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Home, Home Again: Palestinian Refugees and a Halutza-Like Swap

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As of 2000, there are 3,737,494 Palestinian refugees in the occupied territories, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon. 1,211,480 of them live in refugee camps, over 450,000 in the Gaza Strip alone¹. In other words, a third of the Palestinians *just in Gaza* are living in refugee camps. The scale of this problem, and its impact on the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, cannot be overstated. The disposition of these refugees, and the Palestinian assertion of a “right of return” to Israel is a hugely contentious issue. There is no one solution for this problem, and a discussion of all possible solutions is impractical to address in a short paper. However, the possibility of “land swaps” in an eventual peace agreement – in which Israeli retention of some settlement blocs in the West Bank would be offset by giving the Palestinians small pieces of Israeli territory – presents an interesting set of options when viewed from a macro projects perspective. In particular, the Palestinian acquisition of the Halutza sand dunes through land swaps could confer a great deal of benefit regarding the refugee issue and others.

The Halutza sand dunes are a portion of the Negev desert next to the Gaza Strip's southern tip and the Egyptian border, about 200 square kilometers in size² – this is slightly larger than Washington, DC. It was discussed as a possible land swap site in the 2000 Camp David/Taba negotiations,³ but Ariel Sharon announced in July of 2001 that the Israeli government would be constructing settlements in Halutza, thus making it an unlikely candidate for a land swap.⁴ Information on the current state of these settlements is difficult to find, but the Foundation for Middle East Peace reports that construction of an agricultural settlement, Bar Milcha, began on Aug. 14th, 2003⁵. The region *was* uninhabited, and lacked infrastructure, which made it much less controversial to part with from an Israeli perspective. We have been unable to find information on the current population- if any – of the Halutza settlement(s).

This is unfortunate from the Palestinian perspective. Halutza sits on top of an underground lake of brackish water, and kibbutzim in the Negev have learned that brackish water can be used as-is for forms of agriculture and aquaculture. This water is also easier to desalinate than ocean water. Thus, Halutza could be helpful at the very least in providing some jobs and food to the Palestinians, and reducing Gazan water shortages.

Halutza also would provide an extraordinary resettlement option for some of the Palestinians currently living in refugee camps. The land is likely still largely undeveloped, and so the Palestinians would have the opportunity to develop it optimally if they acquired possession of it. There's a *lot* of land, too, on the scale of the Gaza Strip – gaining Halutza would increase the Strip's area by roughly 50%. Through careful planning, it should be possible to build settlements that can at least make a dent in Gaza's internal refugee problem – that is, the refugees in Gaza itself.

Ameliorating the 50% unemployment rate of the Palestinians is at least as important as resolving the refugee problem – and here, too, Halutza could be useful. The construction of new roads, housing, factories, schools, and so on would be a massive project, and most likely one that would last years. Thus, there is a tremendous employment opportunity here, particularly for Palestinian youth.

Although Yassir Arafat was unimpressed with the Halutza dunes in 2000, they could be hugely useful to a new Palestinian state. Even if the territory cannot be transferred to Palestinian control in its entirety, Israeli population density in Halutza may remain low enough that at least some of it could be given to the Palestinian state. Particularly if the Palestinians could secure rights to extract water from the underground lake, a bit of Halutza would be better than nothing at all. For that matter, some of the benefits of acquiring Halutza would accrue to the Palestinians in *any* similarly-sized land swap arrangement along the Gazan border – for example, the opportunities for housing construction and the resulting employment opportunities. But in size and potential utility, the Halutza land swap proposal seems to have been and remains unequalled. It should provide a model for future land swaps – but if Halutza could be put back on the table, that would be extremely useful.

Notes and References:

1. Lasensky, Scott. "How To Help Palestinians Today". Jerusalem Center For Public Affairs, <http://www.jcpa.org/jl/vp491.htm>
2. Derfner, Larry. "Sand for Peace?". Jerusalem Post, Aug. 31, 2000.
3. Ibid.
4. Haberman, Clyde. "Israeli Cabinet Rules Out Idea Of Exchange Of Territory". New York Times, July 16, 2001.
5. "Report On Israeli Settlement In The Occupied Territories", Nov-Dec. 2003.