



Home Demolitions

Colonial Weapon

Demolition of Palestinian homes has been a weapon in the arsenal of those seeking to colonise Palestine in the 20th Century. It was carried out under the British Mandate and following that by the Israelis.

The destruction of Palestinian homes - which can include outhouses, workshops, animal accommodation, water cisterns, orchards, farmland etc - is, in effect, 'forced eviction' which is illegal under international law. This practice has always been intrinsic to the Israeli project of ethnically-cleansing Palestine of its indigenous people.

1948 Nakba

When the state of Israel was established in 1948 and in the years immediately following, whole Palestinian villages - more than 400 - were destroyed by the Israeli Army and militias, seeking to expand the territory granted them by the United Nations.

1967 Six-Day War

Following its victory in the 'Six-Day War' of 1967, the Israeli army illegally occupied Gaza and the West Bank and embarked on a program of Palestinian home demolition to make way for Jewish settlements.

The Three Reasons for Home Demolitions

1. To terrorise and punish the population.
This is to deter Palestinians from resisting the Israeli occupation and from seeking to improve their lives in any way.
2. To alter the demographic landscape.
That is to drive the Palestinians out of an area, thus ensuring a Jewish majority.
3. To serve military and economic aims.
That is to separate Palestinians from their land and to acquire it for an expanded Israeli state. To acquire the resources of that land.

Israeli Strategy

In recent times Israel has visited massive terror and punishment upon the Gaza Strip. During Operation Cast Lead alone, carried out in 2008/9, over 3,500 residential properties were destroyed and thousands made homeless. However, the main target of Israeli colonial expansion has always been the West Bank.

Home Demolitions

When Israel illegally occupied the West Bank in 1967 it appointed itself as the 'Civil Authority' and put itself in charge of 'land administration and construction'. It drew up plans to move settlers in and rewrote the existing property laws to restrict Palestinian access to land and housing. Israel :

- severely restricted the number of building permits allocated to Palestinians
- froze land registration , making it difficult for Palestinians to prove ownership of their land
- froze planning schemes, designed to improve facilities and infrastructure, for Palestinian towns and villages

This bureaucratic chicanery left thousands of Palestinians unable to obtain permits to build on their land, either because they could not prove ownership or because the infrastructure needed updating. Faced with the necessity of providing shelter for their families and the need to develop their businesses, the Palestinians were left with no option than to build without a permit. This provided the Israelis with an excuse to destroy Palestinian property.

Lack of 'building permission' from the Israeli authority is a major pretext for the demolition of Palestinian constructions.

It has been estimated that over 25,000 Palestinian homes have been demolished in the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza since 1967

Division of the West Bank

The Oslo Accords of 1995 divided the West Bank into three zones – Areas A, B and C. The largest zone is Area C – 62% of the West Bank. It encompasses the fertile Jordan Valley and contains many valuable natural resources, including aquifers. Area C is under full Israeli military control and is the Area where most home demolitions have taken place.

Home Demolitions in 'Area C'

Israeli military control over Area C also extends to land administration. The Israeli Military Authority drew up plans which included Settlements and a network of roads to connect them; closed 'military zones' and 'natural parks'. Palestinian construction in or near these areas was forbidden and any pre-existing Palestinian property was demolished. Since Oslo, thousands of Palestinian residences have been pulled down and olive orchard and grazing land destroyed. Since 2009 there has been a sharp increase in demolitions. In 2011 the Jordan Valley alone sustained the largest number of home demolitions : 199 structures with 401 people displaced. (see Sadaka special report on The Jordan Valley). Despite its size, Palestinians are currently only allowed to build in 1% of Area C.

Settler Privilege

While it is extremely difficult for Palestinians to obtain a building permit – they must go through a long, complicated and expensive process which frequently ends in failure – no such restrictions are placed on the Settlers.

In the years 2000 to 2006, Settlers in Area C were granted 6,945 building permits while Palestinians only received 95. In recent years over 94% of all Palestinian applications have been turned down. In addition, the Settlements contain thousands of houses built without permits; they are not demolished and are frequently awarded permits *post* construction.

'Transfer by Stealth'

A recent UN survey, (ref.) found that in 10 out of 13 Area C communities, families have moved away because *"policies and practices implemented there (in Area C) make it difficult for residents to meet basic needs or maintain their presence on the land."* These findings have led analysts to conclude that the Israeli plan is to pressurise Palestinians to move to Areas A and B so that Israel may annex Area C.

East Jerusalem

The same combination of discriminatory housing policy and settler incursion has been used by Israel to take over East Jerusalem and its surrounding area.

- Though Palestinians currently constitute 30% of the city's population, they are forced to reside in just 7% of the city's area.
- Settlers are allowed to evict Palestinians from their homes within the city. Huge settlement blocs are being expanded outside the city, to the east, leading to the demolition of yet more Palestinian property.

