Civilian Settlement: Not Designed to be a Fortress of Power

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In addition to the clear benefit provided by the Iron Dome system of preventing serious injury and loss of life among the Israeli population, the system also provided the Israeli government with a level of freedom of action that it would not have enjoyed had the rockets from Gaza caused significant injury to the Israeli civilian population. One example of this effect was Prime Minister Netanyahu's acknowledgement that his decision to refrain from sending IDF forces into the heart of the Gaza Strip was facilitated by the protection provided by the Iron Dome system. Whether justified or not, the Prime Minister avoided a more extensive ground operation in the Gaza Strip under cover of Israel's effective missile defense system.

Against the background of this important strategic advantage, the government's weakness vis-à-vis the settlements of the western Negev, located in the region referred to as "the Gaza envelope," stands out in strong relief. These settlements sustained heavy fire, particularly mortar fire, and their residents were forced to weigh continuing to live in such difficult conditions against abandoning their homes for safer locations for the duration of the fighting. The longer the fighting went on, the greater was the hardship faced by the western Negev population, and the louder and more widespread their protests became. Among other charges, the inhabitants complained that the government had not assumed the task of evacuating them in organized fashion from their homes that were under bombardment.

The government's decision to refrain from assuming responsibility for the organized evacuation of these citizens presumably stemmed in part from economic considerations, although the Zionist ethos regarding the importance of settlement to national security also likely played an important role. This

ethos, which has accompanied the modern Zionist enterprise almost since its inception, is entirely without foundation.

According to the pre-state Zionist ethos, the borders of the Jewish state would be determined by the settlement map, with Jewish settlements constituting fortresses of power with military significance for the anticipated clash with the Palestinian Arabs during the period preceding the establishment of the state, and with the Arab armies in the course of Israel's War of Independence and during the period following the establishment of the state. These were groundless premises. First, the borders of the state were not determined by settlement. The settlements that were established throughout Mandatory Palestine were in most cases established in areas with a relatively small Arab population, such as the Western and Eastern Galilee, the Jezreel Valley, the coastal plain and lowlands, and the northern Negev. Virtually no Jewish settlements were established in areas containing significant Arab populations, such as Judea, Samaria, and the central Galilee. In other words, the outline of the *yishuv* (the pre-state community) was determined by geography and demography, not by the intentional mapping of Jewish settlement patterns. Moreover, Jewish settlements established in regions in which Arabs accounted for a majority of the population were destined, under the United Nations resolution on partition, to be included in the Arab portion. These included settlements such as Kfar Darom and Hanita. In other words, the borders of the State of Israel as demarcated by partition were determined not by the settlement map but by existing blocs of Jewish and Arab communities.

During the 1948 War, the Israeli forces conquered areas intended for incorporation into the Arab state that contained Jewish settlements (e.g., Hanita). These conquests did not follow the line of the Jewish settlements, rather the line of the Arab military formations present in those regions. Thus, in the course of October-December 1948, IDF forces conquered the central Galilee, which was then held by the relatively weak Arab Liberation Army but contained no Jewish settlements whatsoever. At the same time, a region containing Jewish settlements, such as Kfar Darom in the Gaza Strip, was not conquered due to the success of the Egyptian forces in the area in holding off the IDF. Similarly, IDF forces did not conquer the Jewish settlements that were abandoned in northern Jerusalem and Beit Haarava.

The claim that settlement has played a security role is also without foundation. The perceived security-settlement-land connection led the Zionist leadership to decide that even if fighting were to break out as a result of the

declaration of the establishment of the Jewish state in May 1948, Jewish settlements in isolated or frontier regions would not be evacuated. The decision to refrain from evacuating settlements was based on two main factors: the argument that "the entire country is the front lines" and that there was no place that was not vulnerable to injury, whether in the heart of the country or in the periphery; and the belief that evacuation would disrupt the very fabric of life in the *yishuv* and undermine the resolve of the population. These two arguments collapsed the moment the Arab invasion began. At this point, a clear line between the front lines and the home front was established, and it became evident that the evacuation of frontier settlements neither harmed the *yishuv's* fabric of life nor weakened the resolve of the population or of the *yishuv* as a whole.

The *yishuv* leadership, however, had made no preparations for the possibility of evacuation. As a result, on May 15, 1948, a non-combatant civilian population, including children, occupied the decisive majority of the country's Jewish frontier communities, including settlements such as Yad Mordechai, Degania Alef and Bet, and the other communities of the Jordan Valley. The moment that enemy forces began crossing the border, the evacuation of the non-combatant population from these settlements began. Because the *yishuv* leadership had not prepared for this possibility, the evacuation process involved improvisation and difficulties. At this point, it also became clear that the evacuation of civilians not only did not harm the war effort of the Haganah/IDF but actually enabled it to move fighting forces away from the communities themselves and toward the primary effort engaged in fending off the invading forces.

