

NOREF Report

Religion, territory and violence: exploring emerging religious-political groups in Israel and Palestine

Three field-trip reports from Israel and the West Bank

Jacob Høigilt, Tilde Rosmer and Hanne Eggen Røislien

Executive summary

This report is the result of fieldwork carried out by the authors in Israel, the West Bank and Gaza in November 2010. Written sources were consulted and key actors were interviewed on three tendencies and their role in terms of religious ideology, territory and violence: 1) the Islamist Movement in Israel (IMI); 2) the changing nature of Islamist activism in the West Bank; and 3) the presence of members of the Jewish settler movement in the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF). Conclusions in each area are as follows: 1) the IMI represents a trend that increases the internal Jewish-Palestinian divide and decreases the distance between Palestinians in Israel and

in the occupied Palestinian territories; 2) a strong Islamic identity – especially among the young – is increasingly expressed in ultra-conservative religious trends, and specific trends that need to be watched are the evolution of Salafism and the growing influence of the secretive Hizb al-Tahrir; and 3) the claims of a growing presence of radical Jewish settlers in the IDF need to be analysed in terms of the wider issue of to what extent extremist national-religious trends are gaining a greater foothold and exerting greater influence in Israeli society as a whole. In all three areas, more research is needed.

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Introduction

This document is a collection of three separate field reports about Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories (OPT). The reports are part of the NOREF-funded project Religion, Territory and Violence: Exploring Emerging Religious-political Groups in Israel and Palestine. They are based on interviews and written sources acquired during the authors' field trip to Israel and the OPT between November 22nd and 30th 2010.

The focus on the Israeli state, the Palestine Liberation Organisation and Hamas in current policy analysis obscures the existence of important subgroups that will have an impact on future Israeli-Palestinian relations. In addition, the complex role of religion as a vehicle for ideology in both societies is not sufficiently illuminated. This is the background for these three reports, which together aim at identifying religious-political groups that may gain increased influence in Israel and the OPT in the near future. The reports focus on three tendencies and their role in terms of religious ideology, territory and violence: 1) the Islamist Movement in Israel; 2) the changing nature of Islamist activism in the West Bank; and 3) the presence of members of the Jewish settler movement in the Israeli Defence Forces.

The following texts are based on interpretive summaries of 29 interviews conducted by the authors, as well as written sources in Hebrew, Arabic and English. The reports are not meant to be analyses. They seek to forefront Israeli and Palestinian actors and their points of view. Analytical comments are restricted to identifying issues and questions for further study, as the time frame of the current project does not allow for an in-depth analysis.

Palestinian Muslims in Israel

Tilde Rosmer

This report focuses on relations between the Islamic Movement in Israel (IMI) and other representatives of Palestinian society in Israel based on interviews conducted during this field trip only. It relates these observations to the focus of the project on violence and territory. The aim of

this approach is to situate this movement within the context of civil society groups representing Palestinian citizens of Israel (PCI) by focusing on tensions, solidarity and co-operation between the movement and the mostly secular non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and political parties representing PCI.¹

The under-studied IMI is today one of the main opposition groups among PCI. Since its establishment in the late 1970s and its grassroots beginnings, the IMI has gradually increased its institutionalisation and has participated in local elections in Palestinian-dominated areas in Israel from the early 1980s. In 1996 the movement split over disagreement over whether or not to stand for national elections and has since had two branches: the IMI of Shaykh Ra'ed Salah, also called the Northern Branch, and the IMI of Shaykh Ibrahim Sarsour, also called the Southern Branch.

Since 1996 the Southern Branch has had representatives in the Knesset (the Israeli parliament) on a coalition list with different partners: in 1996 the list had four members in the Knesset partnering the Arab Democratic Party; in the 1999 elections this list gained one additional seat; in the 2003 elections this alliance dissolved and the list gained two seats; in 2006 the United Arab List ran together with Ahmad Tibi's Arab Nationalist Party in Israel and gained four seats (including that of Tibi); and in the 2009 elections the list also gained four seats (including that of Tibi). However, despite the split, the two branches operate in a similar manner, emphasising self-reliance vis-à-vis the state by providing services for their constituencies in their own institutions and working to stimulate the Islamisation of Muslim Palestinians in Israel. As for local election results, the Northern Branch has controlled the municipality of Umm el-Fahm since the late 1980s and the Southern Branch controls eight local councils throughout Israel and has representatives in many more.

Because the IMI does not operate with any registered membership and the Northern Branch

¹ For a more-thorough introduction to the development, followers and agenda of this movement, see Tilde Rosmer, 'The Islamic Movement in the Jewish state', Khaled Hroub, ed., *Political Islam: Context versus Ideology*, London, Saqi Books, 2010.

does not participate in national elections, it is difficult to determine the exact number of IMI supporters, as well as the numbers belonging to the two branches of the movement. Nor are there statistics that indicate the numbers of those who use the IMI's facilities. In the absence of such data, the numbers of supporters who participate in functions arranged by the IMI can give an idea of its size. For example, as reported in Israeli newspapers, in recent year tens of thousands of supporters have participated in the annual festival known as *Al Aqsa Is in Danger*, which was arranged by the Northern Branch for the 15th time in October 2010 in its stronghold city of Umm el-Fahm.

