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In West Bank, Israel Sees Room to Grow

Government Moves Swiftly to Capitalize On Pullout From Gaza Despite Criticism

By Scott Wilson
Washington Post Foreign Service
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MAALE ADUMIM, West Bank -- In the tan hills a few miles east of Jerusalem, construction cranes dangle over a string of red-roofed neighborhoods that make up the largest Jewish settlement in the West Bank. It is here that Prime Minister Ariel Sharon is reengaging with his electoral base following Israel's efficient but divisive exit from the Gaza Strip.

Enjoying a moment of international sympathy, Sharon's government is moving swiftly to capitalize on its unilateral withdrawal and ongoing demolition of 25 Jewish settlements. The government's efforts are focused largely in the West Bank, land of far more religious and strategic importance to Israel than the remote slice of coastline it has left behind.

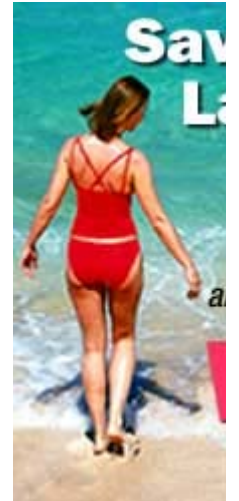
A little more than 31,000 Israelis live in Maale Adumim, a suburban settlement built on land captured by Israel in the 1967 Middle East war. Israeli officials say it will grow to more than 50,000

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A Bedouin shepherd walks with his sheep past the Israeli settlement of Maale Adumim, the West Bank's largest settlement, not far from Jerusalem. (Photos By Brennan Linsley --

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(Associated Press)

people and eventually touch the edge of East Jerusalem, even though the U.S. government and Palestinian leaders have said that such growth would severely complicate efforts to establish a viable Palestinian state.

Last week, as the world watched settlers being hauled from their homes in Gaza, government officials ordered the confiscation of 400 acres of West Bank land for a barrier that will separate Maale Adumim from Palestinian-populated territory. Just east of the main settlement, where construction plans had been frozen because of U.S. opposition, Israel will soon break ground on a new police headquarters serving the entire West Bank.

"I hope Israel is not going to use the fact it has done something right in withdrawing from Gaza in order to do a lot wrong regarding settlement activities, the wall and other matters," said Saeb Erekat, the chief Palestinian negotiator. "I hope they will use this to stay the course and to return to negotiations."

The fate of these hilltops in the coming months will likely determine whether Israel's withdrawal from Gaza refreshes the peace process or generates new friction.

Palestinian officials say the move to begin construction in new sections of Maale Adumim risks squandering the goodwill Israel generated by uprooting settlements for the first time on land designated to be part of a future Palestinian state.

Gaza has become the proving ground for that nascent state, and building a viable economy and political culture there will depend in large part on the nature of its connection to the more prosperous West Bank.

But Palestinian officials say Israel's plans around Jerusalem, a city both sides claim as their capital, will make nation-building far more difficult.

Sharon, seeking to shore up his tattered political base before next year's elections, is acting on assurances he received last year from President Bush after presenting him with his plan to evacuate all 21 Jewish settlements in Gaza and four in the West Bank.

The April 2004 letter from Bush has become a cornerstone of Israeli efforts to seek additional U.S. aid, propose borders beyond the demarcation between Israel and the territories, and build within West Bank settlement blocs such as Maale Adumim.

"In this case, the Palestinians are not giving the quid pro quo" for the Gaza pullout, said Dore Gold, an adviser to Sharon. "This time, the quid pro quo comes from the United States."

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