the silent annexation of the West Bank and the dissolution of the two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Thirty years later, more than 350,000 Jews reside in 125 settlements and 100 outposts all over the West Bank (not including settlers in the Jerusalem vicinity).

In recent years, conflict scholars such as Maria Stephan and Erica Chenoweth have been promoting an alluring proposition. They maintain that, in territorial conflicts, sub-state actors who choose nonviolent over violent tactics benefit in three main ways. First, they reduce the costs and risks of their struggles. Second, they improve their prospects of attaining their short-term objectives. Third, by diverting disputes from violent to peaceful paths, they gain both domestic and international legitimacy that helps them in the long run.

A review of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict over the past three decades provides support for the first two propositions. However, it casts some doubts on the third. Indeed, it illuminates a darker aspect of nonviolent tactics: In some cases, they can contribute to the perpetuation of conflicts.

FUNDAMENTALIST AFFINITIES

Since the 1980s, fundamentalist actors have set the course of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: on the Israeli side, the settlers' network; on the Palestinian side, Hamas and Islamic Jihad. Despite its original association with Christianity, fundamentalism is the most appropriate concept for the study of these Jewish and Islamic groups. Its power lies in the fact that it sheds light on the similarities among groups that are typically placed on extreme opposites of the spectrum. Although their worldviews are mutually exclusive, these fundamentalist groups share an uncompromising, primal commitment to advancing their beliefs. Their importance in determining the course of the conflict requires replacing the old dividing line between Israelis and Palestinians with a newer one, between fundamentalists and pragmatists.

The struggle over the fate of the holy land has always been more than a territorial conflict between national movements. Even the most pragmatic factions on both sides have anchored their claims for ownership of the land in a combination of historical and theological justifications. However, the pragmatists maintained a certain degree of ideological flexibility that allowed them room to reach compromises without alienating their constituencies. Leaders who make such compromises often justify their pragmatism by arguing that they must seize a unique historical opportunity to make a better future for their

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people. Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin and Egyptian President Anwar Sadat did so in the late 1970s when they made peace between their countries. Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, Palestine Liberation Organization leader Yasser Arafat, and King Hussein of Jordan used similar rhetoric when they reached a set of accords between 1993 and 1995.

Fundamentalist movements, on the other hand, derive their ideologies directly from their respective scriptures and cannot temper their worldviews. Leaders of such movements consider themselves as emissaries of the spiritual realm. Consequently, they have neither the will nor the legitimacy to alter the sacred creeds. The visions of the Jewish settlers and the Palestinian Islamists regarding the future of the contested land are the epitome of fundamentalism, since they are not only mutually exclusive but also unyielding.

Both Islamic Jihad, an Iranian-backed group, and Hamas, a branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, adhere to ideologies that combine Pan-Islamism and nationalism. They perceive the lands of both the sovereign state of Israel and the occupied territories as *waqf*, a sacred Islamic ground or endowment. Article Six of the Hamas Covenant of 1988 states that the group “strives to raise the banner of Allah over every inch of Palestine.”

Jewish settlers who follow the theology of Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook (1891–1982), the spiritual leader of Gush Emunim, hold an almost identical outlook on the national issue. They consider the whole land of Israel and Palestine as a holy Jewish territory. For them, the rise of the Zionist movement and the subsequent formation of the sovereign state of Israel in the Holy Land were *Atchalta De'Geulah*—the beginning of the Jewish people's redemption.

DIVINE CALL

Until the summer of 1967, Jews could only dream of visiting, let alone settling in, the most sacred sites of their religion. According to the worldview of Rabbi Kook, the outcome of the Six-Day War was miraculous. After a long period of collective anxiety, Israel secured a swift and decisive military victory against Egypt, Jordan, and Syria, conquering East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip, as well as the Sinai Peninsula and the Golan Heights. The war reconnected

the Jewish people to places such as Hebron and Jerusalem, and thus turned the Covenant of the Pieces—in which the Lord promised the land to Abraham and his offspring—into a reality. Kook's followers considered the Israeli conquest as a divine call to settle all over the Promised Land. They were not alone.

