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In Israel, Settling for Less

By GADI TAUB

Tel Aviv

WILL Israel remain a Zionist state? If so, what kind? These are the important questions in Israeli politics today, and will be looming over the direct talks between Israel and the Palestinian Authority scheduled to begin Thursday in Washington.

The secular Zionist dream was fundamentally democratic. Its proponents, from Theodor Herzl to David Ben-Gurion, sought to apply the universal right of self-determination to the Jews, to set them free individually and collectively as a nation within a democratic state. (In fact, the Zionist movement had a functioning democratic parliament even before it had a state.)

This dream is now seriously threatened by the religious settlers' movement, Orthodox Jews whose theological version of Zionism is radically different. Although these religious settlers are relatively few — around 130,000 of the total half-a-million settlers — their actions could spell the end of the Israel we have known.

The roots of the problem have been there from the birth of modern Zionism. The relations between Herzl's movement and Jewish Orthodoxy were uneasy from the start. After all, the Zionist movement sought to achieve by human means what Jews for two millennia considered to be God's work alone: the gathering of the diaspora in the land of Israel. Most rabbis therefore shunned Herzl, but not all. Some joined the movement, even formed a party within it, based on a separation of religion and politics. For them, secular Zionism was primarily a solution to the earthly predicament of the Jews; it was not so theologically laden.

But over the following decades another form of religious Zionism came to precedence, inspired by the quasi-mystical writings of Abraham Isaac Kook, who was the chief rabbi of Palestine under the British Mandate in the 1920s and '30s. Kook saw secular Zionists as the unwitting agents of God's providence, advancing redemption by returning Jews to their homeland.

His son, Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook, later focused his father's theological ideas around a single commandment: to settle all the land promised to the ancient Hebrews in the Bible. His disciples, energized by a burning messianic fervor, took Israel's victory in the Six-Day War of 1967 as confirmation of this theology and set out to fulfill its commandment. Religious enthusiasm made the movement subversive in a deep sense — adherents believed they had a divine

obligation to build settlements and considered the authority of Israel's democratic government conditional on its acceptance of what they declared to be God's politics.

Although religious settlers often describe themselves as heirs of the early Zionist pioneers, they are anything but. Herzl's vision was about liberating people, while theirs is about achieving a mystical reunion between the people of Israel and the land of Israel. Herzl's view stemmed from the ideals of the Enlightenment and the tradition of democratic national liberation movements, dating back to the American and French Revolutions; religious settlers are steeped in blood-and-soil nationalism. Herzl never doubted that Israeli Arabs should have full and equal rights. For religious settlers, Arabs are an alien element in the organic unity of Jews and their land.

The consequences of these differences are huge. If the settlers achieve their manifest goal — making Israel's hold on the territories permanent — it will mean the de facto annexation of a huge Arab population and will force a decision about their status. In Israel proper, the Arab minority represents about a fifth of its 7.2 million citizens, and they have full legal equality. But between the Mediterranean and the Jordan River, there are roughly equal numbers of Arabs and Jews today.

Even if Israel annexed only the West Bank, it would more than double its Arab population. With birthrates in the territories far exceeding those of Arabs and Jews within Israel, Jews would soon enough be a minority. This would void the very idea of a Jewish democratic state.

Israel would have to choose between remaining democratic but not Jewish, or remaining Jewish by becoming non-democratic. Israel's enemies have long maintained that Zionism is racism and that Israel is an apartheid state. If the settlers succeed, they will turn this lie into truth.

In fact, the former Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, once the great patron of the settlers, was one of the first politicians on the right to accept that the settlers' dream is hopeless. That is why he led Israel out of Gaza in 2005. But not all have followed him. The secular Israeli right has abandoned the idea of annexation but still favors settlement on short-term (and short-sighted) security grounds.

Preserving military rule over the territories, they believe, is necessary to keep terrorism in check, and the settlements demonstrate Israel's resolve. Although the occupation and the suspension of Palestinian rights are officially temporary, the right wing aspires to keep Arabs indefinitely in quasi-colonial status. Given the Palestinians' refusal to sign a peace deal with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's predecessors, many Israelis who oppose the settlements and occupation in principle have thrown up their hands and accepted this situation, too.

But the status quo cannot last — and Israelis and their supporters need to confront this fact. The most pressing problem with the settlements is not that they are obstacles to a final peace accord, which is how settlement critics have often framed the issue. The danger is that they will doom Zionism itself.

If the road to partition is blocked, Israel will be forced to choose between two terrible options: Jewish-dominated apartheid or non-Jewish democracy. If Israel opts for apartheid, as the settlers wish, Israel will betray the beliefs it was founded on, become a pariah state and provoke the Arab population to an understandable rebellion. If a non-Jewish democracy is formally established, it is sure to be dysfunctional. Fatah and Hamas haven't been able to reconcile their differences peacefully and rule the territories — throwing a large Jewish population into the mix is surely not going to produce a healthy liberal democracy. Think Lebanon, not Switzerland.

In truth, both options — and indeed all “one-state solutions” — lead to the same end: civil war. That is why the settlement problem should be at the top of everyone's agenda, beginning with Israel's. The religious settlement movement is not just secular Zionism's ideological adversary, it is a danger to its very existence. Terrorism is a hazard, but it cannot destroy Herzl's Zionist vision. More settlements and continued occupation can.

Gadi Taub, an assistant professor of communications and public policy at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, is the author of “The Settlers.”