

# Gush Emunim's Drive for Annexation

Over the past few years, the one-hundred-and-some-odd Jewish settlements on the West Bank and in the Gaza Strip have been busy establishing an institutional infrastructure that superficially resembles some joint ventures and cooperative projects inside the "green line" [Israel's pre-1967 border]. The settlers have set up regional councils, economic concerns, a regional defence network, and their own educational system. They also have a coordinating committee, known as the YESHA Council [YESHA being the Hebrew acronym for [West Bank] and Gaza]. However, the organisational network being built up by Gush Emunim in the occupied territories is very different from similar networks inside the green line in that it is geared to a single political objective, namely, the obstruction of any attempt to come to a territorial compromise or relinquish any land on the West Bank or in the Gaza Strip.

My intention in the following article is to adumbrate the power base that is being established in the occupied territories by Gush Emunim. Although there are certain similarities between the organisational and institutional network the settlers are building and the institutional infrastructure established in Israel prior to its independence (insofar as they both include social, organisational, economic, educational and paramilitary components), the former is not being set up to serve as a launching pad for an independent state but rather in order to establish an ideologically motivated infrastructure capable of forcing the state of Israel into annexing the occupied territories.

## In the Event of a 'Debacle'...

Eight years ago, during a meeting of the Gush Emunim executive, Hanan Porat proposed turning Kfar Etzion into "a base for operations in the event of a debacle." At the time, Gush Emunim had marshalled a few thousand religious youths in support of Jewish settlements on the West Bank. Today, in light of the plethora of settlements that have sprouted up throughout the occupied territories, one cannot but admit that the Gush has come a long way. And it has

done so without deviating from its original objective: to check any "possibility of a debacle" — a debacle being understood as any sign of the state's willingness to reach some sort of territorial compromise or withdraw from the occupied territories.

I do not mean to imply that the entire settler network is nothing more than a clandestine underground organisation waiting to be activated if circumstances so conspire. However, it certainly can be viewed as an organisational framework that will use all the means at its disposal in order to prevent such an eventuality from arising.

Attorney Elyakim Ha'etzni of Kiryat Arba stands out as perhaps the loudest of the more obstreperous Gush Emunim spokespersons. He recently published a series of articles in *Nekuda* [the settlers' journal] about what the settlers should, can and must do in the event of a "debacle." On the eve of the last national elections, he wrote: "Were the state of Israel to relinquish Israeli sovereignty over [the West Bank], it could do so in name only. For the Jews in [the West Bank] and Gaza would not feel bound by such a decision." He went on to ask "whether in such circumstances we ought to take the law into our own hands?" and called on his readers to "prepare for the future" (*Nekuda*, No 75). In another article, written after the general elections, he lashed out against "assimilationist Jews" who had jumped on the Palestinian bandwagon — an omen, he wrote, that could portend civil war (*Nekuda*, No 82).

## Civil War Imminent?

Many people dismiss Ha'etzni as a crank, the author of bombastic articles that bear titles such as, *Even Now a Civil War Could Break Out!* But he is far from being alone in hinting at such a possibility (although his statements are usually more hysterical than most of his Gush Emunim cronies). One is driven to draw the following conclusion: Whoever is anxious about such a turn of events or anticipates civil war must prepare for such an eventuality. Needless to say, that is not tantamount to claiming that the whole settler network is being built

## Israeli Occupation: Settlements

up solely for that purpose; perhaps even the opposite is true. The settlers have put a lot of effort into foisting their programme and political aspirations on the public without recourse to violence. But when it comes to their chances of succeeding, well, that is an entirely different matter.

The operation carried out by the settlers a few weeks ago — when they closed 30 West Bank traffic arteries in protest against the government — is just one small example of their organisational capabilities. All of the newspapers cited the "military discipline" and "sophisticated methods" of the settlers. Within a few hours, between 600 (according to *Davar*) and 1000 (according to the Gush Emunim spokesperson) settlers, in some 300 private cars, divided into cells and equipped with walkie-talkies, brought West Bank traffic to a standstill. A small example of their organisational potential, and yet, one must take care not to blow things out of proportion.

## Government Silence is Tacit Support

Be that as it may, the fact that there was no official response to the Gush's action is cause enough for legitimate and profound concern. The police did not arrest a single person, although the law was clearly being broken. No one was interrogated, no one was even issued a warning. What better evidence could there be of the political power the settler institutions have accumulated in their drive to coerce the state of Israel into accepting their ideology?

The regional councils of the Gush Emunim settlers are dynamic institutions that bear scant resemblance to their counterparts in Israel. In only a few years' time, they have managed to establish social and economic structures, transportation, health and educational networks, and a variety of organisational frameworks that reach from the north [West Bank] to the south of Gaza Strip. In addition to the regional councils of [West Bank], Binyamin district, Etzion, H'ir Hevron, and the Gaza Coast, there are also local councils in Kiryat Arba, Ariel, and Elkana; they employ hundreds of people and have both capital and technical resources at their disposal.