While most Israelis associate the formation of the first settlements with Gush Emunim, the movement was not founded until 1974, more than six years after the first settlements appeared. In his 1996 book *The Triumph of Embarrassment*, the late Israeli journalist Reuven Pedatzur traced the roots of the settling enterprise to the summer of 1967. In the aftermath of the Six-Day War, even the seemingly moderate leaders of Israel, including Prime Minister Levi Eshkol, refused to entertain the idea of a full withdrawal from the occupied territories. Indeed, Israel began settlement activity in the vicinity of Jerusalem almost immediately after the war. The two main contenders for the leadership of the Labor Party, Yigal Allon

and Moshe Dayan, presented different plans for the future status of the occupied lands, but both called for vast annexations. Others were even more hawkish. Begin, the leader of Herut (Freedom), Israel's main right-wing party at the time,

warned the cabinet of the consequences of transferring even a single inch of the liberated lands to foreign hands.

However, there was a significant gap between rhetoric and deeds. Regardless of their statements, Israel's elected officials had to consider legal, budgetary, and most importantly, international pressures. Moreover, neither Labor nor Likud, the party that succeeded Herut, held fundamentalist ideologies. For Labor, the occupied territories were mostly a strategic asset. They served as a buffer zone between the Arab armies and the Israeli heartland. Likud adhered to an ideology that combined romantic nationalism and religious symbolism.

Shortly after the dramatic elections of 1977, when the Socialists lost power to the right for the first time in the history of Zionism, Israel's new prime minister, Begin, visited Kedumim—the first Jewish settlement in the heart of the West Bank. The visit had a significant symbolic value. Kedumim had been founded in 1975 by the settlers of the Elon Moreh enclave, a group that

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represented the ideological core of Gush Emunim. The founding of Kedumim was a compromise. It followed a long struggle between the members of the enclave and the Labor-led cabinet, which had objected to the idea of settling in the heavily populated Palestinian parts of the West Bank. The Elon Moreh group's success in strong-arming the cabinet became a milestone in the history of the settlers' movement.

During his visit, Begin expressed his support for the settlers and pledged to form many more settlements like Kedumim. Nonetheless, several weeks after he assumed office, Begin engaged in quiet talks that eventually led to the signing of the Camp David Accords in 1978 and the Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty in 1979. Beyond consenting to a full Israeli withdrawal from the Sinai Peninsula, Begin, the iconic champion of the Greater Israel ideology, also agreed to institute autonomous Palestinian rule in the West Bank. Shocked by the pragmatism of Begin and his cabinet, the blindsided leaders of Gush Emunim arrived at the conclusion that they should never have put their faith in supposed political allies who did not share their fundamentalist worldview.

STATE PENETRATION

In a 2007 article, Oded Haklai of Queen's University in Canada coined the term "state penetration" to encapsulate the political awakening of the Israeli settlers and the modus operandi that facilitated their success even when trends turned against them. Back in the late 1960s, when they were forming the first settlements, the inexperienced activists became avid students of the settling tactics that the Zionist leadership had utilized in the pre-state era. In particular, the Socialists' tradition of creating "facts on the ground" inspired the young settlers. To that end, they formed ad hoc coalitions with state agencies, and most notably with the military.

In the aftermath of the Six-Day War, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) faced significant challenges. The vast extent of the occupied territories forced the IDF to expand its scope of control to remote areas. Much of the responsibility fell on the shoulders of relatively junior officers, who were happy to share the burden with enthusiastic volunteers. The settlers turned into an asset for the IDF. They studied the convoluted legal framework of land ownership in the occupied territories and mobilized resources in order to strengthen the Israeli presence in those areas.

In addition, the settlers formed alliances with decaying organizations such as the Jewish Agency (the administrative branch of the World Zionist Organization) and the Jewish National Fund. In the pre-state era, both groups had provided the financial and operational resources for land purchases and the settling of Jews in Palestine. The creation of a sovereign state and the nationalization of its lands rendered both organizations redundant. In an attempt to avert irrelevance, they desperately searched for a new *raison d'être*. After 1967, the sluggishness and ambiguity shown by policy makers over the fate of the territories, on the one hand, and the vigor of the young settlers, on the other hand, energized the old organizations. They provided the new pioneers with resources and expertise.

