

Israel and the Settlements

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Israel's settlements on the West Bank are a mistake. But freezing them is not the panacea that the Obama administration believes it to be. Peace in the Middle East will come only when both sides make mutually reinforcing reciprocal concessions. So what would I have Israel do? I believe that Israel should accede to the wishes of the Obama administration and freeze all settlements building activity. Then I believe Israel and the American Jewish community can rightfully call upon President Obama to insist upon a reciprocal concession from the Palestinian side.

On June 14, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel accepted the principle of a Palestinian state living side by side with Israel. Netanyahu moved closer to the American and international consensus for a two-state solution because he didn't have much choice.

Besides pressure from the Obama administration, the two-state solution is favored by Israel's most long-standing friends in Congress, including Vice President Biden and Senator John Kerry. Even AIPAC, the most mainstream American Jewish lobby, has come out in favor of it. With little opposition to Palestinian statehood coming from the Congress or even the American Jewish lobby, Netanyahu reversed his long-standing opposition to Palestinian statehood.

But for those of us who believe the two-state solution is indeed the right approach, we shouldn't get too excited just yet. Netanyahu's assent to Palestinian statehood came with so many conditions that it ultimately sounded less like substantive agreement with the American position and more like verbal semantics, just to give the appearance of agreement with the Obama administration. At the same time, with 400,000 Israelis now living on the West Bank, Prime Minister Netanyahu pushed back on the issue of Jewish settlements. He defended the settler movement, refusing to yield on his view that existing settlements must be allowed to expand to accommodate natural population growth. Clearly, Netanyahu hoped to win sympathy for the settlers. After all, shouldn't families have the right to have more children? But his argument is really disingenuous.

First of all, the Israeli government does not allow "natural growth" in Israel proper. Israel's national plan limits population growth in many communities. Young families in those communities cannot grow, cannot stay and have more children. If Israel controls the natural population growth of its citizens in Israel proper, there is no reason why it cannot impose the same restrictions on its citizens in the West Bank.

Secondly, official Israel government statistics show that 40% of the population growth in West Bank settlements is due to the influx of new settlers, not new babies.

Thirdly, Israel could just as well develop new settlements within Israel proper for an ultra-orthodox population that is bursting at the seams, with an average of seven children per family. But the ultra-orthodox do not want to live in Israel proper. They want to live in biblical Israel. Biblical Israel is the West Bank.

So while the principle of allowing natural growth among the settlements in the West Bank seems fair enough, in actuality it is not. Indeed the settler movement publicly and unabashedly asserts that the purpose of unrestricted population growth in the West Bank is to bring in so many people, homes, roads, and such that it will be politically and practically impossible for Israel to give back most of the West Bank to the Palestinians. Prime Minister Netanyahu knows full well that the purpose of natural growth in the Jewish settlements is to predetermine the permanent borders of Israel, to annex biblical Israel, and to abort a Palestinian state.

So what does our Reform movement say about this issue? The Central Conference of American Rabbis issued a statement supporting President Obama's call for a settlement freeze. The statement of my Reform rabbis' organization said, "The CCAR has long seen settlements in the West Bank as potential obstacles to peace. Repeatedly we have called for freezing settlement activity. Establishing new settlements or outposts, or continuing to expand existing settlements, even by 'natural growth,' does not serve the cause of Israel or of peace."

So too, the Union of Reform Judaism to which our congregation belongs adopted a resolution on June 13 calling upon the government of Israel to freeze all settlement construction and to take firm and consistent action against those fringe settler groups who challenge the authority and legitimacy of the Israeli government and its courts. The URJ statement calls upon Israel to do this "not only to fulfill its prior commitments, but also to do so as the politically wise and morally right action that enhances Israel's efforts to preserve a secure future for Israel as a Jewish and democratic state."

Personally, I believe that the position of the reform movement is correct but a tad naïve. Here is why I am opposed to Israeli settlements on the West Bank.

First of all, some of these settlements have been established on confiscated Palestinian land. This is unjust, it is provocative, and it gives the erroneous impression that the majority of the Israeli people are not interested in a two-state solution.

Secondly, the vision of Israel's settler movement, that biblical Israel should be part of modern Israel, is not without legitimacy. But the fact that one million Palestinians now live in what was biblical Israel means that the settlers' goal is unrealistic and impractical.

Thirdly, I believe that the messianic dreams of Israel's far-right settlers not only jeopardize American foreign policy and its foreign policy goals in the Middle East, they also threaten Israel's long-term security and stability.

Now let me get to what is naïve about the settlements issue. I see merit in the view that the existence of the settlements may not be an obstacle to peace, but just an excuse not to make peace. When Israel left southern Lebanon in 2000, the Lebanese government offered no reciprocal gesture of good will. In fact, the opposite occurred. Hezbollah was allowed to move in and began to attack Israel from the evacuated territory.

In 2005, Israel withdrew from the Gaza strip, implementing the courageous and painful act of evacuating 21 Israeli settlements by force. Here again, the Palestinians offered no reciprocal gesture of good will. In fact, the opposite occurred. Hamas moved in and began its campaign of firing rockets from Gaza into southern Israel.

The absence of reciprocal gestures of Arab good will suggests that Israel's dismantling of settlements may not be perceived by its Arab neighbors as gestures of good will, but as gestures of weakness to be exploited. Why else would Israel's gestures of good will not encourage the Palestinians to offer the olive branch rather than engage in even more hostile behavior?

Even if Israel dismantled every settlement and gave back every inch of the West Bank, it could be argued that the Palestinians will still not make peace. It is not at all clear that the Palestinian leadership and the Palestinian street have truly accepted the right of a Jewish state to exist in part of what was Palestine.

In conclusion, I would say this: Israel's settlements on the West Bank are a mistake. But freezing them is not the panacea that the Obama administration believes it to be. Peace in the Middle East will come only when both sides make mutually reinforcing reciprocal concessions.

So what would I have Israel do? I believe that Israel should accede to the wishes of the Obama administration and freeze all settlement building activity. Then I believe Israel and the American Jewish community can rightfully call upon President Obama to insist upon a reciprocal concession from the Palestinian side. For example, the Obama administration pressured Prime Minister Netanyahu to accept publicly a Palestinian state alongside Israel, and he did. Now the Obama administration should pressure President Abbas and the Palestinian authority to publicly accept a Jewish state alongside Palestine.

And that might be just enough to genuinely kick start the peace process!