

# Israelis Are Gone, but Gaza Rebuilding Is Slow



Taghreed El Khodary for The New York Times

Ibrahim Abu Shatat, right, with his wife, Maha, and one of their children, recently walked among new homes being built in the Gaza Strip.



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**RAFAH, Gaza Strip, Feb. 16** — In a place where most everyone has a hard-luck story, Ibrahim Abu Shatat could write an entire book. Two of his homes have been destroyed by Israeli troops, he has been out of work for six years and his family of nine has lived in the storage room under Rafeh's soccer stadium for three years.

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Yet Mr. Shatat may be one of the few Gazans who see a ray of hope. Partly through his persistence, construction has begun on 300 homes in the sand dunes next to the former Jewish settlement of Rafiah Yam. Along with a neighboring school, they are the first major construction projects in or near a settlement since Israeli soldiers and settlers pulled out of the Gaza Strip in summer 2005. And one of those homes will be his, possibly by fall, Mr. Shatat said.

The Israeli withdrawal raised Palestinian hopes for new homes, schools and businesses, and an easing of the overcrowding in the Gaza Strip, an impoverished coastal territory where about 1.5 million Palestinians live.

“When the Israelis left, we demanded that the Palestinian government give us a piece of land,” said Mr. Shatat, 47. But internal Palestinian turmoil, the conflict with [Israel](#) and a lack of money have kept the abandoned settlements looking almost exactly as they were the day the Israelis left. Israel, in agreement with the Palestinians, flattened the roughly 1,600 settler homes, and so far, the rubble is being removed from only 3 of the 21 settlements.

But there is progress on the barren patch that was a no man’s land just outside Rafiah Yam, in southwest Gaza near the border with Egypt.

Mr. Shatat took his wife, Maha, to the construction site for the first time on Friday to see the cinder-block foundations of about 20 homes. The plans call for modest, detached houses of two or three stories, with one family living on each floor. “I’m so excited,” Mrs. Shatat said. “Now I finally believe it is happening.”

Since the Palestinian uprising began in 2000, at least 1,500 families in Rafah have lost their homes, according to the Palestinians. Israeli military bulldozers made repeated forays to destroy houses that Israel said were being used by weapons smugglers and gunmen firing on Israeli forces along the border with Egypt.

The Israeli departure raised the prospect of land-hungry Palestinians flooding into the former settlements. But while many Palestinians are impatient for new housing, security guards have kept out would-be squatters in most, but not all, cases. The settlements also came with greenhouses that offered the prospect of thousands of agricultural jobs. Yet the greenhouses sit idle.

The Palestinians invested millions of dollars to repair the greenhouses shortly after the Israelis left, and had an excellent crop in the winter of 2005 and 2006. But they were unable to export their produce to Europe, the main market, because Israel kept Gaza's main crossing for goods closed for weeks at a time, citing security concerns.

Short of money and fearing a similar fate this year, the Palestinians did not plant a winter crop in the greenhouses. But the goods crossing has been mostly open in recent weeks, when the crops would have been ready for export.

The Palestinian Agriculture Ministry says it will soon start renting the greenhouses to private farmers and will encourage them to grow for the local market, since there are no guarantees that fruits, vegetables and flowers can be exported in a timely manner.

Ahmed Yousef, an adviser to the Palestinian prime minister, Ismail Haniya, said the government had been allocating former settlement land for universities, hospitals, recreation facilities and housing. The projects have been slow in developing for several reasons. The

Palestinian government has never been known for its efficiency, and several months after the Israelis left Gaza, [Hamas](#), the radical Islamic movement, came to power, which prompted Western countries to cut direct financial assistance. “We had to find countries to finance these projects,” Mr. Yousef said. Saudi Arabia is providing \$11.5 million for the 300 homes in southern Gaza, and the [United Nations](#) development program is overseeing the project.

Mr. Shatat was a welder in Israel for 14 years and built a large, three-story home in Rafah, just 50 yards from Gaza’s border with Egypt. But the Palestinian uprising that began in 2000 dealt his personal fortunes a double blow.

Mr. Shatat was among the thousands of Palestinians who lost their jobs as Israel restricted the number of Palestinian workers allowed in. Then, five years ago, with Palestinian militants in Rafah battling Israeli troops, Mr. Shatat’s home was rendered uninhabitable when Israeli forces demolished his neighbor’s home. The Shatats rented a home nearby; that was destroyed in January 2004 when Israel tore down more homes. The only shelter Mr. Shatat could find for his wife and eight children, now ages 3 to 20, was the storage room under the Rafah stadium.

As soon as he moved his family in, Mr. Shatat began lobbying the [Palestinian Authority](#) to build replacement homes for those destroyed in the fighting, but received little help, he said. He set up a committee for the homeless in Rafah, and made himself a nuisance at government offices in Gaza City, particularly at the Land Authority. “I told them that if they did not give us land, we would start living in their offices,” he said.

About a year ago, the Palestinian government allocated land for 300 homes, though this will provide shelter for fewer than half those who lost homes in fighting along the border, according to Mr. Shatat.

Several miles up the Mediterranean coast, the former settlement of Tel Katifa offers a more typical example of the state of the former settlements. At its northwest corner, armed members of Fatah stand guard, maintaining positions they have held since shortly after the Israeli departure. Along the southern side, Hamas forces hold an outpost established a month ago, in a bid to replace the Fatah men.

At the southwest corner, unarmed guards from the Agriculture Ministry hope their presence, marked by a torn Palestinian flag flapping overhead, will discourage the factions from shooting at each other. So far, Fatah and Hamas have exchanged only sporadic gunfire during the factional fighting in Gaza.

Meanwhile, a family affiliated with Fatah is living in Tel Katifa's former kindergarten, the one building left standing when the Israelis pulled out. Fawzi Abu Abed said his family moved in after receiving permission from a Palestinian family that claimed it owned the land before the Israelis arrived. Mr. Abed said his home was destroyed by the Israelis in 2002, and government subsidies to rent a home ran out last year. "The government is broke, so we had to find our own solution," Mr. Abed said.