Sources

In November 2010 Rosmer interviewed Prof. Muhammad al-Atawneh of Ben Gurion University (together with Høigilt); Zvi Bar'el, journalist at *Ha'aretz* (together with Høigilt and Røislien); Tikva Levy, director of the Israel Committee for Equality in Education (HILA); Yehouda Amichay, an HILA fieldworker; an anonymous parent and political activist from Jaljuliya; Jamal Zahalka, National Democratic Assembly member of the Knesset (MK); Hanna Sweid, MK for the Democratic Front for Peace and Equality; and Ibrahim Sarsur, MK for the United Arab List (IMI).

The IMI and NGOs

Tensions

Based on the interviews conducted, there are two main areas or issues of contention between the IMI and secular NGOs that represent the interests and rights of the PCI: gender issues, mainly women's rights and also gay/lesbian rights; and the approach vis-à-vis the state in the struggle for the just distribution of government funds and equal rights.

Regarding women's rights and position, NGO activists express deep concern over the restrictions enforced on women within the increasingly conservative religious community of Muslim Palestinians, where the IMI is presumed to be a push factor for this development. Examples provided by my interviewees are those of prohibiting women from going into shelters in order

to protect themselves from violent male relatives; using women as pawns in large family (*hamula*) politics by marrying them off without their consent and/or against their will, often to husbands living in other areas of the country far away from the women's family and local community (to be fair, the lack of choice of spouse is also the case for young men for whom the family chooses a wife, but the men stay in their local communities); forcing women to dress "Islamically"; prohibiting women from freely leaving the house without permission from their father or husband, thus prohibiting these women from participating in education and social activities, and limiting their freedom of movement; and not providing or allowing access to sex education, including birth control. As Yehouda Amichay from HILA explained in an interview: "It is complicated for HILA's activism with these restrictions because generally the most active parent in their children's education is the mother, but they are prohibited from coming to our meetings led by me" (a male fieldworker). These observations indicate that to the secular NGOs the IMI is seen to spearhead the increasing conservative tendency in this community. Prof. Muhammad al-Atawneh of Ben Gurion University confirmed these impressions, commenting that "[t]here has been a general Islamic revival in Israel that is visible in terms of increases in Islamic banking, clothing and conservative behaviour". However, formally, the IMI speaks about equality between the genders, albeit acknowledging that men and women have different roles. Simultaneously, at Israeli university campuses, many, if not the majority, of the IMI's student activists are women, which could indicate opposing trends to those described above. Thus, these issues need to be researched further before any conclusions can be drawn.

In terms of approach vis-à-vis the state, whereas most NGOs that work to ensure that PCI obtain their rights as citizens on an equal footing with Israeli Jews focus on demanding material benefits or political rights from the state, the IMI methodology is based on the principle of self-reliance. For this purpose, the IMI has developed an impressive system of local grassroots institutions and organisations that cater for its constituency from the cradle to the grave. It administers kindergartens, after-school activities, youth clubs, extra-curricular classes for pupils

and students, preparation courses for university, religious education for all ages, local radio stations, cultural-religious festivals, and trips to holy places in Jerusalem and around the country. Most of its activities are funded by collections from its constituency and foreign donations. However, the movement also receives state funding for some of its institutions, such as kindergartens and other municipal-related services. From the NGOs' point of view, the main concern caused by the self-reliant IMI approach is that it undermines their struggle to force the state to deliver equal material support and rights to its non-Jewish citizens.

To illustrate this tension, the IMI and NGOs reacted differently to the damage done by the riots in Acre in 2008. This northern city has a mixed population of Jews and Arabs. The riots were started by religious Jews who were reacting to what they considered a violation of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, which is the holiest day in the Jewish calendar. On this day, the entire country comes to a standstill, and both secular and religious Jews refrain from leaving their houses, except to go to the synagogue. When a Palestinian man drove through a Jewish neighbourhood in order to pick up his daughter, he was attacked by religious Jews for violating the holy day. In the turbulence that ensued, several Palestinian houses were torched by Jewish gangs and many Palestinian inhabitants fled the city. In the aftermath of this, both NGOs such as Mossawa – the Advocacy Centre for Arab Citizens in Israel – and the IMI came to the assistance of the families involved. The NGOs offered to help them demand compensation from the state for the damage and the failure of the police to protect victims. The IMI, on the other hand, came with cash and construction vehicles to rebuild their houses. Thus, the IMI, consciously or not, ended up undermining the NGOs' attempt to make the state take responsibility for the damages. In a nutshell, there seems to be a competition between NGOs and the IMI over providing services to the PCI and in terms of methodology vis-à-vis the state. These tensions and their consequences, both in practical terms and their influence on the collective integration of the Palestinian community in Israel, require further study.

