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[afgazad@gmail.com](mailto:afgazad@gmail.com)

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By Susan Abulhawa  
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## ***Taking advantage of pandemic / Israel moves to annex more Palestinian land***

Speaking to students at Tel Aviv's Bar Ilan University in November 1989, Benjamin Netanyahu, at that time the Israeli deputy foreign minister, said: "Israel should have exploited the repression of the demonstrations in China [at Tiananmen Square], when world attention focused on that country, to carry out mass expulsions among the Arabs of the territories."

In other words, Netanyahu was lamenting a missed opportunity to carry out more war crimes with impunity. In fact, committing war crimes in the chaos of international confusion and/or distraction has been Israel's modus operandi since its inception. This came to fruition with the terrorizing, massacring and expelling of indigenous Palestinians under the cover of Europe's holocaust and World War II.

Behind the popular romantic narratives of Israel's existence is a reality of wanton murder, theft and ineffable misery and suffering. This malfeasance is not merely the strategy of a settler-colonial state bent on ethno-religious purity. Rather it is the national supremacist mindset of a government and citizenry that propel the engine of land theft and settlement, complete with fine-tuned tools to take everything: apartheid laws, mass imprisonment, home demolitions, property confiscations, murder, daily harassment and humiliation, control, cultural appropriation, bombing, night raids, day raids, school raids, kidnappings and propaganda. All to take the land, water, heritage and home of the terrain's true, native people.

## **Taking advantage of pandemic**

Now, 31 years after Tiananmen, Netanyahu is the prime minister of Israel and is taking full advantage of the current global coronavirus pandemic to consolidate more power over the whole of what is Palestine. Israel is pushing to formalize its control over the majority of the West Bank land area, inching closer to fulfilling the promise of its flag: a Star of David between two lines, symbolizing Israeli reign from the Mediterranean Sea to the Jordan River.

In 1948, Israel formalized its theft of 78 percent of Historic Palestine. After launching a war in 1967, it then occupied all of Palestine and formally annexed Jerusalem. The Oslo Accords of 1993 allowed Israel to control approximately 60 percent of the West Bank, in what is called Area C, ostensibly as a trust that would be handed over to the future Palestinian state.

However, as the world finally understands, Israel never intended to let go. Instead, they built settlements at breakneck speed, importing Jews from other countries to populate them, offering various economic incentives in order to create “facts on the ground.”

Now, Israel proposes to formalize its control by annexing 30 percent of the West Bank, which includes the most fertile and resource-rich lands — of course. It has pursued a strategy of imperialism by the inch, the incremental theft of land in normal times so as not to arouse international ire. And in times of upheaval or distraction, like a global pandemic, it takes bigger bites.

From a small gang of European colonizers at the turn of the 20th century, the Zionists went from owning less than 3 percent of the land to now controlling approximately 92 percent of Historic Palestine (including Area C) and 100 percent of all water resources — which they ration to Palestinians at three times the cost of water sold to Jews in the same area. They also totally control all commerce, food production, borders and movement.

Consistent with the government’s nefarious aims, illegal Israeli settlers are exploiting the pandemic lockdown, imposed in the occupied West Bank, to attack Palestinian homes and livelihoods.

## **Destruction of Palestinian farms**

In a single week in April, there were three incidents in which Israeli settlers destroyed Palestinian farms and paved the roads in the districts of Nablus, Jerusalem and Bethlehem. In separate incidents, settlers attacked olive groves, cutting down trees that are hundreds of years old and belong to Palestinian families who traditionally subsisted on them.

Settlers have increased their vandalism of cars and property belonging to Palestinians, with instances documented in Madama, Burqa and Burin.

“We experience attacks from the settlers a few times a month,” Ghassan al-Najjar, a 30-year-old activist in Burin, a village 3 miles south of Nablus, told Middle East Eye. “But ever since we were put under lockdown because of the coronavirus, it has increased tenfold.” He continued, adding that settlers, under the protection of Israeli soldiers, have been raiding the village daily.

The Palestine Liberation Organization issued a statement against these abuses, as well as Israel’s recent desecration of the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem, when Israeli settlers stormed the mosque under police protection.

“The escalation in settlement activities coincides with the crimes of settler gangs who are wreaking havoc against and assaulting our people by cutting down trees and attacking houses and vehicles in the streets, and starting to build roads for settlers, as is now taking place between the villages of Za’atra and Hawwara for the use of settlers, which is an attempt to create the Bantustans and ghettos for our people, believing that they can take advantage of the current situation to pass the so-called American deal of the century,” said the PLO in a statement after a meeting in Ramallah to discuss the latest developments.

The statement also rejected Israel’s recent excavations near the wall of the Al-Aqsa mosque. Israel has been digging under the mosque and the Dome of the Rock since 1967, trying to find some trace of the Jewish Temple they claim is there. After 53 years of digging and excavating, they’re still empty-handed, with no evidence to show in support of their romantic narrative.

Their colonial fairy tale of Israel belies the destruction of an entire ancient society that has lived, loved, built, farmed and died in that land for millennia. And now Israel is using the global pandemic as cover to take one more stab at erasing the Palestinians all the more.

*A Palestinian-American writer and political activist, Abulhawa is the author of Mornings in Jenin (2010) and founder of a nongovernmental organization, Playgrounds for Palestine. Abulhawa's parents, born in At-Tur in Jerusalem, were refugees of the 1967 war.*

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