



ISRAEL COMPLETES GAZA PULLOUT

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The Israeli government finished forcing all residents out of the 21 Jewish settlements in the Gaza Strip on Monday, completing an operation that while emotionally wrenching for the Middle Eastern nation, did not spark the violence that some had feared.

After a short break over the Sabbath, Israeli soldiers began evicting the last Gaza settlers Sunday. In some emptied settlements the demolition of houses began, part of an agreement with the Palestinian Authority, which will assume responsibility for the land once the Israeli army is gone.

But the clashes between settlers and Israeli forces appeared far from over as protesters, many of them young people, headed to the West Bank, where four settlements are slated to be closed later this week.

As in Gaza, many of the residents of the settlements have already left, drawn by promises of housing and money from the government. While the Gaza evictions were largely nonviolent and soldiers unarmed, some Israeli intelligence officials have said they expected protesters in the West Bank to be more extreme and perhaps armed.

History of the Gaza settlements

The Jewish settlements, small communities within Palestinian occupied territories, are scattered throughout the Gaza Strip, an area about 139 square miles -- about twice the size of Washington, D.C.

First captured from Egypt during the 1967 Arab-Israeli War or Six-Day War, the Gaza Strip is located on the Mediterranean Sea, bordering Egypt and Israel and was home to some 8,500 settlers surrounded by 1.3 million Palestinians.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the Jewish settlements grew from crude military outposts to neighborhoods boasting upscale villas. Many of the Israelis who moved to the settlements were professionals who sought inexpensive housing, tax incentives and rural living outside Israeli's urban centers. Others were ultranationalists, extremely politically conservative Jews, who believed that the settlement area's lands were God-given and that it was their mission to live there.

The settlements have always been controversial. Despite the fact that they were considered illegal under international law, Israel had argued that the settlements were essential to maintaining peace and security. But, more recently, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's government has said the price of their upkeep and protection had become too great.

Why the pullout?

Sharon's decision to leave Gaza came as a surprise, since he was one of the original architects of the settlement movement. But in February, Sharon pushed a plan to withdraw all 21 Jewish settlements from the Gaza Strip and four from the West Bank through his cabinet.

Some Middle East experts believe that Sharon's decision, which was made without any Palestinian input, was a shrewd political move aimed to secure Israel as a majority Jewish state. Because the birthrate of Palestinians continued to outpace Israelis, eventually there would be more Muslims than Jews, which could pose a dramatic challenge to the democratic state.

"Within a decade and maybe even within six years, the Jews could be the minority. And Sharon has awoken to this. He thought the mass of immigration of the 1990s would reverse this demographic trend, it did not," David Makovsky told the NewsHour with Jim Lehrer.

Whether fueled by demographic concerns or simply worries about the cost of protecting the settlements, the pullout was seen as a necessity to the Israeli government.

"There is no sense whatsoever to remain here," Shimon Peres, the deputy prime minister, told reporters last week, according to the New York Times. "The settlements must be evacuated."

Critics of the withdrawal

Although initial polls indicated that 55 percent of Israelis support the planned closure of the settlements, Sharon and his government are facing criticism, even from within his own conservative Likud political party.

A week before the start of the Gaza pullout, Israel's finance minister and one of Sharon's main political rivals, Benjamin Netanyahu, resigned saying the pullout would endanger the nation's security by allowing Gaza to become a "base of Islamic terror."

Netanyahu's sentiments are echoed by other right-wing politicians, who fear that Palestinians will see the withdrawal as a victory for suicide bombings and other violent attacks against Israelis.

"The Palestinians have no other way to make sense of this pullout than to think that it is because of the intifada," Yuri Stern, a member of the right-wing Yisrael Beitenu (Israel is Our Home) party, told the Christian Science Monitor.

Palestinian reactions

Palestinians in Gaza, most the direct descendants of those who fled or were expelled from Israel during the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, are unsure of what the settlement pullout means for the area.

"Gaza could become a much, much better place than it is today, a place where people can live with some measure of dignity," Eyad Sarraj, a Palestinian psychiatrist and human rights activist, told the Los Angeles Times. "Or, as hard as it is to imagine, it could become even worse."

--Compiled by Annie Schleicher for NewsHour Extra

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