

Gaza Settler Relocation: New Progress, Ongoing Complications

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Brief Analysis

Among the challenges facing the Israeli government in the weeks before the Gaza disengagement commences are relocating evacuated settlers and determining the future of settlement assets. This PeaceWatch will examine the former issue; a future PeaceWatch will address the latter.

Settler Compensation

On June 9, 2005, the Israeli supreme court handed down judgment on twelve petitions challenging the Evacuation Compensation Law. Although the court upheld the legality of the disengagement, it offered additional support to the settlers, increasing the amount of aid for relocation. The decision is expected to increase the number of settlers entering into relocation and compensation negotiations with the government. In general, settlers have been given three choices for the manner in which they relocate: they can move as a community, they can resettle anywhere in Israel on an individual basis, or they can take advantage of additional incentives to relocate to empty homesteads in the sparsely populated Negev or Galilee.

One means of evaluating settler attitudes and intentions toward these and other options is by observing their degree of preparation for resettlement. Taking concrete steps to ensure that they will be comfortably relocated within Israel proper demonstrates a degree of pragmatism on their part, regardless of their ideological opposition to disengagement. Accordingly, although the settler leadership dismissed the court's ruling, cracks have begun to show among the residents of Gush Katif, a cluster of ideologically conservative settlements in the southwest corner of Gaza. If the government can reach an agreement with them regarding their future homes in the near term, it could decrease the intensity of the opposition expected to erupt once the disengagement begins.

The Evacuation Compensation Law originally authorized \$884 million in compensation for the settlers. In order to provide compensation that settlers would find adequate, the government employed a complex mathematical formula that took into account the size of each family, the number of years the family had lived in its home, the value and size of the home, the household's annual income, and the price of homes in the relocation area. The law entitles families to approach the Disengagement Authority for compensation up to three years following the withdrawal. The supreme court's ruling expanded settler rights by allowing individuals under twenty-one years of age to be compensated and by permitting settlers to sue the government for damages even if they have received compensation.

Lessons from the Past

The emergence of a large group of families seeking to resettle signals more than just a practical recognition that disengagement is going forward. It also highlights the manner in which collective resettlement can help ensure social cohesion.

In April 1982, the Israeli government evacuated 1,400 settler families from Sinai. The experiences of the families who left the Yamit settlement provide a clear lesson for policymakers: the transition into new homes and lives will be

easier for evacuees if they are relocated together. As Yonatan Bassi, current director of the Disengagement Authority, stated, "We are trying to convince people that the right way to leave is in a group. We can offer more, and the process will be easier." Accordingly, while all evacuated settlers are eligible for aid under the Evacuation Compensation Law, Clause 85 of the legislation provides increased compensation to those who agree to evacuate as a group.

Under this provision, the government proposed building four new towns around Nitzanim, a beachfront community about three miles south of Ashdod and slightly north of Gaza. These towns would contain homes for 1,000 families from Gush Katif. According to Israeli officials, the residents of Nitzanim are ideologically similar to those of Gush Katif, and the beachside location makes the area quite similar to the settlements that will be evacuated. The Gush Katif leadership refused the offer, along with other attempts at planning for disengagement. On May 2, however, a significant milestone was reached when 400 residents of the settlement agreed to the Nitzanim plan.

This agreement, announced by Justice Minister Tzipi Livni, was a victory for both sides. The families in question were assured that they would remain together as a community and would not suffer the feelings of dislocation experienced by the Yamit families. They will even be permitted to maintain their own regional council. For its part, the government could point to the initiative as a clear sign that the settlers are beginning to come to terms with reality. Although the agreement cannot by itself prevent settlers from engaging in civil disobedience this summer, it is conditional on the avoidance of illegal activities, thus reinforcing Israeli democracy even while helping to resolve the resettlement crisis.

Complications

Initially, implementing the May 2 agreement did not go as smoothly as first hoped. Even as construction crews broke ground in Nitzanim, the settlers brought the government to court for issuing a deadline to sign up for relocation there, which they consider an ultimatum. In addition, they opposed moving into existing housing scattered around southern Israel while their new neighborhoods are being built and made expansive demands regarding the temporary trailers that the government had indicated it would provide. Meanwhile, environmental activists brought suit against the government as well, charging that the new neighborhoods will extensively damage the area's Mediterranean dunes. Members of Green Course, a student environmental group, were detained for blocking the bulldozers attempting to expand Nitzanim.

Recently, however, a compromise seemed to be reached. The May 2 agreement will soon be supplemented with a more binding agreement. Moreover, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon announced on June 1 that only the 400 signatories will be eligible for the expensive temporary trailers that the government will provide while new houses are built in Nitzanim. The first such trailers arrived in Nitzanim on June 9, demonstrating on yet another front the government's commitment to going through with disengagement and relocation. Although the 400 signatories do not have the support of Gush Katif's leadership, they represent the first serious cracks in the bloc.

Relocating Gaza farmers, a process that involves finding appropriate new fields for them, has also been a challenge. The Disengagement Authority announced that it has reached tentative agreements with 80 of the 166 active Israeli farmers in Gaza to relocate to lands under the jurisdiction of Kibbutz Zikim and Moshav Mavkiim, both of which are just south of Ashkelon, a coastal town north of Gaza. This agreement is tentative, however.

Conclusion

The June 9 milestones—the supreme court's decision and the arrival of the first temporary housing in Nitzanim—demonstrate the reality of the coming disengagement. The settlers who are negotiating with the government are taking a pragmatic step. For the rest, the streets are becoming the last forum through which to express their opposition.

Minda Lee Arrow, a research assistant at The Washington Institute, recently returned from a trip to Egypt, Jordan,

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