

DISENGAGEMENT

The What and Where of the Gaza Strip

Once prosperous, the Gaza Strip has become synonymous with terror and squalor. Past governments thought settlements would remedy the problem. > by Yadin Roman

Until 1947, the Gaza region was one of the most fertile in the Land of Israel. Going north, it was the first area with a large supply of underground water after the Sinai Desert and, going south, the last agricultural area before the descent from the fertile coastal plain of Israel into Egypt. It was coveted by all.

The soldiers of the pharaohs of Egypt held it for centuries. Delilah lured Samson to his death in the city of Gaza in the days when the Philistines ruled the coastal plain. David conquered it for Israel, the Greeks took it away and named it Gaza – the treasure. The Hasmoneans took it back from the Greeks, and the Romans removed it from Jewish rule again. The city of Gaza was known for its port and food market. It remained prosperous even during the decline of the Muslim-ruled lands in the Middle Ages.

In 1799, Napoleon marched into Gaza. When he was finally repelled, the city and surroundings became an important Turkish stronghold against British-ruled Egypt. In World War I, Gaza became one of the most important battle sites in the Middle East theater of operations (incidentally, the British coined the term Middle East to describe this area of operation).

Some 260,000 British soldiers descended on Gaza in early 1917 to face off against 25,000 Turkish and German

troops. The battle for Gaza lasted 11 months, ending on November 2, 1917, the same day that the Balfour Declaration was issued.

The Gaza region was in ruins by the end of the war. The Turks had expelled most of the population and the fighting had driven everyone else away. But new inhabitants soon began to arrive, attracted by the construction of major British army camps in the region. On the eve of the War of Independence, the Gaza region's population had reached 74,000.

The Egyptian army responded to the decision to divide British Mandate Palestine between Jews and Arabs by invading the Gaza Strip, and continuing northward toward Tel Aviv. The Israeli forces halted the Egyptians only 26 kilometers south of Tel Aviv and pushed them back to the Gaza area.

The armistice agreement between Israel and Egypt allowed the Egyptians to retain a strip of land that had been part of British Mandate Palestine. This strip was 40 kilometers long and 5.5-14 kilometers wide, covering a total area of 360 square kilometers. Some 200,000 Palestinian refugees from Jaffa and the southern parts of Israel streamed into the area now known as the Gaza Strip. They were housed in refugee camps that were created around the abandoned British army camps.

The Egyptians neglected the area and the development of any resources for the

refugees. They were, and still are, housed in the camps. The Palestinians were not permitted to migrate or move freely into Egypt. In 1955, the Egyptian general staff created a special unit to carry out hostile attacks against Israel. The Gaza Strip has been a breeding ground for terror attacks inside southern Israel ever since.

In 1956, following the Suez Campaign, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) occupied Sinai and the Gaza Strip for six months. The IDF withdrew from both after reaching an agreement with the Egyptians on a cessation of hostilities from the Gaza Strip, the opening of the Straits of Tiran, and the placement of UN troops in Sinai. In 1967, Egypt ousted the UN troops, triggering the Six Day War. After the war, Israel held Sinai and the Gaza Strip again.

The basic philosophy behind the creation of Israeli settlements in the Gaza Strip was formulated only a few months after the war. Since it was not believed that the Gaza Strip would be returned once again to Egypt, the government of then-Prime Minister Levi Eshkol adopted a plan intended to separate the Palestinian population of the Gaza Strip from the Egyptians by creating a Jewish settlement area on the empty dunes on the strip's southern end. This settlement area would be connected to the Jewish settlement area in northern Sinai. For the next two years, the driving force behind

the creation of Jewish settlements in the Gaza Strip was then-Minister of Immigrant Absorption and Deputy Prime Minister Yigal Allon, of the ruling political party – the Labor Party.

In the 1970s, terror activity from the Gaza Strip, and especially the refugee camps in the center of the strip, began to rise. Israeli military and settlement planners developed a new strategy: establishing Jewish settlement regions in the Gaza Strip to isolate the refugee camps from one another and thus make it more difficult to mount terror operations.

