

## Israeli 'Peace Now' Reveals, Settlements Grew Since Oslo

by Dean Andromidas

A new report by Peace Now, Israel's leading peace organization, exposes the fact that Israeli settlements in the West Bank and Gaza Strip have increased by more than 50% since the signing of the Oslo Peace Accords in 1993. In December 1993, there were 115,700 settlers, and, by the end of this year, the number is expected to reach 199,460. Entitled "Facts on the Ground Since the Oslo Agreements, September '93," and compiled by the group's "Settlement Watch" committee, the report demonstrates that the expansion of settlements is one of the principal reasons for the Palestinian frustration and rage fuelling the current conflagration in the Israeli Occupied Territories.

The settlements represent one of three major causes for the failure of the Oslo Accords. The other two include the failure to keep to the original Oslo timetable, where, by 1998, a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, with East Jerusalem as its capital, should have been established. The third, and most crucial, is the failure of the Israeli government, the United States, and the international community to implement the crucial "annexes" of the Oslo Accord. These annexes called for building a Palestinian state in the context of a massive regional economic development plan, including development of infrastructure, industry, and, above all, desperately needed water resources, through desalination. These annexes paralleled the "Oasis Plan" for Middle East economic development put forward by American statesman Lyndon LaRouche.

A source close to the framers of the Oslo Accords pointed to the failure to implement the "macro regional economic development" ideas and "the broad vision" encompassed in these annexes, as the "principal cause" for the collapse of the peace process.

### Doubling of Settlers in Seven Years

The raw facts given in the Peace Now report speak for themselves. The settlements have increased at a far more rapid pace since the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993, than in the 25 years between 1967, when Israel seized the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and 1993. Peace Now drew the following data from the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics:

**Population:** Between the end of 1993 and June 1999, the settler population increased 52.96%, from 115,700 to 176,973, a rise of 61,973. Given an average annual growth of 7.9% during 1992-98, Peace Now projects a settler population of at least 199,000 by the end of this year: a rise of 84,000, or 72%.

**Housing:** The number of housing units has increased by 52.5% since 1993, which includes 17,190 housing units added to the 32,750 which existed as of 1993. Of these, 2,830 were constructed in the first year of Prime Minister Ehud Barak's 18 months in office.

**New settlements:** Although there are 145 official settlements, they are distributed in 200 independent localities on the West Bank and in Gaza. Despite the fact that the Oslo Accords were to signal the end of new settlement construction, three new Israeli government-sponsored settlements were established, with a population of 12,212. In addition, 42 unofficial settlements were established, of which only a handful have been dismantled.

**New roads:** The construction of "by-pass" roads, designed to allow the settlers to avoid travelling through populated Palestinian areas, has been carried out at a similar pace, with 159 kilometers paved during 1994-97. These roads are constructed on agricultural lands that were simply confiscated from Palestinians.

These figures do not include 180,000 Israelis who live in settlements within East Jerusalem and parts of the West Bank that have been annexed by Israel, and are now within the municipal boundaries of what Israel terms unified Jerusalem. By the end of this year, at least 400,000 Israelis will live in areas captured by Israel in the 1967 war.

For the Palestinians, the settlements are the most visible and degrading aspect of the Israeli occupation. They are built on land that was simply confiscated by the Israeli military command that governs in the territories. These lands are not barren desert, but include Palestinian olive orchards, grazing land, and other agricultural properties. The report documents that 740 Palestinian homes were demolished in the West Bank alone, since 1994. In addition, Palestinian workers desperate for employment have been hired over recent decades to build the homes of a population that despises them.

Many of these settlements are deep within Palestinian urban centers. The most dangerous of these settlements is in the middle of Hebron, one of the largest Palestinian cities on the West Bank. This settlement of 400 people is controlled by the most radical and racist of the settler organizations. It holds hostage the surrounding Palestinian community of more than 30,000, who must remain under full Israeli military control. This entire section of Hebron has been under 24-hour curfew since the current clashes began two months ago. The killer Baruch Goldstein, the settler who massacred dozens of Muslim worshippers in 1994, lived in this settlement's sister settlement, Kiryat Arba, just outside of Hebron.

