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חסות:

משה קורניק

Senat No. 285 on Political Issues:

Israel's Convergence Program

Main Conclusion:

1. The three areas to be affected by the Convergence Program are: Jerusalem, the Jordan River Valley and the main blocs of Israeli settlements, particular those along the "Jerusalem perimeter".
2. The area to remain under Israeli control encompasses 43% of the West Bank. It currently containing 380,000 Israelis who live in 52 settlements, as well as 270,000 Palestinians, the majority living in East Jerusalem.
3. About 40,000 Israelis living in 31 settlements are to be evacuated.
4. The position taken by the Palestinians, the Arab world and the international community support any step aimed at reducing Israel's occupation of the Territories. Nevertheless, this position denies acceptance of the reality Israel wishes to impose by unilateral measures.
5. Israeli political parties located to the right of Kadima will reject any unilateral measures not accompanied by political returns whereas the ultra-right as well as the left will not endorse the program given the absence of effective negotiations.

The Convergence Program has been put forth as the core of Ehud Olmert's term of office as Israel's Prime Minister. He publicly stated this agenda during his victory speech, delivered at the conclusion of the 17th Knesset elections: "During the coming years, we will aspire to fix the permanent borders of the State of Israel as a Jewish and democratic State enjoying a Jewish majority."

During the speech, he stressed that "...we will attempt to achieve this goal by means of a negotiated settlement" and the "there is no better alternative to a peace agreement." However, "should (the Palestinians) not take part in the process, Israel will take its fate into its own hands.

Based on a broad national consensus, together with the deep understanding we share with our friends throughout the world, especially the United States, we will proceed even without consent from [the Palestinians].”

In order to assess the significance and features of the permanent borders that Olmert seeks to delineate, we will analyse the political agenda formulated by his party, Kadima, and trace the map anticipated with respect to the three criteria presented in that platform.

Territory requisite for the defence of Israel. In order to arrive at a concrete image of the respective territory, we can refer to the ‘Map of Defence Interests’ approved by the Netanyahu government in 1998, which incorporated the Jordan Valley in its broadest terms. According to the Sharon doctrine, the ‘Allon Road’ and its ‘upper level’ (i.e., corridors) as well as the IDF artillery zones located in the Judean Desert, covers an area estimated at about 1,850 sq. km. or about 33% of the West Bank. This area is home to about 10,000 Israelis, living in 29 recognized settlements. A more modest alternative to the Jordan Valley is based on Road No. 90, which will apparently remain under Israeli control should the unilateral withdrawal be executed in the absence of a negotiated settlement.

Jewish Holy Places and National Symbols, Headed by a United Jerusalem, Israel’s Capital. This criterion defines Jerusalem in terms of its new boundaries, roughly drawn according to the separation barrier’s alignment. The estimated scope of the territory lying east of the Green Line, about 74 sq. km., is an area almost equal to that of East Jerusalem (70 sq. km.). Included are Kiryat Arba and the Jewish settlement in sacred Hebron, City of our Fathers, especially the area along the road connecting these settlements to the Green Line, an area totalling an additional 65 sq. km, in which about 7,000 Israelis live.

Maximum inclusion of functioning Jewish settlements, while stressing blocs of settlements. The separation barrier currently being completed is an appropriate device for locating the respective blocs of settlement. We should recall, however, that the breadth of the barrier’s seam represents, according to the Sharon doctrine, the State’s ‘western security boundary’. First, three main settlement blocs comprise the area referred to as the ‘Jerusalem perimeter’: Givat Zeev, Ma’ale Adumim and the expanded Gush Etzion. Their total expanse, about 165 sq. km., contains about 88,000 residents, distributed among 17 settlements. Second, the Ariel-Kedumim bloc, which will eventually be subdivided in two “strips” according to a government decision dated 30 April 2006, covers about 123 sq. km. and houses about 38,000 Israelis in 14 settlements. Third, there is the Hashmonaim bloc, covering about 12 sq. km., home to about 36,000 Israelis dwelling in 5 settlements. A number of smaller blocs should also be added, for instance, Shaked, Alfei Menashe and Tzofin, covering a total of about 153 sq. km.; about 25,000 Israelis live in the respective 14 settlements.

