The Disengagement:
An Ideological Crisis

Yehuda Ben Meir

The idea of the Greater Land of Israel has been central to the ideological, public, and in many cases personal lives of a large number of Israelis for more than thirty years. For them, Israel's disengagement plan represents a moment of truth and a point of no return. This plan has unquestionably triggered a profound crisis, challenging and destabilizing many of the truths underlying their world view. An important aspect of this crisis stems from the fact that the architect and leader of the disengagement is none other than Ariel Sharon, who until recently served as the community's chief patron. The crisis is likely to have far-reaching repercussions.

This article will assess the scope of the crisis and its implications, primarily for this community but also with an eye to Israeli society as a whole. The threat of civil war has been mentioned more than once, and government ministers, Knesset members, and public leaders from various circles regularly discuss the need to forestall this possibility. It is therefore important to emphasize from the outset that there is no danger of civil war. In some cases, use of the term "civil war" reflects attempts to frighten and threaten the general public in order to reduce support for the disengagement. In other instances, it reflects demagoguery and even ignorance. Yet there can be no civil war in the true sense of the term without two armed forces, and this means that there can be no civil war without a split in the military. During the American Civil War, the military units of the southern states deserted from the United States army and formed

Editor's Note

As this issue of *Strategic Assessment* goes to press, the disengagement is four months away, scheduled to begin in mid-July 2005. With the plan officially approved by the Knesset, much of the focus is no longer on "if," but rather "how," and what will be the impact on the domestic scene. The calls for a national referendum, the legitimacy of refusing military orders, and the various scenarios for evacuation sketched by the police, security forces, and opponents of disengagement have assumed center stage in the Israeli debate, with increasing attention paid to the internal social ramifications of the plan.

This is the backdrop for the opening article, which focuses on one subculture within the religious Zionist movement. Written by Dr. Yehuda Ben Meir, the article describes the evolution of the ultra-Orthodox national religious community, among the sectors most profoundly affected by the disengagement, and explores the deep sense of crisis overwhelming it. Faced with an imminent reality that challenges much of its national religious beliefs and aspirations, this community is searching for practical, ideological, and religious means to grapple with the disengagement.

In his article, Dr. Mark Heller explores some of the ramifications of the new Palestinian leadership. Arafat has been succeeded by Abu Mazen, but will Arafatism be replaced as well with a new style of governance and a rejection of terror? According to Heller, Abu Mazen has yet to make clear how much he will confront the violent factions at home and firmly quell the opposition to a new chapter in Israel-Palestinian relations.

Oded Eran, Israel's ambassador to the European Union, recently submitted a proposal to the NATO directorate regarding Israel–NATO relations and enhanced cooperation between Israel and the organization. In his article, Dr. Zaki Shalom examines the strategic potential for Israel of a closer association with NATO, and also reviews some of the risks to Israel should it be offered formal membership in the organization.

The fourth article, by Dr. Ephraim Kam, evaluates the key findings of the investigative committees formed in the United States to examine the intelligence failures of the September 11 attack and the war in Iraq. Though fundamentally different intelligence failures, taken together the cases testify to recurring systemic problems in the intelligence community. Kam reviews some of the suggestions proposed by the committees to correct these problems as well as the difficulties inherent in their implementation.

The final article of this issue, written by Dr. Anat Kurz, discusses what motivates or restrains terrorist organizations vis-à-vis their use of non-conventional weapons. Kurz argues that while access to non-conventional weapons is clearly a fundamental prerequisite, it alone does not determine whether an organization will or will not employ them. Rather, a major factor underlying terrorist activity is the organizational motivation for self-preservation, and it is this factor that is crucially linked to the relatively few attacks that have involved the use of non-conventional weapons.

The Disengagement: An Ideological Crisis – cont.

the Confederate army, taking their arms and command structure with them. A similar split in the national military was true of the civil war in Spain. Barring a split in the armed forces, therefore, there can be no civil war, and there is little if any possibility that IDF tank, infantry, artillery, or air force units, with their weapons and commanders, will desert and join the opponents of disengagement.

However, the fact that the disengagement has not positioned Israel on the verge of a civil war does not mitigate the crisis faced by the Greater Israel proponents. Nor does it reduce the seriousness of the ramifications of disengagement, or ease the difficult challenges the plan poses to the state and Israeli society.

The Settlement Movement

The population facing this crisis of consciousness is known by a myriad of names, including: the settlers, Gush Emunim ("Bloc of the Faithful"), the Yesha (the Hebrew acronym for Judea, Samaria, and Gaza) Council, religious Zionism, the national religious community, the right wing, and the extreme right wing. A better assessment of the situation and possible developments as the disengagement progresses requires a more precise definition of the population in question. Most importantly, it requires an understanding of the nuances that characterize the different sub-groups within this population.