As Haklai noted, the settlers kept on expanding their strategic repertoire. State penetration became one of their most successful tools. Settler leaders, both national and local, identified bureaucrats who shared their fundamentalist worldview and lured them into operating on the movement's behalf within the state agencies. Starting in the 1980s, Moetzet Yesha (the Yesha Council), a voluntary association of municipal and ideological settler leaders, served as the primary vehicle for this strategy. Formally, the organization aimed to respond to the distinctive day-to-day issues encountered by Jewish residents beyond the sovereign boundaries of the state. Informally, this seemingly inconspicuous body served as the successor of Gush Emunim. Its goals included constructing new settlements, expanding existing ones, paving roads to connect the settlements with Israel's main urban areas, and lobbying government ministries. Most importantly, the Yesha Council sought to prevent territorial concessions and eventually to facilitate the annexation of the West Bank and Gaza. (Israel had already annexed East Jerusalem and the Golan Heights in 1980 and 1981, respectively.)

Every Israeli cabinet formed between 1977 and 1992 included at least several ministers who were ardent supporters of the settlers. These ministers provided representatives of the Yesha Council with unlimited access to policy-making processes that pertained to the occupied territories. Meanwhile, at the grassroots level, the settlers continued their campaign to occupy bureaucratic positions that had direct influence on their enterprise. They realized that policy making at the national level could be a long and complicated process, and that policy

makers often left office before they managed to turn their ideas into policies, let alone implement them. The bureaucracy offered consistency. As the American political scientist Michael Lipsky noted in his 1980 book *Street-Level Bureaucracy*, a bureaucrat often occupies the same position for decades. These individuals know the intricacies of their areas of responsibility better than anyone else does. Street-level bureaucrats often become powerful political actors who use laws and regulations to facilitate or hinder the implementation of policies based on idiosyncratic preferences.

The case of the Jewish settlements that encircle the holy basin in the Old City of Jerusalem illustrates this phenomenon. Since 1967, Israeli cabinets have refrained from demonstrating sovereignty over Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif or settling Jews in the adjacent areas. Starting in the 1980s, non-state actors—most notably the Ateret Cohanim and Elad associations—first recruited public servants who shared their ideology and later installed their own people in relevant positions. This allowed them not only to transfer properties to Jewish hands but also to receive state subsidies for their enterprise.

EXISTENTIAL THREAT

In the summer of 1992, the Labor Party returned to power for the first time in 15 years, forming a coalition government in which the settlers had no foothold. This generated panic among the leaders of the Yesha Council. The 1993 Oslo Accords substantiated their fears, paving the way for a territorial compromise in the West Bank and Gaza. The agreements demonstrated the ability of both Israeli and Palestinian leaders to find flexibility in collective myths in order to offer a better future for their people. From the perspective of the fundamentalists on both sides, though, the peace process posed an existential threat to their core beliefs. Paradoxically, despite their opposing long-term visions and intrinsic mutual hatred, the fundamentalists found themselves sharing an identical short-term agenda of undermining the peace process and sabotaging the implementation of the Oslo Accords.

Indeed, shortly after the signing of the treaties, extremist settlers and fundamentalist Palestinians launched violent campaigns. In February 1994, Baruch Goldstein, a settler from Kiryat Arba, perpetrated a massacre in the Cave of the Patriarchs

in nearby Hebron, leaving 29 Palestinian worshippers dead and 125 injured. Less than two months later, Hamas carried out two suicide terrorist attacks in the Israeli heartland. These events cracked the fragile layer of trust that the negotiating parties had forged. They also cast a dark shadow over the prospects for the Agreement on the Gaza Strip and the Jericho Area, a treaty providing for limited self-rule by Palestinians in the occupied territories. However, with vigorous support from the international community, the Israeli and Palestinian leaders overcame their aversions, signed the pact in May 1994, and implemented it.

The fundamentalists responded swiftly and harshly. In 1995, Hamas and Islamic Jihad carried out eight suicide attacks against Israeli targets. The Jewish fundamentalists were less lethal but more efficient. In the summer of 1995, a group called Zo Artzeinu (This is Our Land) incited a campaign of civil disobedience that at its peak clogged Israel's main highways. On November 4, 1995, Yigal Amir, a law student and fundamentalist activist, assassinated Rabin.

