

The message of the bulldozers

by Jeff Halper

House demolitions reflect the refusal of Israel to acknowledge that there is another people living in the country with legitimate claims and rights of their own

Israel's policy of demolishing Palestinian homes is part and parcel of an overall policy of displacement in which 80% of the Palestinians have been pushed from what has become Israel. Almost half of the entire Palestinian people (those living in the Occupied Territories) are being confined to a truncated Bantustan. Millions of refugees continue to languish in camps and 'Israeli Arabs', Palestinian citizens of Israel, find their own status increasingly threatened.

"In our country there is room only for the Jews. We shall say to the Arabs: Get out! If they don't agree, if they resist, we shall drive them out by force."

Professor BenZion Dinur, Israel's First Minister of Education, from *History of the Haganah* (1954)

House demolitions have stood at the centre of Israel's approach to 'the Arab problem' since the state's conception. Between 1948 and 1954, Israel systematically demolished 418 Palestinian villages – 85% of all Palestine's villages. Demolitions have been at the heart of the broad process of displacement (euphemistically dubbed 'transfer' by Israelis). The policy of house demolitions serves to confine Palestinians to small islands or is used to enhance Israeli 'security'. It is also used as a form of collective punishment, either for 'deterrence'

(demolishing homes of people accused of security offences) or for purposes of intimidation. Throughout Israel proper, in the 'unrecognised' Palestinian and Bedouin villages, and in the Palestinian neighbourhoods of Ramle, Lod and other Arab Israeli towns and cities, houses continue to be demolished.

After 1967, the process – and message – of displacement was carried across the Green Line into the occupied territories of the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza. Israeli bulldozers have demolished more than 11,000 Palestinian homes since 1967.

- At least 2,000 houses were demolished in the aftermath of the 1967 war – including four entire villages in the Latrun area (now known as 'Canada Park') and the Mughrabi Quarter in front of the Western Wall.
- In 1971 Ariel Sharon ordered 2,000 houses in the Gazan refugee camps to be razed to the ground.
- At least 2,000 houses were destroyed in the course of putting down the first *intifada* in the late 1980s and early 1990s.
- In April 2002 massive D-9 Caterpillar bulldozers laboured for three days to demolish over 300 homes at the heart of the densely-packed Jenin refugee camp.

has become more difficult and because data published by the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) lacks credibility.

By expropriating land, blocking preparation of town planning schemes for Palestinian neighbourhoods and restricting building permits, the Jerusalem Municipality has caused a severe housing shortage. Many Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem are forced to build without permits, only to find their houses are demolished by the Ministry of Interior and the Municipality. Forced to relocate to homes outside the city, they then lose their Jerusalem residency and are banished from the city forever.

Nour Eldin Domiry spent 28 years working for the Israeli Civil Administration as a police officer in Jerusalem. He has a large plaque and a shelf full of commendations for his faithful service. In April 2003, two months after retiring, his home – which he had financed from his life savings and a loan – was demolished. He had not obtained a permit for the house he had built as he could not afford the \$20,000 fee demanded. The demolition team was led by his old boss. Amidst the wreckage of his old house he built a rickety, tin-roofed two-room house so he and his family would have a place to stay. He still owes the balance of the loan from his first house and also owes a fine of \$50 per square metre of his old house – the municipality's standard demolition fee. His new dwelling now has a demolition order against it. He is unable to afford a lawyer as his new job as a security guard is so badly paid. His entire professional career was spent with an overwhelmingly Jewish organisation, the Jerusalem Police Department. If this is how Israel treats those who collaborate, what is it like for people who resist?

Many of the thousands of Palestinians in the OPT facing demolition of their 'illegal' dwellings began building during the early years of the Oslo process in the mid 1990s. Encouraged by the prospects of peace, many returned to their home towns and

Data concerning house demolitions in the West Bank is problematic because there are no international agencies working systematically in the field, because accessibility for Israeli organisations

A Palestinian girl searches through the rubble of her house in Nablus.



villages and invested in new homes. At the time, many thought the policy of demolitions would cease. Indeed, the Civil Administration gave them to believe that since most of the land was going to be handed over to Palestinian control they would face no demolition problems – even if the process had not formally changed.