Solidarity and co-operation

Most NGO activists interviewed expressed respect for the IMI due to its success in providing local services to the PCI and also in maintaining general good relations with them (i.e. the NGOs), despite the concerns addressed above. For example, Yehouda Amichay, the HILA fieldworker, specifically mentioned the IMI's ability to carry out volunteer-based activism in which leaders and activists put in hard work and long hours to build needed facilities in Palestinian communities, such as schools and playgrounds. The parent activist from Jaljulyia (interview), who represents the Communist Party in his village, added: "They are good Muslims and they take good care of their own. I am a practising Muslim too and I believe in the same as them." The apparent contradiction that this man is a religious communist is an indication of the complexity of identity politics among the PCI.

As for direct co-operation, not that many NGOs engage in cross-organisational work with the IMI.

The IMI and political parties

Tensions

The major tensions between the IMI and secular political parties are caused by their conflicting views on the separation of religion and politics. All the Palestinian politicians interviewed expressed their desire for such a separation, which clearly goes against the IMI's *raison d'être*. This therefore represents a fundamental ideological difference between the IMI and the other political parties. Hanna Sweid was particularly clear that to him, "pushing religion into politics is dangerous", especially with regard to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In his view, dealing with the conflict in religious terms can only produce more confrontations that cannot result in anything but more clashes.

In addition, the issue of gender (women's and gay and lesbian rights) is also a major cause of tensions between these parties. Jamal Zahalka exemplified this with the proposal to change the legal age for marriage from 17 to 18, which he and his party, the National Democratic Assembly, supports, but the IMI opposes. Moreover, Zahalka related that even though IMI representatives never

publicly declare that they support polygamy, they do not oppose this practice, which indicates that they are not against it.

The issue of gender is further related to the influence of the IMI on public discourse. According to Zahalka, the increasing Islamisation of the Palestinian public in Israel and the position of the IMI cause him and other politicians to self-censure themselves not to speak about sensitive issues such as gay and lesbian rights. He asserted that this does not mean that he and his party are abandoning their principles, but rather that there are other more important political issues that take precedence over this issue. Thus, at the moment, gay and lesbian rights are losing out in the battle for minds/voters among the PCI (not that they were ever a major issue).

Solidarity/co-operation

All the Palestinian politicians interviewed stated that on what they called “external” or “political” issues regarding the PCI, they and the IMI are in agreement and do co-operate. These include general rights for the PCI; work against racism in Israeli society, and specifically against the new proposal for racist laws (such as the citizens’ oath and the ideas about population transfer of right-wing foreign minister Avigdor Lieberman); work against house demolitions; and work for equality. This co-operation is evidenced in joint declarations and co-operation in the Knesset and in the participation of all the political parties and the IMI in the High Follow-Up Committee, which is the highest cross-boundary organ representing the PCI.

Concluding remarks

Regarding territoriality, the IMI, similar to NGOs and political parties representing the PCI, focuses its activism within the boundaries of the Israeli state and also within the latter’s legal framework. Thus, like its secular counterparts, it is non-violent, but its ideology is distinctly different due to its mixture of religion and politics, and its views on gender issues in particular. Indeed, based on the interviews and observations presented above, gender relations and the issue of the separation of religion and politics divide the IMI from its counterparts, whereas the predicament

of the PCI connects them. In addition, the IMI has ideological and organisational links with the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and presumably also other movements in the region, such as Hamas (although it is very careful not to disclose any such links, as they would complicate relations with the state of Israel).

In the current atmosphere of alienation between Jewish and Palestinian Israeli citizens (a development that has increased since the outbreak of the Second Intifada in October 2000, when 13 PCI were killed by Israeli police, and is exemplified by the emphasis on population transfer as articulated by Foreign Minister Lieberman), the IMI represents a trend that increases the internal Jewish-Palestinian divide and decreases the distance between Palestinians in Israel and in the OPT. The consequences of this needs to be studied before drawing any conclusions, but it seems fair to assume that the Palestinisation (in addition to the Islamisation) of politics among the PCI will add a complicating element to future peace negotiations between “two peoples in two states”. Thus, in addition to representing a complex element in Palestinian politics in Israel, the IMI adds a complicating element to Israeli-Palestinian politics that needs to be explored fully in a further study. Furthermore, as became clear above, in terms of political issues vis-à-vis the state, the IMI is more in line with than engaged in confrontation with secular nationalist NGOs and political parties, which indicates that the majority of the Palestinian population in Israel will be a force to consider in future peace negotiations.

Changes in religious ideology in the West Bank

Jacob Høigilt

The following report has two aims. Firstly, it will outline the general religious-political development as reflected in the interviews, and will then examine what this means in terms of religious ideology, territorial struggle and violence among West Bank Palestinians. The conclusions are based on 12 interviews conducted in Jerusalem, Hebron, Bethlehem, Ramallah, Nablus and Qalqiliya in the OPT, and in Beer Sheba and Tel Aviv in Israel

during the course of the field trip. The names of some of the people I met with are not disclosed in order to protect their identities; full names and positions are given for all the others.