Indeed, the settlement movement in Judea, Samaria, and the Gaza Strip, which now numbers some 250,000 people, is far from homogenous and

includes a variety of types of people. The residents of Ma'aleh Adumim, Ariel, and Alfei Menashe are different from the residents of Elkana, Efrat, and Paduel, who are different from the inhabitants of Ofra, Elon Moreh, Kedumim, and Karnei Shomron, who in turn are different from those of Itamar, Har Bracha, Yizhar, and Tapuah. Despite the many faces among settler sub-groups, we can draw two major distinctions: the distinction

> Ideological settlers are a minority among the overall settlement population of Judea, Samaria, and the Gaza Strip, but it is the religious–ideological group that has the dominant voice.

between the religious population (which includes three ultra-Orthodox settlements) and the non-religious population; and the distinction between ideological settlements and settlements that arose primarily from standard of living considerations and affordable housing opportunities. These two distinctions do not overlap completely, but there is a significant correlation between the respective polarities. Numerically, ideological settlers are a minority among the overall settlement population of Judea, Samaria, and the Gaza Strip, but it is the religious–ideological group that

has the dominant voice. Most Yesha Council leaders are associated with the ideological settlement stream, and the Council's positions are primarily those of the ideological settlers.

The settlement movement, which stands at the forefront of the opposition to the disengagement plan and is officially represented by the Yesha Council, began to take shape during the first few months after the Yom Kippur War. However, its ideological and emotional roots can be traced back to the euphoria that followed Israel's victory and conquest of Judea and Samaria in the Six Day War. This sense of euphoria was experienced by the country as a whole, but took on almost messianic overtones in the national religious community. The decisive lightning victory of the sovereign Jewish army and the liberation of geographical areas teeming with national religious meaning (especially Jerusalem, crowned by the religious and historical icons of the Western Wall and the Temple Mount), in conjunction with the sense of "God's speedy redemption," was understood as the actualization of the religious Zionist ethos – the perfect coalescence of "safra" and "sayfa," the hand of God and military might. This approach even led several religious Zionist circles to propose canceling the Tisha B'Av fast, or at least the minor fasts that commemorate the destruction of the temple.

These deep feelings, which were intensified by the direct physical encounter with sites that religious Jews had for centuries "visited" constantly through their liturgy and Scriptures,

were not immediately translated into a clear political–ideological program obligating individual actualization. Despite the feelings of spiritual uplifting during the first years following the Six Day War, the majority of the national religious public adopted a pragmatic approach to the political question of the future of the territories. On this issue, the community had not yet come to constitute the Israeli right wing.

A small yet extremely close-knit and committed group within the national religious community called for retaining all parts of the Land of Israel at any cost, and strongly supported the physical settlement of the territories conquered during the Six Day War. The inner core of this group was made up of students and graduates of the Merkaz Harav yeshiva in Jerusalem, primarily the students of Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook, the most zealous prominent figure in the religious Zionist camp with regard to the absolute imperative of maintaining Jewish control over the entire Land of Israel.

This group's first step was the partisan-style settlement in the Park Hotel in the heart of Hebron on Passover 1968, a move that resulted in the establishment of Kiryat Arba outside Hebron and thereafter the Jewish settlement in Hebron itself. In the years preceding the Yom Kippur War, Kiryat Arba was the site of the establishment of the Elon Moreh group, a group that in many ways served as the catalyst for the settlement movement as a whole. Gush Emunim was formed after the Yom Kippur War, to a large degree as a response to the intense trauma caused by the war. In its nascence, the inner core of Gush Emunim consisted of students of the Merkaz Harav yeshiva, but also included activist circles from religious Zionist movements such as Igud Hamoshavim, Hapoel Mizrahi, and Hakibbutz Hadati. The "young guard" within the National Religious Party likewise supported the new group. The union of Gush Emunim and the Elon Moreh group created the settlement movement, whose evolution and development have had a major impact on the State of Israel.

During the first phase of its existence, the settlement movement enjoyed great support throughout the national religious population, especially among the youth and young adults, despite the fact that it constituted a minority of the religious Zionist population as a whole. In the one and a half generations between 1974 and today (and almost two generations since the Six Day War), Israel's national religious population has undergone far-reaching social, cultural, educational, demographic, and ideological changes. These profound changes within the religious Zionist movement lie beyond the scope of this article, but critical here are two processes that were formative for the movement.