In 1970, Allon became the head of a new committee – the Government Settlement Committee (he would later be replaced by the even more hawkish Labor Party leader Israel Galili). In September 1970, the committee – with the prodding of Ariel Sharon, who headed the Southern Command at the time – decided to create two Nahal settlements in the Gaza Strip: Netzarim, just south of Gaza, and Kfar Derom, a Jewish settlement that had been established in 1946 and abandoned in 1948, when the Egyptians invaded. (Nahal combines military service with civilian service on a newly founded kibbutz or moshav.) Kfar Derom was reestablished immediately.

As the terror increased (500 acts of terror were launched from Gaza alone in 1970), Moshe Dayan and Haim Bar Lev,

who were, respectively, minister of defense and chief of general staff at the time, added their voices to those calling for the creation of settlements to stop the terror. Two years after the committee's decision, Netzarim was finally established, followed two years later by Morag to its south. Eight months later, Katif was founded. All were Nahal settlements.

In the wake of the Yom Kippur War, the Nahal settlements in the Gaza Strip began to become regular civilian settlements. Netzer Hazani (originally called Katif B) was established as a civilian agricultural settlement in 1976. In the ensuing decade, there was massive construction of settlements in the Gaza Strip.

The Israel-Egyptian peace agreement and the evacuation of Sinai, followed by the Oslo accords and the establishment of the Palestinian Authority, as well as two intifadas, have changed the basic Israeli concept that settlements in areas populated by Palestinians will provide security and hinder terror activity. The heavy price of defending outlying settlements has created a major change in the Israeli public's outlook on settlements.

For the past decade, political voices have been raised to declare that maintaining settlements in areas heavily populated by Palestinians is not a solution to terror. It instead creates the problem of

having to deal with hundreds of thousands of Palestinians mingling with Israelis. The idea of evacuating the settlements in the Gaza Strip – the most crowded place in the world – has been on the Israeli political agenda for the past 10 years. It has now come to fruition.

Israelis from across the political spectrum are following the evacuation of the Gaza Strip settlements with a heavy heart. It was the Israeli public and the Israeli governments (most of all, the governments headed by the Labor Party), who sent these families to settle there. They have created highly successful communities, developing the most modern sand dune agriculture in the world (nearly all of Europe's Christmas strawberries come from these settlements, which also are the world's largest exporters of potted plants).

But staying there, in the midst of nearly two million Palestinians, just does not make sense. In a few weeks, the settlements will be dismantled. There will be heart-wrenching scenes as people who have put 30 years of their lives into making the desert bloom will have to leave their homes. But just as they went to settle there in answer to a national call – a national call now tells them to leave.

Hopefully, this enormous personal sacrifice will help strengthen the Israel that we all love so much.



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THE SETTLEMENTS

Bedolah

This religious community of 34 families (220 people) was established in 1986. Its income is derived mainly from hothouse vegetables and flowers. Most residents are second-generation residents of the western Negev and the Tel Mond area. The residents include immigrants from France.

Bnei Atzmon (Atzmona)

Established in 1979 in the Yamit region of Sinai, Bnei Atzmon was relocated to the Katif region (Gush Katif) in 1982. A religious community with 70 families (550 people), it has educational institutions ranging from preschools to regional religious schools and a pre-army preparatory academy. The community's income comes mainly from a plant nursery, a turkey farm, agriculture, and a factory for cleaning products.

Dugit

This secular community settlement of 18 families (some 80 people) was established by a settlement group of fishermen in 1990 near Shikma Beach. Dugit has a fish farm with saltwater ponds. The children attend schools in the Negev.

Eli Sinai

This mixed community settlement of some 85 families (370 people) was established in 1983 by a *garin* (settlement group) that included people evacuated from the settlements in Sinai. Most of the residents are professionals, and some work in agriculture and industry. In addition, the residents have developed the resort area of Shikma Beach.

