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ANALYSIS | 'Lebanon, Part of the Promised Land': Israel's Messianic Right Wing Targets New Territory for Settlements

Wednesday 19 June 2024, by [PFEFFER Anshel](#) (Date first published: 18 June 2024).

Before you dismiss the religious messianists who held a small online conference on Monday with their eyes set on reclaiming 'God's Promised Land,' remember that their plans for West Bank settlement seemed equally outlandish 50 years ago

People hanging out at the beach in the Lebanese port city of Tyre last week. Some Israeli settlers have their eyes on southern Lebanon land below the Litani River. Credit: Anwar Amro/AFP

Toward the end of Monday's online conference organized by Uri Tzafon ("Wake Up the North"), a far-right movement calling for Israeli settlement in southern Lebanon, a feeling emerged that this wasn't really an event worthy of coverage.

After all, this was [a group of religious messianists](#) discussing a topic so seemingly detached from reality that, at its peak, only 280 people were watching its YouTube channel.

And then the moderator, Prof. Amos Azaria, introduced a panel discussing "Successful Models of Settlement From the Past and Lessons for South Lebanon" with [Daniella Weiss](#), Yehudit Katzover and Rabbi Elishama Cohen.

Unlike the previous speakers, this panel had no expertise or insight on the history or topography of Lebanon. But what they had was proof that a small, determined group can change the course of Israel's history.

Back in the 1970s, Weiss and Katzover were among the leaders of the movement that founded the Jewish settlements in Samaria and Hebron. Cohen, a lesser-known figure, has spent the last seven years climbing with a tiny band of young students to the ruins of Homesh – the West Bank settlement evicted in 2005 as part of the disengagement plan. However, the Netanyahu government passed its "[canceling the disengagement" law](#) last year, allowing them to build a permanent structure there.

Daniella Weiss during a march by settlers last year. Fifty years after she helped establish settlements there, half a million Israelis now live in the West Bank. Credit: Moti Milrod

Weiss reminisced about the days when Gush Emunim, the original settler movement, had tried to found its first Samaria settlement in Sebastia exactly 50 years ago. Today, she is the leader of one of the groups trying to rebuild Israeli settlements in Gaza and is open to suggestions regarding Lebanon as well. She has the receipts: half a million Israelis now live in the West Bank.

“You have to dream,” said Cohen, echoing Weiss. “There are many obstacles, but we will bang our heads against the wall and the wall will break. In Lebanon as well.”

They are one of the success stories of Israel’s last half-century – and if they’re joining the movement to settle South Lebanon, who are we to call them delusional?

They live among us – Israelis who look to the north and dream of a home in Lebanon. Israel Socol, a reservist who was [killed in action in Gaza](#) at the start of the year, was one of them. The Uri Zafon movement is named after him and his sister, who started Monday’s proceedings recalling his desire to “live in a place where it’s green in summer and white in winter.” On his grave they wrote the words “I saw you Gaza, under the shade of Lebanon’s trees.”

Socol wasn’t alone. A succession of speakers followed, all Zooming in from their homes. Eliyahu ben Asher, who wasn’t introduced with any title but according to the Srugim website to which he regularly contributes is “a rabbi, *sofer* [scribe of Torah scrolls], amateur historian and reservist,” presented the “geopolitical aspect” of Lebanon.

A convoy of United Nations peacekeepers from France seen after crossing a makeshift bridge over the Litani River, southern Lebanon, in 2006. Credit: Sergey Ponomarev/AP

Apparently it is a “colonialist construct – a Western intervention in the Ottoman Empire.” In other words, “everything they say in the Middle East about Israel is actually true when it comes to Lebanon ... it’s a failed state from birth.” And since Lebanon is an invented entity with an illogical border with Israel – another colonial remnant from the 1916 [Sykes-Picot Agreement](#) dividing Ottoman lands – Israel should aspire to “a real border between the southern and northern Galilee where the war will end, and that’s the Litani River.”

Next online was biblical scholar Prof. Yoel Elitzur, who enthused over the “evident miracle” and “divine message” of the Hamas attack [on October 7](#). He urged listeners to understand what God was demanding of them (this message got Elitzur suspended from the Academy of the Hebrew Language eight months ago when he wrote about it online).

Elitzur brought a wealth of Old Testament quotes and place names to prove that Lebanon is part of God’s Promised Land, whether under the “limited promise” – which reaches the Gulf of Alexandretta in Turkey, and includes all of Lebanon and western Syria – or the “expanded promise,” which includes the land south of the Euphrates, all of Syria and western Iraq.

The next speaker was Hagi ben Artzi, better known as the older brother of Sara Netanyahu. “We’re not radical – we don’t want a meter beyond the Euphrates,” he told viewers. He also added the biblical Jeshimon, Saudi Arabia, to the list.

Back to modern times and the next speaker was lawyer Doron Nir Tzvi, whose contribution to the conference can be summarized in his declaration that “everything is bullshit”: If Israel decides to annex south Lebanon, it can be formalized legally and diplomatically.

Members of the Uri Tzafon movement protesting at a junction near Haifa earlier this year, calling for the settlement of southern Lebanon. Credit: Linda Dayan

After him came Amiad Cohen who, interestingly, wasn’t introduced by his day job – CEO of the Israeli branch of the ultra-conservative [Tikvah Fund](#) – but as a major in the Israel Defense Forces reserves. He was mainly concerned that the IDF’s generals no longer talk of “capturing territory” as a war aim, but said he was hopeful that when “the Third Lebanon War” begins, capturing the territory up to the Litani River would indeed be a prime objective.

You can dismiss this sparsely attended conference, with its participants dropping off the line, not knowing how to launch their slide presentation or talking of a war that has yet to start. After all, it's not the first time the messianic right has spoken of building settlements in south Lebanon. Gush Emunim was calling for a return to the "homeland of the Tribe of Asher" back in 1982 when the first Lebanon war began. Nothing came of it then.

But you should also look at today's reality, in which this same political-social-religious segment of Israel has established a massive settlement enterprise in the West Bank, which would have seemed delusional 50 years ago. This is the reality Finance Minister - and no less importantly, perhaps more, minister in the Defense Ministry - [Bezalel Smotrich](#) was aiming at when he demanded two weeks ago that Israel "occupy south Lebanon" if Hezbollah continues firing missiles at Israel's northern communities.

Lebanese men inspecting a house that was destroyed in an Israeli airstrike in the village of Adloun, southern Lebanon, earlier this month. Credit: Mohammad Zaatari/AP

It's such an imaginary development that there aren't even surveys asking how many Israelis support the idea of settlements in south Lebanon (there are [surveys on rebuilding settlements in Gaza](#)). Still, it could become a central part of Israel's public discourse very quickly if a ground war does start with Hezbollah.

They've already proved that in Israel, today's delusions are tomorrow's policy and the next day its reality.

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P.S.

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<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2024-06-18/ty-article/.premium/lebanon-part-of-the-promised-land-israels-messianic-right-wing-targets-new-territory/00000190-2b9d-d340-a1f8-2b9d18220000>