The success of the Sebastia activity in 1974 thrust Gush Emunim on the political map, made the group a force to be reckoned with, and led to government concessions toward the settlement drive. This, and even more importantly, the Likud's rise to power in 1977, enabled the settlement movement to grow until it reached the critical mass necessary to perpetuate itself. At this point, Gush Emunim faded away and was replaced by two institutional organizations: the Yesha Council and Amana, the settlement movement organization founded by Gush Emunim. Purely for the sake of analogy, and acknowledging the significant differences between them, this transformation can be compared to the Zionist movement's institutionalization and transition to the sovereign state of Israel. Both the Yesha Council and Amana have for years enjoyed (and continue to enjoy) large allocations from the state budget, which has enabled them to build sizable organizations, undertake major organizational and public relations activities, and implement large-scale projects that afford them extensive public exposure.

At the same time, the Merkaz Harav graduates and their associates (including the late Rabbi Moshe Zvi Neria, the founder and head of the Bnei Akiva yeshivas, and Rabbi Haim Druckman, current head of these institutions) began expanding their spiritual and organizational influence within the Bnei Akiva youth movement and the educational system of the national religious sector (yeshiva high schools for boys, religious girls' high schools, yeshiva–military "hesder" programs, and pre-conscription religious academies) until they dominated the system entirely. The Merkaz Harav group is the religious Zionist equivalent to Habad (the activist, high-profile, evangelical Lubavitch

Hasidism movement) in the ultra-Orthodox sector, and, like Habad, is also a missionary group of sorts. In the early 1970s, this group represented a small, closely knit, and extremely energetic minority within religious Zionism. Most parents of Bnei Akiva youth movement members and students of the religious Zionist educational system were still far from this group in terms of worldview and way of life. And in fact, at the beginning, the Merkaz Harav influence was limited. However, as years passed, Merkaz Harav's success in taking over the formal and informal educational systems of religious Zionism had a major impact. While this group still constitutes only a minority of the religious Zionist sector, it is a minority of great importance that wields immense influence.

The combined impact of the two processes described above over the course of one and a half generations, possibly compounded by other processes, resulted in the evolution of a new nationalist ultra-Orthodox sub-culture within religious Zionism. This new sub-culture ("hardal" – the Hebrew acronym for ultra-Orthodox national religious) comprises a population very similar to the ultra-Orthodox in worldview, customs, and lifestyle. The critical difference is their position on the national issue, and their level of identification with the state and its symbols. The ultra-Orthodox national religious identify with the state, serve in its army, fly its flag, and observe its holidays (Holocaust Day, Memorial Day, and Independence Day). The great majority of

this population also differs from the ultra-Orthodox sector in that they are integrated in the country's workforce and support themselves, although there has been a degree of erosion in this context as well. But this population does not differ fundamentally from the ultra-Orthodox population in most other ways, such as its strict religious behavior; its emphasis on the importance of studying Torah at the expense of more general studies;

> The evolution of the ultra-Orthodox national sub-culture moved the mainstream of religious Zionism to the right, to the point that religious Zionism as a whole came to symbolize the right wing of Israeli politics.

its opposition to any type of gender-integrated activity; its tendency toward seclusion and introversion; its negation of the expressions of modern society (television, movies, and other such articles); and its acceptance of their rabbis' authority in all areas of life.

The ultra-Orthodox community sanctified two values: a high birthrate and the study of Torah. The nationalist counterpart of this sector sanctified two values of its own: a high birthrate and the Land of Israel. The ethos of the Greater Land of Is-

rael became the center of life and the primary essence of this sub-culture. More important, the evolution of the ultra-Orthodox national sub-culture has had a major influence on religious Zionism as a whole. Sub-cultures, which are often rebellions against their parent cultures and emerge as counter-cultures, typically undergo progressive radicalization. In the case at hand, this process had two results: it moved the mainstream of religious Zionism to the right, to the point that religious Zionism as a whole came to symbolize the right wing of Israeli politics; and it spawned some extreme and uncontrolled offshoots, such as "noar hagvaot" (the hilltop youth) and movements along the lines of Kach, the outlawed extremist political party.

The Existential Challenge

The disengagement plan hit the ultra-Orthodox national public and religious Zionism as a whole like a clap of thunder on a clear day, creating the current deep identity crisis. For the ultra-Orthodox national religious community, which includes most of the members and institutions of the religious-ideological settlement movement and many other circles, the crisis is twofold:

■ **A religious crisis of faith**: Deep in the consciousness of this group is a belief that the settlement drive in Judea, Samaria, and Gaza is part of a divine plan and the ultimate redemption, and is therefore irreversible. It is a messianic belief, and for this reason there are those who regard it as a transition from religious Zionism to

messianic Zionism (the Temple Mount Movement, and preparations for the rebuilding of the temple and for resuming God's work on the Temple Mount are classic expressions of this belief). Implementation of the disengagement would be a major blow to the religious–ideological worldview or call it entirely into question.

