

## Settlers against a settlement



THE policy proclaimed by young Jewish settler-militants on the West Bank is called "Price Tag". Whenever the Israeli army tries to dismantle settler outposts—even individual caravans or huts—that have not been authorised by the Israeli authorities, the militants retaliate violently. Not necessarily in the same place; they may hit Palestinians or soldiers somewhere else. They stone cars, smash windows, burn olive trees and fields. They attack villagers and shepherds, and tangle with the army and police.

Their aim is to persuade Israelis that no further forcible dismantlement of Jewish settlements is possible. When Ariel Sharon was prime minister, he did it once, in 2005, in the Gaza Strip and northern bits of the West Bank, evacuating 21 settlements, against little hard resistance. When Ehud Olmert, who succeeded him, demolished nine buildings at Amona, in 2006, thousands resisted. Now passive resistance is bolstered by physical retaliation.

The militant core group once numbered dozens, says the Israeli general commanding the West Bank, Gadi Shamni. Now there are hundreds. And they are backed, he says, by rabbis and political leaders from the more mainstream settler movement. The general sounds powerless, as he gives warning that "the extremist margins are growing wider." The settlers have been running rings round the army for decades. That is how many of the settlements and outposts got built in the first place, defying the government's purported restrictions.

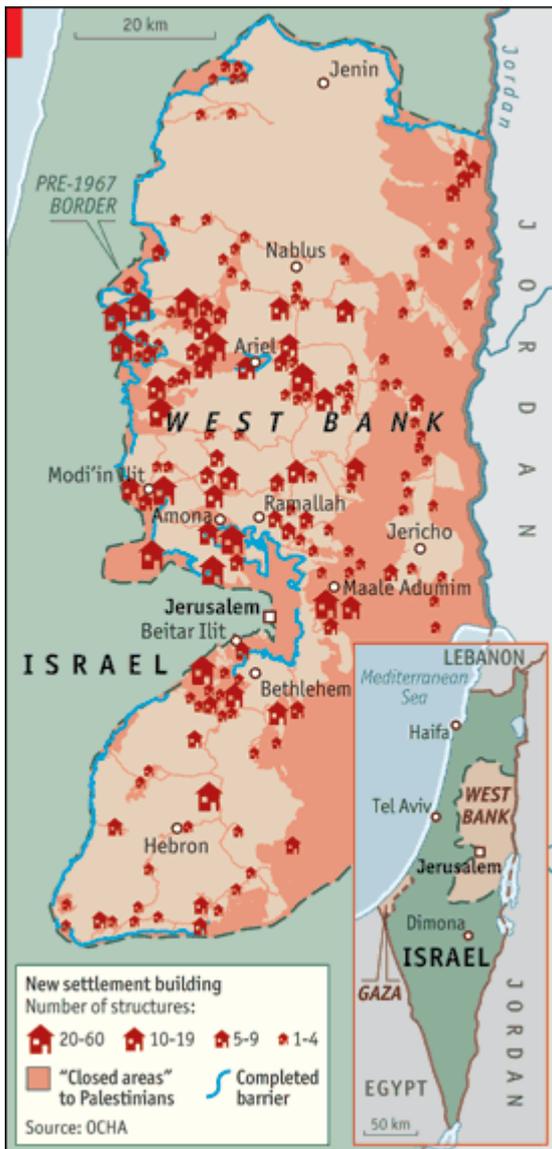
Now a new government under Tzipi Livni, hitherto the foreign minister, looks likely to take over. Will she stiffen General Shamni's spine? For decades the Israeli establishment has been flaccid in the face of the settlers. But she has a chance to build on the changing thinking of her three predecessors. Ehud Barak (1999-2001) accepted the principle of swapping territory and sharing Jerusalem; Ariel Sharon (2001-06), actually evicted several thousand settlers; and Ehud Olmert (2006-08) now says that the land swaps must be equal, so that the Palestinian state ends up with the full equivalent of territory occupied by Israel in the war of 1967.

Ms Livni also knows that her Palestinian negotiating partners accept swapping land and sharing Jerusalem as the basis in principle for a border deal. She herself has been talking for months to Ahmed Qurei (also known as Abu Alaa), the Palestinian Authority's chief negotiator, while Mr Olmert has held parallel talks with the Palestinian president, Mahmoud Abbas.

But for all his talk of an equitable partition, Mr Olmert presided over a period of settlement expansion. Even since he pledged at a peace conference in Annapolis last November to stop settlement building, more than 2,000 new homes have gone up. As defence minister responsible for policy in the occupied territories, Mr Barak will keep his job under Ms Livni.