Amir relied on the doctrine of *Din Rodef* (Law of the Pursuer) from the *Halakha* (Jewish religious law) and was rumored to have secured a rabbinical blessing in advance of his act. At his trial, Amir maintained that

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according to the Jewish law, Rabin had neither the legal nor the moral authority to give up parts of the biblical land of Israel. The assassination contributed to the derailment of the peace process, as Amir had hoped it would.

However, it also caused a shockwave similar to the one that the unveiling of the Jewish terrorist network had generated a decade earlier. Israelis, including many prominent leaders of the Yesha Council, called for a period of self-reflection. Amir, whose views were more extreme than those of the veterans of Gush Emunim, presented a difficult dilemma for the students of Rabbi Kook. As much as he sanctified the land of Israel, Rabbi Kook also hallowed the state of Israel. Amir recognized only the sanctity of the land. The assassination of Rabin drove the two principles into a head-on collision.

STRATEGIC NONVIOLENCE

The cataclysmic events of 1994 and 1995 set the Jewish and Palestinian fundamentalists on separate strategic paths. Both Hamas and Islamic

Jihad refused to recognize the legitimacy of the newly established Palestinian National Authority. Subsequently, they boycotted the first parliamentary and presidential elections, held in January 1996. In late February and early March of that year, they carried out four suicide bombings in Jerusalem, Ashkelon, and Tel Aviv, killing 59 Israelis. These attacks contributed to the victory of the right-wing bloc under the leadership of Benjamin Netanyahu in the May 1996 elections.

Although they were relieved that their political camp was back in power, the settlers found themselves in a precarious position. Based on the bitter lessons they had learned during the Begin era, the leaders of the Yesha Council were skeptical of Netanyahu, especially given his promise to the international community not to revoke the Oslo Accords, and his decision to uphold his predecessor's policy against new settlements. Nonetheless, the leaders of the Yesha Council did not want to take to the streets and assume the risk of alienating the new administration. They were also concerned about alienating the Israeli public, which was still recovering from the assassination of Rabin.

Accordingly, the Yesha leaders decided to eliminate the role of violence from their strategic repertoire, focusing instead on the nonviolent schemes they had mastered. This marked the dawn of the so-called Outposts Era. Assisted by Ariel Sharon, then serving as national infrastructure minister, as well as by their old partners, the IDF and the Jewish Agency, the settlers created facts on the ground without seeking official approval. They set up outposts in the West Bank and connected them with roads designated for the exclusive use of Jewish residents. These new settlements and roads served key objectives—preventing Palestinian population centers from expanding, and undermining Palestinian territorial integrity.

The operation succeeded beyond the expectations of its architects. The majority of Palestinians lost their faith in the peace process. They gradually transferred their support to the fundamentalist factions, which remained committed to the path of violence. Indeed, the second intifada, which broke out in late 2000, turned into the most violent episode in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Seemingly, violence had proved effective. In the

short run, it put an end to the peace process, an objective shared by both Hamas and the settlers. In the long run, the Israeli reoccupation of large parts of the West Bank and the cynicism that most Israelis developed regarding the peace process allowed the settlers to silently pursue their goals.

In the aftermath of the intifada, the idea of the two-state solution gained increasing support among Israelis. However, this support should not be correlated with a sense of optimism over the peace process. More than anything else, it reflected a widespread concern that the perpetuation of Israel's hold over the West Bank and Gaza could lead to the formation of a single binational state. Such a development might allow Jews to settle all over the Promised Land, but only at the cost of relinquishing the vision of a Jewish nation-state, since Jews would constitute an ethnic minority in a binational state.

Even supporters of the settlers, including Sharon and his successors as prime minister, Ehud Olmert and Netanyahu, reached this conclusion and declared their support for territorial compromise. Sharon's 2005 decision to unilaterally remove the Israeli settlements from the Gaza Strip followed this logic. Although the Yesha

Council labeled Sharon a traitor, the implementation of the withdrawal, and the subsequent coup in Gaza that brought Hamas to power, pushed the Israelis and the Palestinians further apart.

