

The Settler State

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THE OTHER day, the almighty General Security Service (Shabak, formerly Shin Bet) needed a new boss. It is a hugely important job, because no minister ever dares to contradict the advice of the Shabak chief in cabinet meetings.

There was an obvious candidate, known only as J. But at the last moment, the settlers' lobby was mobilized. As director of the "Jewish department" J. had put some Jewish terrorists in prison. So his candidature was rejected and Yoram Cohen, a kippah-wearing darling of the settlers was appointed instead.

That happened last month. Just before that, The National Security Council also needed a new chief. Under pressure from the settlers, General Yaakov Amidror, formerly the highest kippah-wearing officer in the army, a man of openly ultra-ultra nationalist views, got the job.

The Deputy Chief of Staff of the army is a kippah-wearing officer dear to the settlers, a former head of Central Command, which includes the West Bank.

Some weeks ago I wrote that the problem may not be the annexation of the West Bank by Israel, but the annexation of Israel by the West Bank settlers.

Some readers reacted with a chuckle. It looked like a humorous aside.

It was not.

The time has come to examine this process seriously: Is Israel falling victim to a hostile takeover by the settlers?

FIRST OF all, the term "settlers" itself must be examined.

Formally, there is no question. The settlers are Israelis living beyond the 1967 border, the Green Line. ("Green" in this case has no ideological connotation. This just happened to be the color chosen to distinguish the line on the maps.

Numbers are inflated or deflated according to propaganda needs. But it can be assumed that there are about 300,000 settlers in the West Bank, and an additional 200,000 or so in East Jerusalem. Israelis usually don't call the Jerusalemites "settlers", putting them into a different category. But of course, settlers they are.

But when we speak of Settlers in the political context, we speak of a much bigger community.

True, not all settlers are Settlers. Many people in the West Bank settlements went there without any ideological motive, just because they could build their dream villas for practically nothing, with a picturesque view of Arab minarets to boot. It is these the Settler Council chairman, Danny Dayan, meant, when, in a (recently leaked) secret conversation with a US diplomat, he conceded that they could easily be persuaded to return to Israel if the money was right.

However, all these people have an interest in the status quo, and therefore will support the real Settlers in the political fight. As the Jewish proverb goes, if you start fulfilling a commandment for the wrong reasons, you will end up fulfilling it for the

right ones.

BUT THE camp of the "settlers" is much, much bigger.

The entire so-called "national religious" movement is in total support of the settlers, their ideology and their aims. And no wonder – the settlement enterprise sprung from its loins.

This must be explained. The "national religious" were originally a tiny splinter of religious Jewry. The big Orthodox camp saw in Zionism an aberration and heinous sin. Since God had exiled the Jews from His land because of their sins, only He – through His Messiah - had the right to bring them back. The Zionists thus position themselves above God and prevent the coming of the Messiah. For the Orthodox, the Zionist idea of a secular Jewish "nation" still is an abomination.

However, a few religious Jews did join the nascent Zionist movement. They remained a curiosity. The Zionists held the Jewish religion in contempt, like everything else belonging to the Jewish Diaspora ("Galut" – exile, a derogatory term in Zionist parlance). Children who (like myself) were brought up in Zionist schools in Palestine before the Holocaust were taught to look down with pity on people who were "still" religious.

This also colored our attitude towards the religious Zionists. The real work of building our future "Hebrew State" (we never spoke about a "Jewish State") was done by socialist atheists. The kibbutzim and moshavim, communal and cooperative villages, as well as the "pioneer" youth movements, which were the foundation of the whole enterprise, were mostly Tolstoyan socialist, some of them even Marxist. The few that were religious were considered marginal.

At that time, in the 30s and 40s, few young people wore a kippah in public. I don't remember a single member of the Ir-gun, the clandestine military ("terrorist") organization to which I belonged, wearing a kippah – though there were quite a number of religious members. They preferred a less conspicuous cap or beret.