The Israeli aim is two-fold :

- to 'judaise' a city which has been arab for over a thousand years
- to prevent the establishment of a viable Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital.

Special Features

Loss of Residency Rights – Loss of their home makes it difficult for Palestinians to comply with the stringent Jerusalem residency conditions imposed on them by Israel, so they face the risk of banishment.

Archeological Excavation – US funded settler groups have been able to have Palestinian homes in East Jerusalem demolished on the grounds that 'biblical remains' lie beneath them.

Widespread home demolitions have been carried out in the neighbourhoods of Sheikh Jarrah and Silwan to make way for a 'King David Theme Park'.

Since 1967, more than 3,000 homes have been demolished in East Jerusalem. The number of outstanding demolition orders is estimated at up to 20,000.

The Demolition of Bedouin Homes

Outside Jerusalem: The 20 Bedouin communities, comprising some 2,300 people, who live in the hills to the east of Jerusalem, have all received demolition orders. This is because their homes are located in an area called 'E-1', a 12km piece of land that Israel has earmarked for the expansion of illegal Israeli settlements like Ma'ale Adumim and Kfar Adumim, in order to link them up with occupied East Jerusalem. Many of these Bedouin were already displaced from their ancestral home in the Negev Desert in 1948.

The Negev Desert: Israel has never recognized Bedouin land rights and considers any village built before 1948 to be illegal. The villages of those Bedouin who managed to remain face demolition because Israel doesn't recognize them. These 'unrecognised villages' - 45 in number - together with their livestock accommodation, water supply, orchards and crops are subject to destruction at any time. In the two years up to March 2004 the Israeli authorities destroyed about 24,500 acres of village crops.

In September 2011 the Netanyahu government approved the Prawer Plan under which the homes of over 30,000 Bedouin of the Negev will be demolished to make way for Israeli installations, settlements etc.

Home Demolition Method

Methods used by the Israelis are arbitrary and brutal :

- Demolition Order issued but not always given directly to the householders so they may not realise they've received one.
- Timing. The order may be acted upon immediately or at some indeterminate time in the future and then without warning, so the family can have this threat hanging over them for months or even years.
- Legal proceedings. Lengthy, costly and pointless – no order has ever been overturned by the court. At best a delay or freeze may be granted and a fine imposed but sometimes this court decision is ignored by the demolition squad. Often demolitions occur before the court process is even completed.
- Demolition is carried out by armed soldiers and policemen who turn up in force, usually in the early hours of the morning, with giant bulldozers, explosives and other wrecking equipment. The family, who may still be in bed, are given little time to salvage their possessions, which frequently are destroyed along with the house. Animal sheds are sometimes demolished while the animals are still inside.
- Cost of demolition and removal of rubble is borne by the homeowner. This can amount to thousands of shekels. For this reason some homeowners demolish their own homes.
- Punishment demolitions. These are used against the homes of Palestinians who actively resist the Occupation. They take place only occasionally now because deemed to be ineffective. A curfew is imposed in the locality and tanks and armoured personnel carriers accompany the unit carrying out the demolition. Frequently, the homes of those who have some connection to the accused – family members etc. - are also demolished, whether or not they were involved in militant activity. This constitutes 'collective punishment' and breaches the terms of the Geneva Convention. Houses have been demolished with people still inside.

Role of the US and Caterpillar

The machines used to demolish Palestinian homes, rip up orchards and clear land are specially modified giant bulldozers manufactured by the American company Caterpillar. The US government purchases these from the company and donates them to Israel through the US Foreign Military Sales Program. However, in donating machinery defined as 'military' it has been claimed that the US is violating the U.S. Arms Export Control Act, which prohibits the use of military aid against civilians. Other companies which supply Israel with machinery to demolish homes include: Volvo, Hyundai and Komatsu.

Psychological Effect of Home Demolition

Surveys have revealed the devastating effect that home demolition has on the mental and physical health of those who have to endure it. The loss of the home frequently entails loss of livelihood as well. It can lead to break-up of the family, of the community, to pauperisation and to exile. The shock is greatest for the most vulnerable, children, the elderly and the disabled.

Effect on Children

Studies reveal that home demolition is extremely traumatic for children, provoking massive insecurity and mental disturbance. Symptoms of their distress include chronic anxiety; nightmares; bed-wetting etc. They often lose their fondest possessions – toys, books, clothes, animals etc and, if their school is destroyed, their educational provision.

The Legal Position

The demolition of Palestinian homes breaches many international laws regarding housing rights. Israel is also in contravention of laws applicable in conflict situations regarding destruction of property; forcible 'transfer'; discrimination and colonization. Examples :

The Hague Regulations (section IV. Art.46)

The IVth Geneva Convention (Art.49. para 6. Art.53)

The UN Convention on the Crime of Apartheid (Arts. 1 & 2)

The Rome Statute of the ICC 2000 (Art.7(1)(d))

According to these laws Israel is also guilty of war crimes

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