

Settlers must leave Hebron or accept Palestinian authority

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Despite last week's shooting spree by an off-duty Israeli soldier in the Hebron market, the long-delayed Hebron agreement has still not been signed. It would be an absurd tragedy if 450 Jewish settlers – dominated by armed, violence-prone zealots – were allowed to destroy the opportunity that exists for a fair and peaceful resolution of the protracted conflict. One hopes that an agreement will soon be concluded and the halting Israeli-Palestinian peace process will resume.

The redeployment from Hebron, however, will offer only temporary relief. Welcome though it will be, it will not solve the Hebron problem. There can be no peace agreement, and no peace, unless the settlers leave Hebron. The Israeli government should encourage them to leave voluntarily, both by invoking national interest and by offering the settlers ample compensation for their homes and help in resettlement within Israeli borders. If necessary, the government should be prepared to remove them by force.

The government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu treats the evacuation of these (and other) settlers as unthinkable. Even the former Labor Party government

was unwilling to discuss such a step prior to the final-status negotiations. Yet it is hardly a novel or radical proposition. After the February 1994 massacre of 29 Palestinians praying in the mosque at Abraham's tomb in Hebron, there was strong support for this option within the Israeli Cabinet. Today, many Israeli voices counsel evacuation of the Hebron settlers on a variety of grounds: Shabak, the internal security agency, cited the danger that the settlers could provoke bloodshed, and some religious leaders, including Eliahu Bakshi-Doron, the Sephardi chief rabbi, invoking the obligation of preserving life, called for the evacuation of the settlers if their security cannot be ensured.

The continuing presence in the center of Hebron – a city of some 150,000 Palestinians – of a small enclave of armed and hostile settlers protected by Israeli troops and complex security arrangements that interfere with the daily life of the rest of the population is a threat to peace. It creates the conditions for violence and counterviolence, which could only derail the effort to achieve an agreement and undermine such an agreement once it has been achieved. Beyond their provocative character, Israeli settlements in the heart of the territories in which Palestinians hope to establish their national state – as is the case in Hebron – are inconsistent with

the underlying principle on which a peaceful resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict must ultimately be based.

The mutual recognition between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization in the Oslo Accord of September 1993 paved the way for a historic compromise that would allow the two peoples to share the land they both claim. The majority on both sides envisages two independent states co-existing peacefully side by side. An agreement conducive to a stable peace and a cooperative, mutually enhancing relationship between these two states presupposes a commitment on both sides to the finality of this arrangement (which means relinquishing all claims to the other's territory) and to the integrity, viability and security of each of the two states. Israeli settlements enjoying extraterritorial rights in the midst of a Palestinian state and relying on Israeli troops for protection would seriously compromise the finality of the agreement ^{and} the integrity, viability and security of the Palestinian state. If Netanyahu is serious about peace, he will have to prepare his public for the evacuation of settlements, not their expansion.

A two-state solution does not contemplate an ethnically pure Palestinian state, any more than an ethnically pure Israel. Jews should clearly have the right to live, in

the Palestinian state, subject to appropriate immigration laws and to the absorptive capacity of the new state. Indeed, many Palestinian leaders have indicated their readiness to welcome those Israeli settlers who are willing to stay on as citizens or resident aliens under the authority of the future Palestinian state. This is not, however, what the settlers in Hebron have in mind. They are there to assert their ownership of the Palestinian territories and to establish an Israeli claim to them. There is no question that Jews have religious and historical attachments to Hebron, and Hebron has symbolic significance as the site of an old Jewish community that was destroyed by a massacre in 1929. These sentiments deserve respect, but they do not translate into a right of ownership and sovereignty. Both sides have legitimate claims. The essence of the historic compromise is that each side relinquishes part of its claim in order to achieve an agreement that responds to both peoples' desire for peace, justice and a better future.

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