Gan Or

Alumni of the Bnei Akiva youth movement and *hesder* yeshivot (combining military service and Torah studies) established this settlement of 52 families (some 320 people) in 1983. Its residents are involved in developing and advancing the community through culture, education, and social issues. Most of them are professionals or work in flower and vegetable hothouses.

Ganei Tal

This religious community of 70 families (some 380 people) was established in 1979. The residents are professionals or grow vegetables, flowers, and other produce in hothouses.

Gadid

This religious agricultural settlement of 56 families (some 310 people) was established in 1982 by a *garin* that included French

immigrants. Most of its income comes from its hothouses, where greens, tomatoes, flowers, and herbs are grown. Gedid also has an absorption center for new immigrants from France and a factory producing health products based on the teachings of Maimonides.

Katif

This community of 60 families (340 people) was established in 1985. It has one of the largest and most sophisticated dairies in Israel with 400 cows, as well as several factories, hothouses, and educational institutions.

Kerem Atzmona

This young religious settlement of 12 families was established in 2001 near Atzmona. Most residents are students at religious schools.

Kfar Derom

This settlement of 60 families (some 330 people) is located in the same area as the Jewish community of Kfar Derom mentioned in the Talmud. After the Six Day War, it was established as a Nahal settlement. It was a base for settlement groups in the initial stages. Residents are professionals or work in agriculture and a vegetable packing plant. Kfar Derom has an elementary school, a yeshiva,

a research institute focusing on agriculture in Jewish law, and a visitors' center and museum.

Kfar Yam

This settlement was established by the sea in 1983, west of Neveh Dekelim. Its residents are professionals or work in agriculture.

Morag

Morag, the southernmost settlement in the Katif region, was established as a Nahal settlement and became a civilian community in 1983. It is a religious community of some 35 families (170 people). Its residents work in flower and vegetable hothouses.

Netzarim

Originally a Nahal settlement, Netzarim became a civilian community affiliated with the religious kibbutz movement in 1984. Today it is a religious community settlement of 55 families (some 380 people). Its residents are mainly professionals or work in agriculture. It has guest houses with some 40 rooms and a research center on the Jewish heritage of Gaza.

Netzer Hazani

This is the first settlement established in Gush Katif. It is named after the late Michael Hazani, who served as minister of social welfare and

agriculture. Some 70 families (410 people), live here. Most residents work in agriculture.

Neveh Dekalim

This urban settlement numbers more than 500 families (2,500 people). It was established in 1983 as an urban center for the communities of southern Gush Katif. It has numerous educational institutions, an institute for desert research, and a high-tech hothouse. In addition, there is a medical center, shopping center, and petting zoo. The industrial zone includes various carpentry and metal factories, a printing press, and garages. The regional council's offices are located here, as are two synagogues.

Nisanit

Nisanit, which has some 300 religious and secular families (1,000 people) was established in 1984 and moved to its current site in 1993. It is the center for the settlements in the north of the strip, with a branch of the regional council, a regional library, and other institutions. Children attend schools in the Negev and Ashkelon.

Pe'at Sadeh

This mixed community settlement of 20 families (95 people) was established in 1989. It moved to its current site in 1993. The community's

residents work in education, the service industry, and agriculture.

Rafiah Yam

Established in 1984, this settlement of 23 families (some 150 people) is located some 200 meters from the Egyptian border. Residents are professionals or work in agriculture, sewing, and carpentry. The residents also operate Eshalim Beach.

Shalev

This community of 10 families began as a Nahal settlement in 1980, and since 1982 has served as a base for settlement groups in their initial stages. Since 2001, graduates of the military preparatory program in Atzmona have been joining the residents remaining here.

Shirat Hayam

This is a young religious settlement of 12 families that was established in 2000 as a Jewish response to terrorism. Its residents are professionals or work in agriculture.

Tel Katifa

This community of 18 families was established in 1992. It is named after a tell where discoveries from the Egyptian and Canaanite periods have been found.

