

ANALYSIS / The West Bank has always meant both a homecoming to the landscapes of the Bible and a potentially disastrous intertwining with a foreign people

As Trump era begins, what does Israel actually want in the West Bank?

The settlements grow apace, peace remains stalled and Israel's intentions seem a genuine mystery in Western capitals. Yet the question has a surprisingly simple answer, one which hasn't changed since 1948

BY HAVIV RETTIG GUR | February 9, 2017, 9:24 am |

On May 15, 1967, the night before Israel's nineteenth Independence Day, in a small religious seminary in downtown Jerusalem, an elderly rabbi with a black hat and a venerable, wispy white beard was admonishing his disciples.

The rabbi, Zvi Yehuda Kook, would come to be recognized as the spiritual father of the West Bank settlement movement. But this was still weeks before the Six Day War, and Israel had yet to conquer the West Bank.

In his unusually emotional sermon that night, Kook recalled another "famous night," the fateful night of November 29, 1947, when news reached Israel of the United Nations vote to partition the land into a Jewish state and an Arab one.

"While all the nation streamed into the streets to celebrate their joy," he told his students, "I could not go out, I could not join the happiness. I sat alone in silence, a weight upon me. In those first hours I could not accept what was done, that terrible news, that the prophecy was fulfilled: 'And divided my land!' [Joel 4:2]."

As he spoke, the emotion broke through. "Where is our Hebron?" he cried. "Did we forget it? And where is our Shchem [Nablus]? Did we forget it? And where is our Jericho? ... Where is every clod of earth, every parcel and parcel of the four corners of the land of God?"

Three weeks later, on June 7, the third day of the Six Day War, Israeli troops captured those very cities, Hebron, Nablus and Jericho, from the retreating Jordanian army. By the war's end on June 10, the entire West Bank, including the hallowed Temple Mount in Jerusalem's ancient center, as well as the Golan Heights in the north, Gaza and the Sinai Peninsula in the south, was in Israeli hands. It was a staggering achievement, unexpected, unimagined – and to the disciples who had gathered in that Jerusalem seminary as their revered rabbi lamented the partition of God's land, a fulfillment of both an immediate prophecy and an ancient one.

Kook was 76 the year he delivered that sermon, too old to actually lead the movement that the Six Day War conquests would engender. But with his teachings — his belief drawn from the mystical historiosophy of his famous father, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, according to which Zionism, the mostly secular nation-building project, was unwittingly fulfilling the biblically promised redemption — he provided his students with the intellectual underpinning for what was to come.

One of those disciples, Rabbi Hanan Porat, who fought as a paratrooper in the 1967 battle for the Old City, a year later organized the first Israeli settlement in the newly captured West Bank – the restored Etzion Bloc south of Jerusalem. Another student, Rabbi Moshe Levinger, helped found the second: In April 1968, he arranged to hold Passover festivities in a hotel in Hebron, and when the holiday was over, he and a band of fellow activists and believers simply refused to leave. Thus he founded the renewed Jewish settlement in the city of the Patriarchs.

Both settlements held a special significance to Israelis far beyond the small circle of Rabbi Kook's adherents. Both Hebron and Gush Etzion were home to thriving pre-state Jewish communities that were massacred and driven out by Arab rioters in 1929 and 1948, respectively.

A few years later, in 1974, Porat, Levinger and others would formally establish the Gush Emunim ("Bloc of the Faithful") movement that took upon itself the sacred task of ushering in the redemption by settling Jewish communities in the biblical heartland of Judea and Samaria, the

West Bank.

Last month, five decades on, the heirs to those ideologues were [disparaged](#) by John Kerry, in his waning days as US secretary of state, as “the most extreme elements” of Israel’s current right-wing government. It is their ideological camp that produced the 40 or so families of the Amona outpost, which was evacuated last week after multiple court rulings concluded they were illegally living on privately owned Palestinian land. And it is those devotees of Kook’s mystical vision of Jewish return to the West Bank whose drive to establish hard demographic facts on the ground is seen by much of the world as the most significant obstacle to the possibility of a future separation of Israelis and Palestinians into two states.

‘No good answers’

By Israel’s own official figures, from those humble beginnings in 1968 the population of the settlements has ballooned to about 390,000 Israelis, not including the Jewish neighborhoods of East Jerusalem. This population is younger by far than the Israeli average, with a median age of 19 compared to 30 for the general population. At 4 percent annual growth, it is also growing about twice as fast as the Israeli population as a whole.