The general picture obtained from this analysis indicates that Olmert is attempting to use the unilateral convergence program as a lever to retain, with or without the separation barrier, territory encompassing about 2,440 sq. km. or about 43% of the total area of the West Bank. This territory contains about 52 settlements (including the Jewish settlements in and around East Jerusalem), in which the resident 377,000 Israelis represent about 90% of all the Israelis living beyond the Green Line. About 270,000 Palestinians also live in this area, the majority in East Jerusalem and the remainder in Hebron’s H2 area. As to the remaining territory, Olmert is offering the “convergence” of about 40,000 Israelis, living in about 31 recognized settlements, among which we can cite Ali, Alon Moreh, Beit-El, Ofra, and Shiloh.

What are the chances that such a map will earn the “broad national consensus, together with the deep understanding we share with our friends throughout the world, especially the United States”? The map will certainly gain near cross-the-

board approval by Israel's political system, as if it guaranteed the transformation of its boundaries into Israel's permanent borders. Moreover, we can assume that the parties ranging from Kadima left would even surrender the Jordan Valley and the Judean Desert within the framework of a permanent settlement that would have retained Israeli sovereignty over only 10% of the West Bank. Alternatively, it appears that all the parties right of Kadima, lead by the Likud, will object to every substantive unilateral move that involves evacuation of settlements without any political returns. Parties such as the Mafdal and the Ichud Haleumi will certainly object to any evacuation. On the Palestinian side, Fatah and the Hamas will privately endorse any Israeli withdrawal. Fatah, however, will openly express doubts about any process that they perceive potentially strengthening their extremist opponents. They will consequently reiterate their contention that the sole basis for determining Israel's permanent borders remains Security Council Resolution 242 and the agreements reached between the parties in its wake. Turning to Hamas, if we accept all their declarations to date, it will undoubtedly publicly reject any borders determined by Israel while repeating their denial of any recognition of the State of Israel.

As to the Arab world, it remains adamant in maintaining its position, stated in the Beirut Declaration of March 2002, calling for a comprehensive peace and normalization with Israel in return for full Israeli withdrawal to the June 1967 borders and establishment of a Palestinian state with its capital in East Jerusalem.

The Europeans have budged not an inch since the nine members of the European Community declared (Venice, June 1980) that Israel is to "...put an end to the territorial occupation which it has maintained since the conflict of 1967" and that they would "not accept any unilateral initiative designed to change the status of Jerusalem." As to the blocs of settlements that Israel wishes to annex, the Nine "are deeply convinced that ...these settlements, as well as modifications in population and property in the occupied Arab territories, are illegal under international law." Israel cannot, therefore, anticipate any sympathy from Europe. The opposite may be the case: The convergence program may only intensify the boycott against Israel's presence in the Territories.

For its part, the United States, under former president Bill Clinton, deviated from the fundamental American position. In December 2000, as part of his plan for reaching a permanent settlement, Clinton proposed beyond annexation of territory and agreed-upon compensation to be granted the Palestinians, Israel receive an additional 3% of the territory lying within Judea and Samaria, free of any need to compensate the Palestinians. It was, however, the current president, George W. Bush who, in a letter dated 14 April 2004 addressed to Ariel Sharon, informed him that although "it is unrealistic to expect that the outcome of final status negotiations will be a full and complete return to the armistice lines of 1949." In the same letter, Bush hurried to add that "[i]t is realistic to expect that any final status agreement will only be achieved on the basis of mutually agreed changes...."

In conclusion, the Government of Israel, headed by Ehud Olmert, can either evacuate the settlements east of the separation barrier or exclude Palestinian neighbourhoods situated beyond it. The considerations directing these moves, numerous and diverse as they may be, will all be guided by the principle of improved Israeli security and reinforcement of Israel's awareness of the need for political and demographic separation between the two parties. However, it would be very difficult to accept assumption that unilateral steps will facilitate arrival at recognized permanent borders. The common Palestinian, Arab and international stance regarding this issue is clear. Although all parties will support, in principle, any measure reducing Israeli presence in the Territories, they will certainly not approve any reality that Israel desires to create by means of the unilateral actions implemented in the form of convergence.