Paralysis and disillusion: the death of the political process and its consequences

To understand the current religious-political trends in the West Bank, it is useful to acknowledge just how invisible Hamas is as a social and political actor at present. By Hamas members' and sympathisers' own account, the Palestinian Authority (PA) has been very successful in dismantling not only the political organisation, but the whole Hamas social movement in the West Bank. In addition to imprisoning a large number of Hamas activists, the PA has forcibly changed the boards of charity organisations and cleansed them of people who are suspected of harbouring Hamas sympathies. The members of the Palestinian Legislative Council in the West Bank have been rendered powerless and one prominent Hamas spokesman in Nablus expressed fear of meeting with me during the field trip. A Hamas member and journalist in Qalqiliya stated that "[y]ou have a lot of Hamas individuals, but no organised work". He feared that Hamas "might be losing an entire generation of young activists" because there is no venue for them. This view was corroborated by a sympathetic observer and academic in Nablus, who said that the security sector harasses Islamist students and delays the progress of their studies, thus forcing them to abandon their activism on campus and outside.

The weakening of Hamas does not, however, translate into more popularity for the PA. In 2010 trust in Prime Minister Salam Fayyad's government among West Bank Palestinians was between 11 and 21%, except among Fatah supporters, 70% of whom trusted the government.² Among the civil society activists and analysts I interviewed, there was near consensus that a sense of disillusion and conflict-weariness has set in among West Bank Palestinians, despite the somewhat improved economic and social

conditions. Mahdi Abdel-Hadi, director of the research institute PASSIA and an experienced political analyst, expressed the current situation thus: "The PA today is just a big municipality of services that depends on Israel and is funded by the West. It is a five-star hotel under occupation." Several of his colleagues, like George Giacaman of Muwatin and Jamil Rabbah of Near East Consulting (both well-known research institutes in Ramallah), expressed the view that there is no political process in the West Bank anymore, just an administration that is subject to the whims of the occupying power.

At the same time, there is general agreement that Islamic identity among West Bank Muslims has not been weakened, and according to Jamil Rabbah of Near East Consulting, the importance of religious identity is on the rise among the young. (This is probably not unique to Muslims; Sami Awad of the Holy Land Trust in Bethlehem claimed that young Christian men in the Bethlehem area have started wearing clothes with conspicuous Christian symbols on them.)

The proliferation of various quietist Salafi trends deserves mention. Quite unlike the jihadi Salafi currents that have attracted attention in Gaza, West Bank Salafism conforms to the dominant Salafi global trend, which is peaceful, very conservative and concerned with doctrine, individual behaviour and piety rather than political activism. One Hamas member in Qalqiliya caustically referred to this trend as "the religious face of the PA" on account of its submission to political authority.

There are reportedly several Salafi organisations in the West Bank, from the well-established Jama'at al-Tabligh wa-l-da'wa to smaller, more-informal groups centred round charismatic individuals. A more important (and for the PA more ominous) development is the growth of the idiosyncratic and extremely well organized Salafi organisation Hizb al-Tahrir (the Liberation Party). Established in Jerusalem in 1953, Hizb al-Tahrir is a global and uniform movement that subscribes to the ultra-conservative Salafi religious doctrine and in addition works toward the aim of re-establishing the Islamic caliphate as a political entity. Utopian as this might sound, Hizb al-Tahrir is by no means a negligible force

² Fafo, *Key Results from an Opinion Poll in the West Bank (February) and Gaza Strip (May) 2010*, Oslo, Fafo, 2010, http://www.fafo.no/ais/mideast/opt/opinionpolls/palestinian_opinions_2010/Summary_2010_EN.pdf.

in Palestinian society and may well become politically relevant in the not so distant future, as argued below. The party is secretive and there are no figures for the numbers of its supporters, but it is reportedly strongest in Hebron, Jerusalem, and the countryside around Bethlehem in the south and in Jenin, Tulkarm and Qalqiliya in the north. Some analysts made qualified guesses that its popularity in the Hebron district (the most populous in the West Bank) lies between 10 and 15%. During my interview with a Hamas member in Qalqiliya, he estimated that Hizb al-Tahrir has about 1,000 active cell members in that town. Both independent observers and Hamas members I met agree that Hamas has leaked members to Hizb al-Tahrir recently, but they differ over whether this is politically significant or not.

Ideology, territory and violence in the post-Hamas West Bank

The weakening of Hamas and the rise of Salafi trends is not unique to Palestine. It is a general tendency in the Middle East that Salafi currents expand as more modernist Islamist movements seem to exhaust their political potential. In the Palestinian context, the freeze on Hamas activism and the dismantling of its organisation in the West Bank undoubtedly make for more stability and less violence, which is appreciated by ordinary people. However, the increased strength of Salafism has other costs, notably in the social domain, and there are signs that it has political relevance too.

