

Gaza Today, Jerusalem Tomorrow

They came, they conquered and they left. After 38 years of military occupation Israel has decided to evacuate its 8,000 colonists from the Gaza Strip. As ever the event is presented as yet another historic 'painful' and 'generous' concession made for the sake of peace. Such claims could hardly stand the most elemental test of reason and scrutiny.

To begin with, the first question that comes to mind is, if the Israeli leadership could muster the political will to evacuate the Gaza Strip today then surely they could evacuate the West Bank and Jerusalem tomorrow. The latter two, after all, were equally subjected to Israel's belligerent military occupation for the same period. This is the litmus test that beckons Ariel Sharon – the 'man of peace.'

For the Palestinian population of the Gaza Strip the evacuation of the settlements is most welcome. Undoubtedly, it would free up much needed land for agriculture, housing, schools and hospitals. Israel's 8000 colonists controlled 30% of Gaza's 365 sq miles. But this is not 'as good as it could get'. If Israel maintains its military outposts at the international crossings (to Egypt in particular) and continues its blockade of the territorial waters as well as the airspace over Gaza, then the territory's 1.4 million residents would remain for all intents and purposes virtual prisoners.

Clearly, using the criteria set down by the Fourth Geneva Convention Israel would still remain an Occupying Power. It does not take much to figure this out given its refusal to guarantee the free and uninhabited movement of people and goods. The evacuation of Gaza – not to be confused with 'withdrawal' – is widely seen as part of a long-standing strategy to get rid of as much Palestinians as possible while expanding control of Palestinian land in the West Bank.

In more normal circumstances where peace and justice are simultaneously being pursued there could be no such attempts to eliminate the Gaza's 1.4 million Palestinians from the political equation. One million of them are actually refugees from 1948. They hail from towns and villages in Israel. The same buses that evacuate the colonists could also be used to return these refugees and their descendents to their homes. This, however, is too bitter a pill for Sharon and his Zionist legions.

By lamenting before the cameras on how painful the evacuation has been Israeli colonists are today hoping to win international sympathy and tacit approval for the continued occupation of the West Bank. Sharon claims he has reassurances for the United States. Among Palestinians, there would be no tears to see the backs of the colonists who for 38 years were the reason for Israel's military rule over their lives. Today's evacuation is seen on the streets of Gaza as the fruits of resistance and sacrifice. Much more of the same would be needed to regain the West Bank with Jerusalem.

In September 2000 Ariel Sharon started a process that appears irreversible. It started in Jerusalem when he intruded into Masjid al Aqsa. Nothing in the Israeli arsenal could have stopped the flood once the gates were open, not after the murder of Muhammad al Dura in Gaza. While the wheels continue to turn in Gaza today Jerusalem awaits its turn tomorrow.

By Dr Daud Abdullah, Assistant Secretary General, The Muslim Council of Britain