

The Settlement Enterprise Endangers Democracy

Dr. Shaul Arieli, Prof. Gilad Hirschberger and Prof. Sivan Hirsch-Hoefler

Now, as the Israeli government is planning to transition from occupation of the territories in the West Bank to annexation, is a good time to measure the actual success and future prospects of the settlement project, itself a central goal of the judicial overhaul. A superficial glance at the number of settlers (475,000) and settlements (126, plus another 135 illegal outposts, including dozens of farms) shows an apparent success story. But a deeper look at the 2022 demographic data in the Judea and Samaria region, published by the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) last month, creates a completely different picture.

According to the CBS, the annual growth rate of the settler population is 2.4%. Is such growth, which is slightly higher than the growth rate of the general population (2.2%), a success? Since the devil is in the details, the answer, upon a careful reading of the statistics, is no. First of all, only 11,247 new Israeli settlers were counted in 2022 in addition to the 464,462 counted in the census at the end of 2021 — the lowest increase in the last 12 years (second only to 2020, when only 10,017 were added). According to this figure, the annual Israeli growth rate in the West Bank has reached an unprecedented low. However, to truly understand the demographic changes in the settlements, one must go beyond the growth rate of settlers and actually study the sources of trends and changes in the annual growth rates.

The internal migration balance, which was negative for the first time in 2020 at 842 (the number of residents who moved from the West Bank to Israel was higher by 842 than the number of those who moved from Israel to Israel), changed in 2021 to a positive balance when 74 net residents were added, but became negative again in 2022 (-1,022). Only by doubling the balance of those entering the West Bank from abroad in 2022 (more than 80% of them from Russia and Ukraine due to the war) put the total immigration balance at a minimally positive number: 278 residents. The analysis of the demographic data over the last decade shows that in the first half of the decade, the total migration balance composed about a quarter of the annual growth of the Israeli population in the West Bank, while in the second half this balance contributed less than 10% of that balance, and in 2022 it dropped to a mere 2.2%. Therefore, it's apparent that the annual increase in the settler population is based almost entirely on natural growth, which masks trends of negative migration from the settlements.

But if the natural growth remains high despite migration trends, perhaps this is still a success story? Delving deeper into the sources of this natural growth reveals a phenomenon that has been known for years, but is deliberately suppressed by settlement propagandists: 47% of the total natural growth originates in the two ultra-Orthodox cities, Modi'in Illit (3,239 residents) and Beitar Illit (2,538 residents), which together contain about a third of all Israelis living in the West Bank. Meaning, the settlement enterprise has difficulty retaining residents and is characterized by negative migration from both settlements with ideologically-motivated residents and settlements whose residents are motivated by quality of life in the territories; this resounding failure, however, is not immediately apparent in the data, because the high ultra-Orthodox birth rate hides what is really happening.

If these trends continue, the ultra-Orthodox will inevitably compose about half of the settlers in the West Bank within a decade, and the proportion of secular Israelis there will be less than 15% (the rest will be religious nationalists). This reality will have heavy economic consequences, as the ultra-orthodox settlements are located in cluster 1, the lowest category in the socioeconomic index of the CBS. This is a burden that weighs more and more on Israeli taxpayers, with no prospect for future change, due to the lack of employment opportunities for Israelis in the West Bank. 60% of the Israeli workforce in the West Bank make their way every day to work in Israel, and the majority of the remaining workers are employed in municipal positions in the settlements.

The Yesha Council does not particularly like these figures, and tends to claim that these trends are the result of the failure to issue a sufficient number of construction permits. This argument can be easily refuted: in the last five years, the number of construction launches reported by the CBS was higher by dozens of percentage points than in the five years preceding them. On January 7, 2021, the CEO of the Yesha Council, Yigal Dilmoni, wrote in "*Haaretz*": "Only about two years ago, hundreds of units were approved in Ariel, and this year in Ma'ale Adumim. We will start to see them being populated in the coming year." In other words, in 2021. And what has happened since then?

In 2021, Ariel had a negative migration balance of -168, and Ma'ale Adumim had a negative migration balance of -872. Furthermore, the total annual increase in Ariel was only 30 people, and in Ma'ale Adumim the number of residents actually decreased by 314. This trend continued in these two majority secular cities through 2022 as well. Ariel continued to be characterized by a negative migration balance (-85) and an annual increase of less than 100 people. Since 2021, it has become only the fourth largest settlement, after Givat Ze'ev, and the number of its residents has not yet exceeded 20,000, despite the hundreds of Arabs registered as residents. In Ma'ale Adumim, although benefiting from a high number of immigrants last year, the total number of residents decreased by 132.