All Salafi trends, including Hizb al-Tahrir, share a pronounced social conservatism and a disdain bordering on hatred for those who do not share their views. For example, the director of a well-established and non-religious NGO in Hebron that engages in capacity-building among the youth stated that Hizb al-Tahrir consistently seeks to sabotage all initiatives it views as un-Islamic. It has targeted NGOs that arranges mixed-sex activities and organisations that provide free musical education to children and youth. While having a political aim – the re-establishment of the caliphate – it encourages private gatherings and keeps a low profile in Palestinian politics. Consequently, Salafism may have far-reaching consequences in a society where civil society has traditionally been relatively strong.

In terms of violence, the current situation promises more stability, at least in the short term. The two Hamas members I spoke with insist that armed resistance and civil protest are the only viable forms of national struggle, and point derisively to the lack of progress on the non-violent track, 19 years after the Madrid conference. However, despite the occasional attack, Hamas in the West Bank does not have the resources to destabilise the situation.

As for the Salafis, they mostly preach non-violence and have not been seen as a security threat. This has gained them good-will among people who do not share their views. In one village south of Bethlehem, I was told how Hizb al-Tahrir has significantly lowered the level of violent family feuds by forcefully advocating religious mediation instead of fist fights as a means of settling conflicts. As for Israeli security, the Salafis have presented no problems. Many of them are wealthy tradesmen carrying Israeli trading permit cards and they have no inhibitions about dealing with Israelis.

However, it is not self-evident that this mode of action will last forever, especially not in the case of Hizb al-Tahrir. As mentioned, this party does have a political aim – the re-establishment of the caliphate. It is committed to non-violent activism, but only until such time as it perceives that it has enough support among the population to initiate a revolution. Hizb al-Tahrir should not be mistaken for a pacifist organisation. It is also very well organised. Andreas Indregard of the International Crisis Group (ICG), one of the few foreigners who have been able to interview Hizb al-Tahrir officials, states that it holds internal elections, has a well-established indoctrination programme and regularly arranges meetings. In Hebron, I was shown some of the numerous internal and public publications the party distributes. Adli Daana of the International Palestinian Youth League, who is strongly critical of Hizb al-Tahrir, nevertheless expressed admiration for its discipline: “It coordinates media appearances by members whenever there is a debate in the local media about social or moral issues, giving people the impression that ‘everybody’ shares Hizb al-Tahrir’s views. ... Whenever there is a wedding or a funeral, [Hizb al-Tahrir members] gather together in a big group of about 50 people and

go together to congratulate or offer condolences, giving them a strong public presence.” Hizb al-Tahrir members have also started to arrange demonstrations, which have caused them some trouble with the PA. Hizb al-Tahrir leaders have been able to gather several thousand supporters in Ramallah, Bethlehem and Hebron to commemorate the fall of the caliphate in recent years, and the PA has sought to suppress these demonstrations. One civil society activist claimed that the Palestinian security forces had found a small cache of light weapons in the house of some Hizb al-Tahrir members they arrested earlier this year (2010), and that this information had been kept secret. It is difficult to assess the reliability of such information, but it merits attention.

The tension between the PA and Salafi organisations, notably Hizb al-Tahrir, seems to have increased during the last couple of years. One explanation for this is that, as a kind of pre-emptive action, the PA cracks down on all kinds of Islamic movements that are able to gather a large number of people in public places.³ There is a danger that the tension between ultra-conservative religious trends and an increasingly authoritarian PA may result in the radicalisation of Salafi individuals.

Conclusion

To summarise the impressions gained from interviews held in the West Bank, the current situation is characterised by a defeated nationalist-Islamic movement (Hamas), a lethargic political sphere, a political administration that survives on foreign aid and Israeli good-will, and disillusion among large segments of the population. At the same time, a strong Islamic identity – especially among the young – is increasingly expressed in ultra-conservative religious trends.

The situation for now is peaceful, but arguably not sustainable in the long run (see the excellent ICG report *Squaring the Circle* for a similar argument pertaining to the issue of security reform in the OPT). During interviews, several long-time

Palestinian analysts wondered aloud how long the current state of affairs can last, given the absence of a viable Palestinian economy and political process, and the lack of progress in the peace talks. In this situation, it is perhaps pertinent to recall the fact that Hamas started as a non-political social movement. Hizb al-Tahrir’s future function and influence are unclear, but the fact that it has a single-minded political purpose and an efficient organisation should be enough to warrant close scrutiny of it in the near and more-distant future.

By way of conclusion, we can point to three issues that merit attention and further study on account of their importance for politics and security in the OPT.

1) The evolution of Salafism should be studied further, including relations between Salafi trends and the PA, and the socio-political impact of Salafism as an ideology and practice among West Bank Palestinians.

2) The influence of Salafi ideology and trends on Hamas and/or its constituency, and vice versa, is another concern. Intermingling seems bound to occur, given the current situation, and examples from countries like Egypt and Kuwait suggest that this may have tangible effects on Islamism as a social and political force. And although defeated in the West Bank, Hamas will by no means be irrelevant there in the future.

