

Sabeel Reflections on the Gaza Disengagement

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Reflections on the Gaza Disengagement Facts and Concerns

“My son, do not sow in the furrow of injustice, and you will not reap a seven fold crop.” (Ben Sirach 7:3)

Long overdue, it has finally happened. Israel is out of Gaza, but not quite. There is sorrow in Israel but mixed with joy. The burden called Gaza has been lifted. There is joy in Palestine but mixed with sorrow. The burden called occupation has been lifted, but not quite. Sabeel would like to share some facts and concerns with our friends:

1. Fact: Around 8000 settlers lived on 42% of the 365 square kilometers of the Gaza Strip, occupied by Israel in 1967. One million, four hundred thousand Palestinians lived on the remaining 58%. Gaza itself is only 5% of all of the Occupied Palestinian Territories – and 95% still remains occupied. Prime Minister Ariel Sharon throughout the disengagement process has declared his intentions to continue the expansion of settlements on the West Bank and in East Jerusalem.

Concern: As the settlers leave Gaza, where are they going? Some of the Gaza settlers had previously lived illegally on occupied land in Egypt’s Sinai Peninsula. We are concerned that the bulk of settlers will move again to live in illegal settlements on the Occupied West Bank or East Jerusalem.

2. Fact: The Gaza pullout is not an end to the occupation of the Gaza Strip according to International Law until the Palestinians are granted full sovereignty over air, land and sea. The pullout from Gaza is not a negotiated agreement. It is a well-calculated, unilateral Israeli project, which leaves Israel free of any obligations or commitment towards a peaceful solution.

Concern: Gaza will be turned into a giant prison with Israel controlling its borders, air space and seaport and suffocating its 1.4 million people. Although Israel is still responsible, according to the Fourth Geneva Convention, for the well-being of this occupied population, we are concerned they will not meet their legal obligations. Palestinians are left without a political horizon and this may trigger another Intifada.

3.Fact: The settlers and their sympathizers have called the Gaza pullout “a transfer of Jews by Jews.”

Concern: Transfer is a word dreaded by Palestinians and often advocated by extreme right-wing Israelis to “deal” with the Palestinian problem. It is now feared that since Sharon has set a precedent with Jewish Israelis, he is more likely to get away with the transfer of Palestinians.

4. Fact: The world has watched scenes of the evacuation of the settlers from Gaza. Everyone spoke about the suffering of the settlers and the pain of the soldiers evacuating them. On the other hand, during the evacuation, “angry settlers” killed four Israeli Palestinians in the north of Israel and four Palestinian workers in the West Bank.

Concern: Now that the settlers have been moved, a great deal of the blame and anger is directed towards the Palestinians. It is greatly feared that settler attacks against Palestinians will increase. Palestinians are once again concerned that they will be made to pay the price of the suffering of the Jewish people.

5. Fact: Prime Minister Sharon has declared that Israel will keep and annex six settlement blocks on the West Bank as well as all of Jerusalem. Silvan Shalom, his foreign minister, together with U.S. Secretary of State, Condeleeza Rice, are calling for a regional conference where Israel will normalize relations with the Arab States.

Concern: The pullout has changed the mutually accepted formula of “Land for Peace.” Sharon wants a long-term temporary agreement that will freeze any final peace agreement and indefinitely delay defining borders. The new formula he seems to have developed is “Land for Time.” It is clear that Sharon is expecting a reward from the Americans for the pullout. However, to grant this partial withdrawal the reward of total normalization ignores the fact that the withdrawal is simply one step towards dealing with the wider issue of illegal occupation.

6. Fact: Settlers in Gaza bemoaned the fact that they were being forced out of their homes. Few made the connection between their removal and the eviction of Palestinians and the destruction of Palestinian homes which has continued since 1948. In Gaza alone, since September 2000, 2,704 homes have been demolished.

Concern: As the world focuses its sympathy on the relocation of displaced settlers, the international community will continue to turn a blind eye to the house demolitions and dispossession of the Palestinian community.

As Palestinians watched the settlers being uprooted memories of losing homes, neighborhoods and communities came back painfully. We remember the sorrow and sense of hopelessness. We wish that the settlers – as they receive compensation, apologies from the soldiers, acknowledgement of the government’s responsibility, and sympathy from the global community – that they and the world will begin to empathize and take action to end the occupation and bring about a just peace for the Palestinian who are still waiting.