So is Kerry right to warn that the settlements are “leading toward one state and perpetual occupation?” After all, it isn’t just the Obama administration or UN diplomats who share this concern. Even US President Donald Trump’s defense secretary, the retired Marine general James Mattis, [told a crowd](#) in 2013 that settlements were ensuring that Israel “ceases to be a Jewish state, or you say the Arabs don’t get to vote — apartheid. That didn’t work too well the last time I saw that practiced in a country.”

Just last week, while affirming that settlements are not the obstacle to peace, White House spokesman Sean Spicer nevertheless suggested that building new ones, or expanding existing ones beyond their current boundaries, “may not be helpful” to bringing about that peace. And in Europe, pro-Israel bulwark Germany is as troubled by this question, and as critical of settlements, as self-proclaimed anti-Zionists on the British far-left.

That this criticism is shared so broadly across so many political divides, and especially that it comes as often from allies as from adversaries, suggests it is rooted at least in part in authentic bewilderment. Many foreigners watch Israel’s West Bank settlements grow and can’t help but ask the obvious question: Does Israel plan to keep large non-Israeli populations permanently under its control? And how would the Jewish state hold on to its Jewish majority, its legitimacy and its friends in the attempt?

“Nobody has ever provided good answers to those questions, because there aren’t any,” Kerry declared in his swan song.

Outposts on a hill

The reality on the ground, of course, is more complex than these political anxieties, and reveals much about what the Israelis are actually thinking.

Of some 130 state-approved settlements in the West Bank, the largest by far, and the fastest growing, are the two ultra-Orthodox cities Modiin Illit and Beitar Illit, home to over 115,000 residents between them, nearly one-third of the total Israeli population in the territories. And they are growing at a rapid pace: Modiin Illit’s median age is an astonishing 11.3, Beitar Illit’s 12.6.

But both these surging engines of demographic change lie scarcely 2,000 feet from the so-called “Green Line,” the 1949 armistice line that forms the boundary between the West Bank and Israel.

They are representative of what Israelis term the “settlement bloc” phenomenon. As many as three-quarters of West Bank settlers live in clusters of towns that lie adjacent to or very near the Green Line, and are mostly composed of people who have little connection to the redemptive nationalism of Rabbi Kook: ultra-Orthodox Jews, Russian-speaking immigrants and secular Israelis — all drawn to cheaper housing barely half an hour’s drive from the commercial and government hubs of Tel Aviv and Jerusalem.

In every round of negotiations held between Israelis and Palestinians since the launch of the Oslo peace process in 1992, the Israelis assumed these blocs, which encompass just 2% to 4% of the actual land of the West Bank, would become part of Israel in a mutual land swap. Within Israeli discourse, therefore, proponents of a two-state solution have a radically different sense of what stands in the way of a negotiated peace. They don’t worry about the hundreds of thousands of residents of places like Efrat or Modiin Illit, but about the much smaller group of 90,000 or so who live in outlying settlements nestled, in some case 20 miles or more, beyond the Green Line, along the winding highway called Route 60 that transects the longitudinal middle of the territory.

It is here, in state-sanctioned settlements of a few thousand residents and unauthorized outposts, some of which number scarcely a dozen residents, perched between the largest Palestinian cities, that the internal Israeli ideological battle for the West Bank is waged. It is along this watershed, the central mountain ridge ranging from Jenin in the north to Hebron in the south, where the contiguity and viability of any future Palestinian state will be decided.

Blocs of the left

To outsider observers, the Israeli distinction between the blocs and isolated settlements can seem like a question of political convenience. To them it often appears that what little land the Palestinians still have left for their future state is being further diminished so as not to obstruct the already triumphant yet still land-hungry Israelis. After all, no one forced Israel to built entire cities in those stretches of land, which even Israel’s own laws do not define as Israeli territory.

But to Israelis, the distinction is fundamental and necessary, and speaks to an anxiety as old as the state itself.

In December 1948, during a lull in the fighting in Israel’s War of Independence, the cabinet ministers of the newly declared Jewish state gathered in Tel Aviv to consider a final military push to expel the Egyptian army from the country’s south and Iraqi troops from the northern West Bank cities of Qalqilya and Tulkarem, both of which lie scarcely nine miles from the Mediterranean coast and form Israel’s perilously narrow coastal waistline just north of Tel Aviv.

