

The Settlers: Israel's movement toward an apartheid state

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Directed by Shimon Dotan; written by Dotan and Oron Adar

This June marks the 50th anniversary of the Six-Day Arab-Israeli War, in which the rapid victory of the Zionist state led to a tripling of the territory under its control. The war spawned a settlement movement in the Occupied Territories, particularly in the West Bank. *The Settlers*, a documentary film being screened this month in New York, Los Angeles and London, explores the explosive growth of this movement in recent decades.

Israeli settlements in the occupied territories, spearheaded by a relative handful of religious fanatics beginning in the late 1960s, have now grown to encompass a population of about 400,000 in the West Bank, amid 2.7 million Palestinians who live under Israeli military rule and are denied the most elementary rights in their own land. Nearly another 400,000 live in east Jerusalem and in the Golan Heights.

The enormous growth of the settlements, illegal under international law, has more and more exposed the hypocrisy behind the pretense of the Zionist authorities and their imperialist backers to support a “two state solution” to the Mideast conflict. Inside Israel itself, right wing elements are openly advocating the annexation of wide sections of the West Bank, an outcome that would amount to an official acknowledgment that Israel had become, to all intents and purposes, an apartheid state.

Dotan's documentary combines archived video and photography, contemporary interviews with various academic and political observers and, most importantly, conversations with some of the leading figures of the ultra-right settler movement. The resulting film gives an overview of the five decades of the occupation of the West Bank that is useful, although it seriously minimizes the responsibility of the Labor Zionist founders and leaders of the state of Israel for the first three decades of its existence for the growth of the settler movement. The end result amounts in that sense to a political cover-up.

The award-winning Israeli filmmaker and screenwriter has explained the settlers willingly spoke to him even though he made it clear that he did not share their views. “Perhaps they thought that I was a conduit through which they could tell their side of the story,” he has said. Whatever the motivation, the resulting discussions shed some light on the decades-long process through which the most extreme chauvinist and messianic religious elements have expanded their influence within the Zionist state and its ruling establishment. *The Settlers* in some respects complements another recent Israeli film, *Censored Voices*. In that

documentary, released in 2015, Israeli veterans of the Six-Day War listened to their own tape-recorded testimony from nearly five decades ago, pondering the history of the past 50 years with concern and anxiety.

While *Censored Voices* examined the earlier testimony in the context of the relentless entrenchment of the occupation over the recent decades, *The Settlers* looks in some detail at the history of the settlement movement itself, including present-day interviews with some of those who have played a leading role.

Rabbi Yehuda Kook was one of the first religious extremists demanding a “Greater Israel.” Kook, who died 35 years ago, spoke in May 1967 of the “pain of Partition,” voicing his bitter opposition to the acceptance by the Zionist establishment of the UN Partition Plan of November 1947. When Israel overran the West Bank in the war in June 1967, the Rabbi's followers, basing themselves on his words of less than a month earlier, attributed the outcome to divine providence. In April 1968, Rabbi Moshe Levinger led a group of settlers into Hebron, the first time that settlers had moved into an urban center. This and other settlements later became official policy. Hebron became a magnet for extremists, the film explains, with 1,000 Israeli soldiers protecting 600 settlers among a Palestinian population of 200,000.

“How can one say no?” became the answer of “mainstream” Zionist leaders when confronted by the settlers' demands. The ultra-right pursued the strategy of becoming “a bone in the government's throat,” as one of its leaders declares. The authorities refused to move against the settlers, and the settlements expanded into areas that the government itself acknowledges are illegal under Israeli, and not only international law.

On this crucial issue, *The Settlers* covers up the role of the Zionist political establishment. Figures such as then-Prime Minister Levi Eshkol in 1967, Labour Party minister and former general Yigal Allon, and Prime Minister Golda Meir were not in some way misled by the settlers. They encouraged the ultra-right, and not the other way around.

The national unity government after the 1967 war, headed by Eshkol, established settlements in the newly conquered territories. Golda Meir was chosen to succeed Eshkol precisely because she embraced the nationalist perspective of the Labour Zionists, and a new wave of religious immigrants came from Europe and the United States to settle in the Occupied Territories. Moshe Levinger based himself in part on these elements, as did Meir Kahane and his fascistic Kach party. Kahane, assassinated more than 25 years

ago, remains a hero to and is considered the spiritual founder of the most extreme settler outfits today.

