

JERUSALEM LETTER / VIEWPOINTS

Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs

VP:58 28 Shevat 5747 / 27 February 1987

Gush Emunim Today

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Ideological Foundations / Settlement Objectives and Policy Implementation / On the Political Front / Internal Crises and Opposition

Following a shaky transfer of power between Shimon Peres and Yitzhak Shamir under the terms of the 'rotation' agreement, a new government has been formed in Israel. This transfer of power has been accompanied by the raising of a number of major controversial issues, not the least of which is the controversy over Jewish settlement in Judea, Samaria and Gaza. The Gush Emunim movement, the major pro-settlement lobby group, has been leading calls for the establishment of twenty new settlements.

The media presentation of Gush Emunim has always tended to emphasize its mystical and somewhat 'cranky' characteristics. Yet, in fact, the Gush (Bloc) is an extremely powerful political lobby. The existence of more than 60,000 Jewish

settlers in a variety of urban and rural settlements throughout the region is due in no small part to the pressures brought to bear – both directly and indirectly – by Gush Emunim during the twelve years of its existence.¹ After the past two years of a Peres-led government during which new settlement activities were frozen, it appears that Gush Emunim is now preparing a comeback which may well threaten the continued functioning of the National Unity Government.

Ideological Foundations

Gush Emunim was established a few months after the Yom Kippur War by a group of citizens who perceived the immediate situation as constituting a crisis for the Zionist state. In their

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national-religious world outlook, Zionism, the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 and the occupation of the historical Jewish 'heartland' of Judea and Samaria in 1967 were all part of a gradual process of divine redemption. This somewhat messianic interpretation of events viewed the land itself as being given by God to the Jewish people and therefore to be maintained in perpetuity by them.

In practical terms, their foremost objective has been to ensure that the area will not return to any form of non-Jewish sovereignty. To this end, Gush Emunim adopted a policy of establishing new settlements throughout the region to create new 'facts' and insure a Jewish civilian presence on the land. These objectives were at odds with the official policy of the Labor governments of that time which were only prepared to implement a minimalist settlement policy along the lines of the Allon Plan. This latter concept proposed new Jewish settlement along the Jordan Valley on the eastern border alone, while the densely populated, mountainous interior of the region was left unsettled in the hope that at a later date the area would eventually become an autonomous Palestinian region with a territorial link to Jordan. Such a policy was anathema to Gush Emunim as it meant the surrendering of God-given land to foreign rule.

Settlement Objectives and Policy Implementation

The government's refusal to implement Gush Emunim settlement proposals resulted in a number of illegal settlement attempts by the Movement. In the majority of cases, the government called in the army to forcibly remove the squatters, actions which were widely reported by the mass media and which focused national attention on the settlement issue. Towards the end of 1975, two settler groups were allowed to remain at their locations by then-Defense Minister Shimon Peres.

Following the rise of the Likud government to power in 1977, Gush Emunim demanded the immediate 'short-term' establishment of twelve new settlements throughout Judea and Samaria and the majority of these locations were settled by the following year. In October 1978, Gush Emunim presented a comprehensive blueprint for settlement in Judea and Samaria. The Likud governments (1977-1984) made public resources

available for the implementation of this and other similar settlement proposals.

Probably the most important single action which enabled Gush Emunim to implement their settlement objectives was the establishment of Amana as their settlement movement. All rural settlements in Israel must be affiliated with a settlement movement, and these in turn are most often affiliated with political parties from whom they receive both financial and ideological backing. The recognition of Amana as a legal equal to the older settlement movements affiliated with the established political parties enabled Gush Emunim to receive public resources through similar acceptable channels.

Today Amana includes over fifty new settlements, the vast majority of which are located in Judea and Samaria. This was partially achieved by tapping a settler potential which was not drawn, as in previous years, from the ranks of the Labor movement. Thus these settlers did not adhere to the locational constraints of the Labor government's minimalist settlement policies. Nor did they feel constrained by the traditional settlement types of the kibbutz and moshav which emphasize collectivism and home production, values of lesser importance to the vast majority of potential settlers. Many of the settlers did not come for ideological reasons (that is, for the sake of settling the region whatever the conditions), but rather because of the attraction of high-standard, suburban housing at prices far cheaper than in the urban centers. The recent mass settlement of the western margins of Samaria nearest the Tel Aviv metropolitan region is based almost entirely on economic incentives, as compared to the ideologically motivated settlers in the smaller settlements of the interior.

Gush Emunim has developed a new type of settlement, the *yishuv kehilati* (community settlement) which essentially a village or small town without the infrastructure of cooperative economics that characterized earlier settlement models. This is in keeping with the Gush's non-socialist orientation. Nearly all of its settlements are of this type. In fact, most are dormitory villages whose labor force largely commutes to work in the metropolitan centers. A large majority of the settlements lack a domestic economic base. They range in size from fifteen to

twenty families in the smaller, newer settlements to over two hundred families in the larger ones.

