



## PERSPECTIVES

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# The Future of Settlement in Israel

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BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1,888, January 17, 2021

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Having embraced a market-economy approach, the Israel Land Authority is blocking the growth of Jewish residence in, and control of, most parts of the country that are beyond the densely populated cities of the coastal plain.**

Two matters currently in dispute that are on the agenda of the settlement enterprise constitute a key to the future of the state of Israel: the choice of who will become the next Director-General of the Israel Land Authority (ILA), and the clash within the leadership of the Amana settlement movement over the status of its Director-General, Ze'ev Hever (aka Zambish).

Not coincidentally, both the West Bank communities and the "working" (kibbutz and moshav-type) communities are acting to prevent the appointment of the candidate favored by Housing Minister Yaakov Litzman, Yanki Koyent, and pushing for the appointment of Pinhas Wallerstein instead. Both groups are concerned about the growing difficulties faced by rural communities all over Israel.

The following figure puts the problem into perspective: Among all the communities of the Jezreel Valley Regional Council, this year's population growth came to no more than 1.25%. That state of affairs reflects an almost total construction freeze—one that does not stem from international pressure but from the ILA's land-allocation policy and setting of increasingly high prices for land, in tandem with a tender policy that is open to competition.

In the moshav known as Bethlehem of Galilee, for example, quarter-dunam lots are being offered to members of the community at a starting price of a million shekels. Five minutes away by car, in the Bedouin villages of Beit Zarzir and Ka'abiyye, the ILA is offering larger lots for less than a tenth of that price. The price for a lot in the Jewish communities is well beyond what

young couples can generally afford. Nursery schools are closing, and the communities are gradually turning into old-age homes.

The ILA's appraisal is also determined, of course, by the final price at which lots in previous tenders were sold. The steep price in the Jewish communities reflects not only the real value in the real estate market but also the limited supply of lots for construction in the Jewish communities in relation to the high demand. Hence, the ILA's land-marketing policy actually curtails rural development and pushes the Jewish population to crowd itself into urban high-rises. With its embrace of the free-market approach, the ILA is in fact impeding the growth of the Jewish rural communities, and not only in the center of the country but even in the Galilee and the Negev.

The head of the Jordan Valley Regional Council, Idan Grinbaum, recently quoted something he heard Yanki Koyent say during negotiations on the future of Kibbutz HaOn: "My task is not to build communities and not to fulfill the goal of settlement. My task is to sell state land to the highest bidder." Grinbaum summed it up: "As far as he is concerned, Zionism is dead and he is a land salesman." The fight over leadership of the ILA, then, is a fight over the future of settlement and of Jewish control over most parts of the country that are beyond the densely populated cities of the coastal plain.

In this regard the West Bank communities are in much better shape. Consider, for example, the difference between the Nimrod community on the Golan Heights and the relatively young Keeda community in the Binyamin region of the West Bank. Both were founded in 1999, but because of procedural obstacles created by the state, Nimrod still numbers no more than six families, whereas Keeda now numbers about 80. The difference stems to a large extent from the fact that Keeda was developed by the Amana movement in the West Bank, where there is still relative freedom from state planning and building regulations.

Indeed, with the privatization of the state and the decline of the settlement movement, Amana under Zambish's stewardship remained the last organizing force for settlement not based on the profit motive. It is obligated, of course, to take economic constraints into account, which indeed it does. But its *raison d'être* is not to make a profit but to build the country and its legacy.

In the West Bank and the Jordan Valley, a battle is now being waged between Jews and Palestinians over control of open lands. The Palestinian endeavor of residential and road construction, while also preparing land for agriculture, is being orchestrated and directly supported by the Palestinian Authority with targeted financial assistance from the EU. The Palestinians see it as a national struggle for a cause that goes beyond cost-benefit calculations. The Zionist

settlement endeavor was like that once, until it began to espouse new notions of a free-market economy.

The West Bank communities, for their part, continue to show devotion to the cause, except for a few like Efrat and Neve Daniel that are already capable of acting in line with free-market economic logic. Still needed in the West Bank, as in the past, is initiative and the support of a pioneering settlement body that is driven by a national mission.

The struggle over who will lead Amana is thus a battle over recognition of the continued essential quality of the settlement enterprise in an organizational mode of pioneering. If those pushing for the “professional management” of Amana come out on top, the last organizational entity in the state of Israel that is capable of working for the furtherance of settlement will be destroyed.

*This is an edited version of an article that appeared in Makor Rishon on December 18, 2020.*

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