

Summer of Disengagement

Hand Over Settlements to Palestinians

By AMITAI ETZIONI

The question as to what is to become of the residences, clinics, schools and greenhouses of the Israeli settlers once they leave Gaza this summer may seem like a minor subplot in the epic struggle for a peaceful resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. However, the disposition of these settlements is so rich in symbolism and affect that it is correctly viewed as a significant factor in determining what will be Israel and Palestine's next steps on the long and torturous road toward becoming two states and living in peace next to one another. Specifically, will the retrenchment make it easier or harder to remove some settlers from the West Bank?

The going wisdom in Washington — and now in Jerusalem and Ramallah, following an American-brokered deal this week — is that the difficulty of disengagement will be eased by demolishing the settlers' houses before the Israeli military withdraws from Gaza. Any agreement made between Palestinians and Israelis in the current climate can properly be considered an achievement, but the joint decision to demolish the settlers' houses is shortsighted and does little to advance the cause of peace.

The best way to proceed is to turn all these assets over to select Palestinian groups and NGOs after the Israeli settlers leave or are removed but before the Israeli military hands over control. Schools would go to local educators, clinics to medical authorities, greenhouses to farmers and residences to poor and/or senior citizens. Ideally, this should be done in collaboration with the Palestinian Authority.

If the P.A. refuses, a third party such as the United Nations or a foundation should be willing to take them over and ensure a peaceful transition. If no such organizations render themselves available, due to fears of retaliation from extremists, the departing Israeli authorities should determine who will be invited to assume possession of these buildings.

Such a controlled transfer by the Israeli government, as opposed to a scenario in which it merely walks away, would avoid two evils. First, it would help to prevent a situation in which the families of known terrorists move into the houses recently left by the Israeli settlers.

For some, this possibility evokes numerous images — all deleterious in their potential effects and foreboding in their implications for security. In such visions, Israelis see Palestinians raising their flags on the same masts where until the day before Israeli flags flew and turning synagogues into mosques or Hamas meeting halls. Israelis can see the sight of Palestinians dancing in the streets that they themselves paved. And they can imagine the sounds of guns firing wildly into the air in victorious celebration, coupled with claims by Palestinians of having driven the Israelis out of Gaza — just as Hezbollah did in south Lebanon.

Yet all this would be avoided if the settlements were already occupied by select Palestinians when the Israeli military finally leaves. Indeed, the scene

would prove quite different: Palestinians enjoying their newly acquired homes, farmers tending to roses and tomatoes growing in the greenhouses, and children on their way to their recently gained schools.

Second, the same controlled turnover would also prevent the severe damage to Israel's reputation that would surely occur if all these structures were dynamited, as was done to the settlement of Yamit when Israel turned over the Sinai peninsula to Egypt in 1982. The fact that the P.A. agreed this week to the destructions of the houses would not prevent Arab media from playing up the pictures of settlers leaving nothing behind but piles of rubble where yesterday there were well appointed villages.

Such concerns would seem to be argument enough against demolition, but the strategy has gained the backing of a broad spectrum of groups — each eyeing a short-term goal without stepping back to look at the big picture.

The Israeli right, of course, favors demolition over the thought of Palestinians taking their property. But even some dovish Israelis are expressing their support, out of the fear that if the Gaza settlements are used to house the families of suicide bombers whose homes were leveled by the Israeli military, any future removal of Israeli settlers from other contested areas would become even more difficult.

This fear, though, can be assuaged by turning the assets over to elderly people or to welfare cases.

The Palestinian leadership, too, has agreed that Israel should demolish these settlements before they leave. They argue that Gaza needs high-rise buildings and not the one- or two-story ones found in the settlements. They point out that the greenhouses are water intensive and hence not suited for dry Gaza.

This all goes to show how hostilities can pervert anything good in the Middle East.

There is plenty of room in Gaza to construct such high-rise buildings. In the meantime, the low rises could serve to house some of those who now live in, at best, one-story shanties. And while water is in short supply in Gaza, employment is even scarcer. Palestinians might be well served by keeping the greenhouses busy for now.

In the end, some kind of message will be sent regardless of how the settlements are disposed of. Thus, a controlled turnover of all the settlements' assets would show that once in a while — when all the stars are properly aligned and careful preparations have been made — reason and good will can find a place, even in the Middle East.

One may even be entitled to hope that such a move would invite similar handlings of other sore spots in the future — of which there are quite a few in the small land that Jews and Arabs must learn to share.

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At first, the mainstream media didn't respond. We were, to put it kindly, ignored. Whether this is an example of what Channel 2 commentator Amnon

in a way that was mutually beneficial. They thought Israel could and should get something for it, but the opportunity was missed. They felt that Sharon, who