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FACTS ON THE GROUND

Two decades after the signing of the Oslo Accords, a territorial compromise seems as remote as ever. Fatah, the leading secular party that Arafat had founded, overthrew Hamas after the Islamists won the parliamentary elections of 2006. In response, Hamas took over the Gaza Strip, dividing the territories of the Palestinian National Authority into two distinct entities. Gaza became the main concern of Israel's security establishment. Since 2008, Israel and Hamas have engaged in three major military conflicts. The Israeli public saw these events as a further confirmation of the Palestinians' desire to annihilate the Jewish state, and lost any hope for peace. Despite the loss of the settlements in Gaza, the settlers benefited from the escalation. By 2013, the number of settlers in the

West Bank had reached 330,000. (An additional 200,000 Jews resided in East Jerusalem by that point.) Contractors struggle to meet the increasing demand for new housing units, and in some settlements, real estate prices have risen to the level of properties in central Israel.

OBSTACLES TO PEACE

In Jerusalem, the city that both the Israelis and Palestinians perceive as their capital, fundamentalists on each side have been making tremendous efforts to secure gains. From their perspectives, the one square kilometer of the Old City, and especially Temple Mount (*Har haBayit* in Hebrew and *Haram al-Sharif* in Arabic), is the beating heart of the conflict. Both sides clandestinely try to secure small victories that eventually could translate into the ultimate prize: exclusive control over the holy place.

Neither party wants to escalate the situation into a full-fledged religious war—at least not yet. The recent outbreak of violence in Jerusalem is an exception. It is likely to be restrained, or at least removed from the area of the holy basin. Since the signing of the Oslo Accords, peace negotiators have been postponing deliberations over the future status of Jerusalem, given the complexity and divisiveness of the issue. Meanwhile, by using nonviolent tactics, the fundamentalists have managed until now to keep Jerusalem out of the public eye as they work to ensure that any agreement involving territorial compromise in the city would become unfeasible.

The fundamentalists on both sides achieved their goals. They hijacked the conflict and escalated it to a degree that prevents moderates from offering sustainable paths toward a peaceful resolution. However, in terms of their long-term objectives, the settlers have the upper hand. By abandoning violence and adopting diverse bureaucratic insurgency tactics, the Yesha Council managed to continuously increase the Jewish population in the occupied territories. Even the most optimistic plans for a territorial compromise include vast land swaps that would require Israel to remove close to 100,000 settlers. By comparison, there were about 5,000 Israelis in Sinai and less than 9,000 in Gaza. In both cases, Israel had limited success in relocating the settlers. A major evacuation would require a

financial and logistical effort of unprecedented magnitude.

In addition, the decision of the Rabin administration to freeze the building of new settlements backfired. The settlers no longer sought permission, so the “illegal outposts” that have replaced the “legal settlements” since the 1990s have altered the geopolitical reality of the conflict. A look at the map demonstrates the success of the Yesha Council’s efforts to slice up the West Bank. The inhabitants of many outposts represent the ideological fundamentalist core of the settlers’ movement and are unlikely to submit to a government-decreed withdrawal.

Netanyahu’s current coalition is supportive of the settlers. In fact, the housing and construction minister, Uri Ariel, is a prominent leader of the settlers’ movement. However, the settlers are ready for any scenario. Even in the unlikely event that a left-wing party forms the next government, their agenda is unlikely to suffer major setbacks. They are deeply entrenched in the bureaucracy, so their agenda will outlive any elected cabinet. Moreover, they know the ambiguous legal and administrative frameworks in the West Bank better than anyone else does. Even in cases of illegal outposts, they can use the courts to stall the execution of evacuation orders.

Following the conclusion of the second intifada, the moderate Palestinian leadership restrained the violent elements within the Fatah movement and launched a campaign for Palestinian statehood. The international community, which has always considered the settlements in the occupied territories as an obstacle to peace, has become increasingly impatient with Israel. Indeed, the continuous expansion of the settlements has turned into the single most intractable obstacle to improving Israel’s position in world politics.

The nonviolent strategy of the moderate Palestinians offered hope for believers in a two-state solution. However, in recent years Palestinian fundamentalists have begun to adopt the tactics of their Jewish counterparts. In many countries, the organizations that advance the Palestinian cause actually represent the worldview and interests of Hamas and its counterparts, and call for a total delegitimization of the Jewish state. It will be interesting to see if the pendulum of the conflict swings in their direction. ■