The national-religious party (originally called Mizrahi – Eastern) played a minor role in Zionist politics. It was decidedly moderate in national affairs. In the historic confrontations between the "activist" David Ben-Gurion and the "moderate" Moshe Sharett in the 50s, they almost always sided with Sharett, driving Ben Gurion up the wall.

Nobody paid much attention, however, to what was happening under the surface – in the national-religious youth movement, Bnei Akiva, and their Yeshivot. There, out of sight of the general public, a dangerous cocktail of ultra-nationalist Zionism and an aggressive tribal "messianic" religion was being brewed.

THE ASTOUNDING victory of the Israeli army in the 1967 Six-day War, after three weeks of extreme anxiety, marked a turning point for this movement.

Here was everything they had dreamed of: a God-given miracle, the heartland of historical Eretz Israel (alias the West

Bank) occupied, "The Temple Mount Is In Our Hands!" as a one general breathlessly reported.

As if somebody had drawn a cork, the national-religious youth movement escaped its bottle and became a national force. They created Gush Emunim ("Bloc of the Faithful"), the center of the dynamic settlement enterprise in the newly "liberated territories".

This must be well understood: for the national-religious camp, 1967 was also a moment of liberation within the Zionist camp. As the Bible (Psalm 117) prophesied: "The stone the builders despised has become the cornerstone". The despised national-religious youth movement and kibbutzim suddenly jumped to center stage.

While the old socialist kibbutz movement was dying of ideological exhaustion, its members becoming rich by selling agricultural land to real estate sharks, the national religious sprang up in full ideological vigor, imbued with spiritual and national fervor, preaching a pagan Jewish creed of holy places, holy stones and holy tombs, mixed with the conviction that the whole country belongs to the Jews and that "foreigners" (meaning the Palestinians, who have lived here for at least 1300, if not 5000 years) should be kicked out.

MOST OF today's Israelis were born or have immigrated after 1967. The occupation-state is the only reality they know. The settlers' creed looks to them like self-evident truth. Polls show a growing number of young Israelis for whom democracy and human rights are empty phrases. A Jewish State means a state that belongs to the Jews and to the Jews only, nobody else has any business to be here.

This climate has created a political scene dominated by a set of right-wing parties, from Avigdor Lieberman's racists to the outright fascist followers of the late Rabbi Meir Kahane – all of them totally subservient to the settlers.

If it is true that the US Congress is controlled by the Israel

lobby, then this lobby is controlled by the Israeli government, which is controlled by the settlers. (Like the joke about the dictator who said: The world is afraid of our country, the country is afraid of me, I am afraid of my wife, my wife is afraid of a mouse. So who rules the world?)

So the settlers can do whatever they want: build new settlements and enlarge existing ones, ignore the Supreme Court, give orders to the Knesset and the government, attack their "neighbors" whenever they like, kill Arab children who throw stones, uproot olive groves, burn mosques. And their power is growing by leaps and bounds.

THE TAKEOVER of a civilized country by hardier border fighters is by no means extraordinary. On the contrary, it is a frequent historical phenomenon. The historian Arnold Toynbee provided a long list.

Germany was for a long time dominated by the Ostmark ("Eastern marches"), which became Austria. The culturally advanced German heartland fell under the sway of the more primitive but hardier Prussians, whose homeland was not a part of Germany at all. The Russian Empire was formed by Moscow, originally a primitive town on the fringes.

The rule seems to be that when the people of a civilized country become spoiled by culture and riches, a hardier, less pampered and more primitive race on the fringes takes over, as Greece was taken over by the Romans, and Rome by the barbarians.

This can happen to us. But it need not. Israeli secular democracy still has a lot of strength in it. The settlements can still be removed. (In a future article, I shall try to show how.) The religious right can still be repulsed. The occupation, which is the mother of all evil, can still be terminated.

But for that we have to recognize the danger - and do something about it.