As prime minister, Mr Barak did nothing while the settlers built with single-minded vigour. Do not, he argued, waste political energy and military muscle on removing the odd settlement

when soon there will be a comprehensive agreement with the Palestinians. This, he and President Clinton proposed and Yasser Arafat rejected, would let Israel keep the densely populated settlement “blocks” abutting the old border (see map) and compensate the Palestinians with land elsewhere.



Mr Sharon drove Mr Barak from office but in time he accepted his thinking. The barrier on the West Bank, which Mr Sharon at first opposed but later espoused and energetically began to build, dovetailed with this long-term strategy of distinguishing between the big blocks and the more scattered, remote and smaller settlements.

The nub of the territorial dispute has narrowed down to the blocks' size. Under Mr Sharon, the barrier was several times pushed back towards the old 1967 border by Israel's High Court after appeals by Palestinians whose lives were made miserable by it. George Bush's administration, which made periodic but mealy-mouthed complaints to Mr Sharon and then Mr Olmert about settlement-building, objected more vigorously to Israel's fencing in the more salient of the blocks, at Ariel and Maale Adumim, which is why the barrier round these areas is incomplete.

Israel says the barrier is temporary and reversible (it is 95% fence, 5% concrete wall), conceived at the height of the second Palestinian *intifada*, or uprising, that started in 2000, and says it has plainly succeeded in stopping suicide-bombers crossing into Israel proper. If completed as planned, it would encompass some 8% of the West Bank. Palestinian negotiators envisage a swap of no more than 2% or so. Another awkward complication is that Israel

suggests that the Palestinians annex land adjacent to the Gaza Strip. But Gaza is ruled by the Islamist movement, Hamas, which on principle opposes a negotiated peace based on two states existing side by side.

The settlers are a big impediment too. The hard-core "ideological" ones, most of them religious, have never accepted the logic of the blocks and still seek to prevent a viable, contiguous Palestinian state by cutting into its territory with their settlements and web of linking roads. Most of the 100-odd "unauthorised" outposts are east of the planned barrier. Peace Now, an Israeli group that monitors settlement building, says that 493 new housing units have gone up east of the planned barrier in the past year, in outposts and older settlements. Most of these are caravans and prefabs, some smuggled in piecemeal past the army's check-points. They represent 18% of all settlement building in this period, but the amount of land they have taken is a much higher proportion, says Peace Now.

The settlement leaders seem pleased. They say the accretion of young families and single people into outlying communities means the movement was not broken by Mr Sharon in Gaza. They reject the idea, embraced by most Israelis, that almost all the West Bank will have to be given back.

Nominally, Israel accepts that it must stop all settlement building on both sides of the barrier and in East Jerusalem. But Mr Olmert never countenanced limits to new building in the new Jewish suburbs of East Jerusalem, where 180,000 Jews now live; he never shrank from saying so, even though he now favours dividing sovereignty in the city between the Jewish and the Palestinian areas as part of a peace deal. Some 2,400 new homes were begun in these Jewish suburbs during his two-and-a-half years in office. As for the big settlement blocks, he was more circumspect in public but hardly so in his actual policy. By one count, the settler population rose by 50,000 during his term.

Counting settlers is a matter of terminology as well as of numbers. Many of the 275,000 settlers (in the midst of roughly 2.2m West Bank Palestinians, by Palestinian estimates) do not feel like settlers and do not identify themselves with the movement. Their settlements are so big and long established that many of their occupants, especially younger ones, are barely conscious of living on the occupied West Bank. This is especially true of ultra-Orthodox communities close to the 1967 border such as Beitar Ilit and Modi'in Ilit. It is also true of Maale Adumim and Ariel, mainly secular towns offering cheaper housing.

The original settler ideologues dreamt of a future in which hundreds of thousands of Israelis would live in the "newly liberated" areas. But they have been only partially successful, since the vast majority—perhaps all but 70,000 or so settlers—live in the blocks. So those seeking a two-state solution still hope for a division of land between the two nations. Mr Olmert talked the talk. It will be Ms Livni's biggest challenge to turn talk into action.

Shopped Around. *The Economist*, London, n. 8602, v. 389, Oct 18-24. 2008. Disponível em: <[http://www.economist.com/world/mideast-africa/displaystory.cfm?story\\_id=12436112](http://www.economist.com/world/mideast-africa/displaystory.cfm?story_id=12436112)>. Acesso em 20 out. 2008.