■ **The crumbling of a cognitive cornerstone**: According to this worldview, the establishment of as many settlements as possible throughout Judea and Samaria, and the retention of all the settlements in the Gaza Strip (including the remote settlements of Netzarim and Kfar Darom), was supposed to ensure that no Israeli government would ever be able to vacate settlements, and that there could never be a practical possibility of establishing a Palestinian state with real territorial contiguity. During the debate that took place among settlement leaders between captivating the hearts of the people versus actual physical settlement, the leadership unequivocally chose to regard physical settlement as a priority. Their underlying assumption was that it would be a left wing government that would want to vacate the settlements, and that this could never be carried out in face of the persistent combined opposition of the national religious population, the ultra-Orthodox population, and the entire right wing of Israeli politics. The settlers never imagined that it would be a right wing government, no less one headed by Ariel Sharon, that would threaten the existence of the project that had been his own life's work. Sharon's ability to carry out the

large scale evacuation of all of Gush Katif and some settlements in Samaria unilaterally, not even within the framework of a comprehensive peace settlement, means the total collapse of this conception and raises major uncertainties regarding the future of the settlement project as a whole.

The crisis is fundamental and deep. The question at this point is: what will be the national religious population's response to this crisis? In this context, it is important to distinguish between different sub-cultures within religious Zionism. One possible response is to break all the rules by refusing to accept the decision of the state and commencing a mass uprising against implementation of the withdrawal plan. The most far-reaching expression of this approach is adoption of the extremist approach that says: "if the State of Israel withdraws from the Land of Israel, then we are withdrawing from the State of Israel." And in fact, this approach of breaking all the rules enjoys significant and consistently growing support throughout the ultra-Orthodox national religious population.

At the same time, there are two distinct variations of this approach. For a portion of the ultra-Orthodox national religious population (the majority, as of today), this is primarily a tactical approach, while for the remainder of the population it is strategic. For those who employ this approach tactically, represented first and foremost by the public institutional leadership of the settlers (the Yesha Council), it is primarily a threat against the government and Israeli society, based on

the hope that the threat will serve its purpose and restrain the prime minister from implementing the disengagement. So far, proponents of the tactical approach have been careful not to cross red lines. They speak in obscure, ill-defined terms regarding civil disobedience and a soldier's personal refusal to obey orders, but they rule out organized refusal to obey orders and organized violence.

In contrast, those who employ this approach strategically (with the support of a large number of Yesha rabbis, as well as rabbis located outside of the territories) are willing to stay the course and place their relations with the State of Israel in question. This group's ideology is quickly evolving into an ideology similar to that of Neturei Karta, the ultra-Orthodox sect that has consistently denied the legitimacy of a pre-messianic Jewish state and refused to recognize it. While not precluding the validity of a pre-messianic polity, the crisis of the ultra-Orthodox national religious essentially invites a rejection of the state in its present form. For now, the tactical approach remains dominant throughout this population, although the danger always exists that proponents of the tactical approach will be swept under the ideology of the strategic approach.

The settlement movement's two major power centers are the Yesha Council and the Yesha rabbis. The Yesha Council is more pragmatic, while the rabbis lead the extremist line. Unseen tension exists between these two power centers. This is because the Yesha Council is supposed to repre-

sent the settlements in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip as a whole and therefore must take into account the positions of non-ideological settlers. The Yesha Council is also the force leading the public political struggle, and it must consider constraints of political parties and public opinion. Moreover, there are disagreements within the Yesha Council itself regarding the direction the struggle should take: one important indication of this disagreement was the recent resignation of the Council spokesperson. In addition, some leaders of the Yesha Council do not lead an ultra-Orthodox national religious lifestyle and belong to the mainstream of religious Zionism.

In contrast, many prominent Yesha rabbis reflect the fundamentals of the ultra-Orthodox national religious culture and are, to a large extent, its spiritual leaders – the avant-garde leadership that sets the tone of ultra-Orthodox national religious culture overall. More ideological and zealous than the Yesha Council, the statements of many Yesha rabbis are growing increasingly extreme as the withdrawal approaches. Finally, it is also important to take into account the extremist elements of the settlers and their supporters, such as the hilltop youth, Kach-related movements, and the messianic stream within Habad. While these elements represent only a minority of the settlers, it is a minority that consistently incites the population and accepts the authority of neither the Yesha Council nor the Yesha rabbis, not to mention the rule of law and the State of Israel. Herein lie the

dangers of these groups, dangers that the more responsible members of the settlement movement have still not learned or at least not chosen to address in any fundamental way.

