

Israeli forces remove Zionist settlers from Gaza

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Midnight Wednesday marked the final deadline for Jewish settlers to evacuate their 21 settlements in Gaza. Of the 8,500 settlers in the Palestinian territory, approximately half had left their houses in the days preceding the cut-off date. The situation remains tense, however, as the remaining residents have been joined by an estimated 5,000 supporters who have vowed to resist Israeli police and military forces ordered to remove those defying Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's "unilateral disengagement" plan.

About 50,000 police and soldiers have been deployed to Gaza for the operation. On Sunday night, the border between Israel and the settlements was closed, and on Monday and Tuesday Israeli forces issued formal eviction notices to the settlers. Almost 1,000 protesters were arrested as they tried to enter Gaza in support of the settlers, but despite police and army roadblocks, and border checkpoints, thousands more right-wing and ultra-Orthodox activists entered Gaza in advance of the forcible removals.

In the West Bank, out of a total of 120 settlements, four of the smallest and most isolated are being removed. The Ganim and Kadim settlements were fully evacuated on Wednesday, and the two others are expected to be closed shortly.

Despite the protests in Gaza, a Sharon aide told *Haaretz* that all 21 settlements could be cleared by Friday. Most settlers have negotiated short extensions on the deadline for evacuation with army commanders in return for their voluntary departure. In some cases, residents have barricaded themselves in synagogues or behind barbed wire, but claim that they will not violently resist their removal.

Clashes over the evacuation have so far been largely confined to those between the Israeli forces and outside protesters, most of whom are reportedly teenagers from West Bank settlements. On Tuesday, about 50 people were arrested following a standoff at the largest Gaza settlement, Neve Dekalim. According to the *New York Times*, "the most serious incidents occurred when one young man threw a caustic liquid, probably ammonia, into the eyes of a police cameraman, and another tossed urine on a woman police officer and paint on a senior commander."

In the Morag settlement, a female soldier was stabbed with a needle by a protester on Wednesday. In other cases, the settlers' supporters lit bonfires and tyres, threw stones and bottles, barricaded the entrances of settlements, and slashed the tyres of police and army vehicles.

Despite the violence, the Israeli government and security forces have made every effort to placate the settlers, most of whom believe they have a biblical entitlement to Gaza, as part of a "Greater Israel". The evacuation procedure has been codenamed "Brotherly Hand", and everyone from Sharon to ground-level army commanders has repeatedly expressed their support and sympathy for the settlers. "We will show all the sensitivity that a family forced to leave its home deserves," declared Colonel Erez Katz.

Such sensitivity stands in marked contrast to the Israeli army's destruction of Palestinian homes and farmlands. More than 3,000 Palestinian homes in the Occupied Territories have been destroyed since

the Sharon government came to power in 2001. As Amnesty International described in a 2004 report: "Forced evictions and house demolitions are usually carried out without warning, often at night, and the occupants are given little or no time to leave their homes. Sometimes they are allowed a few minutes or half an hour, too little to salvage their belongings. Often the only warning is the rumbling of the Israeli army's bulldozers and tanks and the inhabitants barely have time to flee as the bulldozers begin to tear down the walls of their homes."

While the international media has hardly reported such illegal incidents of Israeli collective punishment, about 6,000 journalists from around the world, many of whom have been "embedded" in Israeli army units, are now covering the Gaza withdrawal. There have been innumerable stories in recent days and weeks examining the plight of the settler families, and portraying the religious ideologues in a highly sympathetic light.

The removed settlers have been heavily subsidised. Successive Israeli governments have provided welfare payments, economic incentives and publicly funded infrastructure development. Under the negotiated compensation package, the settlers leaving Gaza will receive money and benefits worth an average of \$US250,000 per family. In addition, settlers will receive a combined amount of \$US14 million in privately donated money raised in the US by James Wolfensohn, the former World Bank president and current Middle East envoy for the Bush administration.

No compensation has been arranged for the 3,500 Palestinians who may lose their jobs on settler agricultural lands and greenhouses, nor for the thousands more working in the Erez industrial centre in northern Gaza, which is also likely to close.

More fundamentally, the withdrawal of the Jewish settlers will do nothing to alter the impoverishment and oppression faced by the 1.3 million Palestinian residents of Gaza. Under international law, Israel will remain the occupying power over the territory, because of the Zionist state's maintenance of its strict control over Gaza's air, land, and sea borders. Palestinians within the territory, who suffer from 60 percent unemployment and endemic poverty, will continue to face harsh Israeli travel restrictions to the West Bank and East Jerusalem.

International reaction

The removal of the settlers has been widely praised by international leaders. A spokesperson for US President George Bush said that he supported Sharon and his "bold initiative". British Prime Minister Tony Blair wrote to his Israeli counterpart: "I believe you are right to see disengagement as an historic opportunity to pursue a better future for Israelis and Palestinians. I look forward to working with you to help achieve this, and to continue working together towards a just and lasting peace, free from the scourge of terrorism."

The reality, however, is that the Sharon government has openly acknowledged that the disengagement scheme has nothing to do with advancing any form of negotiated peace with the Palestinians, and is actually intended to counteract any pressure for such a move, particularly from the Bush administration. As Sharon put it on August 12, "I prefer to reach an agreement with the Americans rather than to reach an agreement with the Arabs."

