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by RAMZY BAROUD

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‘People of the Cave’: Palestinians Take Their Fight for Justice to the Mountains



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Palestinians are not going anywhere. This is the gist of seven decades of Palestinian struggle against Zionist colonialism. The proof? The story of Ahmed Amarneh.

Amarneh, a 30-year-old civil engineer from the northern West Bank village of Farasin, lives with his family in a cave. For many years, the Amarneh family has attempted to build a proper home, but their request has been denied by the Israeli military every time.

In many ways, the struggle of the Amarnehs is a microcosm of the collective struggle of Farasin; in fact, of most Palestinians.

Those who are unfortunate enough to be living in areas of the West Bank, designated by the Oslo II Accord of 1995 as Area C, were left in a perpetual limbo.

Area C constitutes nearly 60% of the overall size of the West Bank. It is rich with resources – mostly arable land, water and ample minerals – yet, relatively sparsely populated. It should not be surprising why right-wing Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, wants to annex this region. More land, with fewer Palestinians, has been the guiding principle for Zionist colonialism from the outset.

True, Netanyahu's annexation plan, at least the de jure element of it, has been postponed. In practice, however, de facto annexation has been taking place for many years, and, lately, it has accelerated. Last June, for example, Israel demolished 30 Palestinian homes in the West Bank, mostly in Area C, rendering over 100 Palestinians homeless.

Additionally, according to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), Israeli army bulldozers destroyed 33 non-residential structures as well. This is "the same number (of homes) demolished throughout the entire first five months of 2020," OCHA reported.

Unfortunately, Farasin, like numerous other Palestinian villages and communities across Area C, has been singled out for complete destruction. A small population of approximately 200 people has been subjected to Israeli army harassment for years. While Israel is keen on implanting Jewish communities in the heart of the occupied West Bank, it is equally keen on disrupting the natural growth of Palestinian communities, the indigenous people of the land, in Area C.

On July 29, Israeli forces invaded Farasin, terrorizing the residents, and handed over 36 demolition orders, according to the head of the Farasin village council. Namely, this is the onset of ethnic cleansing of the entire population of the village by Israel.

Ahmed Amarnah and his family also received a demolition order, although they do not live in a concrete house, but, rather, in a mountain cave. "I didn't make the cave. It has existed since antiquity," he told reporters. "I don't understand how they can prevent me from living in a cave. Animals live in caves and are not thrown out. So let them treat me like an animal and let me live in the cave."

Amarneh's emotional outburst is not misleading. In a recent report, the Israeli rights group B'tselem, has listed some of Israel's deceptive methods used to forcefully remove Palestinians from their homes in Area C or to block any development whatsoever within these Palestinian communities.

"Israel has blocked Palestinian development by designating large swathes of land as state land, survey land, firing zones, nature reserves and national parks," according to B'tselem. Judging by the systematic destruction of the Palestinian environment in the West Bank, Israel is hardly interested in the preservation of animals, either. The ultimate goal is the allocation of "land to settlements and their regional councils," B'tselem argues.

Therefore, it should not come as a surprise that, for example, as of November 2017, only 16 of the 180 Palestinian communities in Area C have been approved for development. The rest are strictly prohibited.

Between 2016 and 2018, of the 1,485 Palestinian applications for construction and development in these areas, only 21 permits have been approved.

These unrealistic and draconian measures leave Palestinian families with no option but to build without a permit, eventually making them targets for Israeli military bulldozers.

Hundreds of families, like that of Ahmed Amarneh, have opted for alternative solutions. Failing to obtain a permit and wary of the imminent demolition if they build without one, they simply move to mountain caves.

This phenomenon is particularly manifest in the Hebron and Nablus regions.

In the mountainous wasteland located on the outskirts of Nablus, the wreckage of abandoned homes – some demolished, some unfinished – is a testimony of an ongoing war between the Israeli military, on the one hand, and the Palestinian people, on the other. Once they lose the battle and are left with no other option, many Palestinian families take their belongings and head to the caves in search of a home.

Quite often, the fight does not end there, as Palestinian communities, especially in the Hebron hills region, find themselves target to more eviction orders. The war for Palestinian survival rages on.

The case of Ahmed Amarneh, however, is particularly unique, for rarely, if ever, Israel issues a military order to demolish a cave. When the cave is demolished, where else can the Amarneh family go?

This dilemma, symptomatic of the larger Palestinian quandary, reminds one of Mahmoud Darwish's seminal poem, "The Earth is Closing on Us":

"Where should we go after the last frontiers?

Where should the birds fly after the last sky?

Where should the plants sleep after the last breath of air?"

However depressing the reality may be, the metaphor is undeniably powerful, that of savage colonialism that knows no bounds and Palestinian steadfastness (sumoud) that is perennial.

Often buried within the technical details of oppression – Area C, home demolition, ethnic cleansing and so on – is the tenacity of the human spirit, that of the Amarneh family and hundreds of other Palestinian families, who have turned caves into loving homes. It is this unmatched perseverance that makes the quest for justice in Palestine, despite the innumerable odds, possible.

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