

Preparing to Sacrifice Israel

Chris McGreal in Beit El
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'Settlers don't know when the knock on the door will come and they have to leave'

Acting prime minister prepares to sacrifice smaller colonies to secure future of bigger ones

Three decades ago, a small group of religious pioneers installed themselves on a bare hillside to reclaim the biblical town of Beit El for the modern state of Israel.

A few miles inside the occupied West Bank, Beit El offered a special symbolism. Its name, meaning House of God, was chosen by Jacob 4,000 years ago because it was there that the Lord told him the land belonged to the Jews. The modern community grew into a settlement of 6,000 people, its residents certain no one could take from them what God had said was rightfully theirs.

Israel's voters appear ready to differ.

If, as expected, next week's general election returns a government led by the acting prime minister, Ehud Olmert, and his Kadima party, Beit El and other settlements home to tens of thousands of Jews are probably doomed. Mr Olmert says he will sacrifice many isolated and smaller colonies - often the ones most dear to the religious community - to hold on to the settlements on the Israeli side of the West Bank barrier that will mark its future border.

"I'm pretty sure we're on the death list," said Chaim Silberstein, a resident of Beit El for 21 years. "We have rights. We are not occupiers. We are here for political, religious and historical reasons. But if Olmert is elected I think we are finished."

The future of Israel's West Bank colonies is at the heart of an election being fought over how best to separate from the Palestinians. The Israeli right would keep all the settlements and pen the Palestinians into cantons. The left would negotiate and pull back much closer to the 1967 border.

Forced removals

But the opinion polls show the strongest backing is for the strategy laid out by Kadima's founder,

Ariel Sharon, before he fell into a coma - to act unilaterally to withdraw behind the barrier and give up much of what lies beyond.

Mr Silberstein, a "strategic estate agent" - meaning he buys properties in Jerusalem from Arabs to establish Jewish communities - says the skill of Kadima's strategy is that it divides the settlers. About 70,000 would be moved to let 350,000 Israelis in the main settlement blocks to stay where they are.

"If they do try to give up the heartland of Israel they will be using the age old tactic of divide and conquer. It will be a big challenge for us to maintain unity because those people inside the fence are going to thank God their backsides were saved," he said.

The forced removal of 8,000 settlers from the Gaza Strip last year showed that it could be done without widespread upheaval. Mr Silberstein said the settlers, a minority who once wielded immense political power, had lost public support. Where once they were seen as enhancing Israel's security, now they are seen as undermining it.

"The settler community, the religious Zionist community and the [ultra-religious] Haredim bear a certain responsibility for [alienating] the majority of Israelis. The rest of us took the support of other Israelis for granted.

Unfortunately we woke up a little late," he said.

"If the government decides we have to go, respecting that decision is the democratic thing. The furthest I would go is passive resistance. It's illegal but it was good enough for Gandhi and Martin Luther King."

Mr Silberstein will vote for the National Union led by Benny Elon, who wants to annex the occupied territories to Israel and expel many Palestinians to Jordan. So will Yoel Tzur, a founding resident of Beit El in 1978 whose wife and 12-year-old son were shot dead by a Palestinian 10 years ago. "Support for Kadima represents the despair of the Jewish people, a feeling that we have no alternative. It's a bankruptcy, or a lack of willingness to keep the tradition of the Jewish people who have returned after 2,000 years," he said. "We will work in a democratic way to oppose it in any way possible but once the government makes the decision we will respect it," he said.

An hour's drive north of Beit El in the settlement of Karnei Shomron, near Nablus, there are those who believe Israel cannot get out fast enough.

Changing world

Benny Raz, a former El Al security agent, moved to the settlement with his family eight years

ago. "We are living with uncertainty. The settlers don't know when the knock on the door will come and they will have to leave. Why do we have to be hostages? Why not plan for the future now when we already know what the end will be?" he said.

Last year Mr Raz was a founder of One Nation, a group campaigning with backing in parliament for the government to pay compensation to any settler prepared to move back to Israel. "I bought my house for \$120,000 (£69,000) and today it's worth \$30,000 because people don't want to buy houses on the other side of the fence," he said.

One Nation says a survey of 57 settlements found 80% of residents would take the money rather than fight the government. But there is opposition.

Mr Raz said he was fired from his job at the settlement council six months ago because of his involvement in the campaign and a rabbi placed him in "herem", an ancient religious practice requiring that a wayward person be ostracised.

"The world has changed. The Russian empire collapsed. There might be democracy in Iraq. Israel has to change too. Finally the Arabs will accept the 1967 borders. We are strong enough to let them have that," he said. "It's not acceptable in 2006 that the Palestinians should be without water or electricity, their children without education. The Palestinians have to have their own state and they will get back their self-respect and forget about terror."