During the cabinet meeting, interior minister Yitzhak Gruenbaum phrased a question that has plagued Israelis ever since: Is it wise to take control of territories with large Palestinian populations? Israel’s expansions up to that point in the war were into areas that were either sparsely populated to begin with, or from which Arab populations had largely fled; or into places of such desperate strategic significance, such as Lod and Ramle, that Israeli forces simply expelled some of the Arab residents.

The historian Benny Morris described Gruenbaum’s concern as stemming from the understanding that Israel “could not hold territory packed with Arabs.”

The question returned even more forcefully a few months later, when Yigal Allon, the most successful field commander of the nascent IDF, urged prime minister David Ben-Gurion to order the conquest of the West Bank, an operation he thought could be concluded in a matter of days. This was particularly true after a February ceasefire with Egypt freed up a great deal of Israel’s over 100,000 troops to contend with a Jordanian fighting force in the West Bank of perhaps 12,000. Again Israel’s leaders demurred, and for the same reason: Could a Jewish nation state afford to extend its sovereignty over large non-Jewish populations?

In other words, the West Bank as it is defined today — a distinct territory that is neither Israel nor Jordan — was not, as is commonly believed, forged by Jordanian military success in holding the Israelis at bay in the 1948-49 war. It was created, rather, by the Israeli fear of the consequences that might flow from absorbing large numbers of Palestinians. That concern has not waned in 70 years. It is still the primary argument on both right and left against annexation of the West Bank and for the establishment of a Palestinian state.

But there is a countervailing Israeli anxiety, and it, too, has been there from the very start: the palpable sense of vulnerability Israelis feel over the winding, mountainous route of the 1949 armistice line now referred to as the Green Line.

In 1948, Ben-Gurion had good reason to fear that the Iraqi troops deployed in Qalqilya and

Tulkarem might strike out westward and in one fell swoop cut the country in half. In June 1967, then-foreign minister Abba Eban, speaking at the UN Security Council, called this slim corridor “the crowded and pathetically narrow coastal strip in which so much of Israel’s life and population is concentrated.” And in 2017, Israeli leaders on left and right worry about a Hamas takeover of that hilly ridge that would place the group’s rockets within easy targeting range of Israel’s central metropolis and commercial heart.

And so in June 1967, as Jordan joined in the Arab war preparations despite the entreaties of Israeli leaders to stay out of the fight, the security fears finally won out. Three weeks after Rabbi Kook’s biblically inspired lament for the splintering of the land of God, Israel took the West Bank. Uzi Narkiss, commander of Israel’s forces in the West Bank during that war, would later say that that conquest, unlike Israel’s advances on the Golan and in the Sinai, was unexpected and unplanned until the very start of the fighting.

But the conquest did nothing to change the fundamental equation, the competing worries about the narrow coastal waistline and the folly of absorbing vast, potentially hostile non-Jewish populations.

And so, while a handful of religious nationalists turned their eye toward Hebron and the Etzion Bloc, it was the ruling left-wing coalition that launched the first systematic settlement program in the West Bank. The new settlements ran roughly along the contours of the “Allon Plan,” developed by the very same Allon who had urged the conquest of the West Bank in 1948. The plan sought to strike a balance between the two incompatible aims with which the Israeli cabinet had wrestled 20 years earlier: to claim areas that would mitigate the perpetual threat to Israel’s narrow north-south corridor while leaving intact and unclaimed a large, contiguous Arab-majority territory that could someday become a Palestinian state.

In practice, that meant relatively modest steps, such as establishing well-defended hamlets along the Jordan River whose reservists-turned-farmers could hold an enemy army at bay in an emergency, or expanding the most vulnerable and precious of Israel’s cities, Jerusalem, to encompass the hills that before the war had threatened it on all sides. Even today, most of the settlers live in a circle around Jerusalem or in towns placed as buffers around the main highways leading to the capital.

As Allon himself [told the cabinet](#) on June 19, 1967, shortly after the war, at the end of the day a Palestinian state must be established in the territory that is the “maximum” it can be, “not a canton, not an autonomous region, but an independent Arab state agreed on between us and them in an enclave surrounded by Israeli territory – independent even in its foreign policy.”

