

More information

Al-Haq, West Bank affiliate of The International Commission of Jurists (Geneva), a Palestinian human rights organization located in Ramallah, West Bank, in special consultative Status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations. Al-Haq has extensive information and case studies on their website about the Israeli policy of punitive house demolitions. <http://www.alhaq.org>

Amnesty International, an international human rights organization that does yearly reports on the status of Israel's relationship with the occupied territories as well as press releases and smaller reports: Israeli and the Occupied Territories Page: <http://web.amnesty.org/report2003/isr-summary-eng>

B'Tselem, the Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories. B'Tselem has extensive sections on house demolitions. www.btselem.org

The Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949 can be found on the UN commission for Human Rights Website at <http://www.unhcr.ch/html/menu3/b/92.htm>

Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions is a non-violent direct action group established to oppose and resist Israeli demolition of Palestinian homes. www.icahd.org

Rabbis for Human Rights is involved in protecting homes of Palestinians from demolition <http://www.rhr.israel.net/>

Rebuilding Homes, <http://www.rebuildinghomes.org>

United Nations Relief and Works Agency carries out relief and work programs for Palestinian refugees. <http://www.unrwa.org>



Five things you can do to help

1. Write a letter to the editor or op ed for your local paper.
2. Call your local newspapers and media stations to complain when they run erroneous reports on Israel's occupation - and to thank them when they get it right.
3. Working with local peace and justice groups, contact your elected city, state, and national representatives to demand that U.S. policy support a just peace based on human rights and international law, and stop aid to Israel until it ends the occupation.
4. Organize local educational forums regarding events in Israel and Palestine.
5. Get your local group to join the U.S. Campaign to End the Israeli Occupation (www.endtheoccupation.org) to join their efforts with others around the nation.

OCCUPATION REALITIES

AFSC Israel-Palestine Resource Series

Middle East Task Force | Fall 2004

House Demolitions

“Can we... even begin to imagine what it feels like to have bulldozers suddenly appear in the middle of the night and plow under everything a family has, as they and their children watch? Did the decision makers take into account the hatred they are sowing in the hearts of the children who witnessed the destruction of their homes? And what will become of these wretched people now, people who even before their homes were razed were doomed to a sordid life in one of the poorest of the refugee camps? Where are they going to spend the bitterly cold nights?”

(Gideon Levy, Ha'aretz, 1/21/04)

Since 1967 Israel has pursued a policy of expanding the settlement of Israeli civilians into the Occupied Palestinian Territories, which includes Gaza and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, while severely limiting Palestinian growth, confining the population to small enclaves. Under the guise of planning and the law, the natural development of Palestinian towns and villages is frozen by various means, including land expropriation, discriminatory planning and zoning policies, restrictive granting of building permits and the demolition of Palestinian homes. According to the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions, since 1967 over 8,000 Palestinian homes in the Occupied Palestinian Territories have been destroyed by the Israeli military or civil authority in defiance of international law.

Palestinian homes destroyed by the Israeli government fit into one of the following three categories: administrative, punitive or security.

Administrative Demolitions

Thousands of Palestinian homes have been demolished on the bases that their construction is in violation of Israeli permit requirements. However, it is almost impossible for Palestinians living in certain parts of the West Bank, especially in East Jerusalem, to obtain permits for the construction of new homes, or additions onto an existing home. The process is long, expensive and complicated. More often than not, a permit is not granted. Palestinians are faced with the choice of staying in an overcrowded and sometimes uninhabitable home or building without a permit. Many under these circumstances choose to build a new house and hope they won't receive a demolition order or that the demolition won't be carried out.

Punitive Demolitions

The Israeli military demolishes the homes of Palestinians who have committed or who are suspected of committing violent actions against Israeli civilians or Israeli soldiers, or suspected of collaborating with others involved in such actions. One of the most serious problems with the punitive house demolition policy is that it punishes innocent people for offences committed by others.

In many cases, the Palestinian who committed the violence is not the owner of the demolished house. Often, the suspect is already in custody, is serving a long prison sentence or, in the case of suicide bombers, is already dead. So the victims of the demolition are not the suspects but rather family members who are not guilty of any wrongdoing. Because these demolitions target those who have committed no offense, they constitute collective punishment and are illegal under international law.

Security Demolitions

Palestinian houses in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip are also demolished when they are in the path of, or too close to the building of Israeli bypass roads, buffer zones, Israel's separation wall, settlements, and military posts. The Israeli authorities refer to these practices as "clearing" and justify them on the grounds that they are needed for security. Thousands of Palestinians in the Gaza Strip have been made homeless since the beginning of the second *intifada*, as block after block of houses are demolished for security purposes (September 2000).

“I cried and begged them not to do this. I said, ‘See how many of us are here!’ ” said Jamila Moussa, 55, whose fugitive son, Ahlan, is accused of being a member of Hamas' military wing and helping plan bombings. In August, the army demolished the four-story family home in the West Bank village of Beit Jala. The family said 32 people lived there, among them 12 children, the youngest of them an 8-month old baby.”

—Los Angeles Times, 2/13/03, Israel's Policy of Demolition Hits Home

AFSC principles and positions

The American Friends Services Committee roots its positions on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict in the belief that there is that of God in each person, an adherence to international law and human rights, and a commitment to nonviolent action for social change. Within this framework we strive toward a lasting peace between Israelis and Palestinians that provides justice and security for all peoples living in the region.



