



The PA Is Winning in Area C

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The Palestinian Authority's decade-long plan to take control of the West Bank's Area C is being implemented successfully. This is a historic game-changer in the 100-year-old conflict that requires an immediate and massive Israeli response.

All too often, the Palestinian Authority is dismissed as a failed entity. This is wishful thinking. To the contrary: the PA is winning one of the most important battles it has ever waged against Israel. It is the same battle the Zionist movement and later the State of Israel successfully waged: that of strategic settlement. This means the creation of rural and urban infrastructure to consolidate control over territory required to create a state.

Israel's Homa v'Migdal (tower and stockade) movement, the War of Independence, the heroism and durability of the kibbutzim on the Syrian front before the Six-Day War, Kiryat Shmona and the kibbutzim in the Hula in the 1980s, and Sderot and the kibbutzim around Gaza in the past two decades are a living testimony to the historic importance of "strategic settlement," a term first coined by the Zionist movement in 1942.

Alas, this Zionist strategy has now been successfully adopted by the PA, especially in the fight for control over the majority of land in the West Bank called Area C. According to the Oslo Accords, Area C was to remain under exclusive Israeli jurisdiction until the achievement of a final-status settlement.

According to a highly detailed [report](#) by Regavim, an organization that documents illegal encroachment on state land (as well as private property), the PA over the past decade has been winning the battle for control over Area C. In 2009, the majority of built-up space in Area C was populated by Jews (47,000 dunams compared to 46,000 for the Palestinians). By 2019, after an

unrelenting 10-year settlement push directed by the PA, most of the built-up space is Palestinian (79,000 dunams compared to 57,000 inhabited by Jews). Such a feat rivals even the most successful settlement projects of the Jewish Agency during the Mandate. Indeed, it may even outshine them.

More important than the number of dwellings that were constructed are the qualitative dimensions of the building spree. The clusters were created as part of a strategic plan conceived in 2009 by then PA PM Salam Fayyad, a former senior economist at the World Bank, to create the State of Palestine from the ground up rather than leave it to diplomacy.

Sound familiar? It should. This was the rejoinder of David Ben-Gurion and his Mapai stalwarts to both Chaim Weizmann and Ze'ev Jabotinsky, who placed greater faith on diplomacy to create the Jewish State. Labor's strategy was popularly called "one more dunam (a quarter of an acre), one more goat." Thankfully, that strategy won the day in 1936 and lasted up to and beyond the creation of the Jewish State.

Behind the unrelenting Palestinian strategic settlement drive are a host of institutions within the PA, which commands a budget of \$4.7 billion. Those institutions include the Ministry of the Interior, the Palestinian Ministry of Planning and Administrative Development, the Ministry of Agriculture, a commission within the Ministry of Interior responsible for the registration of land and water rights, the Ministry of Local Government, and the "Colonization and Wall Resistance Commission," which is run by an official with ministerial status. These ministries coordinate extensively on planning and implementation.

A 160-page report published in 2016 illustrates the PA's planning capacity. One hundred and ten local outline plans have been prepared for 119 Palestinian communities—most of them in Area C.

Behind the PA's successful strategic settlement drive stands an array of EU and UN institutions that both finance the project and provide much of the planning know-how. They do this either directly or indirectly by offering capacity-building programs and venues.

The Palestinian goal of seizing control over Area C also involves organized protest and violence, which is directed both from the ground up and from the highest government echelons down.

The "Colonization and Wall Resistance Commission" is responsible for coordinating those efforts. It is headed by former Fatah Tanzim member and former security prisoner Walid Assaf. The commission creates and works

with local “resistance” committees, often headed by Fatah members in tandem with the youth committees of the various PLO factions (mostly Fatah’s Shabiba movement) and district-level Fatah organizations. They are tasked with organizing the Palestinian population in surrounding villages to confront IDF troops, intimidating the Israeli Civil Administration as it attempts to monitor the area, harassing settler outposts and settler grazing efforts, and taking over hilltops, springs, and archaeological sites that connect Jews to their past. The aim therefore is not only to strategically settle the area but to drive away the Jewish settlers.

The factor that best explains the Palestinians’ success in this venture is that while the PA is mobilized, consistent, and focused on achieving the goal, the Israeli government, civil administration, and judicial branch largely turn a blind eye to the build-up.

There are many reasons why Israel has reached this sorry state of affairs in Area C. Above all, the near-total freeze on Jewish settlement over the past two decades created a vacuum that the PA rushed to fill. Neither the Ministry of Justice nor the Israeli courts do much to counter the Palestinian lawfare that enables them to illegally encroach upon and take control over the state lands that form the bulk of Area C. Even when the courts rule against such encroachment, as in the case of Khan al-Ahmar (an illegal Bedouin encampment near Maaleh Adumim), the authorities do not honor the ruling.

These developments are mostly determined by politics, and especially by the leadership. The saying attributed to Ben-Gurion that it is not what the Gentiles say but what the Jews do rings true in this context. Merav Michaeli’s recent victory in the Labor Party reflects the extent to which Israeli politicians are divorced from the spirit of the party’s founders, who championed Israeli strategic settlement in all the Land of Israel.

PM Netanyahu did not grow up in such an environment, but one hopes his strong strategic sense will lead him to acknowledge that however important the fruits of diplomacy, such as normalization with moderate Arab Sunni states, their importance pales in comparison to the need to win battles like strategic Palestinian settlement in Area C.

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