No shortage of plans

The Allon Plan was never formally adopted by any Israeli government. But it didn’t have to be; its core assumptions had become axiomatic in mainstream Israeli thinking.

Amos Yadlin, a former IDF intelligence chief, Labor Party’s defense minister-designate in the 2015 elections, and current head of a prestigious national security think tank, has [proposed](#) one version of this plan: a unilateral withdrawal from the central highlands of the West Bank where most Palestinians live, while retaining the Jordan Valley in the east and entrenching the IDF along the security barrier in the west.

Netanyahu, too, backed a version of the plan during the 2014 US-led peace talks, according to a leak first published by Israeli journalist Amir Tibon that was never denied by Netanyahu’s office. Netanyahu sought to hold on to the settlement blocs adjacent to the Green Line and retain control of the Jordan Valley, while dismantling and removing the outlying settlements from the roughly 90% of the West Bank where Palestinian population centers are concentrated.

These are not the exceptions; they are the rule. When then-premier Ariel Sharon pulled Israel out of Gaza in August 2005, he made a point of also demolishing two far-flung outposts in the northern West Bank, Homesh and Sa-Nur. It was a precedent and a message: The West Bank was next. Seven months later his deputy, Ehud Olmert, ran in the March 2006 election on the explicit promise to implement an Allon-style withdrawal from most of the West Bank. He won the election.

There is, in short, a kind of unstated, but nevertheless persistent Israeli near-consensus across seven decades of policymaking. It endures for the simple reason that the primordial fears that first created it have likewise persevered.

And it is a consensus that well-meaning foreigners ignore at their peril.

When the Obama administration insisted from 2009 onward that homes in the southern Jerusalem neighborhood of Gilo, which lies over the Green Line, are identical in significance to homes in, for example, far-flung Eli, it unwittingly set itself against not only the Netanyahu government, but also against the entire edifice of a longstanding internal Israeli compromise and the visceral anxieties it tries to address.

To Obama administration officials, standing up to Israel on construction in the “blocs” seemed a wise gambit to convince Palestinians that peace talks would not be a one-sided diktat. But to Israelis, including a great many left-wing and formerly left-wing voters, it was read as an American tilt away from the very assumptions that made palatable the risks inherent in a West Bank withdrawal.

It is no accident that in the three months since Donald Trump’s election, and ahead of Netanyahu’s February 15 meeting with the new US president, right-wing voices like Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman and his predecessor in the post, Moshe Ya’alon, have publicly urged that Israel seek assurances from the Trump administration not about far-flung settlements, but about the blocs. Nor is it an accident that centrist Yair Lapid, the Obama administration’s preferred alternative to Netanyahu throughout much of Obama’s second term, promised Israelis last year that he could win support from Obama for the blocs.

Even Jewish Home leader Naftali Bennett, the direct political heir to Rabbi Kook’s mystical politics, is now backing a bill to annex the Jerusalem suburb settlement of Ma’ale Adumim — but not a bill that would do the same for the West Bank as a whole.

This self-restraint on Bennett’s part is not a concession to American or European diplomats, but to Israelis.

Outsiders

There are, of course, two groups that are simultaneously outsiders and central players in this Israeli discourse: the aforementioned ideological settlement movement and, obviously, the Palestinians whose fate hangs so precariously — and, for many, gallingly — in the balance of Israel’s domestic politics.

To the ideological heirs of Kook, Levinger and Porat, the Allon consensus means their vision of a redemptive return to the biblical heartland is deeply vulnerable. While the left and many foreign observers believe, as Kerry put it, that “the settler agenda is defining the future of Israel,” the settlement movement itself does not share this sense of its inevitable triumph. They know that Sharon’s 2005 Disengagement was actually popular in its day, with public opinion turning against such withdrawals only after Gaza descended into a Hamas mini-state and recurring war.

Rabbi Yoel Bin-Nun, another student of Rabbi Kook who, like Porat, fought as a paratrooper in the battle for the Old City, is one of the best articulators of this fear.

