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# Why Israel Won't Abandon the Settlers

Once it was the kibbutzim that produced the nation's combat elite. Now it is the West Bank settlements.

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By YOSSI KLEIN HALEVI

Jerusalem

Two issues related to West Bank settlements are on the current agenda of Israeli Defense Minister and Labor Party leader Ehud Barak. The first is Mr. Barak's attempt to persuade the Netanyahu government to extend a freeze on settlement building. The second is his attempt to legalize two houses in a tiny West Bank settlement called Hayovel that were built without government permission and face possible demolition.

The houses were built by two war heroes. Major Eliraz Peretz fell in a skirmish on the Israeli-Gaza border a half year ago; Israelis were especially touched by his story because his older brother died in Lebanon 12 years ago. The second hero, Major Ro'i Klein, was killed in Lebanon in 2006 after leaping onto a grenade to save his men.

Fallen soldiers have a sacrosanct status here. Demolishing the houses that Peretz and Klein built for their families seems to Israelis, whatever their politics, an unbearable act of ingratitude. Even the bitterly anti-settlement movement Peace Now informed the Supreme Court that while it seeks the removal of illegal houses in Hayovel, an exception should be made for these two dwellings. "We are not indifferent to the feelings of the public on this matter," a Peace Now spokeswoman explained.

The story of the Peretz and Klein houses has significance beyond what it tells us about Israeli sensitivities. Increasingly, Israel's military elite is coming from West Bank settlements and, more broadly, from within the religious Zionist community that produced the settlement movement and passionately supports it.

Perhaps 40% of combat officers are now religious Zionists (not to be confused with ultra-orthodox Haredim), nearly three times their percentage in the general population. In the early 1990s, the number of religious combat officers was barely 2%. The newly appointed deputy chief of staff, Yair Naveh, is a religious Zionist.

Once it was kibbutzim, or collectivist farms, that produced the nation's combat elite. Now it is the religious Zionist community that raises its sons to sacrifice. Every Sabbath day the same scene is repeated throughout the settlements: Young men wearing knitted skullcaps precariously pinned to close-cropped hair gather outside the synagogue and exchange stories from their combat units—while their younger brothers eavesdrop and decide which units they



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will one day join.

The prominence of religious Zionists in the Israel Defense Force (IDF) explains in part why the prospect of a West Bank withdrawal is so traumatic to policy makers and to IDF commanders. If the army is sent to dismantle settlements in the West Bank—as it did in Gaza in 2005—there is the very real threat of widespread disobedience and the collapse of entire units.

During the Gaza withdrawal, only a handful of radical rabbis urged soldiers to refuse orders. Today that sentiment has grown among even mainstream religious Zionists like the former Supreme Court justice, Zvi Tal, who recently declared that if he were a soldier sent to evacuate a settlement, he would refuse.

The "settler" has assumed a near demonic image around the world, but most Israelis know that only a radical fringe is responsible for uprooting Palestinian olive trees and vandalizing mosques. Most settlers are part of the mainstream. Israelis encounter them in the army, in the workplace, and in the universities.

Shaul Mofaz, a leader of the pro-withdrawal party, Kadima, was a founder in the mid 1970s of the Elkana settlement in the northern West Bank. Mr. Mofaz's party colleague, Knesset member Otniel Schneller, still lives in a settlement.

Crucially, few Israelis regard settlers as interlopers on another people's land. The political wisdom of the settlement project is intensely debated here, but only a leftwing fringe denies the historic right of Jews to live in what was the biblical heartland of Israel.

Still, while settlers remain widely appreciated for their idealism, their political agenda has become a minority position. The left has won the argument that ending the occupation is an Israeli existential need. If Israelis believed that peace were possible, a majority would opt for painful compromise and support West Bank withdrawal.

But given the absence of a credible Palestinian partner able to deliver a majority of his people for a compromise Israelis could live with, the public will continue to avoid a traumatic confrontation with settlers that could rupture the military and lead to civil war.

For all the ambivalence toward the settlements, there is good reason why the Israeli government should heed Defense Minister Barak's advice and extend a settlement freeze. If nothing else, a freeze would prove that the obstacle to Middle East agreement isn't the settlements—blueprints exist, after all, for resolving the settlement issue in a comprehensive peace agreement—but the more basic refusal of the Palestinian leadership to accept the legitimacy of Jewish sovereignty over any part of the land.

And if the international community wants to understand why the Israeli public doesn't share its antipathy toward the settlers or its urgency to uproot settlements, a good place to begin is with Mr. Barak's effort to legalize two houses on a West Bank hilltop.

*Mr. Halevi is a fellow at the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, and a contributing editor of the New Republic.*

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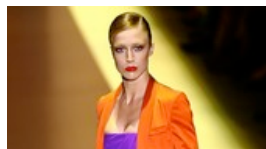
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