Today there are over 2,000 demolition orders outstanding. The day of reckoning arrives without warning. When demolitions take place they are carried out seemingly at random. The wrecking crews, accompanied by soldiers, police and Civil Administration officials, usually come in the early morning just after the men have left for work. The family is sometimes, but not always, given up to an hour to remove their belongings before the bulldozers move in. As family members and neighbours usually put up some kind of resistance – or at least protest – they are often removed forcibly from the house. Their possessions are then thrown out of the house by the wrecking crews (often foreign guest workers). In addition to the demolition of the house, the destruction of their personal property is a serious financial blow – not to mention the emotional suffering of people seeing their most personal possessions broken and thrown out into the rain, sun and dirt. Then the bulldozer begins its work of demolition, taking between one and six hours depending on the size of the house. Sometimes demolition is resisted amidst great violence: people are beaten, jailed, sometimes killed, always humiliated.

The work is overseen by a supervisor from one of the respective government authorities (the Civil Administration in the OPT, the Jerusalem Municipality or the Ministry of Interior in Jerusalem). The supervisors of the Civil Administration, most of whom are settlers, are known to be particularly brutal. They play a major role in the psychological warfare of intimidation that is such an integral part of the planning and enforcement processes. Their white Toyota jeeps, usually accompanied by military vehicles, strike fear as they tear through villages looking for ‘violations’ of building codes. They will often speed up to a house, slam on the brakes, jump out yelling and waving their

rifles as they enter with impunity families’ living rooms, taking pictures, climbing to the roof or searching the house or yard. They humiliate the adults, terrify the children.

While all countries and cities have planning regulations, zoning and enforcement mechanisms, Israel is the only Western country and Jerusalem the only city that systematically deny permits and demolish houses of a particular national group. These actions, reminiscent of apartheid-era South Africa and the Serbs in Kosovo, clearly violate international covenants of human rights:

- Under the Hague Regulations of 1907 and the Fourth Geneva Convention, Israel is required as an occupying power to protect and ensure the needs of the Palestinian population.
- The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that “Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and his family, including food, clothing, housing.” (Article 25.1)
- The International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights “recognize[s] the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living...including adequate food, clothing, and housing.” (Article 11.1)
- The International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination obligates state parties “to guarantee the right of everyone, without distinction as to race, colour, or national or ethnic origin, to equality before the law... in particular the right to housing.” (Article 5)
- The Global Strategy for Shelter to the Year 2000, adopted by the UN General Assembly (Resolution 43/181, 20 December 1988), declares that “The right to adequate housing is universally recognised by the community of nations. Governments [must] accept a fundamental obligation to protect and improve houses and neighbourhoods, rather than damage or destroy them.”

Fear that the displaced might yet rise again and claim their patrimony prevents Israelis from enjoying the fruits of their power. The country has been seized by rising xenophobia

and national-religious fanaticism. Polarisation characterises the relations between right and left, Jewish and Arab citizens, Jews of European and Middle East origin, the working and middle classes, religious and secular. Israelis are increasingly isolated from the world. Young Israeli men and women are themselves brutalised as they are sent as soldiers to evict Palestinian families from their homes. Even the beauty of the land is destroyed as the authorities rush to construct ugly, sprawling suburbs and massive highways in order to ‘claim’ the land before Palestinians creep back in. Aesthetics, human rights, environmental concerns, education and social justice cannot coexist with displacement and occupation. ‘Fortress Israel’, as we call it, is by necessity based on a culture of strength, violence and crudity.

The bulldozer deserves to take its rightful place alongside the tank as a symbol of Israel’s relationship with the Palestinians – the tank as symbol of an Israel ‘fighting for its existence’ and for its prowess on the battlefield, and the bulldozer for the dark underside of Israel’s ongoing project of displacing Palestinians from the country altogether.

Jeff Halper is Coordinator of the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions (ICAHD) and Professor of Anthropology at Ben Gurion University, Beer Sheva, Israel. Email: icahd@zahav.net.il

The Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions (ICAHD) www.icahd.org is a non-violent, direct-action group resisting Israeli demolition of Palestinian houses, land expropriation, settlement expansion, by-pass road construction and policies of ‘closure’ and ‘separation’. ICAHD comprises members of many Israeli peace and human rights organisations. ICAHD’s work is coordinated with local Palestinian organisations. ICAHD aids Palestinians in filing police claims, in dealing with the Israeli authorities, in arranging and subsidising legal assistance and coping with the traumas and tribulations of life under occupation. ICAHD mobilises Israelis and Palestinians to rebuild demolished houses as acts of resistance.