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The Negev Desert: A Viable Israeli Resettlement Option?

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On Feb. 9, 2004, Israeli Infrastructure Minister Yosef Paritzsky suggested that the 7,500 Israeli settlers who are to be removed from the Gaza Strip under Prime Minister Sharon's disengagement plan could be housed in the 13,000 empty apartments available in the Negev Desert. Paritzsky remarked that this would not only be a cheap and effective solution, but would also appeal to the "pioneering and settlement values in which [the settlers] believe." This plan was met with ridicule by the Yesha Council, a settler advocacy body, which suggested that Paritzsky move to the Negev himself if he considers it an "important national mission."¹

The difficulties inherent in a relocation of settlers in Gaza – and later, perhaps, the West Bank – to the Negev Desert are formidable. In August, the *average* temperature is 97.5 degrees Fahrenheit, and average annual rainfall is 2-6 inches.² Agriculture is difficult in this climate, as is ensuring an adequate supply of water for human needs.

There are strong advantages to relocation to the Negev, however. The Negev desert comprises 66% of Israel's territory – in a country where space is often at a premium, encouraging settlement of largely empty territory simply makes sense.

The aquifer which sits beneath the Negev could provide settlements in the desert with a water supply, and possibly other regions of Israel as well – this is a matter of some debate, however. Opinions range from the assertion of former Labor Party Secretary-General Arie Eliav that the aquifer could greatly reduce Israel's water problems to the government position on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs website that the Negev aquifer is suited only to local and supplemental use. While the water in the aquifer is brackish – that is, salty – it is less so than ocean water, and so less expensive to desalinate. The brackish water can even be used as-is for forms of currently experimental agriculture, such as shrimp production and algae.³

The Israeli newspaper Maariv reported on March 11th that the draft plan of Gaza and West Bank withdrawal currently being considered by the Sharon government calls for the evacuation of all Gaza settlements save Nasanit, Dugit and Elei Sinai – all northern settlements near the "Green

Line" 1967 border.⁴ This means that settlements with large numbers of religious Jews who identify their religion or Israeli nationalism as a reason for remaining in the settlements will have to be relocated, and their housing abandoned⁵. Settlers will also be losing significant tax benefits, and public services which are some of the best-funded in Israel.

A move to Negev settlements can dull the sting quite a bit, if the right situation is created. The Negev has religious significance, as one of the areas where Abraham is mentioned to have wandered in the Torah⁶ – this could make it more appealing to some religious Jews. The most important factor, however, is the quality of life that can be provided in the desert – and with the right plan, this could be very high indeed. That plan would be to create high-quality, *privately owned* settlement-style housing in the desert. Some members of the Architecture Macro Studio at RWU have been working on a model for the creation of “Desert Cities” (roughly 5,000 people or less) that could be located in the Negev desert. They have also been working on a sort of modified kibbutz agricultural settlement that could be highly self-sufficient, and not dissimilar to the smaller, outlying settlements in Gaza – the “modified kibbutz” could accommodate roughly 30 families, according to Studio members.

Another advantage of the plans described here is that, fundamentally, there's nothing new about them. They plan essentially treats the relocation of the Gaza and some West Bank settlers as just another immigration wave to Israel proper, of the sort that Israel has seen many times in its history – most recently with former Soviet Jews in the 1990s. The historical response to these immigration waves has often been town construction – it worked before, it can work now. Further, it requires no major change in lifestyle for the Israeli settlers – they'd be living in communities comparable in size and type to those they left. In contrast, Paritzsky's proposal would call for a radical change in living standards – 81.4% of settlers in the West Bank and Gaza Strip own their homes⁷. The “Desert Cities” plan allows for a standard of living that is far more desirable than apartment housing.

Paritzsky is certainly correct in stating that 17,000 empty apartments can house the 7,500 settlers from Gaza – and probably the relatively small number of settlers that will be relocated from the West Bank during the first phase – but most people will not want to be housed there. It is important to note that there will be some need for inexpensive apartment housing, particularly for West Bank ultra-orthodox families.

Settlement-style communities would offer a great deal of political utility, especially because they can be constructed quickly. Ariel Sharon is proposing that the withdrawal process begin in July, and so time is of the essence here. In fact, it's possible that some settlers may need to be housed temporarily in existing Negev apartments, as Paritsky suggested, while more permanent Negev settlements are constructed. I submit that a Negev settlement solution is fast, cheap, can meet the cultural needs of the settlers (including construction of new religious schools to replace those in the West Bank), and lends itself well to integration with a framework for withdrawal that could include more elaborate settler housing options later on. For example, settlers who move to the desert cities could be given priority housing on the artificial island proposed by some RWU Macro Studio students if it is constructed, or some sort of financial stake in it.

Of course, certain assumptions are being made here. Most importantly, I'm assuming that it's politically possible to remove the settlers at all – that is, that Sharon won't back down in the face of a threat from a coalition partner to withdraw. If Sharon does go forward with the withdrawal, and the National Union doesn't back down on its threat, then we can anticipate a fairly major reshuffling in the coalition makeup of the government.⁸

That said – if we assume the withdrawal will take place, then it follows the settlers will need someplace to go. The Negev “Desert Cities” plan isn't a perfect option, but it will allow the settlers to move into high-quality housing rapidly. While at least some settlers will almost certainly have to live in existing apartment housing during the construction of the Negev settlements, this plan offers the best chance of ensuring that the apartment housing will be only a temporary solution.

Notes and References:

1. Haaretz Daily, Feb. 9th, 2004, “PM Begins Bid to get Likud Ministers Behind Disengagement”
2. “Israel's Negev Desert” http://www.negev.org/About/negev_desert.htm
3. “For Israeli Pioneers, Negev Desert Holds Promise of Fruitful Future” <http://www.m-sadeh.org.il/kibbutz/al.htm>
4. Maariv International, March 11 2004, “Draft Disengagement Schedule Finalized”

5. Shimon Peres has proposed that settlers might also have the option of remaining in Palestinian territory, but under Palestinian government.

6. "Israel's Negev Desert"

7. 2003 Social Survey by Israeli Census Bureau

8. See my paper: "Israeli Politics and the Occupied Territories: What's Ahead in 2004".