

The Settlement Folly

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The Sharon government's decision to issue tenders for 700 new housing units in the West Bank is ill-advised, untimely, and foolhardy. In a situation of escalating violence and growing concern over the spread of terrorism, the announcement of the expansion of settlements cannot but add fuel to the fire of the conflict.

International condemnation, easily anticipated, has been swift and harsh. The European Union states have uniformly denounced the policy initiative. The Bush administration, to date mild in its criticism of the new Israeli government, has called the plan an act of provocation. France went further, suggesting that the Sharon government is now openly exhibiting its true and dangerous colors. The Palestinian Authority has called once again for international intervention. Not only the opposition within Israel, but also some key personalities in the coalition, have questioned the move.

Some reasons have been offered to explain why Housing Minister Natan Sharansky, who spearheaded the decision, chose this time and this political climate knowingly to invite the ire of key actors in the region. Perhaps he thought that his policy statement would go unnoticed in the present turmoil. Maybe he wanted to pacify right-wing elements, thus garnering favor amongst groups supportive of his electoral rivals. Or, it is possible that he counted on popular sentiments to downplay this act.

It is much more probable, however, that Sharansky, with the backing of Sharon, knew exactly what he was doing. The expansion of settlements flaunts Israeli control over the territories and signals the desire to extend the occupation. The settlement enterprise is, and always has been, at the core of the conflict between Palestinians and Israelis; its perpetuation obstructs any real progress towards its mitigation.

Government efforts to deflect the sweeping denunciation sound feeble in these circumstances. To suggest that the building of new housing units falls within the present government's guidelines, which include a halt on the construction of new settlements, is at best disingenuous. The addition of new neighborhoods to existing sites, often at some distance from their center, is to promote settlement under another heading. Coalition agreements cannot be used to justify policy since they are patently part of the problem.

Equally unconvincing is the resort to "natural growth" to explain new building. There are least 9,000 empty housing units across the Green Line today. The market in these areas is so depressed that those wishing to leave cannot find buyers. Natural growth relates to people, not to houses or settlements, which are the result of conscious decisions.

It is hardly surprising that the Sharon government has therefore fallen back on the excuse that all it is doing is continuing the policies of its predecessors. Indeed, the more that 160 settlements established since 1967 were created with the compliance of all the governments in office and

frequently with their active support. The state has provided funding, tax incentives, superior services, protection, and legal backing to the well-organized and political influential settler movement. During the three years of the Netanyahu administration, 42 new sites were established, a full 30 during the last six months of its tenure. The Barak government was no better, approving the construction of over 2,000 housing units in the past year alone.

Just because previous governments backed settlement growth is hardly justification for its continuation, especially now, when every Israeli location in the territories has become the object of Palestinian fire. Most settlements are fast becoming a security risk of the highest order. Their defense continues to exact an enormous price in people and resources for reasons that can no longer be upheld.

This is why the claim that the construction of more housing in Ma'aleh Adumim and Alfei Menashe falls within the national consensus is patently false. Even if many believe that these urban areas will remain under Israeli sovereignty in any future peace agreement, to imply that there is unanimity on this issue is simply misleading. No topic has divided Israelis or dictated political alignments more sharply than the settlement question.

There has never been a national consensus on this subject, and no such consensus is conceivable.

Settlements were constructed, and are now being expanded, to achieve three main goals. First, for religious-nationalist ideologues, they are the fulfillment of their visions of a Greater Land of Israel. Second, they have been purposely positioned to separate major population clusters in order to prevent Palestinian territorial integrity both in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. And third, their upholders have consistently used settlements as a means of thwarting a viable peace agreement.

Any hope for peace depends on disengagement, which has both a human and a territorial dimension. Each additional house makes it more difficult to achieve this objective.

Settlements today are fast becoming, more than ever before, a military, economic, political and moral liability. Instead of focusing on their fortification, the government should be honest with itself and its citizens and acknowledge that most, if not all, settlements will eventually be dismantled.

Pessah began with an act of folly: the government's decision to increase housing in the settlements. The holiday can still end with a symbolic act of courage: the removal of the tiny and fanatically provocative Jewish settlement in Hebron. Such a step would enhance the prospects of attaining what settlements preclude: the beginning of some understanding between Israel and its neighbors in the hope of creating a livable future for all.