Over the last three years, the two ultra-Orthodox cities have also shared this trend of negative migration. In 2020, 758 more residents left Modi'in Illit than entered it; In 2021, 452 more residents left than entered, and in 2022, the number rose to 867 residents. This is also the case in Beitar Illit (-1752, -158-, and -419, respectively). As mentioned above, only the high natural growth in these cities allowed for positive annual growth.

The bottom line is that living in the territories is not attractive despite all the benefits, and the settlements fail to draw new residents who will close the gap created by those leaving. If anyone still hopes that the Jewish settlements will change the demographic balance in the territories, they are in for a disappointment. The proportion of Israelis among all West Bank residents is decreasing, and is currently only 13.5%. North of Nablus up to the Green Line and south of Gush Etzion down to the Green Line, Israeli presence is minimal, with a demographic weight at less than 4%. 75% of the Israelis who live beyond the Green Line (including in East Jerusalem) are concentrated in the Jerusalem envelope area (whose vertices are the three largest cities:

Modi'in Illit, Beitar Illit and Ma'ale Adumim), and they will be annexed to Israel within the framework of a permanent settlement, as proposed in the past by Israeli and Palestinian leadership.

Despite the high level of support that the settler movement receives from political parties and Israeli governments, it has not been able to capture the hearts of the Israeli public. Despite the attempt to present the project as an irreversible success, by presenting the general number of settlers and settlements, in the psychological sense the Green Line has not been erased, but rather sharpened.

In fact, despite the support from political leadership, most of the achievements of the settler movement are quite fragile. This was apparent in the disengagement from Gaza: as soon as the settler movement lost the support of the state, it was left almost powerless and unable to protect the settlements. The public mostly supported the state's position, and not that of the settler movement. Even today, only a minority of Israeli society supports the expansion of the settlements, and even fewer support the unilateral annexation of the West Bank. International public opinion is largely hostile to all settlements, and the international community sees them as a violation of international law. Resolution 2334 of the UN Security Council in 2016 called for their dismantlement.

Based on this, the current Israeli government and the settler leadership have now adopted a plan that includes two main threads. The first, based on the understanding that it is impossible to beat Palestinian demographics and annex the entire West Bank without harming the Jewish majority in the State of Israel, is an effort to prevent the establishment of a Palestinian state by significantly damaging the Palestinian territorial continuity. The area that is suitable for achieving this goal and dividing the West Bank into two is the Jerusalem envelope, where half of the population is already Jewish. Therefore, the government, led by Bezalel Smotrich, seeks to expand this area by building huge neighborhoods in Jerusalem and the surrounding settlements.

In northern Jerusalem, in what used to be the Atarot airport area, a neighborhood of 9,000 housing units is planned. In the southern part of the city, the Givat HaMatos neighborhood is currently being built: 2,610 housing units according to the plan, with two new neighborhoods planned next to it: the Lower Aqueduct, with 1,446 apartments, and Har Homa E with 539 apartments. In addition, other neighborhoods are planned: Givat HaShaked near Beit Safafa with 473 apartments; in Ma'ale Adumim the neighborhood of Mevaseret Adumim (E1) with 3,412 apartments; and in Efrat, Givat Eitam with about 2,500 apartments. Recently, the Higher Planning Committee of the Civil Administration even approved hundreds of additional housing units in other localities around Jerusalem. We are therefore talking about an addition of more than 22,000 housing units.

The majority of the population intended to live in these neighborhoods is of course from the ultra-Orthodox community, which suffers from a housing crisis. In other words, it is an addition of more than 140,000 Israelis, most of them ultra-Orthodox, most of whom will live in East

Jerusalem (and some of them in the outskirts of Jerusalem), and a significant expansion of the Israeli built-up buffer zone between the south and the north areas of the West Bank. This move will ensure that the negative migration trend that has characterized Jerusalem for more than 30 years - 8,000 people each year on average, half of them ultra-Orthodox - will be reversed. Severe economic consequences are also expected in this scenario. Jerusalem, which has sunk to cluster 2 in the socio-economic index mainly due to the growing proportion of ultra-Orthodox residents (another factor is the growing proportion of Arabs), may sink to a low from which there is no way out.