In the tiny Gaza Strip, 6,500 settlers live in 16 settlements which are surrounded by a security zone occupied by the Israeli military, which covers more than 20% of Gaza. Thus, 2 million Palestinians are left to live in 650 towns in the remaining 80%, many in squalid refugee camps. It is in one of these settlements that the son of Meir Kahane, the founder of the fascist Jewish Defense League and the outlawed terrorist Kach organization, runs a radical yeshiva, or religious school, in the same tradition as his father.

The current growth rate of the settlement population, through natural growth and immigration, is 7%, while the growth rate of the Palestinian population is only 5%. Israel has refused to allow immigration of any of the hundreds of thousands of Palestinians who live outside of the territories, many in refugee camps in neighboring Jordan and Lebanon, into the West Bank or Gaza.

Because of Israel's need to secure the settlements under the Oslo Accords, the West Bank has been divided into three zones, A, B, and C, where A is under full Palestinian control; B is jointly controlled, with Israel continuing its military occupation; and C is fully controlled by the Israelis. This has bottled up the Palestinian population into no fewer than 190 mini-bantustans. They are required to go through military checkpoints, which can often be a degrading and dangerous experience. This state of affairs has lasted for almost a decade,

and has made any progress in Palestinian civil and economic development impossible.

## **Dismantle the Majority of Settlements**

Peace Now puts forward a clear position on the settlements: "Israel's overriding interest is to secure an agreement ending the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and end our control over a large and hostile population." It urges the Israeli government to "engage in negotiations with the Palestinians on the basis of the Green Line of 1967, including Jerusalem."

In order to do this, the majority of the settlements must be dismantled and 85,000 settlers relocated back within Israeli borders, as a prerequisite for a peace agreement. This includes the dismantling of all the settlements in Gaza, and the relocation of its 6,500 settlers. In the West Bank, this includes dismantling settlements located in the heart of densely populated areas, those surrounded by Palestinian towns, deep within the West Bank, in the Jordan Valley, and those that break up the contiguity of Palestinian areas.

The report suggests that it is feasible that two other categories of settlements—those located along the "Green Line," Israel's 1967 border, and the Jerusalem metropolitan settlements lying on the West Bank, which cover a total of 5.5% of the West Bank—could be annexed to Israel through land exchanges in agreement with the Palestinians.

The report dismisses the Israeli government's proposal to annex so-called "settlement blocs" as totally unworkable, because this would require annexing regions where more than 100,000 Palestinians currently live. Furthermore, it says, the claim that it is possible to annex 80% of the settlers "has no foundation in reality, and reflects the wishes of certain politicians rather than demographic facts." It also shows that the government's unilateral "separation plan" is not only unacceptable, but could not be implemented.

A spokesman for Peace Now also dismissed the idea that settlements could remain within territory given over to the Palestinians. He pointed out that it is precisely these settlements that are controlled by the most radical anti-Palestinian settlers, who would never tolerate living under Palestinian sovereignty, and therefore would only perpetuate the conflict. Further, these radical settlers claim that, as Jews, they have a "right of return" to the Holy Land after 2,000 years. The spokesman points out, that if that is the case, then the Palestinians could easily claim the "right of return" to their homes in Israel, which they fled as a result of the 1948 war, only 52 years ago.

The report also debunks legal arguments that have been put forward by the Israeli government, concerning dismantling or freezing the settlements. According to a legal opinion included in the report, the Israeli legal system gives precedence to "public law" over private law, especially when "necessary public conditions" apply. It points out that the West Bank and Gaza are considered occupied territories, where

Israel has been declared in violation of international law and treaties that it is a party to. Thus, “necessary public conditions” obviously exist.

### Settlements and the ‘Southern Strategy’

The settlements issue has a political dynamic that goes beyond simply “obstacles to peace.” The supporters of these settlements, both in Israel and the United States, represent the Israeli counterpart to the “Southern Strategy” of factions within the U.S. Republican and Democratic parties. They are not only linked to, but play the same role as, U.S. Christian fundamentalists, in distorting and manipulating the political environment. These groups, working both in the Israeli and American political scene, are the principal obstacles to peace.

