

# The Post-Disengagement Anguish

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In the months preceding the disengagement, Israeli society rehearsed terrifying scenarios of the evacuation of settlements in the Gaza Strip and northern Samaria. Even Prime Minister Sharon himself, in somewhat of a careless comment, spoke of the potential of civil war. Opponents of the disengagement plan warned that the withdrawal would result in an irreparable split between the state and the religious Zionist population, a large, active sector of the Israeli public. Almost everyone believed that the disturbing scenes witnessed during the Israeli evacuation of Yamit in 1982 did not compare to what awaited Israel in the Gaza Strip settlements. Senior IDF commanders spoke of a best-case scenario that included broken arms and legs, and Soroka hospital in Beer Sheva was instructed to make preparations to treat 200 injured people per day. Against this background of grim predictions, the smooth, quick evacuation, which surpassed even the best expectations, allowed Israeli society to breathe an immense sigh of relief.

Prior to the disengagement, it was argued in this journal that the widespread frightening scenarios were exaggerated and unrealistic. It was emphasized that there was no danger of civil war, and that religious Zionism's mainstream was little likely to disengage from the state or lend its support to mass refusal of orders or other acts that would significantly damage the IDF.<sup>1</sup> Just as I believed that the scenarios back then were highly exaggerated (and as we have seen, this was in fact the case), I now regard Israeli society's immense sense of relief as exaggerated as well.

The discussion below focuses on this sense of misplaced relief. It aims to describe the dimensions of the crisis experienced by the settler population throughout Judea, Samaria, and the Gaza Strip and

parts of the national religious sector, and to assess the short and long-term implications of the crisis for this group, and for Israeli society in general. For the decisive majority of the Israeli population – supporters and opponents of the disengagement alike – the disengagement passed without having inflicted any great trauma. Furthermore, not only was the disengagement not traumatic, but in some ways Israeli society even emerged strengthened from the ordeal. According to all surveys, the feeling that characterized Israeli society most after the disengagement was a feeling of pride and satisfaction with the determined and sensitive way the IDF and the Israeli police force carried out the task. Most Israelis sympathize with the evacuees and identify in one way or another with their pain and sorrow; a large percentage of the population (albeit a minority) think that the disengagement plan was a mistake. Still, the vast majority regards the manner in which the disengagement was conducted as a great success for the State of Israel in general and for the IDF and the police force in particular. For this portion of the population, the disengagement is a fait accompli that should be accepted and a point from which to move onward.

## The Trauma of the Disengagement

The evacuees of Gush Katif, the greater settler population (especially of the ideologically-based settlements), and certain segments of the religious Zionist community (primarily the "hardal" – the Hebrew acronym for the ultra-Orthodox national religious – sector) see things quite differently. The disengagement in their eyes was a genuine trauma. For them, the passage of the disengagement plan by the Knesset and the cabinet resulted in a crisis of consciousness – for many a crisis of religious faith, as

well as a crisis that punctured an entire worldview.<sup>2</sup> The actual disengagement and the specific way the evacuation was carried out intensified the crisis for a number of reasons. First, significant portions of the settler population and the ultra-Orthodox nationalist sector sincerely believed that at the end of the day, the evacuation would not occur. During the weeks and days leading up to the evacuation, the word “disengagement” was consistently accompanied by the words “that will never happen”; Rabbi Mordechai Eliyahu, former chief rabbi of Israel, promised in a celebratory tone, “there will be no disengagement!” Within the ultra-Orthodox nationalist sector were those who expected a miracle from heaven. The more pragmatic settlers were waiting for either a dramatic last-minute political turnaround or for the IDF to inform the government that it was unable or unwilling to carry out the evacuation by force (just as Chief of Staff Motta Gur had informed Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin regarding the evacuation of settlers from Sebastia in 1975).

Today, with the wisdom of hindsight, these hopes appear to have been wishful thinking or products of immense self-delusion. And indeed, there was a large degree of self-delusion. This, however, does not detract from the intensity of the feelings experienced by this portion of the population during the days preceding the disengagement. The last issue of *Nekuda* (the monthly publication of the Yesha – the Hebrew acronym for Judea, Samaria, and Gaza – Council) published before the disengagement clearly reflects the depth of the belief that it was still possible to prevent, stop, or at least delay the implementation of the disengagement plan.<sup>3</sup> The fact that the evacuation was carried out in its entirety according to the precise schedule set by Prime Minister Sharon, despite all the hopes, prayers, promises, lobbying, and efforts of its opponents, demonstrated that their labors had been in vain. The more this fact seeps into the consciousness of this portion of the Israeli population, the more intense their psychological, religious, and emotional crisis becomes.

