

Response to a Critic: The Settlements and Convergence For Peace

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Leopold Friedman (Letter, June 23) objects to my claim that “metastasizing settlements have long occluded the emergence of a Palestinian polity” in my June 2nd opinion article, “Convergence Towards Peace.” He charges that by implying Israeli settlements in the West Bank are like “cancers,” my use of a medical metaphor is “racist,” given that Jewish claims to the territory are “at least as valid as those of the Palestinians.”

As just as it is in principle, the Jewish historical and moral claim to the entire Land of Israel has in practice fueled a four-decades long settlement juggernaut which is threatening Israel’s existence and the entire Zionist enterprise. Echoing the post-1967 warnings of Israel’s founding father David Ben-Gurion, then-Deputy Prime Minister Ehud Olmert was among the first to say in December 2003 that permitting most settlements to remain in the West Bank “will lead to the loss of Israel as a democratic Jewish state.”

More recently, Israel’s Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni has explained: "My need as an Israeli and a Jew is to keep a Jewish homeland for the Jewish people, a sovereign, Jewish and democratic state with a Jewish majority. So how do we [do that]? The idea is to divide the land, to give up some of our rights on the land of Israel and to establish a two-state solution. I came to the conclusion that I cannot implement all of my ideology. I have to choose and my choice was to implement the ideology of a homeland for the Jewish people with equal rights to all the minorities in the land of Israel, but [the homeland will be] only in part of the land of Israel."

57,000 Israelis live in seventy official settlements and over one hundred outposts throughout the West Bank heartland east of the separation barrier. The proliferation of these and other Jewish communities in areas where several million Palestinians seek self-determination has obstructed a two-state solution to the conflict, as intended by their architects. Every U.S. administration for over 25 years, both Republican and Democrat, has viewed the settlements as an obstacle to peace. Countless Israeli generals and IDF chiefs of staff have described them as “security burdens” on Israel, exacerbating tensions between Israelis and Palestinians.

By placing a Jewish minority in control of a Palestinian majority, the territorial maximalism of the Whole Land of Israel movement and its facilitators in both Labor and Likud governments has jeopardized not only Israel’s democratic ethos as a society of equal citizens but its Jewish identity as well. The settlements and the occupation which supports them have transformed Israel, in Olmert’s words, into a country “that controls a large population under conditions of inequality.” Prime Minister Ariel Sharon insisted that “It is...not possible to control densely populated areas for prolonged periods without those populations eventually having to receive rights.” If it fails to remedy this situation, warned Olmert, Israel will become a “pariah state.”

Though I myself have many family and friends living throughout Judea and Samaria, we must face this inescapable fact: the settlement project has become a mortal danger to Israel. Both Prime Minister Olmert and Foreign Minister Livni have stressed that it is the policy of the Israeli government, backed by a solid majority of the Israeli public, to dismantle many West Bank settlements and to draw an interim “security border” between Israelis and Palestinians, preferably by agreement. The government is determined to perform life-saving surgery for the sake of Israel’s survival. My medical metaphor could not have been more apt.