The city, which is soon to cross the threshold of one million inhabitants, may sink into a very challenging socio-economic situation, similar to that of the surrounding ultra-Orthodox settlements. An absurd and dangerous situation is developing in which the majority of the residents of Israel's capital are actually anti-Zionist. Additionally, the city will resemble in its poverty the descriptions known from history books about the Ottoman period in Jerusalem. It will be a poor and non-Zionist city, with close to half of its residents lacking citizenship, and will have difficulty functioning as Israel's capital.

The second step in the plan of the government and the settler leadership is to strengthen its grasp over the other side of the hills by controlling Route 60, which connects the major Palestinian cities from Jenin to Hebron (against this backdrop, the repeal of the Disengagement Law last month and the return to Homesh and Evyatar settlements can also be understood). Achieving this goal involves "whitewashing" dozens of illegal outposts, built along Route 60 precisely for this purpose. The "Regulation Law" that will be re-enacted and an override clause that will prevent the High Court from invalidating it once more, are supposed to regulate the final takeover of "state lands" and the lands privately owned by Palestinians, on which these outposts were built.

At the same time, the government is continuing the implementation of the master plan for transportation in the West Bank, which was launched three years ago with a planned budget of 13 billion NIS and whose goal is to quickly connect most of the isolated settlements to Jerusalem and Israel. For example, the Hawara bypass road to the four settlements in the Nablus area will be budgeted for 800 million NIS, and a similar amount will be invested into a bypass of Al-Aroub, south of Gush Etzion - all this just to ensure a quick connection to Jerusalem for about 20,000 Israelis living in the Hebron area, where 800,000 Palestinians live. In addition, Israel plans to complete the new water project at a cost of nearly two billion shekels, which will ensure supply of water from Israel to the settlements.

The settlement enterprise represents a failure of Zionism from every possible angle. It endangers the Jewish majority in Israel and democracy, and it is also collapsing. The settlements are failing and cannot support themselves financially, while close to half of their resident population is ultra-Orthodox, a burden on the State of Israel. They keep going only thanks to massive financial support from the state, and even that is not enough to prevent their residents from leaving.

Today, the local and regional councils in the West Bank benefit from government grants, primarily balancing grants from the Ministry of the Interior, in an unusual manner and contrary to the decisions of the various committees that dealt with this matter. Today, the rate of grants reaches almost 80% of the local authorities' budget (double the average for the local authorities based in Israel), and now with Smotrich in the Ministry of Finance as well as a minister in the Ministry of Defense, and with Aryeh Deri the (likely future) Minister of the Interior, it may reach even higher rates.

This subsidy will ensure an increase in the number of people employed in government jobs in the local and regional councils, who already today make up about a third of the workforce in the West Bank - more than twice the average in Israel. Although they represent only a quarter of the Israeli public, they determine Israel's policy due to their willingness to save Binyamin Netanyahu from the courts. Economic considerations do not bother those who see themselves as the heralds of messianic redemption, as reflected in an article Smotrich wrote about a decade ago: "It (religious Zionism) deserves more... because its sons were assigned the task of leading the people of Israel" ("We deserve more", "*Basheva*", 2012).

Awareness about the social, economic and security consequences of the continuation of the settlement project is especially important in view of the judicial overhaul which is expected to accelerate the processes we are already witnessing today in the West Bank. There is a deep inherent connection between the transition from occupation to annexation and the damage to the democratic regime of the State of Israel. The answer to both is a reconnection to the liberal-democratic ideology that inspired the development of Zionism and the establishment of the State of Israel, an ideology expressed in the Declaration of Independence: a secure democratic state with a Jewish majority, and a member of the international community.

The settlement enterprise is a dangerous mutation of Zionism, and it will lead to a country with a non-Jewish majority; a country where, ironically and sadly, the non-Zionist Jewish population will push the Zionist Jewish population into a corner, with the help of support and grants from the state. This process will lead to an economic, moral and social collapse that will threaten our very existence here. The liberal-democratic camp must fight not only to stop the regime coup, but also to bring the State of Israel back to the values of the Declaration of Independence and to end the conflict through separation from the Palestinians via an agreement.