

After Israel exits Gaza, synagogues destroyed: Synagogues empty after Israeli withdrawal

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Israel ended its 38-year occupation of the Gaza Strip following one last difficult decision. Israeli government officials decided at the last moment not to go ahead with the destruction of 19 synagogues in the coastal strip.

Sensitivities rose to the fore in Israel after cabinet ministers announced that they would not be party to the destruction of synagogues in the territory. The government had planned to destroy the synagogues to prevent them from possibly being desecrated by Palestinians. But cabinet ministers changed their minds following stern opposition from leading rabbis.

Some Palestinians said they viewed the decision not to destroy the synagogues with suspicion because they saw it as a means for Israel to keep a presence in the area. The empty shells of the synagogues were left intact by the Israeli army as the last soldier left Gaza on September 12. Building interiors and religious fixtures had been removed to Israel.

In August the army had flattened the homes of 8,500 Jewish settlers in Gaza and the northern West Bank in accordance with Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's controversial disengagement plan.

Even before the withdrawal was completed, thousands of Palestinians inundated the Gush Katif settlement bloc, where most Israeli settlers had lived, and immediately set fire to synagogues there.

"It is impossible to argue in the defense of the government that it failed to see the writing on the wall and did not clearly expect the mass Palestinian assault on the empty synagogues in Gush Katif," editorialized the liberal Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* September 13. "Most of the members of the cabinet were afraid to be seen by the

public as having gone against the words of the rabbis. They preferred to blame the Palestinians for the destruction of the synagogues rather than have some [people] blame them.”

The fires did little structural damage to the concrete and stone buildings. Later, the Palestinian Authority bulldozed a synagogue in the abandoned settlement of Netzarim, near Gaza City, to make way for housing developments that will include high rise buildings to accommodate many of the 1.3 million Palestinians in Gaza. The coastal strip is one of the world’s most densely populated places.

President Mahmoud Abbas had said the Palestinian Authority would destroy the synagogues, which in his view were no longer holy sites because they had been emptied of all religious objects. Palestinian officials canceled their participation in a preplanned ceremony marking the withdrawal to protest the Israeli decision not to destroy the synagogues. *-Ecumenical News International*