



Middle East Programme, Chatham House and Sir Joseph Hotung Programme in Law,
Human Rights and Peace Building in the Middle East, SOAS, Roundtable meeting

Israeli Settlements: A New Home for the Palestinians?

Tuesday, 2 May 2006, 14:00-15:30
Chatham House, London

Speaker: **Geoffrey Aronson**
Director, Foundation for Middle East Peace (FMEP)

Chair: **Dr Claire Spencer**
Head, Middle East Programme, Chatham House

The meeting was held on the record.

This summary is issued on the understanding that if any extract is used, the speaker and Chatham House should be credited, preferably with the date of the meeting.

Summary report

Geoffrey Aronson

The International Development Research Centre, Canada, had asked FMEP to help explain how housing assets from Israeli settlements could be made available and suitable for use by Palestinian refugees. Mr Aronson introduced a database designed by FMEP as part of the response to the question. He noted that Canada was responsible for the question of refugees under the Madrid Peace Process. The database contains contemporary information of settlement assets, although he acknowledged it to be a 'snapshot' which would require further maintenance to remain relevant, given the pace of change in the Middle East. In considering to what extent the Israeli settlements [in the West Bank] are suitable for Palestinian housing needs, Mr Aronson and his colleagues concluded that withdrawal to anything short of the 1967 borders would fail to make a valuable contribution to Palestinian housing needs.

Among the tools used in the design of the database and the development of its working formulas are photographs, open source information and field studies. The database presented two indexes, an Urban Suitability index* (taking into account population densities and available housing units, as well as nearby Palestinian localities and centres of commercial life) and an Environmental Suitability index, considering quality of land and resources given projected population densities and needs. Subtracting the Environmental index from the Urban Suitability index then produced a final number indicating 'Suitable', 'Unsuitable', 'Slightly Suitable' and 'Slightly Unsuitable'. Mr Aronson emphasized that this study was intended to present a framework for future consideration given, the current debates regarding the future of the Occupied Territory, and that it was designed to reflect a

unilateral disengagement, not a 'land swap' or a withdrawal on terms negotiated with the Palestinians. In addition, he noted that 'suitability' for Palestinian housing needs was judged in accordance with levels set by the Palestinian ministries.

Mr Aronson presented 8 prospective scenarios regarding settlement evacuation:

1. Israeli withdrawal to 1967 borders
2. Taba Agreement
3. Camp David
4. Geneva Accords
5. Barrier A
6. Barrier B
7. Barrier C
8. Barrier D

He concluded that only the first option would provide a meaningful contribution in meeting projected Palestinian housing needs.

**To calculate the number of settlement housing units available, FMEP used photographs, open source information and fieldwork to count the number of housing units and then divided them by 4.2, the calculated population density within Israel proper.*

Ahlam Akram asked why it was at all necessary to consider such a 'compromise' when a great number of the settlements were deemed illegal under international law?

Geoffrey Aronson

Mr Aronson responded that it was important to take a hard headed look at the history of the region and trends in behaviour in order to be prepared for a number of different policy options, indicating that the scenario of meeting the maximalist demands regarding settlement evacuation is unlikely.

Arthur Goodman asked what, at this time, seem to be the Israeli Prime Minister's maximum and minimum options regarding the absorption of West Bank territory into Israel?

Geoffrey Aronson

Mr Aronson responded that it seemed that the maximum land that the Palestinians could hope to secure under Prime Minister Olmert would be approximately 90% of the West Bank, if both settlements and IDF positions were evacuated. Alternatively, at minimum, they could hope to secure 40%-45%, should Prime Minister Olmert decide to remove only settlements, leaving IDF positions in place.

Jill Hamilton asked why the 'separation barrier' was being called a 'security fence' when in fact it was a manifestation of the projected Israeli borders and commented that there should be a re-evaluation of the name.

Leila Sansour commented that all current terms used to describe the barrier, whether 'Separation Barrier' or 'Security Fence', met with Palestinian disapprobation as they considered it first and foremost a 'land grab'.

Geoffrey Aronson

Mr Aronson noted that in his documentation he had called it a 'separation' barrier.

Samir Nasif asked about other concerns that FMEP had taken into account when considering the 'suitability' of settlement assets for Palestinian housing – such as roads/transportation access, employment opportunities and educational facilities.

Geoffrey Aronson

Mr Aronson replied that they had not done so, but that he hoped the database could include such information in the future with further contributions.

In addition, a question was raised regarding the willingness of Palestinians to move into the settlements and the contentious issue of original land ownership in settlement areas. Mr Aronson said that it would be an issue for the PA to adjudicate in the matter of land ownership and that he knew it would be difficult to persuade Palestinians to move. The main goal of the project, he stated, is to 'poke a hole in the argument that you could move out settlers on Monday and move in Palestinians on Wednesday'.

Regarding the difference in the settlement assets in the Gaza Strip and West Bank, Mr Aronson remarked that those in the Gaza Strip were of little use given their extremely low density potential and their distance from Palestinian amenities. Settler housing in the West Bank, however, had a greater potential to contribute to Palestinian housing needs.

Khalid Nadeem asked who would be the target audience for such a database and also, what kind of contribution could the Gulf countries, as interested third parties, make to developing housing options for Palestinians? He also asked whether any members of the Hamas government had seen this database?

Geoffrey Aronson

Mr Aronson replied that the database would be of importance to the Palestinians themselves, as they have limited access to such detailed information and maps regarding Israeli settlements. In addition, the database could also be of use to international organisations and policy analysts contemplating the future of the area. In terms of the Gulf countries, Mr Aronson noted that no-one was likely to refuse a generous cheque though there might be some problems getting it through the banking system!

With regards to Hamas, Mr Aronson noted that his colleague had made a presentation in Nablus where the Hamas Minister for Planning was in attendance, and therefore, they had indeed seen the plan. However, given the location, the audience was particularly interested in the fate of Nablus and its surrounding settlements.

Claire Spencer asked whether Mr Aronson and his colleagues had seen a RAND study on transportation networks and access?

Geoffrey Aronson

Mr Aronson responded that he was acquainted with the study and thought it a "cruel joke"

Mr Aronson concluded by noting that the database and information therein had been well received by the Palestinian authorities and stated that he had also given a copy to the Israeli authorities. He expressed the hope that the necessary funding and interest would be available in order to maintain the relevance of the data and that the database could develop in terms of depth and also respond to changing situations on the ground. He noted that the database would be available, along with extensive documentation regarding settlement activity, on the website of the Foundation for Middle East Peace, www.fmep.org.