

Settlements become cities

Rather than meeting the Palestinian negotiating demand for a freeze on settlements, Israel is grabbing yet more land for Jewish-only urban expansion, writes **Saleh Al-Naami**

From his balcony, Gamal Hussein, 30, surveys the horizon and is filled with anguish and gloom. Hussein has lost his farmland in the mountains that stretch west of his village Shaqba, west of Ramallah in the centre of the West Bank. The Israeli army confiscated his farm as part of a land grab to expand the Jewish settlement of Kiryat Sefer, near the village.

The seizure allocates more land to the settlement after orders were made by the Israeli Ministry of Interior to expand it into a city. Although Palestinian villagers there already lost 50 per cent of their land when the settlement was created in 2000, they have lost another 30 per cent now to make room for its expansion into a city.

The land grab is not all the villagers have to worry about. This settlement-cum-city is populated by ultra-Orthodox Jews who are known for their high fertility rates (an average family has eight members). This means that Israeli authorities will continue to expand the settlement under the pretext of "natural growth". Accordingly, more Palestinian land in the area will be usurped for this purpose.

It is ironic that at a time when Israel is talking about temporarily freezing settlements in the West Bank, Tel Aviv is announcing that more existing settlements will be converted into cities. The move indicates that Israel has no intention of seriously addressing or resolving the conflict with the Palestinian people. It is not the first time that a settlement has grown into a city -- this scheme was adopted a decade ago. But lately, the pace has been significantly accelerated since the hardline Orthodox Shas movement took over Israel's Ministry of Interior.

The ministry has the authority to decide on transforming settlements into cities, and it is noteworthy that the majority of residents in the expanding settlements are ultra-Orthodox Jews. This is true of the Amo Anil settlement, in the north of the West Bank, inhabited by ultra-Orthodox Jews who follow the Ashkenazi (Western) Yahadut HaTorah Party; at Kiryat Sefer, west of Ramallah in the centre of the West Bank, whose residents are mostly eastern (Sephardim) Orthodox Jews who support the Shas Party; in Beitar Illit settlement in Jerusalem that is also inhabited by Sephardim Orthodox Jews who support Shas; and Maalia Avram, in the east of the West Bank that is home to several sects of ultra-Orthodox Jews.

Until the mid-1990s, all settlers belonged to religious-Zionist and right-wing secular groups. Orthodox Jews were mainly based in occupied Jerusalem and the town of Beni Barak, northeast of Tel Aviv, as well as Kfar Chabad. They were also present in districts in large cities.

Another signal of Israel's intentions is the fact that the Council of Jewish Settlements (CJS) in the West Bank and the Ministry of Housing are anxiously waiting for the end of a nine-month freeze on settlements in the West Bank, to announce the construction of the largest yet settlement city there. The CJS is calling this development Ir Ganim (Garden City) and construction will be west of Bethlehem, where 14,000 settlers are expected to come in the first phase alone. The settlement will greatly increase the Jewish

demographic in the West Bank.

The construction of this city is certain to spell doom for tens of thousands of Palestinians who live in the area. Nadav Shragai, settlement correspondent for *Haaretz* newspaper, wrote that converting settlements into cities aims to increase the number of settlers in these compounds. This is directly connected to the fact that ultra-Orthodox Jews have come to realise the economic benefits of settling in the West Bank. The majority are unemployed and live on government assistance.

Other incentives for settlers are free land ownership and soft loans over extended periods. At the same time, they receive economic aid from a number of ministries because settlements are categorised as Preferred Zone A, meaning that occupants are granted tax holidays and free education. The settlements also offer residents a religiously and culturally coherent society, especially that there is no longer room for more people in designated ultra-Orthodox areas within Israel.

According to Shahar Ilan, an expert on religious political parties, the "discovery" of the benefits of settlements in the West Bank by ultra-Orthodox Jews is of paramount significance. It means that the Jewish demographic will sharply rise in the West Bank, Jerusalem and surrounding areas since Orthodox families tend to be large. Ilan continued that an increase in the number of ultra-Orthodox Jews would also give rise to the number of their representatives on the West Bank CJS, which plays a leading role for settlers in the West Bank.

Israeli observers agree that the inclusion of Orthodox Shas members in Olmert's cabinet was a major factor in increasing incentives for ultra-Orthodox Jews to settle in the West Bank. Israeli journalist Akifa Al-Dar highlights the role played by the second in command in the Shas movement, Minister of Construction Rabbi Ariel Attias, the youngest cabinet member in Netanyahu's government. Attias "does not hesitate to kick in the door to Netanyahu's office and issue ultimatums to ensure that [Netanyahu] approves all plans for the construction of Orthodox settlements," noted Al-Dar. "Otherwise, Shas threatens to withdraw from government."

According to Al-Dar, cabinet members who seek Shas's approval rush to assist in the building of settlements inhabited by ultra-Orthodox Jews.

To facilitate the sequestering of Palestinian land in the West Bank, rigid restrictions imposed by Jewish tenets are overlooked, such as the rule of resting on the Sabbath. A number of Jewish clerics have decreed that constructing settlements on the Sabbath is permissible, in order to impose a de facto reality in the West Bank. In an unprecedented move, an edict was issued allowing construction work on the Sabbath and religious holidays, since it enables Jews to control more Palestinian territories.

The grand chief rabbi of Ofra settlement, Avi Gisser, one of the largest in the West Bank and located next to Ramallah, gave permission to construction companies to continue working in order to prevent the Palestinians from recovering their land by force. Gisser argued that the tenet of "settling on the land" is above all other commandments, including resting on the Sabbath, according to a decree by Rambam, the most prominent Jewish religious scholar who lived in Egypt in the 12th century.

Meanwhile, an exposé in *Haaretz* revealed how settlers succeeded in controlling vast areas of Palestinian land in the West Bank. The newspaper reported that the first step by settlers, with the assistance of the Israeli army, was to prevent Palestinian villagers from reaching their land under the pretext that the presence of Palestinian farmers near

settlements represents a security threat.

According to procedures in the West Bank, Palestinian agricultural land that is not farmed for three years can be legally taken over by the local councils of settlements. *Haaretz* added that since the signing of the Oslo Accords, settlements in the centre and north of the West Bank have used this practice to swallow up large chunks of Palestinian land.

In light of the de facto settlement policy of Netanyahu's government, and its future plans, the Palestinian public is frustrated by and rejects talk of imminent peace negotiations. Many Palestinians believe that renewing talks now would legitimise the carving up of Palestine and be the concession to Israel that breaks the proverbial camel's back.

Caption: The Israeli apartheid wall on the outskirts of Jerusalem, while Israeli settlements are seen in the background

[Caption 2](#): The Israeli apartheid wall on the outskirts of Jerusalem, while Israeli settlements are seen in the background

© Copyright Al-Ahram Weekly. All rights reserved

Al-Ahram Weekly Online : Located at: <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2010/986/re5.htm>