Superficially, there may not be much difference between Gush Emunim institutions and their counterparts inside the green line, but on closer examination it soon becomes apparent that the differences are great and far-reaching. First of all, regarding their rate of

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

growth and development, I have my doubts as to whether any regional council in the entire state of Israel can chalk up the kind of achievements that the Binyamin Regional Council (in the Ramallah area) has accomplished in so short a time. The Binyamin Region has an impressive and spacious office building, a development company, educational and cultural institutions, a fleet of new buses (that are contracted out for transport work all over the country) and more. Last year the council published a brochure on regional development in the Binyamin region that calls for settling 200,000 Jews in the area. (The brochure almost totally ignores the Arabs living in the Ramallah area.)

One of their most glowing achievements is the "Company for the Development of 'Samarita.'" Within three years since its establishment, the company acquired a fleet of buses, trucks, heavy machinery, pick-up trucks and minibuses. The company is now branching out into "spadework" operations and, together with the Histadrut-owned "Stone and Lime Company," is establishing a cement factory. There is also a joint venture with Paz for opening a factory to produce petroleum-based products such as paint, glue, etc. The directors of the company are proud of what they have accomplished, for they are now capable of establishing new settlements on their own, without any government assistance. They have acquired a great deal of experience in road-building and in all facets of the construction industry; the directors of the company are already hinting at their intention of expanding the company into an economic empire, capable of operating in an autonomous fashion if political problems arise.

### State in the Making

While kibbutz and moshav movements and regional councils inside the green line also have social and economic networks, there is a major difference between them and the Gush Emunim network on the West Bank, for the latter's self-proclaimed *raison d'être* is to consolidate an autonomous infrastructure that does not have to depend on the good will of the government. In short, their goal is to accumulate more and more power and thereby force the state into accepting the political programme of the settlers.

It would seem that the settlers on the West Bank have embarked on a programme akin to the project of the Zionist movement prior to the establish-

ment of the state of Israel, namely, laying the foundations for a state-to-be. The regional councils exploit their prerogative over issues of planning and construction; they control a number of economic and service networks; and they coordinate their activities through the offices of the Council of Jewish Settlement in [the West Bank] and Gaza (YESHA), whose political clout should not be underestimated.

The August 1984 charter of YESHA Council states that the council will work to extend Israeli sovereignty over the occupied territories with all the means at its disposal. There is a political committee, a finance committee, a legal committee, a settlement committee, an information committee, and a defence committee. Indeed, the YESHA committees resemble a kind of shadow cabinet, delegated with the role of representing and consolidating the political and institutional infrastructure of the Gush Emunim settlers.

It's worth pointing out that thousands of other Israelis living in the occupied territories are not affiliated to the YESHA councils as they do not share YESHA's political objectives. The settlements in the Jordan Valley (the majority of which are affiliated to the Labour Alignment) are not members of YESHA; nor are the residents of Ma'ale Adumim or the "five-minutes from Kfar Saba" residential quarters. The ultra-Orthodox Emanuel settlement is also not a member of YESHA, which all-in-all only represents about one-half of all the Israelis living on the West Bank.

The Gush Emunim settler network is not bereft of information and propaganda networks. It has field schools, religious academies, and even the nucleus of a university in Kedumim. A rabbinical court operating under the auspices of the Binyamin Council was recently set up to deal with financial suits — according to *Halacha* [Jewish religious law]. (One must not overlook the overriding importance religion plays in the political lives of the settlers.)

### Halacha Dictates Relations With State

Hence we are drawn to the major question: How will these networks react if they clash with the authority of the state? Ever since the Jewish underground (composed of Gush Emunim settlers) was uncovered last April, there has been a debate raging in all the settler publications between the supporters and the opponents of the underground. Although the debate is far from new, it only became public in the aftermath of the

arrest of the underground suspects. Put simply, it revolves around the following question: When is it permissible and when are we obliged to oppose the legal government of the state of Israel? For the settlers, being Orthodox Jews, the theological dimension is primary: What does the *halacha* allow and what does it forbid regarding our relations with the state of Israel — a state that includes a multitude of secular institutions?

Whoever does not share their beliefs will find the arguments somewhat baffling. But one thing is beyond doubt: a large and powerful group of settlers have established religious-halachic legitimacy for opposing — by whatever means possible — any Israeli move to reach a solution by way of territorial compromise on the West Bank and in the Gaza Strip. Others have found national and political justifications for violent resistance to such an eventuality, and all the settler institutions and networks are united behind the political objective of working for the total annexation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

### Demographic Dilemma

After having established an organisational and institutional network on the West Bank, the settlers still faced a major obstacle. In spite of an array of settlements, financial institutions and a political executive (the YESHA council), their problem has always been what to do with the close to a million-and-a-half Arabs living in the occupied territories. Despite all they have achieved, the settlers represent no more than three percent of the population of the occupied territories. They can step up their acquisition of land on the West Bank and in the Gaza Strip, they can improve their legal standing as the lords of the realm, and they can attract more Israelis to their settlements, but, given the demographic superiority of the Arabs, they have little chance of achieving their main objective. Kiryat Arba, for instance, has been in existence for 15 years and has developed into a community of between 3000 and 4000 people. Yet, juxtaposed with the 150,000 residents of Hebron, it appears a trifling achievement.