3) There is a pressing need for more knowledge about Hizb al-Tahrir and its grassroots activities, both in the Palestinian context and elsewhere. This is a global organisation about which next to nothing is known. Despite its growing influence in Palestinian society, there is hardly any mention of it in literature about Islamism in the OPT. Admittedly, Hizb al-Tahrir is a secretive organisation and is loath to address outsiders, but there is plenty of written material available, and close monitoring of its public appearances will also yield useful data for a more thorough analysis.

³ This was communicated in interviews. The recent International Crisis Group report *Squaring the Circle: Palestinian Security Reform under Occupation* corroborates this view; see <http://www.crisis-group.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/israel-palestine/98-squaring-the-circle-palestinian-security-reform-under-occupation.aspx>.

Israel in the West Bank: the role of national-religious settlers in the IDF

Hanne Eggen Røislien

This report focuses on the relationship between national-religious Jewish settlers and the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) in the West Bank. Specifically, it explores the widely held assertion in Israeli society that the settlers are gaining a greater foothold and influence in the IDF, which has gradually become a more prevalent claim, in particular since Operation Defensive Shield in Gaza in the winter of 2008/09. This is, of course, a serious claim, and, if true, it implies that we may expect to witness profound transformations in the IDF. Should the presence of radical Jewish groups within the IDF be boosted, it would not merely imply an alteration of the IDF's demographic composition. Inherent to the question of the settlers' foothold in the IDF is also that of the extent to which the settlers will import their own values and means into Israel's military. In other words, does an increase of settler numbers within the IDF imply that extremist national-religious trends are gaining a greater foothold in the Israeli military? Can we consequently expect to witness an increased acceptance of a national-religious legitimization of territorial expansion by the IDF?

In order to look into these quandaries, Hanne Eggen Røislien held a series of interviews with people with competence on the topic during a field trip to Israel in November 2010. The interviews addressed Israeli attitudes, concerns and debates regarding the future of the Israeli presence in the West Bank, with particular focus on the settlers and their rabbis in the IDF's military engagement in the OPT. The following report presents a digest of the interviews and impressions from the field trip.

The report opens with reflections on numbers and figures, in order to provide a more solid backdrop for the following analysis, before proceeding to reflections on the general debate in Israeli society concerning the implications of a boosted representation of settlers in the IDF. The report is rounded up by impressions and reflections regarding the expected impact these settlers

may have on the IDF. The report places particular emphasis on the use of civil disobedience and the issue of territorial expansion.

Sources

During the field trip to Israel in November 2010, Røislien met with the following: Zvi Bar'el, Middle Eastern affairs analyst for *Ha'aretz* newspaper (together with Rosmer and Høigilt); Dror Etkes, previously director of Peace Now's Settlements Watch Project and head of the Land Advocacy Project of Yesh Din; Amos Harel, military correspondent and defence analyst for *Ha'aretz*; Anshel Pfeffer, military affairs correspondent and columnist for *Ha'aretz*; Bjørn Hermann, captain in and spokesperson to Scandinavia for the IDF; Danny Seidemann, lawyer, lead counsel for and a founding member of the organisation *Ir Shalem* (Hebrew for "unified city"), and internationally renowned Middle East analyst; and Yagil Levy, professor at the Open University in Ra'anana. In addition, she met with five people who requested not to have their full names given in this report. These individuals represented the following institutions: two soldiers from Yeshivot Hesder in the northern West Bank; one representative from the Yesha Council (an umbrella organisation of Jewish settlements' municipal councils in the West Bank); the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS); and the IDF's Press Office.

The need for clarification

The claim that the settlers and their rabbis are gaining ground in Israel's military does not come out of nowhere: the number of settlers in the West Bank has grown by 5% per year throughout the previous decade. This is more than twice the speed of the general Israeli Jewish population, which according to the CBS grows by 1.9% annually. In consequence, the settlers in the West Bank constitute a group of approximately 305,000 people, living in 121 settlements and 100 so-called "outposts". In addition, some 190,000 Israelis live in 12 settlements in East Jerusalem (outposts excluded).

With these numbers as its backdrop, the conspicuous presence of Avichai Ronski – the IDF's previous chief military rabbi – among the

combat soldiers on the outskirts of Gaza during Operation Cast Lead drew considerable attention in the Israeli press. A resident of the radical national-religious settlement Itamar, Ronski's presence was viewed as a signal that his national-religious teaching was gaining momentum among IDF combatants. This resulted in a series of articles by Israeli military correspondents bringing the role of the settlers in Israel's military forces onto the national agenda.

Still, any analysis of – or claims regarding – the relationship between the settlers and the IDF calls for a series of specifications in order to be valid. For example, because Israeli settlers are constituted by members of a highly multifaceted population group whose only common trait is the fact that they have their homes in territories that are considered occupied under international law, identifying the *type* of settler groups that are gaining foothold is a pressing concern. Equally important is, of course, the question of whether settlers actually *are* gaining a larger foothold within the ranks of the IDF.