The settlers, he famously wrote at the start of the Oslo peace process in the early 1990s, “have failed to settle in the hearts” of the Israeli Jewish mainstream. Speaking of the settlers of Hebron over a decade later, he warned that the very fact that God’s promise to the Jews was “eternal” meant that it was not necessarily promised to this or any particular generation. Unless they draw the Jewish mainstream into their story, he predicted, that mainstream — which has always, since the founding of Israel, feared a Jewish-Arab state almost as much as it feared existential war — might defy the promised redemption and eventually dismantle the ideological settlement project.

‘The last ten percent’

Just as Obama’s policy was blind to the Israeli discourse, and so inadvertently bolstered the very fears it sought to allay, so the Israeli debate is largely blind to how the Palestinians hear and respond to it, and so helps to undermine their capacity to respond in positive ways.

The Allon-inspired consensus already asks a great deal of Palestinians, more than they are ever likely to accept: that Israel surround the Palestinian polity on all sides; dominate the security environment in a way that makes Palestinian independence a de facto act of Israeli toleration; and retain control over the crucible of both Jewish and Palestinian identity, the sacred sites of Jerusalem’s Old City.

Most Israelis blame Palestinian intransigence and terrorism for the stalled peace. This is no mere propaganda, but a genuine and powerful sentiment among Israeli Jews that flows from the repeated experience of waves of brutal attacks directed at civilians, often at the height of peace negotiations.

Yet for Palestinians, the apparent confusion of Israeli policies that flow from the tensions of the Allon compromise, where a single government can speak of peace talks and simultaneously back settlements, where the same Israeli politician might support Palestinian “independence” but not Palestinian control of Palestine’s borders, can make accommodation with seemingly unstable Israel a recipe for political suicide.

This is not to argue that Israel is the primary source of Palestinian political incapacity; only that any Palestinian leader who overcomes that incapacity, who *does* seek accommodation and reconciliation — somehow bridging the internal dissent over peace with Israel, and miraculously quelling the violent camps that dominate so much of Palestinian politics — will, in the end, encounter an Israeli political discourse that may not be able to offer him the kind of dignified independence that even the most liberal and moderate of Palestinians expect.

What sort of Palestinian state can be built around the contours of the Allon Plan? And what sort of Israeli government could sign away either Jerusalem’s holy sites or the defensive line in the Jordan Valley?

Nowhere is this made clearer than in the frustration some Palestinian leaders feel over Israeli unilateralism. In July 2006, less than a year after the withdrawal from Gaza, Yossi Beilin, a former Israeli justice minister and prominent peace negotiator and activist, explained this predicament by citing a conversation he had had with an unnamed Palestinian leader.

As Beilin said in an interview with Haaretz at the time, “One of the most senior and most moderate Palestinians told me recently: ... ‘For years, we have argued in the Palestinian street for Israeli-Palestinian peace. We explain that we have to accept the Jewish neighborhoods in East Jerusalem and the exchange of territory, and disarmament, and a compromise on the refugee issue — so that in the end there will be a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. But if Israel leaves all of Gaza and 90 percent of the West Bank, you think we’ll be able to convince a single Palestinian to agree to these painful compromises in exchange for the last ten percent of the territory?’”

Palestinian moderates are undermined by settlement expansion, which is held up as proof of Israeli malintent. But they are also undermined by Israeli withdrawals, which seem to show that Israel can leave territory without forcing the Palestinians to make the excruciating, politically ruinous concessions demanded of them in their turn.

In the end, Palestinian moderates are weakened most of all by the simple fact that the internal Israeli debate about the future of the West Bank essentially ignores them, and that they, in turn, ignore it. Israel’s shifting, indecisive policies in the West Bank are a function of such powerful competing anxieties that Israelis can hardly muster the emotional bandwidth to pay serious attention to voices from beyond the security fence or across the ocean.

When diplomats in Washington, London or elsewhere wonder about Israel’s intentions – when they complain that Netanyahu is either lying about his support for Palestinian statehood or about his support for settlements, because how can he support both? – they are overlooking the most important fact of Israel’s position. Since Israel’s earliest days, the West Bank has meant both secure boundaries and mortal danger, a homecoming to the landscapes of Jewish and biblical history and a potentially disastrous intertwining with a foreign people.

This contradiction is the most authentic, heartfelt and consistent element of Israeli policy toward the West Bank since long before its capture in 1967. For better or worse, it is this clash of desires, this confusion, and not any single coherent statement of policy one might extract from a particular Israeli politician, that constitutes what Israel “wants” in the West Bank.

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