*EIR* has documented extensively (see Nov. 3, 2000 issue) the ties between the radical right and religious fundamentalists in Israel, and the Christian right and kindred networks in the United States. These networks are responsible for the Nov. 4, 1995 assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, and for assassination threats against President Bill Clinton. In addition, Vice President Al Gore, who has exercised inordinate influence on the foreign policy of the Clinton Administration, is known to be much closer to right-winger, former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu than to Rabin, Shimon Peres, or Barak.

The degree of expansion of Israeli settlements would not have been possible, had not the U.S. government turned a blind eye to it, or perhaps supported it. One might legitimately ask how it is possible for the Clinton Administration and the various governments in Israel under Rabin, Peres, and Barak, all publicly committed to a peace agreement, to allow such expansion. The answer lies in the “Southern Strategy.”

Since the Administration of President Gerald Ford, the United States has officially opposed the building of settlements in the Israeli Occupied Territories as “obstacles to peace.” It was illegal for official U.S. aid to be spent on building settlements in the territories. Between 1991 and 1992, the Bush Administration froze \$10 billion in loan guarantees that had been offered to the Israeli government for its effort to absorb tens of thousands of Russian Jewish immigrants (and as an enticement to bring Israel to the Madrid Peace conference).

In the beginning of 1993, prior to the signing of the Oslo peace agreement, there was a shift in U.S. policy, toward the idea that the “natural growth” of settlements would be permissible. The effect of this decision on settlements can be seen in the Peace Now report. It documents that, at the end of 1993, housing starts collapsed to pre-1989 figures after reaching a peak at the end of 1991. The collapse was an obvious result of the freezing of loan guarantees, as well as a glut in the Israeli housing market. Starting in 1994, housing starts steadily increased, hitting a new peak in 1998 under the Netanyahu government, more than doubling from the 1993 level. Since Netanyahu left office last year, housing

starts have by no means collapsed, but continue at a somewhat lower level.

Despite this shift, there were clear voices in Israel in 1993 pointing to the dangers of the continuation of the settlements policy. In March 1993, the now-defunct daily *Davar*, which was the mouthpiece of the Israeli Labor Party, editorialized: “The territories captured by the Israeli Defense Force in 1967 were supposed to have served as collateral, to be placed on the table at the time of political bargaining. . . . Settlement in them was intended to ‘create facts’ inducing the Arabs to come to the negotiations, but when that result was achieved, settlement turned into a fact interfering with the negotiations themselves.”

After Oslo, this shift had a significant influence on the peace camp, as it began to take a softer line on the settlements as well.

Despite their strong influence, the settlers are not part of mainstream Israeli politics. Peace Now reports that the majority of Israelis are ignorant of the facts presented in their report.

According to Peace Now statistics, 40% of the settlers voted for the most extreme ideological parties, including the National Religious Party, the Yisrael Beitenu, and the National Front, which hold 13 seats in the Knesset (parliament) among them, but exercise considerable influence. The National Religious Party, which has strong ties to the right-wing Orthodox Jewish movement in the United States, was in the previous Netanyahu government, where it took positions even more extreme than Netanyahu himself and the Likud party. In the current Barak government, the National Religious Party holds the post of Finance Minister, considered the most senior position, after that of Prime Minister and Defense Minister. They were also in the Barak government before the latter’s coalition collapsed. Yisrael Beitenu is one of two parties representing the Russian immigrant community. Its founder is Avigdor Lieberman, who was known by the nickname “KGB” when he was the top aide to Netanyahu. It is believed that he formed this party as a means of winning support for Netanyahu outside of the Likud. The National Front is a coalition of several ultra-right-wing splinter factions.

Much of the remainder of the settler vote went to Netanyahu’s Likud and other right-wing factions.

In the last three decades, the settlement project developed strong influence throughout the Israeli government and military security structure. For instance, the settlements were created by the military administration in the territories, because it was the governing agency, and it carried out the seizure of Palestinian land. Military personnel, reserve officers, and members of the security forces were encouraged to settle there. Moreover, the government offers large incentives to settlers, including the opportunity to purchase high-quality homes below market prices, social subsidies, and the like. In fact, more than half of the settlers are “non-ideological,” and have moved to these areas because of the economic benefits.