A critical problem in terms of any discussion regarding the settlers' presence in the IDF is the lack of accurate numbers and statistics. Neither the CBS nor the IDF's Press Office publishes any data on the IDF's manpower. In addition, the state of Israel integrates data on settlements into other regions in Israel, instead of singling them out. The only data concerning settlers in the IDF is provided by one article in the IDF's military journal, *Ma'arachot*, published in October 2010. This publication is highly revealing, as it states that the demographic composition of the IDF's manpower in combat units is in flux. *Ma'arachot's* numbers indicated that the proportion of religious infantry officers may have jumped from 2.5% in 1990 to 31.4% in 2007.

Ha'aretz chief military correspondent Amos Harel stressed the extent of these numbers, expressing a concern that so many settlers in the IDF's ranks may make the IDF less trustworthy. Yet the article does not indicate what *type* of settlers are being referred to. However, an interviewee in the IDF (who wished to be anonymous) stated that the figure of 31.4% refers to settlers within the West Bank. The reason is found in the interpretation of who a settler is in Israeli society: it is well

documented that settlers in the West Bank are more ideologically motivated than those in East Jerusalem. In addition, the 285,000 West Bank settlers are also more inclined to support a religious and ideological motivation for continued Israeli occupation, while also advocating the territorial expansion of the state of Israel.

Nevertheless, whereas religiously motivated settlers have a longer tradition of making use of civil disobedience and violence in their quest for territorial expansion, there are no examples of secular and non-ideological settlers acting in opposition to the state by such means. Consequently, despite the apparent increase of national-religious settlers within the IDF's ranks, there are few indications of an immediate change in terms of the IDF's activities in the West Bank.

The battle over patriotism?

To understand not only the attitude among Israelis regarding the Jewish settler movement's assumed growing presence in the IDF, but also the attention it receives, two factors must be taken into account: firstly, the intimate relationship between the IDF and Israeli civil society, and, secondly, the national discourse in contemporary Israel.

Today, there is a striking lack of any clear direction in and consensus over the issue of national identity and ideology in Israeli society. This is a topic all interviewees stressed: the Israel of today is fragmented, lacking both a unifying leadership and a single ideological direction. Many express frustration and concern over this. In sum, whereas the IDF is a remarkably influential institution in Israel, the increasing role of the settlers at a time when Israel is renegotiating its national identity makes understanding the role of the settlers crucial.

According to Danny Seidemann, Israel is going through a phase he calls "the battle over patriotism". He argues that Israelis are discussing fundamental questions among themselves. This claim is easily sustained: the IDF has been the backbone of Israeli society for decades. As a "people's army", the IDF has nurtured and maintained an intimate relationship with Israeli civil society. A consequence of these well-documented

intimate bonds is that changes within the IDF may have a critical impact on Israel's non-military sectors. In addition, attitudes towards settlement construction and the whole "settler endeavour" pervade the whole of Israeli society and not only create both friends and foes internally in Israel, but also mark Israel's relationship with the international community. In short, the IDF and the settlers are crucial stakeholders in Israel's ongoing battle over the identity and future of the state.

A similar line of argumentation was presented by a professor of political science, Yagil Levy. According to Levy, the IDF cannot be understood in isolation from this national debate: "The IDF is merely a reflection of the situation in Israeli civil society – what happens here [in Israeli civil society], eventually happens there [in the IDF], and vice versa." Therefore, argues Levy, one must read the role of the settlers within the IDF as an example of a struggle for Israel and the future direction of Israeli society as a whole. A representative of the Yesha Council framed it in a simple statement: "Things are up for grabs now, and we will win."

A key point here is the observation that it is the ideological branch of the settlers who are entering the stage, not the whole settler population. This opens up the question of to what extent we are now witnessing the birth of a *new* group, or merely an old group with renewed strength. According to Dror Etkes, one can hardly claim that the settlers constitute a new pressure group. However, he is inclined to claim that their ability to reorganise themselves in the wake of the disengagement in 2005 may potentially also alter – and increase – their influence in Israel: "The settlers have been forced to reorganise their activities, and new generations are emerging with new needs and new energy", he said. But, he added, it is not reorganisation that increases their influence: "Settlers appeal to the most inner Israeli there is – they represent something that most Israelis don't really want to fight. They are nationalists and treasurers of our culture and tradition. That is why they get so much leeway, just because they are basically representing the fundamental Israeli narrative."

Other analysts expressed similar views, for example, Zvi Bar'el, the Middle Eastern affairs analyst for *Ha'aretz* newspaper. In response to the question of whether new groups are emerging with potential influence in Israel today, Bar'el made the following unambiguous statement: "There are no new groups or new players. It is just the old ones reorganising themselves."

The IDF in a new direction?

Nonetheless, we are left with the question of what to expect: will the national-religious settlers' increase in manpower lead to increased acceptance of a national-religious legitimisation of territorial expansion by the IDF? From the interviews, the answer appears to be "no", for three reasons.

Firstly, it should be emphasised that although settlers' representatives advocate continued occupation through both illegal and violent means, few analysts and journalists actually expect the use of illegitimate violence among the IDF's ranks by settler soldiers. There are two reasons for this: firstly, the settler movement is no longer a coherent group that acts in a united way. One example here is the absence of a leading settler body; rabbinical statements encouraging soldiers to refuse to follow orders consequently have limited impact. Secondly, interviewees emphasised the fact that, despite the fear of extensive disobedience among IDF ranks during the disengagement from Gaza in 2005, only one officer actually refused to follow orders.

