



PERSPECTIVES

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Khan Ahmar: Israel's Opportunity

by Maj. Gen. (res.) Gershon Hacohen

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: While there is little doubt that the Bedouin settlement of Khan Ahmar (on the Jerusalem-Dead Sea road) was illegally built, the decision to move its residents to an alternative site needs to be reassessed despite its approval by the Supreme Court. It involves much broader strategic questions than the necessity to enforce the rule of law in one particular case.

Like the Khan Ahmar Bedouin settlement, thousands of Palestinian homes have been illegally built throughout the West Bank. As such, the exceptional international focus on Khan Ahmar can only be seen as a corollary of the sustained campaign by the Palestinian Authority (PA), with the EU's staunch support, for control of the West Bank's largely unpopulated Area C, still under Israel's control in accordance with the Oslo Accords.

The debate over Area C's future has now been joined by the Tel Aviv-based Institute for National Strategic Studies (INSS), which has presented a much publicized (supposedly new) plan espousing phased unilateral disengagement from Area C and transfer of substantial parts of its territories to the PA. The plan's pronounced goal is to preserve Israel's Jewish and democratic nature by preventing the future annexation of the West Bank's Palestinian population. The only problem with this rationale is that Israel's control of this population ended over two decades ago.

By January 1996, in accordance with the interim agreement of September 28, 1995 (Oslo II), Israel had withdrawn its forces from the West Bank's populated areas (withdrawal from the Gaza populated areas was completed by May 1994) with the exception of Hebron (where redeployment was completed in early 1997). On January 20, 1996, elections to the Palestinian Council were held. Shortly

thereafter, both the Israeli civil administration and military government were dissolved, leaving most of the territories' population under PLO/PA rule.

In other words, since the beginning of 1996, and certainly following the completion of the Hebron redeployment, 99% of the Palestinian population of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip have not lived under Israeli occupation. This transforms the future of Area C – which contains Jewish West Bank neighborhoods, IDF camps, and virtually no Palestinian population – into a strategic/military rather than demographic issue (e.g., control of main roads and strategically vital areas such as the Jordan Valley).

With the adverse implications of the 2005 unilateral disengagement from Gaza etched in the Israeli collective psyche, the INSS seeks to fend off public criticism by pledging to keep most Jewish West Bank residents in their homes. But ensuring Israel's national security interests in the territory west of the Jordan River necessitates continued control of Area C's open spaces, first and foremost the Jordan Valley, and not only the continued presence of its Jewish residents. It is above all a problem of shaping the geostrategic reality of this area, which can be exemplified by the question of whether the Jewish neighborhoods of Maale Adumim and Gush Etzion will become fading Israeli enclaves within Palestinian space or whether the Palestinian neighborhoods and villages east of Jerusalem will become Palestinian enclaves in Israeli territory.

Keenly aware of the real nature of the dispute, the EU has focused its efforts on expanding Palestinian control of those vital parts of Area C where the future of the two-state solution will be determined. More specifically, control of the open space between Jerusalem and the Dead Sea will determine the capital city's future: whether it will be a metropolitan hub or a sleepy suburb at the end of the Tel Aviv-Jerusalem highway.

In these circumstances, it is advisable for the Israeli government to adopt a pragmatic approach to the Khan Ahmar problem, leaving the 38 families *in situ* while taking advantage of the episode for increased construction in Area E-1 with a view to establishing a continuous Israeli presence from Jerusalem to the Dead Sea. For, in the final account, Israel will be unable to ensure its vital security interests in Area C through exclusively preventive means such as demolition of illegal construction. Rather, large-scale construction activity in key areas is required, and in this respect the Khan Ahmar dispute can be transformed from a liability into an opportunity.

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