Second, the settlers and the ultra-Orthodox nationalist sector hoped that if the disengagement ac-

tually occurred, its implementation would involve a national trauma so overwhelming that it would be decades before any Israeli government or prime minister would even consider evacuating additional settlements in Judea and Samaria. However, they failed to achieve this aim as well. In fact, the evacuation of the Gaza Strip in six days and the evacuation of all four settlements in northern Samaria in one day convinced many Israelis that the future evacuation of settlements in Judea and Samaria – especially

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small isolated settlements – would not be a serious problem for a determined government with a majority in the Knesset. Indeed, the sense is that while Ariel Sharon was the leader who paved the way and was perhaps the only leader able to do so in the current political context, in the future Sharon will not be the only one capable of such measures. In fact, many voices within Israeli politics are now calling for another unilateral disengagement in Judea and Samaria, and Eyal Arad and Eival Giladi, two of Sharon’s close advisors, have confirmed that such a possibility exists.

It is also worth noting that the leadership of the settler population – both the Yesha Council, the collective public leadership, and the Yesha rabbis, the religious leadership – faced a difficult dilemma. How could they prevent the use of violence that would most likely turn public opinion against the settlers, but at the same time sear the evacuation into the consciousness of the Jewish population of Israel as a major trauma in order to prevent additional

Israeli withdrawals? The settler leadership found no solution to this dilemma and consciously decided on preventing serious violence as a foremost priority. Special emphasis was placed on banning resistance with live ammunition, which was not done in such a determined manner during the evacuation of Yamit.

The Yesha Council claims that this was a principled decision, reflecting its priority of maintaining its relationship with Israeli society over the value of Jewish settlement.

Without doubting the sincerity of the leaders of the Yesha Council, there is also reason to believe that this conscious choice reflects the serious trauma of Yitzhak Rabin's assassination, still perceptible ten years after the fact. During the months leading up to Rabin's assassination, the settlers waged a campaign of incitement against the prime minister, the likes of which had not hitherto been seen in Israel. While the overall majority of the public was indifferent at first, the assassination by Yigal Amir transformed this indifference into a powerful backlash aimed at the country's national religious population in general and the settlers in particular. It was clear to the leadership of the settlers that if during the disengagement a soldier or a police officer were killed, this would again snap the Israeli public out of its indifference and spark a harsher response against the settlers and against the settlement project in its entirety. This meant risking everything, which was a chance the settler leaders were unwilling to take.

Thus, the transformation of the disengagement into reality and the way it was carried out intensified the crisis that the settlers and the ultra-Orthodox nationalist sector were already experiencing. Just as the human body defends itself immediately upon suffering a blow and only begins to feel the intensity and pain of the blow after the passage of time, the same is true of the spirit and the soul. Only with the passage of time have the settlers and the ultra-Orthodox nationalist population begun deal-



ing with the intensity of the crisis. The more time that passes, the greater the sense of frustration, disappointment, bitterness, and helplessness experienced by this portion of the population. During the days and weeks that followed the disengagement, or to use the language of the settlers, after the prime minister's destruction of Gush Katif, taking revenge against Ariel Sharon became the settlers' primary aim. They invested great efforts in defeating Sharon within

the Likud party's Central Committee and ousting him from power. For the settlers, punishing Sharon would offer a degree of consolation and would also send a clear message to other Israeli leaders, that "this is what happens to the man who raises his hand against the Land of Israel." Sharon's surprising and impressive victory within the Central Committee prevented them from achieving this goal as well, which may well result in further intensification of the settlers' feelings of frustration, disappointment, bitterness, despair, and helplessness.

### The Road Ahead

That such feelings are harbored among a sector of the population, which until now has been highly represented in state institutions (unlike the majority of the ultra-Orthodox "haredi" population), is extremely dangerous for the social fabric of the state. These feelings could result in this population's alienation and isolation from the overwhelming majority of Israel's population, which would be a major blow to social consolidation and coherence within the country. In fact, even before the disengagement was carried out, voices within the ultra-Orthodox nationalist public held that if the state disengages from the Land of Israel and the settler population, they in turn will have to disengage from the state.

More generally, the settlers, the ultra-Orthodox nationalist sector, and other parts of the religious Zionist community have been debating intensely the

reasons for the failed campaign against the disengagement, as well as the direction they should follow in the future. This debate has included all voices and virtually the full spectrum of opinions. It has heard calls to disengage from the state, to refuse service in the IDF, to move closer to the ultra-Orthodox sector, to engage in civil disobedience to the point of open rebellion, and to organize forces in order to gain political control of the government. Predictably, the harshest responses have come from the youth who for months played an active role in the struggle against the disengagement, as well as from

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the evacuees themselves. These people feel betrayed and regard the disengagement as a terrible defeat. As is usual in such situations, they are looking for whom to blame. Their focus is primarily on the Yesha Council and to a certain degree on the Yesha rabbis, based on the claim that the struggle these leaders waged was too moderate and too weak. Instead of leading an active resistance, the critics argue, the leaders limited themselves to mere protest and prevented a large portion of the population that was willing to oppose the evacuation in a much more active and determined manner from doing so. Here and there, more extreme voices can also be heard branding the Yesha Council as "collaborators" who knowingly cooperated with the IDF, the police, and the government in thwarting significant resistance to the evacuation, coining terms like the "Pesha" (crime) Council and the "Yeshu" (Jesus) Council (because it too turned the other cheek).

