

It's a dusty stretch of land, only eight miles across at its widest point, probably no more than 20 miles long. It's constantly threatened by encroaching desert. Yet the Gaza Strip is one of the most important pieces of land in the world.

The oppression of the Palestinian Arabs who live there is a continuing source of anger to Muslims worldwide, an anger that can vent itself in the terrorism that we in Britain have now experienced. Gaza is home to 1.37 million Palestinian Arabs, about five times the population of Leicester. Eighty per cent of its inhabitants live below the poverty line. Their daily lives and ability to support themselves are disrupted the Israeli army and their checkpoints that turn a journey along the strip into a day-long expedition.

One of the reasons for the soldiers' presence has been to protect the 8,000 Israelis who had illegally set up home in Gaza with the support of their government and, some of them believed, of their God, who wished to give this land to the Jewish people.

This week we have watched as these people have been removed from their homes by police and soldiers operating on the orders of the same man who encouraged them to move there in the first place: the Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.

At first glance, it might seem like a cause for hope, but there isn't justification for too much optimism. The withdrawal of the soldiers will make life easier for the Palestinians, but this tiny area will not be economically viable. It needs to exchange goods and labour with the wider world, yet its borders and air and sea space will remain under the control of the Israeli government. The government says it wants to prevent an influx of terrorists, but the danger is that the Gaza Strip could become the world's biggest prison.

And, although Sharon says that he is withdrawing in the name of peace, he is simultaneously strengthening other settlements in Israeli-occupied Palestinian areas in Jerusalem. On July 25, another colony of homes was approved to be built in a Muslim quarter of the city and the government continues to build its infamous "security wall", supposedly designed to protect Israelis from terrorists, but being built within Palestinian territory occupied by the Israeli army. The completion of the East Jerusalem sector of the wall is timed for this month - while the eyes of the world are on the smokescreen of Gaza.

Jerusalem was supposed to be a capitol shared by both Israelis and Palestinians, according to President George Bush's "road map" to peace and the USA is the only country that can really influence Israel.

Half of Israel's \$74 billion international debt is owed to the US and it receives hundreds of millions of dollars of aid a year from Washington. It's time the US called in some favours.