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Bennett rejects Palestinian 'right of return' to West Bank

• By TOVAH LAZAROFF

Palestinian refugees can not be allowed to return to the West Bank en masse, Education Minister Naftali Bennett told Army Radio on Sunday morning. He warned that such a move would endanger the State of Israel.

"Anyone who allows millions of [Palestinian] refugees into Kalkilya and Tulkarm will turn Route 6 into a large refugee camp," Bennett said, referring to the major highway that lies adjacent to the two Palestinian cities.

Kfar Saba is just three minutes from Kalkilya said Bennett, as he spoke of the area in the center of the country.

"I want to see a resident of Kfar Saba who would agree to see [in their backyard] thousands of buildings filled with refugees from Syria and Lebanon," he said.

Bennett said part of his opposition to the creation of a Palestinian state stems from the issue of Palestinian refugees, who would be allowed the right-of-return to such a state.

Providing the Palestinians with autonomy instead of statehood in the West Bank would prohibit such an option, he said.

Bennett linked the issue of the return of Palestinian refugees to a future state in the West Bank, to his opposition to an approved plan to expand Kalkilya by 14,000 new homes by 2035.

Kalkilya is located in Area A of the West Bank which is under the auspices of the Palestinian Authority. The Kalkilya plan, which the security cabinet is slated to vote on for the second time, would expand the city into Area C of the West



NAFTALI BENNETT
(Marc Israel Sellem/The Jerusalem Post)

Bank, which is under Israeli military and civil control.

Bennett spoke about the issue of Palestinian refugees in response to comments made by Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman on the topic when he spoke last week at the annual Herzliya Conference.

"We will not allow one single refugee to return to the 1967 lines," Liberman said. "That is at least my opinion, not a single refugee, not a quarter-refugee will return to the '67 lines."

Israel has long operated from the presumption that in any final status agreement with the Palestinians, refugees would have the right-of-return to the newly created Palestinian state but not to sovereign Israel.

Any other resolution of the issue, Jeru-

salem has argued, would undermine the concept of two states for peoples.

But Liberman, like Bennett, raised the issue of the risks of such a resolution in the current geopolitical reality.

The Palestinian Authority can absorb the refugees, but pragmatically it would be difficult, Liberman said.

"If they want to take them in Nablus or Hebron or Kalkilya, let them," he said.

At issue, Liberman said, are 700,000 Palestinian refugees and their descendants living in Syria and Lebanon.

"Not a single Palestinian will return from Canada or the United Kingdom," he said.

Those who would seek to relocate to the newly created Palestinian state would be refugees in Syria or Lebanon, who now live in those countries without rights.

"All of those would want to return," Liberman said.

"To absorb 700,000 people in terms of housing and the economy and people who do not have a profession, there is a generation growing up in Syria that for the last six years have not been to school," he said. "Do not delude yourselves. Even when we resolve the conflict with the Palestinians it will not solve the issues, it will magnify them."

It is one of the reasons that a final-status agreement to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has to be a regional deal, Liberman said.

"The only thing that is a light at the end of the tunnel is a regional arrangement, a comprehensive agreement, full diplomatic relations, full economic relations, not under the table but over the table with Gulf States, with Saudi Arabia [and with] Kuwait," he said.