The critical question is whether the ultra-Orthodox national religious public will be able to attract the mainstream of the religious Zionist sector as it has done in the past. The situation is highly sensitive and complex: there are often family and other ties between these two strands,

> Religious Zionism for the most part will not serve as a potential partner for withdrawal from the state and Israeli society.

as they both evolved within the same population. There are many adults who belong to the national religious mainstream while their children and grandchildren identify with the ultra-Orthodox national religious stream. It is unusual to find a religious Zionist family without a relative, friend, acquaintance, or family member of a friend or acquaintance who lives in a settlement. Nonetheless, all signs indicate that, at the present, the unequivocal answer to this question is that the mainstream of religious Zionism is not considering any disengagement, political or spiritual, from Israel or from the IDF. The red line for

this population, who constitute the decisive majority of Israel's religious Zionist population, is the issue of refusing to carry out military orders and, on a broader and more fundamental level, the attitude toward the IDF. Indeed, the call to refuse orders, in conjunction with acts of aggression against IDF soldiers and officers (e.g., attacks during the dismantling of the Mitzpe Yizhar outpost, threats against religious officers, and demonstrations outside the homes of senior religious officers and General Security Services officials), resulted in heated responses not only from the mainstream, but also from significant groups living in the settlements themselves.

In this context, it is important to note the petitions and letters of opposition against refusing orders, written and signed by senior religious officers and settlement residents, rabbis, and heads of military yeshiva programs and pre-draft religious academies. There have also been newspaper articles written by figures well-known among settlers and the ultra-Orthodox national religious sector, which minced no words cautioning against religious Zionism's withdrawal from the state and from the Jewish people. One author decried the refusal to obey military orders, the challenging of the authority of Israeli national institutions, and the attempt to move political decisions to the street.[1] Another wrote that even if the state is making the Jewish homeland narrower and smaller, and perhaps using means that are questionable as far as their democratic mandate is concerned, the state should not be totally destroyed,

as this would bring down the roof on everyone.[2] It should also be recalled that Rabbi Shlomo Aviner, one of the most prominent and influential figures in the ultra-Orthodox national religious sector, has consistently rejected the calls for soldiers to refuse to obey orders.

Conclusion

The State of Israel is not on the brink of a civil war, but it faces serious trends that are dangerous in and of themselves, such as the refusal to obey orders, civil disobedience, and mass disturbances. Furthermore, extremist fringe groups will likely attempt to carry out extreme acts. But no matter how serious these fringe phenomena may be, they remain for the most part an operational problem for the police and the IDF, and a problem of domestic subversion for the Israeli security services. Germany had the Baader-Meinhof Gang and Italy had the Red Brigades, and both groups cultivated murder and destruction. Nonetheless, both countries overcame these groups, as many other democratic countries have defeated similar domestic challenges. The IDF will in the end undoubtedly be able to overcome these challenges and succeed in carrying out the disengagement plan. Even if 10,000 or 20,000 soldiers refuse to obey orders – and it is extremely doubtful that anywhere near such a number of soldiers will do so – this will not stop the army from completing its task.

Perhaps the intensive involvement of Knesset members representing the settlers (first and foremost that of Zvi Hendel, who is also a resident and leader of Gush Katif) in amending financial sections of the Evacuation and Compensation Law and searching alternative sites of residence reflects an acceptance of the decree. Perhaps at the end of the day, once the disengagement becomes a fait accompli, a minority of the settler community will get up and leave. Yet in any event, religious Zionism for the most part will not strike a blow at the IDF and will not serve as a potential partner for withdrawal from the state and Israeli society. Indeed, it is quite possible that the ultra-Orthodox national religious population and the mainstream of religious Zionism will part ways, after walking together for more than thirty years. The split in the National Religious Party is just the political expression of this parting of ways, and perhaps the first indicator of a deeper and more fundamental social phenomenon.

Notes

1. See the article by Rabbi Yuval Sherlo, head of the military-yeshiva ("hesder") program in Petah Tikva, *Haaretz*, January 7, 2005.
2. See the article by Yisrael Harel,, one of the founders of the settlement Ofra, former deputy chairman of the Yesha Council, and editor of the Council's journal *Yesha Nekuda*, in *Haaretz*, January 6, 2005.