



BY DAVE COOK—THE WASHINGTON POST

Israelis Criticize Settlement Study

U.S. Figures on Vacant Housing Called False

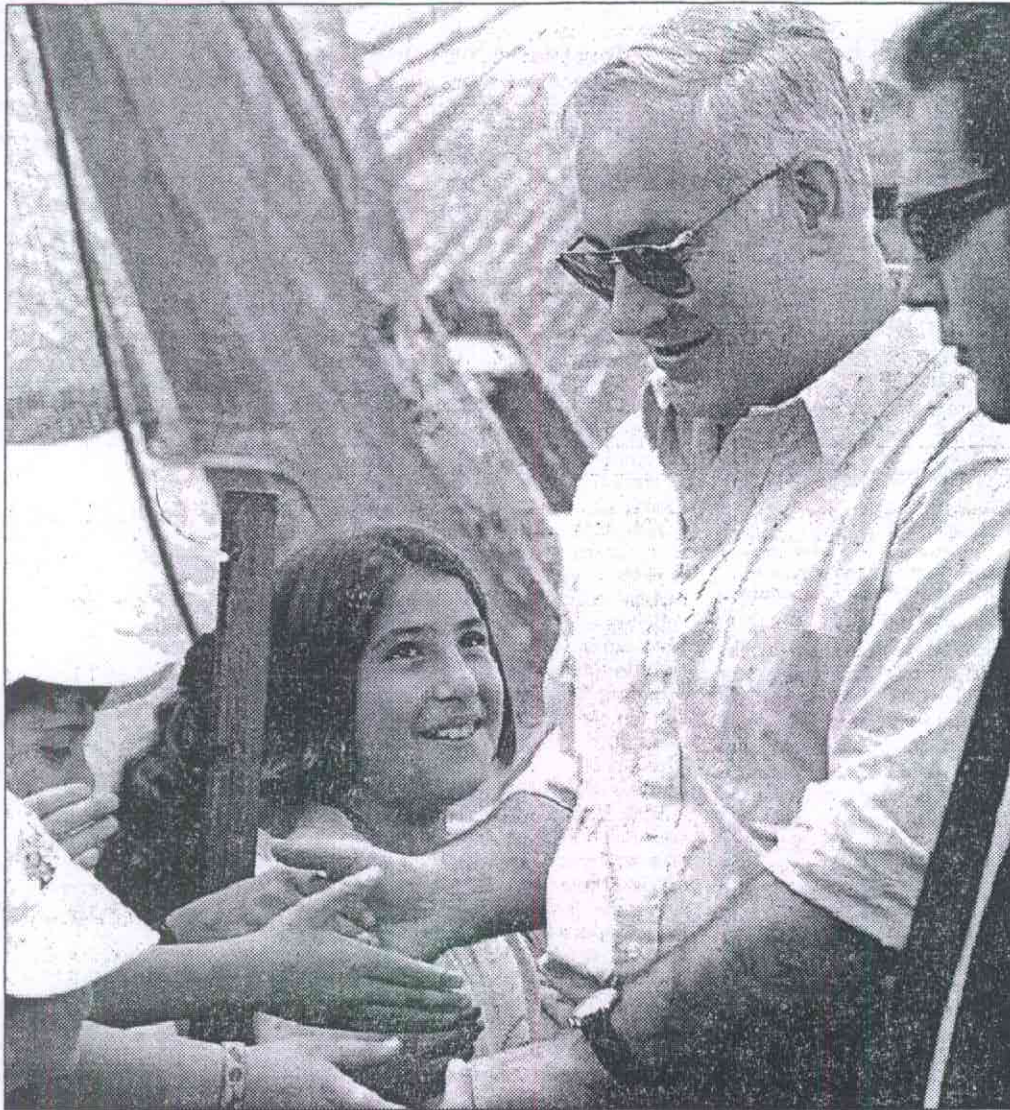
By Barton Gellman
Washington Post Foreign Service

JERUSALEM, May 21—A U.S. government study of housing vacancies at Jewish settlements in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, which sharply undercuts the stated Israeli rationale for additional building there, came under concerted attack here today by the government and settler organizations.

The study, first reported in the Israeli newspaper Haaretz, judged that a quarter of all such apartments in the West Bank and more than half of those in the Gaza Strip are empty. Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu has portrayed the settlements as having been strangled by four years of restrictions under his Labor Party predecessors and said he would allow new building to accommodate "natural growth."