Secondly, with reference to the abovementioned element of old players reorganising their activities, the fact that the settlers remain a minority is crucial. Although the number of settlers in the ranks of the IDF has increased, there is reason to believe that they are about to exhaust their own manpower, simply because they are so few. To quote Harel: "They cannot increase and increase They cannot take over the IDF, simply because they are a minority." A representative of the Yesha Council confirmed such assumptions: "We are working to gather more supporters, as we aren't enough."

Thirdly, it is rank and not numbers that matters. Perhaps not surprisingly, the IDF's own

representative stressed the fact that the IDF is ultimately under political state leadership. Thus, Bjørn Herman emphasises a differentiation between numbers and influence: “It does not really matter who the manpower is – it is the government who is in charge of the IDF, no matter how you twist and turn it. ... So whether or not the settlers are heading towards becoming a majority – which I doubt – they still have to obey their employer.” Nonetheless, his statement finds resonance in the words of Yagil Levy, professor at the Open University in Ra’anana, who drew attention to the significance of rank rather than numbers. Levy claimed that the role of the settlers must be seen in relation to two issues: where they serve in the IDF and for how long: “So far, they mostly serve together, and for a limited time. So you cannot really say that they are taking over the whole army.”

However, it should be noted that in line with Harel, Levy questioned the IDF’s ability to perform its tasks as a provider of state security should the ideological settlers take up a military career and enter key positions. To quote Harel: “When the time comes for another disengagement – and it will come, and it should come – the state may ironically be forced to neglect our military forces. With the settlers in the forefront, it is seriously doubtful whether Israel can rely on the IDF for the job.” However, there are few indications of settlers entering long-term military careers *en masse*. The reason for this is the clash between a military career and religious obligations: the majority of religious and ideological settlers belong to Orthodox Judaism, which to many leading rabbis in the settler movement clashes with taking up a life in the military.

Preliminary conclusion

This report has looked into the basis for the discussions regarding the increased role of settlers in the IDF and the potential changes this may imply. The limited data on this issue leaves a series of questions unanswered. For, whereas the numbers indicate a dramatic shift, numbers and statistics alone will not provide the answers: they do not explain the wider Israeli society, which is the crucial backdrop to this issue, and they do not indicate to what extent the settler population is about to exhaust its own potential. There are thus

many indications that future research must both investigate the numbers further in order to paint a fuller picture of this apparently dramatic shift in the IDF’s demographic composition and explore *where* the settlers serve and for *how long*.

Yet any analysis of the IDF should integrate a crucial civil-military dimension. The IDF is a military institution with an intimate relation to Israeli civil society. A critical question regarding the role of settlers in the IDF is therefore not merely about what happens within the IDF, but also how Israeli civil society at large is developing. A key question is thus to what extent extremist national-religious trends are gaining a greater foothold and exerting greater influence in Israeli society as a whole. Such critical assertions call for further analysis of the players in the Israeli political scene to grasp the complexity of Israeli society and its future direction.

General conclusion

The three religious trends identified in these reports (the Islamic Movement among Palestinian citizens of Israel; conservative Islamism in the West Bank; and national-religious settlers entering the IDF) are relatively new phenomena on the Israeli/Palestinian political and social scene. However, it is clear that their emergence has the potential to increase tensions within and between Israel and the OPT. In Israel, there is unease and uncertainty about the influx of national-religious settlers into the IDF, a supposedly secular institution. Among Palestinian citizens of Israel, the Islamic Movement advocates views on religion, society and politics that conflict with those of the previously dominant secular movement. In the West Bank, the suppression of Hamas and the subsequent weakening of the modernist kind of Islamism associated with the Muslim Brothers have led to a more visible ultra-conservative Salafi movement.

These trends seem destined to play a greater role in Israeli and Palestinian societies in the near future, yet they have been largely overlooked by politicians and academics alike. We have suggested some areas where a more in-depth study would be of benefit to policymakers and analysts.

In the case of the Islamic Movement in Israel, its ideology and practice as an Islamic social movement is likely to cause increased tension with two very different actors in Israeli society: secular Palestinian NGOs and the Israeli state. The evolution of the Islamic Movement and the approach taken to it by other groups and institutions in Israeli society should be followed closely.

In the West Bank, the social and political salience of various strands of Salafism merits further attention. Hizb al-Tahrir in particular should be studied in more depth, considering its avowedly political programme and goals.

The report on the role of the national-religious settlers in the West Bank drew attention to the significance of the military ranks held by settlers rather than merely the numbers of settler soldiers. Yet little is thus far known about how the settlers are actually altering the IDF. The settlers' entrance into the IDF calls for an analysis of this trend in terms of three dimensions: the ranks they hold within the IDF, changes in the demographic composition of Israeli society at large and their status as a minority within Israeli society.