Hence the settlers' recent demand that the government adopt a harsher policy in the occupied territories. Although there have always been stone-throwing incidents on the West Bank, not to speak of terrorist attacks, the Israeli security forces have always been able to keep things pretty much under control. But now the settlers are trying

MAR 29 1985

to exploit such incidents in order to force the government to adopt measures that will make the Arabs start thinking about emigrating. That's the reason they are demanding closer supervision and control of the Arabic press, the closure of the Arab universities, and legislation that would make stone-throwing a terrorist offence; they have called for introducing capital punishment for terrorist offences, dismantling refugee camps and dispersing their residents.

But that's not all. The settlers also want to be allowed to set up a "civil guard" that will function as a semi-autonomous police force. (The settlers say that they only want a civil guard that will operate in the same manner as the Tel Aviv civil guard.) The former army chief-of-staff, Rafael Eitan, helped the settlers set up a regional defence network in which they do their reserve service.

Many people raised their eyebrows at Eitan's scheme and criticised it, claiming that the settlers would take advantage of it. And they have been proven right in their warnings. Among the Gush Emunim underground suspects now standing trial in Jerusalem is a top army officer - Captain Yehoshua Ben Sesson - who was a regional defence commander. Other suspects also had ties with the regional defence programme.

The settlers want a civil guard of their own in order to consolidate the semi-autonomous infrastructure they have carved out for themselves on the West Bank. In other words: the settlers have almost everything they need to operate independently in their backyard. They have the service network of the regional councils, and now they want another military framework to help them achieve their goal of being the arbitrators of policy in the occupied territories.

#### Poised for a Fight

I don't know whether Gush Emunim settlers are presently engaged in planning a clandestine militia to oppose any possibility of an Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank, although a quick perusal of the charge sheet on the settler underground places such a hypothesis within the bounds of possibility.

In the meantime, the settlers have been employing more sophisticated tactics. They are building an infrastructure that they hope will rule out any option save that of annexation. If they can, they will avoid anything that smacks of a "private militia." Their achievements thus far have been impressive, and even

one of their staunchest opponents, Dr Meron Benvenisti, has come to the conclusion that, given the present situation on the West Bank, the wheel cannot be turned back. Many Israelis may wake up one morning to find the settlers' network mobilised against the state of Israel if the option of territorial compromise in exchange for a political agreement ever comes up.

At present, the YESHA council is trying to present the advocates of territorial compromise with a repugnant choice between two equally disastrous alternatives: Either annex the occupied territories and oppress the Arab population, or agree to face the consequences of what may escalate into civil war. The network established by the settlers is thus holding a knife at the state's throat and turning us into hostages. While it is not an armed underground, it is an effective network capable of forcing the state of Israel into making Israeli rule over the West Bank and Gaza Strip (and the hundreds of thousands of Palestinian Arabs living there) a permanent fixture. (Translation: Davar, February 10, 11, 12, 1985)

#### JEWISH TELEGRAPHIC AGENCY APR 9 1985 SHAMIR REJECTS 'TRAP' OF PEACE IN EXCHANGE FOR TERRITORY FORMULA By Hugh Orgel

TEL AVIV, April 8 (JTA) -- Foreign Minister Yitzhak Shamir yesterday rejected what he termed the "dangerous trap" embodied in the "peace in exchange for territory" formula, saying, "No Jew has the right to give up or bargain over any part of Israel."

"This formula is a trap designed to return us to the strangling lines of 1967, and we shall never return to that," Shamir declared. "If any government in Israel goes out of its mind and agrees to give up territories for peace, there is no guarantee for peace. A smashed fragmented Israel will be easy prey to those who want to eliminate it."

Shamir addressed the Knesset "West Bank and Gaza Strip Lobby" at a meeting of Central Committees of political parties which support Jewish settlement in the occupied territories. The meeting was attended by some 800 members of the Likud, Tehiya, Morshasha and other parties and West Bank settlement activists held at Kfar Hamaccabiah.

Also addressing the Knesset lobby meeting was Minister of Commerce and Industry Ariel Sharon and Housing Minister and Deputy Premier David Levy. Sharon came out strongly in support for Jewish settlement around all Arab towns and concentrations in the West Bank. He rejected peace negotiations with Jordan under present circumstances.

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