

# **The US Should Provide the Settlers With Incentives to Return to Israel**

Jerome M. Segal

[Published in Arabic in Al-Quds, April 27, 2017]

When President Abbas meets with President Trump next week, he will face great pressure to return to negotiations without Israel having agreed to freeze settlement expansion in the West Bank.

This has long been a central issue with the negotiations. In 1992, after Israeli Prime Minister Shamir left office, in a moment of openness, he said that his intention was to draw out the negotiations for ten years, during which time he would put half a million settlers into the West Bank. Today it is twenty-five years later, the peace process continues, and if one includes East Jerusalem, there are close to 600,000 Israelis living beyond the green line. The situation has been cleverly described as "negotiating over a pizza, while Israel eats it."

As a pre-condition to resuming negotiations with the Netanyahu government, the Palestinian leadership is demanding that Israel "Stop eating the pizza." As reasonable as this is, the Israeli government, dominated by the settler movement, will not agree. President Trump, having gotten from the Israelis only a vague commitment to exercise restraint, now has turned to the Palestinians, urging a return to negotiations. No doubt, he is offering his personal assurance, "Don't worry. It will all turn out fine."

President Abbas is in a difficult position. With the failure of the efforts of the Obama Administration, it looked as if the peace process was dead. Had Hilary Clinton won the elections, it is doubtful that she would have pushed hard for renewed negotiations. But President Trump's desire to make "the ultimate deal" is very strong. It has opened new possibilities that the Palestinian leadership, quite reasonably, is eager to explore. Moreover, Mr. Trump is unpredictable, and no one wants him as an enemy. On the other hand, the chances of successful negotiations remain poor, and if they go on without end while settlement growth continues, President Abbas will have no choice except to withdraw. Thus while agreeing to renew negotiations may avoid a conflict with President Trump in the short term, it seems guaranteed to result in a conflict later on.

There is however, another possibility. There is a policy step that the PLO leadership can ask of the United States. Potentially it could be even more important than a settlement freeze, and it is one that the US can deliver without gaining the agreement of the Netanyahu government:

The United States can be asked to start, right now, a program that provides financial assistance to settlers who are willing to leave the settlements and return to Israel.

Israeli polling shows that as many as 30% of the settlers, if they were provided assistance to allow them to relocate inside of Israel and to find jobs, would be willing to leave the settlements even without a peace agreement.

Here is how such a program could work:

- The United States could announce that it will provide Israeli non-profit organizations with funding for pilot projects that would begin the process of providing settlers with the financial assistance they require in order to voluntarily return to Israel. The need for such pilot project would be justified by pointing to the difficult experience that Israeli settlers evacuated from Gaza encountered re-integrating (housing and jobs) in Israel in 2005 and for years afterwards. Prior to a peace agreement and in order to minimize settler resistance, the settlers need to know that solutions to their problems exist. For this to be possible, pilot projects need to be developed and tested now.
- While no one knows which settlements will remain in place as the result of a land swap agreement, a program that starts now could focus on settlers living in areas that in all discussions of land swaps would become areas under Palestinian sovereignty. This corresponds to roughly 90% of the West Bank, encompassing all of the settlements beyond the separation barrier.
- In addition, President Trump could announce his willingness to provide the Israeli government with \$5 billion in loan guarantees, if and when it decides to assist settlers in returning to sovereign Israeli territory. While Prime Minister Netanyahu will not take advantage of this offer, putting it on the table will communicate a US commitment to overcome this problem.

Over time, these initially small NGO administered programs would expand, with the goal of achieving, "zero net-population growth" in the areas beyond the security fence. Possibly, a net-return flow could even be achieved. This objective goes beyond what a settlement freeze can accomplish. It should be remembered that even with a freeze on construction, normal population growth of existing settler families, results in an expansion of the number of West Bank settlers by about 12,000 a year. Moreover, with no growth in the settler population, expansion of settlements becomes pointless.

One value of the establishment of such a program is that it would help undercut the current narrative of the Israeli right-wing that says the settlements are permanent, a narrative that encourages settlement by Israelis reluctant to move to settlements if they expect that such a move might only be temporary. It is a way of saying: "Settlements are not like a pizza being eaten; they can be reversed."

Prime Minister Netanyahu will not be happy with a US decision to start such a program, and Knesset Member Naftali Bennett will be furious, but President Trump can respond that he does this as a friend, that in the absence of a settlement freeze, this is necessary to sustain negotiations that are much in Israel's best interest, if "the ultimate deal" can be achieved.

Jerome M. Segal, in the Director of the Peace Consultancy Project at the University of Maryland, and is completing his next book on the conflict, *The Palestinian Olive Branch: The Palestinian Declaration of Independence*.