On the Political Front

Gush Emunim has no formal membership, making it difficult to estimate its size or actual support. While the settlers themselves constitute the grassroots power of the Movement, the Gush has also succeeded in obtaining support from a variety of Knesset members in the right-of-center political parties. Although the Gush has not transformed itself into a political party, many of its members and activists have become leading party figures, including Knesset members of the Tehiya party and the Matzad faction of the National Religious Party. The recent election of a Matzad personality as the new general secretary of the National Religious Party indicates increased strength for the Gush Emunim viewpoint within the NRP's policy-making councils. Gush Emunim's unparalleled success as a non-parliamentary pressure group in Israel has partly been due to their ability to manipulate the political party system without ever having to undergo the test of the electorate themselves. The split of pro-Gush voters among a number of right-wing parties, all of whom identify with Gush Emunim's objectives, has been used to their advantage.

Other leading Gush Emunim personalities have become the administrators of the regional councils set up to provide municipal services to the new settlements. These regional councils receive their budgets through the Ministry of Interior as well as through local taxes. Thus these administrators, as public officials, are in a position to advance their political objectives through the allocation of municipal funds. Additional organizations such as the Council of Settlements in Judea, Samaria and Gaza (*Mo'etzet Yesha*) and the Sheva Finance Company, established to promote Jewish settlement activity in the territories, are largely manned by Gush Emunim activists. Such a process of institutionalization is a far cry from the image of the fundamentalist movement so often presented by the media.

The Movement attempts to promote a populist image by means of its annual Independence Day rally and march through the newly settled areas, as well as through the organization of occasional demonstrations. As is

typical of other Israeli political organizations, it attempts to depict large popular support for its viewpoint by bussing in marchers from state religious schools and sympathetic *yeshivot*. Thus, Gush Emunim rallies are often characterized by the predominance of youngsters and school children rather than an adult population.

A significant rallying of ranks took place in the wake of the Camp David Accords and the subsequent withdrawal of Israel from Sinai. Gush Emunim and its leaders provided a focus for the Stop the Withdrawal from Sinai movement. Gush Emunim viewed the return of Sinai in general, and the destruction of Jewish settlements in northern Sinai in particular, as a dangerous precedent for Judea and Samaria. Many of their supporters remained at Yamit in a final protest before being forcibly removed by the Israeli army.

Internal Crises and Opposition

The discovery of a Jewish underground and its terrorist activities in 1984, and the subsequent arrest, trial and imprisonment of some twenty Jewish settlers, three of them for life terms, resulted in a major crisis within the ranks of Gush Emunim. Their supporters were split, with one camp openly denouncing the underground's activities as being outside the legitimate field of play. Others supported its actions however, owing to what they saw as inaction on the part of the Israeli government in safeguarding the security of Jewish residents in Judea and Samaria in the face of Arab attacks. This fierce ideological debate could be followed in the pages of *Nekuda*, the settlers' monthly magazine.

Although the breach has not completely healed, a degree of reconciliation took place around the question of clemency for the Jewish prisoners. Gush Emunim has been in the forefront of the recent public campaign to release those settlers still imprisoned for underground activity. Such pressure moved President Chaim Herzog to threaten that he would cease his review of the prisoners' request for clemency owing to this outside interference in the judicial process.

While 60,000 Jewish settlers in Judea, Samaria and Gaza are adequate testament to the impact of Gush Emunim over the past twelve years, opposition to the group and its ideology remains intense. The Peace Now movement

continues to protest the establishment of new settlements, viewing them as obstacles to the achievement of any peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians. Religious opposition groups Oz Veshalom and Netivot Shalom emphasize values of peace and the need for inter-ethnic respect as inherently religious values which offer an alternative to the territorialism and nationalism preached by the Gush. Nevertheless, these groups have had relatively little practical impact in combatting Gush Emunim. In the first place, Peace Now does not share the same degree of support among parties to the left-of-center that Gush Emunim does among parties of the right. Indeed, the hard-line members of the Labor party are probably closer to Gush Emunim than they are to Peace Now. The two religious groups have remained small and marginal, owing to the general identification of the religious population with the Gush Emunim viewpoint. Gush Emunim, in turn, derides these opposition movements as consisting of 'speakers' only and point to their own 'doing' (the establishment of settlements) as proof of commitment to their cause. Opponents tend to be labelled as 'do-gooders' and as traitors to the cause of Greater Israel.²

No other non-parliamentary group in Israel's history has had the same degree of success in achieving their stated objectives. Gush Emunim offers a continuous challenge to its supporters - their work is unfinished as long as there exists a chance of territorial compromise between Israel and her neighbors - and have succeeded in

keeping the settlement issue in the foreground of public debate. The return of a Likud Prime Minister to power is viewed by the Gush as a green light for the intensive renewal of settlement activities.

The realization of such objectives could well lead to a crisis situation within the National Unity Government - a crisis embedded in party ideology and principle. The resulting political turmoil could, in turn, lead to the dissolution of the government and the holding of new elections, unless Gush Emunim aspirations are held in check.

¹ The figure of 60,000 Jewish settlers in Judea, Samaria and Gaza is based on estimates made by the West Bank Data Project for the end of 1986. These figures include all urban and rural settlements in the region (not just Gush Emunim settlements), but exclude the urban suburbs in East Jerusalem. Inclusion of the latter would double the figure.

² In Hebrew, *yefei nefesh*. In the context discussed here, there is an added dimension aimed at the do-gooders who would make territorial and other concessions in the search of peace.

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