

{FEBRUARY 7 2004}

GO TO GAZA

Do you want to make the deal of a lifetime? Go to Gaza!

The government has kindly laid on armored vehicles for this purpose. Once there, you can obtain the villa you have dreamt about all your life, with two floors and a green lawn, for next to nothing. The State is rich.

You can put up greenhouses and produce flowers or vegetables. Once upon a time you could engage Palestinian workers, who would work for a pittance. They had no alternative, because their land was taken away from them. Now this is too dangerous, so you will engage workers from Thailand, who get even less.

There are no legal problems, such as a minimum wage, annual vacations, dismissal indemnities or any of that nonsense. Israeli law does not apply. The prevailing law is a relic of the pre-1967 Egyptian occupation, and the conditions are Egyptian, too.

You can export your products to Europe. True, that has to be done discreetly, under false names, but it will get to the markets. The bureaucrats in Brussels will fume, because this violates the trade agreement between Israel and the European Union. Let them fume. Who cares? The main thing is getting your hands on those crisp Euro notes.

Of course, there is a security problem. You and the other 7000 settlers in the Gaza strip sit among a million Palestinians. You took away their essential land reserves and half of their water. So they don't like you. But never mind, the IDF will defend you - a whole battalion to defend a settlement of a few dozen families, a whole division for the Gaza Strip. Many soldiers. Many headquarters. Many armored vehicles. A lot of money. But the State pays.

If your settlement is too close to an Arab neighborhood and there is a problem, not to worry. The army will blow up all the nearby houses and "clean" the area. That will allow the settlement to expand, when the whole thing will repeat itself. The main thing is your security. And the money you make.

And that is only the beginning. If it really is decided to evacuate the settlements in the Gaza Strip, and if the decision is implemented (as you know, decision and

implementation are two different things, not necessarily connected with each other), the real money will start rolling in. The State will pay you a lot just to leave quietly. That's how it was when Menachem Begin dismantled the settlements in Sinai. The settlers got a fortune. Some refused and declared that they would never, ever give up their homes. They got double and more. In the end, not a single settler refused to take the money.

Many of the Sinai evacuees took the money and settled in America or Australia. The clever ones went to the adjoining Gaza Strip and are looking forward to their second helping of compensation.

But in the meantime the settlers crowd the TV studios, roll their eyes to high heaven and proclaim that they are defending Askalon, defending Ashdod, defending Tel-Aviv, and that, therefore, the bankrupt state must invest more billions in the settlements. Because, after all, they are the Real Zionists.

Dear settlers. Dear Zionism.

But is Ariel Sharon really serious about his "decision" to evacuate almost all the settlements in Gaza?

"Almost", because he wants to keep three settlements which are located near the 1967 Green Line. This is a typical Israeli method: when we do, after much commotion, evacuate some territories, we always keep one little piece, so that the conflict goes on. But in the end we leave. When we evacuated all the vast area of Sinai, including the oil wells, the town of Yamit and the settlements, we refused to give up the tiny Taba beauty spot. The quarrel went on for a long time, and then we left. When we left Lebanon, we kept a Security Zone. When we left the Security Zone, after a few hundred more deaths, we kept the Shebaa Farms, where our soldiers are still being killed. Now, when Sharon promises to evacuate the settlements in the Gaza Strip, he wants to keep three settlements as souvenirs.

(There was this person whose teeth were all rotten. He had them all taken out except for one, just to remind him how much it hurt.)

And so, for the nth time, everyone is guessing: What is his intention? Is he really serious this time? Does he deserve all the (verbal) hugs and kisses of Shimon Peres? Is he, at long last, revealing himself as the Israeli de Gaulle?

Well, everyone knows it's spin. It is designed to draw attention away from the bribery affair, for which he was interrogated this week by high-ranking police officers. It is also designed to hint to the brand-new Attorney General that if he indicts Sharon, he will be sabotaging a historic step towards peace. It also serves to tell the President of the United States, on the eve of Sharon's planned visit to the White House, that Sharon is now ready to make a serious move, and that Bush must give him his blessing and some

more billions of dollars (to pay the settlers off.)

But it is not only spin. This move suits Sharon's grand strategy. He is ready to sacrifice a finger to save the whole body. He is ready to give up Gaza, with its million unwanted Palestinians, and also a few isolated West Bank settlements, in order to get the Americans to agree to the annexation of most of the West Bank.

This is not a new strategy. David Ben-Gurion "gave up" 22% of Palestine in order to take over the other 78%, instead of the 55% allocated to us by the UN. Menahem Begin gave up the whole of Sinai in order to get Egypt out of the war and to concentrate on the takeover of the West Bank. Sharon is ready to "give up" all the Gaza Strip and 45% of the West Bank in order to annex 55% of the West Bank to Israel.

That is supposed to be a "unilateral step" - without the agreement of the Palestinians, who will be enclosed in enclaves surrounded by walls and electrified fences. This is the idea Sharon is going to sell to Bush: See, I am evacuating settlements, both in the Gaza Strip and in the heart of the West Bank, in spite of the fact that it hurts me so very much. That is a huge step towards peace. Shimon Peres is kissing me (verbally, verbally!) But in order to execute such a daring political act, I need an official and public American endorsement. And you must promise me not to interfere when I annex the major part of the West Bank.

Of course, this will not bring peace. Nor will it bring security. It will bring a Hamas takeover of Gaza and the Palestinian enclaves in the West Bank. It will bring many more attacks in Israel and all over the world. It will bring a war without end.

But in the eyes of Sharon, this is the decisive stage in the realization of Zionism as he understands it. The State of Israel will comprise 90% of the land between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan. As for the other 10% - God is great.