



PERSPECTIVES

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The Danger of Israeli Public Apathy Regarding Palestinian Construction in Area C

by Maj. Gen. (res.) Gershon Hacoheh

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: While Israeli Jews continue to move into urban centers, the Palestinians have been assuming sovereignty in the open lands and leaving the Jews with personal sovereignty solely in their areas of residence. This trend is not restricted to the West Bank. It is also occurring in the Negev, the Galilee, and the Jezreel Valley, where Jews are moving into high-rise buildings while non-Jews are taking control of the open spaces. A contributing factor to this dangerous trend is the complete lack of interest in the subject displayed by most of the Israeli public.

Over the past decade, 28,650 illegal Arab structures have been built in Area C. Hundreds of kilometers of roads have been laid, and hundreds of thousands of agricultural dunams have been taken over in land that has never belonged to a Palestinian.

This invasion is being implemented with the involvement and guidance of the EU and with major financial support from abroad.

Meanwhile, PM Netanyahu has introduced a plan to build 700 housing units for Palestinians in Area C along with 6,000 housing units for Jews in the West Bank. Despite criticism from settler leadership, cabinet ministers, including Rafi Peretz and Bezalel Smotrich, have supported the plan out of a basic understanding that sovereignty in a territory entails not only setting restrictions on building but also issuing permits. In that regard, sovereignty in Area C is no different from sovereignty in other areas of the country.

The basis of a sovereign state – in Area C as in the Negev – is its ability to plan, which includes stipulating what and where it is forbidden to build and what

and where it is permitted to build. These stipulations should apply to everyone, Jewish or Palestinian.

Apart from the threat Palestinian building in Area C poses to Israel's national and security interests, one needs to ask why the issue has not gained traction among the Israeli public. It is this popular apathy that, among other things, allows the PM to keep ignoring this dangerous trend.

Netanyahu's behavior on this matter is hard to understand. If it is fine with him to give the Palestinians open land for an eventual two-state solution, then presumably the land should be provided as a quid pro quo in an agreement – not simply taken over by the Palestinians in a unilateral process of attrition. If, on the other hand, Israel has an interest in retaining the land, why is Netanyahu allowing the invasion to proceed?

The Palestinians and Europeans understand something Israelis refuse to see. They grasp that while Maale Adumim is a fully-fledged city that will not be evacuated, it can be turned into a threatened and shrinking enclave by fast-tracking Palestinian building all around it and along the roads leading to it. Israeli disregard for the endgame of this tactic, including among most of the defense establishment, is amazing to the point of alarming.

Public apathy on the subject stems in part from the fact that most Israeli Jews spend no time in the West Bank and are simply unaware that this is happening. But their indifference can also be attributed to a traditional Jewish "disability" with regard to open, non-urbanized land.

In their protracted exile, Jews became people of the city. To them, open spaces were simply empty tracts of no value. As Yuri Slezkine, a Jew who emigrated from the Soviet Union to the US, put it in his book:

The Modern Age is the Jewish Age, and the twentieth century, in particular, is the Jewish Century. Modernization is about everyone becoming urban, mobile, literate, articulate, intellectually intricate, physically fastidious, and occupationally flexible. It is about learning how to cultivate people and symbols, not fields or herds.... No one is better at being Jewish than the Jews themselves. In the age of capital, they are the most creative entrepreneurs; in the age of alienation, they are the most experienced exiles.

The autonomy talks based on the 1979 peace treaty with Egypt explored the concept of personal sovereignty – meaning an arrangement whereby the Palestinians would exercise personal sovereignty in their areas of residence while Israel would retain sovereignty over the territory. What is emerging is

exactly the reverse. As the Jews coalesce in urban concentrations, the Palestinians are assuming sovereignty in the open lands. The Jews are left with personal sovereignty only inside their communities.

This trend is not only occurring in the West Bank. In the Negev, the Galilee, and the Jezreel Valley, Jews are moving into high-rise buildings while non-Jews take control of the open spaces. Private agricultural lands in Metulla and Rosh Pina are being sold, and kibbutz lands are being leased mostly to Arabs. When one's view from the high-rise on the coastal plain points west toward the sea, why should one care about another Palestinian housing unit going up in Area C?

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Maj. Gen. (res.) Gershon Hacoheh is a senior research fellow at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies. He served in the IDF for forty-two years. He commanded troops in battles with Egypt and Syria. He was formerly a corps commander and commander of the IDF Military Colleges.