The main lesson learned by a portion of the settlers and the ultra-Orthodox nationalist population, albeit a minority within this collective, is that "one doesn't win by using love" and that victory can only be achieved by active and forceful resistance.

Undoubtedly, some are already preparing the ideological (and perhaps even physical) foundation for active and violent resistance to future attempts to withdraw from territory in Judea and Samaria, and this is the source of the great danger facing Israeli society and the state. A potential foundation for Jewish terrorism and religious and political subversion now exists, as does the possibility of a completely different type of resistance to all future decisions involving the evacuation of settlements from Judea and Samaria.

The rhetoric used by extremist opponents of the disengagement plan (characterized by comparisons to the holocaust and the use of terms such as expulsion, racial transfer, and crimes against humanity) has now become a problematic obstacle for the leaderships of the settler community and the ultra-Orthodox nationalist population. Any intense, committed struggle always involves risk. If the struggle is ultimately successful, there is no problem. If it fails, however, it is very difficult to control the frustrated and extremist responses of the disappointed losers. Indeed, the Yesha Council, the overwhelming majority of the rabbinical and spiritual leadership of the ultra-Orthodox nationalist sector, and the more religiously centrist Bnei Akiva

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youth movement (which represents a large portion of the religious Zionist population) are presently in the midst of an immense damage control operation. These forces completely reject the ideas of looking for guilty parties and disengaging from the state, the IDF, and secular Israeli society. Prominent figures such as Rabbis Haim Druckman, Motti Elon, and Yuval Sherlo have made clear public statements to this effect.<sup>4</sup> Rabbi Druckman said that "the worst Israeli government is far better than the best exile." Rabbi Sherlo has argued that "adopting the ultra-Orthodox model...is a direction that would ensure



our status as an isolationist cult." The major message of a decisive majority of the rabbis and public leaders in the ultra-Orthodox nationalist camp has been that disengagement from the state or from the IDF and the adoption of the ultra-Orthodox model would be tantamount to the total collapse of the century-old religious Zionist ethos.

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It is impossible to predict how the intense debate will be resolved, and there is also no way of knowing if the crisis has crested or if the peak still lies ahead. The settlers and the ultra-Orthodox nationalist camp are now clearly facing great confusion and a serious problem, the outcome of which only time will tell. And while this population accounts for only a minority among religious Zionists, it is not a small group, and numerical inferiority does not quash the seething frustration harbored by many. Herein lies the danger to the Israeli society that in its post-disengagement relief overlooks the crisis of a whole collective.

As for the mainstream of religious Zionism, which accounts for the majority of the country's national religious population, it clearly does not intend on disengaging from the state, its institutions, or Israeli society, nor will it condone attacks on or alienation from the IDF. This population is not about to change its lifestyle, despite its identification with the

evacuees of Gush Katif. Significant also are the voices within religious Zionism pointing in another direction, calling for soul-searching of a different kind. These voices are asking whether religious Zionism was mistaken to have placed such a strong, almost exclusive emphasis on the Land of Israel while at the same time neglecting the people of Israel. Some have posited that the nationalist religious camp itself is responsible to a large degree, due to its behavior and isolationism, for the split that emerged between itself and Israeli society as a whole. A prominent representative of this approach is Bar-Ilan University president Prof. Moshe Kaveh, who has categorically rejected the involvement of rabbis in political issues and argues that religious Zionism must increase its efforts to make connections with the state and with secular society in Israel.<sup>5</sup> And indeed, the majority of religious Zionists will continue reciting the traditional text of the prayer for the State of Israel, serving in the IDF, celebrating Independence Day, identifying with state symbols, and, most importantly, seeing themselves as an inseparable part of Israeli society. For this segment of the population, which constitutes the majority of the religious Zionist public, identification with the state of Israel, the IDF, and Israeli society is stronger even than the value of Jewish settlement.

**Notes**

1. Yehuda Ben Meir, "The Disengagement: An Ideological Crisis," *Strategic Assessment* 7, no. 4 (2005): 1-8.
2. For a description of the crisis, particularly within the ultra-Orthodox nationalist sector, see Ben Meir, "The Disengagement: An Ideological Crisis."
3. *Nekuda*, no. 282, Sivan 5765, July 2005.
4. *Haaretz*, August 29, 2005, p. A5.
5. *Haaretz*, September 23, 2005.