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Stalemate over West Bank settlements

Why the U.S. and Israelis must again take up the cause of removing Jewish settlements from the West Bank.

By Bernard Avishai

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YOU DON'T normally see farmers run, but this farmer and his son were sprinting, carrying pails of barley seed down to stony, tiered plots through a rolling desert landscape. It seemed a miracle that even olive trees could grow here, let alone the crop that Jub'a, his son and his neighbors were frantically sowing, casting seeds this way and that as a rusty, belching tractor followed at full speed, plowing the seeds under.

It was Saturday, noon, Nov. 11, and we were in the Palestinian village of Twane in the hills south of Hebron, an hour's drive from Jerusalem. Rain was forecast. This was probably the last good day of the year for planting.

Jub'a was working fast because, as everybody knew, the Jewish settlers who were squatting illegally on the hilltop — fencing off a larger and larger perimeter around their newly minted settlement of Havat Maon — coveted this land and, hearing the tractor, would call the Israeli army.

And then the soldiers, who have jurisdiction over the territories (and hence the farmers) would demand proof of ownership and, seeing none, suspend the work. But with Israeli civilians, witnesses (that is, us) among the farmers, they would not drive the farmers off, as the settlers hoped. They would call the police, who, unlike the soldiers, have jurisdiction over us.

Then the climax would come. The police would call their commander, and the commander would call a permanent halt to the plowing (but not be bullying about it, seeing us). He would insist that no land in the area could be planted absent a clear title. But he and everyone else would know that title could never be established because the land in question belongs to the village by common oral tradition since the time of the Ottoman administration. It would likely be declared "state land," which the settlers would interpret as meant for *them*.

So the game was to plant as many seeds as possible before the order to stop came. Only this was not a game to the farmers, who need these crops and whose poverty is astonishing (many of the villagers still build their homes into caves and sleep on mattresses in the open air). At one field, this morning's plowing was done with donkeys.

We were there, a small group of witnesses, to try to make sure that the settlers did not simply attack the Arab families with their automatic weapons and truncheons, as they had done in the past. My friend, David Shulman, a Hebrew University South Asia scholar who had helped organize the day (and is a leader of the peace group Ta'ayush) had been shot at and beaten by settlers in these hills a year ago.

As if on cue, the troops drove up after about an hour, in two four-man units, weighed down by full combat gear. By then, the crop was mostly sown. The settlers got their revenge by chasing the village children on their way home from school, forcing them to drop their schoolbags and flee.

The soldiers, for their part, were not amused. They were good boys, with dust-reddened eyes — carrying their burdens with a certain grace, doing their duty. Their commander, a rail of a man, was interested only in keeping things cool. He saw why the farmers had done this, he said quietly, but he would "have a problem" with anyone trying to "disturb the peace."

Another, younger soldier, Eric, was from Mexico and had studied biology and history at Syracuse University in New York. He understood the Palestinian farmers too, he said, but he also understood the settlers, whom he figured were no different from the people who had established Tel Aviv years ago. This claim got him an immediate lecture from David and me, but he stood his ground, and we relented, a little proud of him for taking us on. Anyway, it was like lecturing the customer service rep at a call center when a computer network fails.

Besides, Eric did not like this duty. He had fought in Lebanon and saw what airstrikes could do and could not do. He knew that war was not good for anybody. But the night before, an unknown, armed Palestinian group had shot a Jewish driver on the road adjacent to where we were. He was there to protect us. "I am sorry to see you put in the middle of this situation," I told Eric. "I'm not in the middle," he answered. "I am on a side." As he left, an Arab woman flung a barrage of curses at him — and cursed America to boot.

I am telling this story because Ehud Olmert was just in Washington, and a team of new foreign policy advisors is circling the White House. Its occupant has two years to try to avoid going down in American history as the country's worst president. The leader of the team is, by all accounts, James Baker, who's implied in many interviews that the president's one shot at redemption is to calm the Middle East down and perhaps pull off an Israeli-Palestinian agreement based on the Saudi initiative — which calls for all governments in the region, including the Palestinian Authority, to simultaneously recognize Israel in return for a withdrawal to something like the 1967 borders.

Israelis and American Jews are not supposed to like Baker. The feeling is allegedly mutual: Baker — so it has been widely reported — once said privately "---- the Jews, they didn't vote for us anyway."

But this is not the real reason that Baker is disliked by Jews. He is also the only U.S. secretary of State since the Camp David accords in 1979 to

have taken credible action against the proliferation of Jewish settlements like Havat Maon. In 1991, he and the first President Bush got the Senate to hold up a program of American loan guarantees for Israel that were earmarked to help settle Russian Jewish immigrants; he had tried, and failed, to elicit a promise from then-Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir not to use any of this money for expanding settlements. This is proof positive, Jews tell themselves, that he is "anti-Israel."

WHAT IS curious, though, is that a majority of Israelis now strongly believe what official U.S. policy has always insisted: that settlements are an obstacle to peace. Visit Twane and you know that settlements are an unmitigated disaster — yet they have increased tenfold under "friends" such as Ronald Reagan and George Shultz, Bill Clinton and Dennis Ross. If the sorest part of the West's problems in the Middle East is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the sorest part of that conflict is the settlements, then acting firmly to end them should hardly be thought hostile. Calling Baker anti-Israel is a little like calling your friend disloyal for trying to take away your cocaine.

Some will rush to say, of course, that the Palestinian question is not the main problem and that the settlements are not an obstacle to a solution, that there is a clash of civilizations with Iran and the rest of the Muslim world and the settlers are on the front lines. Those are the people who said that Iraqis would welcome American soldiers as their liberators.

With any luck, Baker will now have another chance. I know at least one Palestinian farmer, one Israeli soldier and a Hebrew University professor who will be grateful for his efforts.

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