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Ethnic Cleansing in Palestine: Home Demolitions on the Rise

By Richard Hardigan
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According to the Israeli Committee against House Demolitions, an Israeli NGO, the Israeli government has demolished 28,000 Palestinian structures since the Occupation of the West Bank and Gaza began in 1967, resulting in the homelessness and suffering of untold numbers of people. There is little ambiguity about the morality of this form of ethnic cleansing, and even most Israeli legal scholars agree that it is in contravention of international law. Article 53 of the Fourth Geneva Convention states:

“Any destruction by the Occupying Power of real or personal property belonging individually or collectively to private persons, or to the State, or to other public authorities, or to social or cooperative organizations, is prohibited, except where such destruction is rendered absolutely necessary by military operations.”

The Occupation is approaching its 49th birthday, and over the years the international community has been sitting by and watching and occasionally issuing toothless condemnations of Israel’s behavior. There have been ebbs and flows in the rates of home demolitions, but the possibility of losing one’s home has nevertheless been a constant part of Palestinian life for generations now. In the year 2016, however, there has been a sharp and extremely disconcerting uptick in the pace of demolitions, as the first few months have seen a three-fold increase in such activity. On one day alone two weeks ago, April 6, the Israeli army demolished 54 structures in nine communities in the West Bank, displacing 124 people, including 60 children.

The Israeli authorities usually demolish Palestinian homes for one of three reasons – building without a proper permit, building in a location deemed unsuitable by the government, and collective punishment.

Improper building permits in Umm al-Kheir

One of the communities affected on April 6 was the small Bedouin village of Umm al-Kheir, located in the South Hebron hills, where the Israeli authorities demolished six structures, rendering 31 residents, nearly half of its population, including 19 children, homeless.

In a video posted on the village's Facebook page, you can see yellow bulldozers leveling the frail tin shacks, as the presence of heavily armed soldiers ensures that there is minimal resistance. The residents look on, helpless, as their shelters are destroyed. A woman wearing a white hijab screams and gesticulates at the soldiers, but one of them pushes her away roughly. Other than that there is surprisingly little display of emotion on the part of the locals. One reason for that, perhaps, is that the people of Umm al-Kheir know that there is nothing they can do to prevent the occupation forces from achieving their goals. Another is that they have experienced all of this before – on many occasions.

The history of Umm al-Kheir is described in a 2011 report by the Israeli daily newspaper Haaretz. This small collection of homes was created after the ethnic cleansing of the Palestinians perpetrated by Zionist forces in the Nakba of 1948. These Bedouins were forced out of their homes in Arad at the border of the Negev and Judean deserts and settled here, not far from the town of Yatta, which was under Jordanian control at the time. They purchased the land from Yatta, and they lived, as they had for centuries, grazing their sheep. After the Occupation began in 1967, the residents of Umm al-Kheir once again found themselves under the authority of the Israelis, who largely left them alone until 1981, when the Israeli settlement of Carmel was created next to the village. As time went on, it became clear that the settlers' thirst for land would not be quenched easily, and they began to harass the villagers, trying to convince them to leave Umm al-Kheir, an effort supported by the Israeli authorities, who issued one demolition order after the other. According to Rebuilding Alliance, an American NGO, the first demolition took place in 2008, followed by demolitions in 2010, 2011 and 2013. In the fall of 2014 the army came to the village to destroy six stone structures, and when the inhabitants took shelter in tents supplied by the International Committee of the Red Cross and others, the army soon returned to demolish them, as well. Small houses made of sheet metal were donated to replace the tents, and it was these structures that the Israeli authorities demolished on this occasion.

The official reason for the demolition of the buildings in Umm al-Kheir was that the locals did not have the proper building permits. Israel refers to the Oslo II accords, which give it the power to control construction in Area C, the part of the West Bank over which it has complete control. Speaking to Al Jazeera in September of 2015, the spokesman for the Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories stated that “in accordance with the interim agreements signed by Israel and the Palestinian Authority and recognized by the international community, every construction in [Area] C requires the approval of the authorities.”

On the surface this statement seems relatively innocuous, but because of the difficulty Palestinians have in securing building permits, it has far-reaching consequences. In June of 2015, +972 Magazine, a left-leaning news blog, reported that only 1% of land in Area C is designated for Palestinian construction, and that 94% of Palestinian applications for building permits are denied. According to B'Tselem, an Israeli NGO, of the 1,640 applications for permits to build in Area C that were submitted by Palestinians between 2009 and 2012, only 37 were approved. The disparity between the amount of land allocated to settlers and that zoned for Palestinians is enormous. According to a report by the United Nations' Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) from 2015, more than 13 times as much land is approved for a settler as for a Palestinian – about 790 square meters per settler, and 60 square meters per Palestinian. Thus, pressure from settler land grabs as well as the Palestinians' increasing population leaves the latter no choice, especially in areas of high-density population, such as East Jerusalem. They have to build without the proper permit. It is then only a matter of time before the bulldozers appear.