Since announcing the disengagement plan, the Israeli prime minister has secured the support of the Bush administration for his insistence that the largest and most important settlements in East Jerusalem and the West Bank—home to some 450,000 settlers—will permanently remain part of Israel. This shift in US policy has given Sharon a green light for the ongoing and rapid expansion of Zionist settlements in these areas, as well as for the construction of the nearly completed separation wall, which effectively annexes large swathes of Palestinian territory in the West Bank and cuts off East Jerusalem from any other Palestinian area.

In a televised speech on Monday night, Sharon made an oblique reference to these strategic imperatives: "It is no secret that, like many others, I had believed and hoped we could forever hold onto Netzarim and Kfar Darom [two of the most important Gaza settlements]," he declared. "But the changing reality in the country, in the region, and the world, required of me a reassessment and change of positions."

Sharon, previously known as the "godfather" of the settler movement, made clear his sympathy for those being removed. "Residents of Gaza, today we end a glorious chapter in Israel's history, a central episode in your lives as pioneers, as realisers of the dream of those who bore the security and settlement burden for all of us," he stated. "Your pain and your tears are an inextricable part of the history of our country. Whatever differences we have, we shall not abandon you and after the evacuation we will do everything to rebuild your lives and communities anew."

He also made reference to Israel's so-called "demographic problem"—that is, the question of securing a Jewish majority within Israel. "We cannot hold on to Gaza forever. More than a million Palestinians live there and double their number with each generation. They live in uniquely crowded conditions in refugee camps, in poverty and despair, in hotbeds of rising hatred with no hope on the horizon."

This statement echoed similar claims that have been made in support of the disengagement plan, particularly from within the Labour Party. "We are disengaging from Gaza because of demography," Labour leader and deputy prime minister Shimon Peres declared last week. According to one projection, taking Israel and the Occupied Territories as a whole, Jews will be the minority within 15 years. Every faction of the Israeli political establishment views this development as a serious threat to the long-term viability of the Zionist state.

Disengagement heightens crisis within Israel

The disengagement plan has opened up deep divisions within Israeli society. While opinion polls have consistently shown that at least two-thirds favour the Gaza pull-out, the influence of the settlers and their supporters is vastly disproportionate to their actual numbers, and extends right into the heart of Israel's political and military establishment. In recent months, the Israeli press has carried numerous articles and commentaries speculating about the possibility of civil war, and of assassination threats against Sharon and his colleagues.

Of particular concern has been the threat of a split within the Israeli armed forces. The army now features an "Orthodox Regiment" made up exclusively of young settlers and ultra-Orthodox Jews. These elements have also increased their numbers in other regiments in recent years.

According to Israeli journalist Meron Rapoport, writing in the latest English-language *Le Monde diplomatique*, about 15 percent of soldiers in fighting units are "national-religious", as are 50 percent of low and middle ranking officers in some regiments. Since the bloody occupation of Lebanon, middle-class Ashkenazi Jews have largely shied away from military careers, allowing religious and settler groups to increase their influence, particularly within operations in the Occupied Territories, where they have no qualms about repressing the Palestinian population.

Regiments with very large religious and settler components have not been activated for the Gaza pull-out, and there does not seem to have been any significant instances of soldiers refusing orders and siding with the settlers, as had been widely feared.

While the removal of the Gaza settlers has not precipitated an immediate split in the army, the ruling Likud Party is in danger of tearing itself apart over the operation. In recent months, Sharon has been forced to manoeuvre around numerous challenges to the disengagement plan from Likud members of the Knesset (parliament) and from party members.

A number of Likud politicians have spoken at mass pro-settler rallies staged in recent weeks. At a cabinet meeting held August 15 to formally authorise the removal of the settlers, four Likud ministers voted against Sharon. Four days earlier, the prime minister revealed that one of his senior delegates—believed to be right-wing leadership aspirant Uzi Landau—had visited the US Congress ostensibly in order to lobby for additional American aid, but then secretly argued against any US money for the withdrawal.

Sharon's most significant rival within Likud, former Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu resigned from his position as finance minister on August 7 in protest against the disengagement policy, which he described as "giving terror a reward".

Despite Netanyahu's unpopularity among the general Israeli electorate, surveys of Likud's membership have placed him well ahead of Sharon. National elections are due to be held in November 2006, but are generally expected to be held early next year. The Israeli media has recently been filled with speculation of the possibility of a political "big bang" if the prime minister breaks with Likud to form a new party together with Labour's Shimon Peres and the secular Shinui Party.

Much more is at stake in the disengagement struggle, however, than the unity of the Likud Party and the survival of the present government. Notwithstanding Sharon's repeated declarations, his unilateral disengagement policy undermines the entire ideological framework of the "Greater Israel" strategy that has been the bedrock of right-wing politics within the Zionist state since 1967.

The Israeli prime minister has insisted that there will be no "second disengagement", no withdrawal from the major West Bank and East Jerusalem settlements, and no final negotiations for any Palestinian state. Nevertheless, the evacuation of the Gaza settlements is a break from the Likud tradition of unyielding and unconditional support for the settler movement, and represents a tacit admission that the long held hope of the Israeli right-wing to supplant the Arab population from the entire "biblical land" of Palestine is unrealisable.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Sharon personally embodied the political convergence between the Greater Israel strategy of the hard-line Zionist right-wing and that of the messianic religious movement. Today he has had to recognise that Israel's geo-strategic interests—above all the need to secure the ongoing patronage of the US—demands that he curtail the settler movement's claims over Gaza. The long-term implications of these developments are far from clear. What is certain however is that they portend explosive social and political upheavals within Israel.



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