The victory of the right-wing Likud under Menachem Begin in 1977 was another turning point in settlement expansion. Begin, hailed by his supporters as the “king of Israel,” promised many more settlements, and appointed Ariel Sharon as “settlement czar.” Sharon, who was later to become infamous for his role in the Sabra and Shatila massacre of the Palestinians in the Lebanese civil war in 1982, also launched a massive infrastructure campaign in the West Bank during this period. The secular right allied itself increasingly with the ultra-religious elements. The settler population grew from only 4,400 in 1977 to about 100,000 at the end of the 1980s.

The last two decades have seen an even more explosive growth of the settlements. The Oslo Accords of 1993 between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization included a commitment to freeze settlement activities, a commitment that quickly evaporated.

Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated in November 1995, and over the next decade, according to a report released in 2005, millions of dollars in government funds were diverted into settlements deemed illegal by the Zionist authorities themselves, with one former government official putting the figure of illegal settlements established during this period at 105. Palestinian anger in the face of indefinite occupation erupted twice in mass resistance in the past 30 years, in the first and second Intifadas from 1987-1991 and 2000-2005, respectively.

Dotan interviews Sarah Nachshon, who played a major role in entrenching the settlement in Hebron by insisting that her infant child, after he died of sudden infant death syndrome, be buried in the city’s old Jewish cemetery. Also interviewed is Daniella Weiss, an early settler who later broke with the established movement because she did not consider it aggressive enough in seizing Palestinian land. Weiss is known as the “Grandmother of the Hilltop Youth,” a new and even more openly racist and anti-Arab trend, which seeks to establish a Jewish kingdom between the Nile and the Euphrates Rivers. One of the younger settlers is quoted on camera as proudly declaring, “I am a racist.”

Others who put forward the extreme ideological and political vision of this movement in *The Settlers* include Benny Katzover, a founder of the Gush Emunim movement and among the founders of the Kiryat Arba settlement in Hebron, and Yehuda Etzion, another founder of Gush Emunim who was imprisoned for attempting to blow up the Dome of the Rock on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem.

Although the ultra-religious elements remain the dominant spokespersons, more than 80 percent of the current settler population consists of “economic” migrants, including many from the former Soviet Union who have settled in the West Bank because of affordable housing, numerous economic subsidies and the protection of the Israeli army. It was the issue of affordable housing, in fact, that triggered the mass protest movement, involving largely middle class layers, in August 2011.

This points to the increasingly conscious policy of the Israeli establishment. Added to the messianism of the ultra-religious is the usefulness of the West Bank as an outlet for the growing class tensions and inequality inside Israel itself. Israeli capitalism is

unable to satisfy the basic social, economic and democratic rights of its citizens, let alone those living under Israeli occupation. The Zionist state, based upon the dispossession and repression of a people already living there, increasingly requires the cultivation of and reliance upon a fascist layer which is used in violent provocations against the Palestinian people. The conditions of fear and intimidation from which the Jewish people were forced to flee for their lives in the years leading up to the Holocaust are increasingly echoed in the repression meted out against the Palestinians. *The Settlers* ignores these issues. Dotan, as a member of the Israeli liberal intelligentsia, is horrified by the trajectory of the settlement movement, but can neither explain it nor propose any alternative. The film essentially takes off from 1967, but the root of the conflict goes back to 1948 and earlier, with the movement to establish a Zionist state in the heart of the Arab world, and then, in the shadow of the Nazi horror, the actual establishment of this state of Israel.

As for the present day, Dotan has nothing to say about the Netanyahu government. Netanyahu served as Prime Minister for several years after the assassination of Rabin and again for much of the past decade. He now faces possible corruption charges, presides over a fractious coalition and is increasingly challenged by Naftali Bennett’s Jewish Home party, with its support for even more aggressive expansion of the settlements. All of these developments reflect the weakness of the Zionist state, and not its strength. A garrison state maintained by an unending flow of military and economic support from world Zionism and US imperialism has only temporarily masked the explosive class tensions within Israel, which are bound to explode in the not too distant future.



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