The bulldozers visit Khirbet Tana in the firing zone

Khirbet Tana lies in the north, not far from the city of Nablus, and it suffered a fate similar to that of Umm al-Kheir a day later. The bulldozers came and demolished 34 structures, which displaced 69 Palestinians, including 29 children. 2016 has been a terrible year for the people of this small hamlet, as this was the fourth visit paid to them by the Israelis during the last two months. According to a statement released by OCHA, many of the destroyed buildings had been provided by relief agencies, including a school. In this case the buildings were destroyed not because of improper permits but rather because the village is located in a firing zone.

A firing zone is an area designated by the Israelis to be used only for military exercises. According to OCHA, 18% of the West Bank falls into this category. The immorality of removing civilian populations from their lands for the purpose of military training is obvious, but what's worse is that over 80% of firing zones are not actually used for this purpose. In 2014, Colonel Einav Shalev, a senior IDF officer, admitted during a session of the 'Judea and Samaria Affairs' subcommittee of the Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee that the designation of some Palestinian areas as firing zones is a ruse to expel Palestinians.

Some Palestinian structures are demolished because of their location, even if they do not lie in a firing zone. A homeowner in Idhna, a village near Hebron, told me when I visited in 2014 she was informed that her home was demolished because it lay too close to the Apartheid Wall, the separation barrier Israel has been building since 2002. Her neighbor had it worse. She was not given any reason at all for the destruction of her home.

Punitive home demolitions

A week before the destruction in Umm al-Keir and Khirbat Tana, in the middle of the night of March 31, the army demolished part of the house of the family of Ihab Maswada, who had been killed in December after he used a knife to attack a settler in Hebron. Soldiers had threatened to destroy the house a few days after the stabbing, but the demolition order did not come until recently.

A member of the family told Ma'an News, a Palestinian news service, that the soldiers gave the family ten minutes to evacuate the house. Afterwards, Maswada's mother said they "fired a stun grenade inside the house and left the house laughing."

The reason for this home demolition was clearly punitive, although the authorities prefer to use the term deterrent. Israel claims that a potential terrorist would think twice before mounting an attack if he knew that his family's home would be destroyed as a consequence. There have been several studies questioning this point of view. For example, Israeli journalists Amos Harel and Avi Isacharoff reported in their book *The Seventh War* that there was no evidence that punitive home demolitions were effective as a deterrent. In fact, the reports show that the number of violent attacks following the implementation of the policy actually increased. In 2005, an Israeli military committee examined the issue, as well, and arrived at the same conclusion.

Shortly thereafter, the government of Israel heeded the committee's recommendations, and, except in a small number of cases, the practice of punitive home demolitions was discontinued until 2014, when it was resumed with the destruction of the homes of the suspected kidnappers of three settler teenagers.

While the end result in each of the three above-mentioned cases is the same – homeless Palestinians – they illustrate the three main categories of justification that the forces of occupation provide for destroying the homes of Palestinians. But the real motive behind the demolitions is much more nefarious. As Hanna Issa, a Palestinian international law expert, explained to *Al Jazeera*:

"The idea behind this is to prevent these lands from being transferred to the Palestinians under a final status agreement. The short-term agenda is to clear the areas [near] settlements -of any inhabitants and to confiscate land for more settlements and for expanding the Israeli [separation] wall."

Home demolitions on the rise

OCHA reports that during the years 2012-2015, an average of 50 homes were demolished in the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem every month. So far this year, the army has destroyed 539 structures, a rate that is more than three times higher. In all of 2015, 453 buildings were demolished, so the sharp surge in this kind of activity is an extremely recent phenomenon. The reasons for this sudden increase are unclear.

Is it simply a result of the shift to the right of the views of Israeli society vis-à-vis the Palestinians? Or are the Israelis beginning to feel the pressure of the efforts, such as the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement, of some sectors of the international community to call into question Israel's policies? In this case, might they believe they have to consolidate as much control and seize as much land as possible before an agreement is forced upon them? Perhaps it is a combination of these factors.

One thing that is clear is that the Israelis are getting impatient. There are currently 11,000 buildings in Area C that have been slated for demolition but as of now are still standing.

Recently Major-General Yoav Mordechai, the coordinator of the government's activities in the West Bank, appeared before a subcommittee in the Israeli parliament to answer questions about the slow pace of demolitions, and he claimed that he was doing all he could. Some right-wing members of the government had accused him of unfairly singling out structures in the illegal Israeli settlements in the West Bank, but he quickly dispelled this notion.

"I want to state unequivocally that enforcement is more severe towards the Palestinians," Al-Jazeera quoted him as telling the officials.

What about the future?

As far-right Israeli NGO's such as Regavim send their drones over the West Bank in search of suspicious Palestinian construction, one wonders what this latest increase in ethnic cleansing means for the long-term future of the Palestinians. Perhaps it will lead to an intensification of the international community's efforts to call Israel to account for its illegal and immoral activities. In the short term, though, it appears that its only consequence will be to make life more difficult for the Palestinians.