Because the U.S. study was not intended for publication and is not available for direct inspection, Israel's government and settler advocates relied on the Haaretz report in drafting their rebuttals. Some described it as deliberate disinformation, intended to place political pressure on Israel. Others speculated that it must have been a low-level State Department report.

According to officials here and in Washington, the data came from a semiannual CIA survey titled "Vacancies in the Occupied Territories." Classified "SECRET/NOFORN," which means it is not to be shown to friendly foreign governments, the survey is based on data gathered in August and updated most recently in February. It represents an ongoing effort by the CIA, which has mapped



BY GREG MARINOVICH—AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

Children greeted Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu during his visit to a Jordan Valley settlement on Tuesday.

and monitored settlements for years, to count apartments and assess which ones are actually in use.

Knowledgeable officials said it is a summary document that draws on much more highly classified data from photographic and infrared satellite imagery and the monitoring of road, electrical and water networks. Collating data from these disparate sources, officials said, permits analysts to determine with some confidence whether a building is inhabited and roughly how it is used.

The Clinton administration,

which has avoided confrontation with the Netanyahu government, appeared to be chagrined over disclosure of the report. State Department spokesman Nicholas Burns declined to confirm its accuracy Tuesday "because it has not been made public," acknowledging only that "we have from time to time and just recently tried to establish a basis of information for ourselves and for the Congress on this issue, and we've done that."

The CIA survey found that 10,939 "residential units" in the West Bank, amounting to 26 percent of the Jewish housing stock

there, are uninhabited. In the Gaza Strip, it found 1,323 vacant units, 56 percent of those available. The study also covered the Golan Heights, where 1,600 apartments were found to be vacant, or nearly 30 percent, and East Jerusalem, where 2,782 apartments, or 7 percent, were unoccupied.

If the American assessment is accurate, there is already enough Jewish housing stock in the West Bank and Gaza to accommodate several years of demand. Israeli census data, accounting for births and deaths, show that the natural

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Israelis Say U.S. Settlement Study Gives False Vacancy-Rate Figures

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annual rate of increase in the settlements is slightly more than 3 percent. New settlers from Israel and abroad have typically added another 5 percent annually to the Jewish population of the territories in recent years.

But separate American studies, also confidential, have identified construction plans for more than 9,000 new apartments that have passed through various stages of approval under the Netanyahu government. There are 2,218 that have received the final go-ahead, including 310 in the tiny settlement of Ganim in the northern West Bank, which now has roughly 100 apartments.

In substance, the argument over numbers is beside the point to most advocates of settlement building; their principal interest is in strengthening Israel's grip on the territories for ideological or security reasons. But it has been essential to their political efforts, at home and abroad, to portray the settlements as bursting with residents who need room to expand.

"We're saying we're tired of hearing that," said one U.S. official. "We don't believe it."

Netanyahu, speaking Tuesday, called the U.S. vacancy estimate "groundless" and "false by an order of magnitude, to put it mildly." Today, various ministries and government bodies issued rebuttals.

The Yesha Council, the main umbrella organization representing the settlers, called the U.S. estimate "mendacious" and knowingly falsified. Pinchas Wallerstein, who chairs the group, maintained that "there is not a single apartment available" in any set-

tlement within an hour's drive of the West Bank's border with Israel.

Salai Meridor, a senior Likud Party figure who heads the settlement division of the quasi-governmental World Zionist Organization, said no more than 3 percent of the apartments are empty. The Housing Ministry put the number at 4.5 percent. The Central Bureau of Statistics, using census data from November 1995, calculated the vacancy rate at 12 percent.

Critics focused most of their fire on two statistics that Haaretz erroneously reported had been drawn from the U.S. government study. Haaretz stated that there were 1,000 empty apartments at the settlement of Shiloh, which does not have that many apartments, and 2,000 empty at Ariel, which is incorrect.

Meridor, expressing surprise at the U.S. report, said, "They did not do good service to the image of U.S. intelligence." Even the Israeli statistics bureau, he said, greatly overstated the vacancy rate because most of the apartments so counted were not actually available on the market.

Meridor, who lives in Kfar Adumim, one of the most popular settlements, said it is clear that many such settlements—designed as bedroom suburbs of Jerusalem and Tel Aviv—are in high demand.

"If someone comes to buy an apartment in Maale Adumim [east of Jerusalem], why should we say, 'Look, we still have some vacant apartments near Nablus? What's the relation?' Meridor said.

their own