

Learning from Past Experience:

Sinai to Gaza

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Brief Analysis

Amid anticipation that Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon will soon get his Gaza withdrawal plan back on track, it is important to examine the only other instance of Israeli settlement evacuation—namely, Israel's withdrawal from Sinai in the wake of the 1979 peace treaty with Egypt. How was evacuation handled at that time? Where did the settlers go? What were their options? Moreover, in light of the Sinai withdrawal, what role, if any, might the international community play in a Gaza withdrawal? What legal factors will the Israeli government face in its efforts to move settlers from their homes?

Disorganized Decisionmaking

Although the Camp David agreement was signed in September 1978, the final evacuation of Israeli settlers from Sinai did not occur until April 1982, when the large settlement of Yamit was dismantled. Israel's decisionmaking during that three-and-a-half-year transition period was characterized by procrastination, lack of organization, inconsistency, and unfulfilled promises, all of which made the transfer process longer and more painful for all parties. The Israeli government failed to establish and implement a clear policy, and too many government ministries were involved in the process without coordination. The result was a long series of negotiations and ad hoc committee decisions that were influenced by pressure from the settler lobby. This in turn led to confusion, frustration, and distrust between the government, the settlers, and the rest of the Israeli public.

Final Disposition of the Settlers

In essence, the 1,400 settler families in Sinai were given two choices: either they could resettle in the adjacent Besor region inside Israel (which had geographical conditions similar to those of Yamit), or they could move to any other rural or urban community in Israel, whether as a group or individually. Of the rural families that had settled in the Yamit area, 135 chose to establish two villages for themselves in the northern Negev in Israel, south of Ashqelon. Meanwhile, 43 families from agricultural settlements in Sinai chose to move to the Besor region, and 54 families settled on an individual basis in various small farming communities in central and northern Israel. More than 100 families moved to small towns and cities throughout Israel, largely abandoning farming as a way of life.

Financial Compensation

The financial compensation process was one of the most controversial issues associated with the evacuation of Sinai. On April 1, 1982—less than a month before the final evacuation took place—the Knesset adopted special legislation resolving this issue (although no such law was passed specifically regulating the evacuation process itself). The long process leading to that resolution created great bitterness between the settlers and the Israeli public. It also caused disagreements between settlers, with different constituencies demanding different amounts of compensation and certain groups changing their demands in light of the demands of other groups. These demands varied based on settlement size and type (industrial or agricultural).

The compensatory payments were meant to cover the costs of abandoned structures and equipment as well as years

of building stores, factories, and profitable house farms. Nevertheless, the settlers' demands were not well received, in part because the compensation payments were seen as too large. Instead of being regarded as sacrificing pioneers who deserved public sympathy, the settlers were often criticized by large sections of the Israeli public as enemies of peace or as opportunists seeking to capitalize on government largesse during a difficult time.

The lion's share of costs associated with the Sinai evacuation were taken up by the relocation of Israeli military installations. Overall, the entire evacuation and relocation—including compensation to evacuated settlers—cost approximately \$7.75 billion in today's terms. More than \$6 billion of this amount (77.6 percent) was dedicated to transplanting Israel Defense Forces facilities from Sinai to the Negev. Approximately \$660 million was channeled to the 1,400 settler families, meaning that each family received almost \$500,000.

Under agreements reached between Israel and Washington at the Camp David summit in 1978, the United States did not pay for the relocation of settlers. Washington did agree to finance the military evacuation of Sinai and the new military development in the Negev, however. This included relocating two new military airfields. Moreover, general U.S. military aid to Israel increased dramatically in 1979. Military loan amounts were increased from \$500 million to \$1.3 billion, and military grant amounts were increased from \$500 million to \$2.7 billion.

Financial compensation will play a major role in any Gaza withdrawal plan as well. The current plan calls for the evacuation of seventeen Gaza settlements containing a total of 1,700 families. If each of these families is given \$500,000 to relocate, Israel's total expenditures on settler compensation alone could exceed \$850 million. From a legal perspective, although no existing Israeli law would be sufficient to forestall evacuation, there is a good chance that the Knesset will wind up adopting new laws guaranteeing adequate compensation, as occurred during the Sinai withdrawal process.

Lessons for Gaza

The Sinai evacuation raises several issues that must be examined prior to the execution of the Gaza withdrawal plan. The three and a half years of planning that preceded the Sinai withdrawal were characterized by widespread disorganization, partly because such a move was unprecedented, but also because it was fraught with political risk. The settler lobby believed that delaying the planning process would help derail the withdrawal itself, which they viewed as a threat to Israeli security. In light of this history, the Israeli government must offer a clear plan right from the start defining the exact manner in which the Gaza withdrawal plan will be implemented.

For example, there should be no confusion regarding which government ministry will coordinate the withdrawal effort. A special interministerial committee composed of members from all relevant sectors (e.g., agriculture and rural development, housing and construction, national infrastructure, finance, justice, defense) should be formed especially for this purpose. This committee will need to provide answers to the questions that were not addressed in a timely manner prior to the Sinai evacuation. It will also need to examine the levels of compensation that settlers will receive and perhaps adopt a specific law defining these levels based on each family's possessions. The entire process should be coordinated with the settlers so that they can get a clear preliminary picture of their prospects (e.g., what they will receive in exchange for relocating; where they can go once evacuated).

Another lesson from Sinai that should be taken into consideration is the inevitable lengthiness of the evacuation process. Clearly, the Gaza settlers and their supporters will struggle to block any withdrawal plan. In Sinai, settlers were evacuated in order to fulfill a peace agreement, and the process was coordinated with the Egyptians. In Gaza, however, there is no peace agreement and no coordination with either the Egyptians or the Palestinians. Therefore, one can expect a great deal of domestic debate in Israel, accompanied by Supreme Court interventions and large protests. Even after the Gaza withdrawal plan receives final approval, the evacuation itself will still take a long time to complete.

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