Although settlement clearly did not play a significant role in the Israeli military campaign of 1948, the lesson was not internalized. Instead, the concept that settlement is important for security continued to exist after the war as well. It was then that the IDF established its system of "regional defense" (*hagana merhavit*), which was meant to solve a challenging strategic problem then confronting the State of Israel: the state's lack of strategic depth to allow for sufficient warning in the event of an Arab attack. In this framework, the frontier settlements were organized to operate as an obstacle for invading enemy forces and provide the state with artificial "strategic depth" until forces of the IDF could make their way to the point of invasion. However, the logic of the regional defense system was negated from the very outset, when in September 1949 Prime Minister and Defense Minister

David Ben Gurion announced that from that point on, the IDF's defensive and offensive formations would be based on attack forces and not on "static defense," as he described it. Yet despite Ben Gurion's words, no change was made to the principle underlying the IDF's approach to regional defense as a means of holding off a surprise enemy attack, although in practice this element was now neglected.

The logic underlying the regional defense system appears to have been more political than military. It was meant to give the inhabitants of frontier regions the sense that they were militarily protected and to continue feeding the ethos linking settlement and security. Nonetheless, frontier settlement played no practical role in the IDF's defensive formations against the possibility of the invasion of an Arab army. And when such an invasion occurred in the Golan Heights during the Yom Kippur War, the civilian population of the region was immediately evacuated. In this way, from both the perspective of the territory it occupied and the population itself, settlement played no military role in the war.

The premise that the evacuation of settlements can be interpreted as the relinquishing of sovereignty is also incorrect. Although objections to Israeli sovereignty over the territory within the armistice lines agreed upon with the Arab countries in the course of 1949 were voiced during the first years of Israeli statehood up to the Sinai Campaign, the situation changed following the 1956 war and even more so after the Six Day War, after which opposition to Israeli sovereignty within the territory demarcated by Israel's peace borders (in the case of Egypt and Jordan) and armistice lines (in the case of Syria and Lebanon) ebbed. After all, the territory along Israel's border with the Gaza Strip and Egypt, and with Jordan the length of the Arava desert, is far more unpopulated than it is populated. Nonetheless, Israeli sovereignty in these regions is unequivocal.

Despite Israel's many years of experience, the equation linking security and settlement has still not disappeared. The ethos is stronger than the reality and has continued to be fed by proponents of the Jewish settlement enterprise in the West Bank, and the inhabitants of the western Negev are yet more of its victims. It makes sense to sever the Gordian knot between settlement and security and to begin to see settlement for what it truly is: a concentration of a non-combatant civilian population including women, children, and the elderly. It is also logical to prevent civilians from being

placed in harm's way, and to cease fearing that the evacuation of settlements holds significant negative social or political implications of some kind.

Perhaps the evacuation of frontier settlements imbues the enemy with a sense of victory and accomplishment. Indeed, Hamas spokesmen have frequently highlighted the departure of inhabitants of the western Negev as an achievement. However, the benefit of evacuating settlements is much greater than the ostensible damage it may cause. First, the damage caused to a civilian population that is not evacuated is much greater than the damage caused by evacuation not only from a material perspective but from a strategic perspective as well, as civilian injury may require the government to make decisions that it might otherwise seek to avoid. Second, in terms of the image it conveys, a government-conducted orderly evacuation to organized places of refuge presumably constitutes a strong signal to the enemy, particularly the civilian population on the other side of the border that does not enjoy the assistance of government bodies. Based on this calculation, the potential benefit to Israel of evacuating the civilian population from areas of fighting is much greater than any image-related damage it may suffer. Moreover, such an evacuation would enable the Israeli leadership to make operational decisions related to IDF capabilities and relieve it of the concern for the fate of a population vulnerable to rocket fire. The Iron Dome achieved the same result with regard to the Israeli population living far enough away from the Gaza Strip and provided them with protection. This protection enabled Israeli decision makers to conduct the fighting in the Gaza Strip without sustaining a large number of Israeli casualties as a result of rocket fire.

It is recommended to apply this logic as well to the civilian population that does not enjoy the protection of the Iron Dome system. In the absence of a missile interception system capable of drastically reducing the damage and injury caused by the mortar fire and short range rockets that the Iron Dome system cannot intercept, it makes sense to conduct an organized and orderly evacuation of the civilian population living in range of these weapons. To do so, Israel needs to take actions similar to those taken by Britain during World War II. Based on the experience of World War I, the British government prepared itself for the possibility that it may come under air attack and that its civilian population may be vulnerable to injury. Against this background, the British government drew up organized plans for the evacuation of non-combatants, especially children. The plans were put into operation with the onset of the German bombardment of British

cities, and thousands of children were evacuated from the cities undergoing bombardment. This conceptual model must also be applied to the Israeli civilian population.

The Israeli government must prepare itself for a situation in which civilians are exposed to rocket and missile fire by preparing an operational plan for the evacuation of the population to safer, protected areas. The problem in making this change is more conceptual than organizational. The civilian defense systems in Israel, in their various forms, are capable of organizing such an operation through advance planning and making the necessary preparations. The true problem is conceptual: the government needs to abandon the approach that links settlement and security and start viewing the civilian frontier population as a security and political burden. Ensuring the security and well-being of inhabitants by keeping then out of the line of fire would provide the government with the same freedom of action with which the Iron Dome system provided it during Operation Protective Edge.