**American Friends
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Israeli bulldozers demolish a house in Hebron in September, 2003.
Photo by: Palestinetoday.org/Nayef Hashlamoun

Demolitions Seen As Collective Punishment

“Any humanitarian looking at the sheer number of innocent civilians who have lost their homes can only condemn Israel’s house demolition policy as a hugely disproportionate military response by an occupation army. The nearly 15,000 people whose homes and possessions have been ground into the sand by Israel’s bulldozers can hardly be blamed if they have come to believe that they are the victims of collective punishment. It is a policy that creates only hardship and bitterness, and in the end can only undermine hope for future reconciliation and peace.”

Peter Hansen, Commissioner General of United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East . UNRWA, Press Release No. HQ/G/02/2004, 01/22/04

“The vast majority of demolitions, it must be understood, have nothing to do with terrorism. According to UN figures, less than 600 of the 10,000 houses demolished since the Occupation began in 1967 involved security suspects. All the rest 94% – were simply houses of ordinary people that were in Israel’s way. That was the case of the home of Dr. Samir Nasrallah, which Rachel [Corrie] died protecting. Dr. Nasrallah had engaged in no hostile activities, had not been charged with anything. His house was demolished because, like dozens of others that have been bulldozed in that section of the dense refugee camp, it laid within a wide “security strip” that Israel wants to create along the border with Egypt. No compensation was given to Dr. Nasrallah, no opportunity to appeal to the court, no alternative housing offered. Simply demolition that leaves families homeless, impoverished, traumatized, ruined. An illegal policy, since international law forbids the demolition of houses by an Occupying Power.”

“Honor Rachel, End House Demolitions”, Jeff Halper, ICAHD, March 18, 2003
Arabic Media Internet Network, www.amin.org/eng/jeff_halper/2003/mar18.html

A Double Standard

If Israeli settlers build in the West Bank without the necessary permits, Israel grants these permits retroactively. This double standard routinely violates international law.

“Israel has created a regime of separation based on discrimination, applying two separate systems of law in the same area and basing the rights of individuals on their nationality. The discrimination against Palestinians is apparent in almost all fields of activity of the occupation authorities, starting from the methods used by Israel to seize control of the land on which the settlements are established, to the separate planning institutions for Palestinians and Israelis, to the application of Israeli law to the settlers and settlements while the Palestinian population remains subject to military law.”

From B’Tselem’s *Land Grab: Israel’s Settlement Policy in the West Bank*, 5/02, p 133

Efforts to Challenge Policy of Home Demolitions

Efforts are being made by Israeli, Palestinian and international peace activists to rebuild houses and challenge Israel’s discriminatory housing policies and its use of collective punishment. Courageous Israeli, Palestinian and international peace activists are working together to protect homes. They have gone into Palestinian villages and towns and literally stood in the path of bulldozers sent to demolish homes, in the hopes that their presence would lead to restraint on the part of the Israeli military.

“The charge sheet says that I stood in front of bulldozers that came to demolish the homes of families whose crime was to build a home in a system which makes it almost impossible for them to get a legal building permit without paying a bribe or agreeing to be an informer... it is the policy of home (and family) demolitions which must stand trial, along with all the institutions which support it. The families whose homes were demolished will be with us in court and I will feel that I am speaking for the thousands who have suffered and suffer from this policy.”

Statement by Rabbi Arik Asherman, an Israeli on trial for trying to prevent a house demolition. From Rabbis for Human Rights Press Release, 01/12/04, www.rhr.israel.net

International Law

No protected person may be punished for an offence he or she has not personally committed. Collective penalties and likewise all measures of intimidation or of terrorism are prohibited.

Article 33 of the Fourth Geneva Convention and Article 50 of the Hague Regulations

... 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.

Article 53 of the Fourth Geneva Convention

... extensive destruction and appropriation of property, not justified by military necessity and carried out unlawfully and wantonly.

Article 147 of the Geneva Convention

The Case of Salim Shawamreh

Since it was first demolished by the Israeli authorities in 1998, the Shawamreh house has become a symbol of resistance not only to the occupation itself, but to Israel’s sustained campaign to displace the Palestinians from their country. In 1991, unable to continue living in the densely-packed Shu’afat refugee camp in Jerusalem, Salim and Arabia bought a small plot of land in the nearby village of Anata, a village that had been incorporated into Jerusalem. Four times they applied for a permit (each application costing about \$5000), and each time they were refused for a different reason: their barren stony plot was zoned as “agricultural land”; the slope was too steep; signatures were missing on the deed; the plot was too close to a planned Israeli highway. Finally, the Civil Administration claimed to have lost their file! In 1994, the extremely overcrowded conditions in Shu’afat forced them to build “illegally” on their land. A demolition order was issued soon thereafter, leaving the Shawamrehs in daily fear that their house could be destroyed at any time. That moment came on in

July 9 1998, as the family was sitting down for lunch. Salim, Arabia and their six children were violently removed by the Israeli army amidst gunfire, tear gas and percussion grenades. Volunteers from the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions (ICAHD) and others rebuilt the house - which was promptly demolished a second time on August 3, 1998. The family, with ICAHD, rebuilt the house for a third time and moved in on April 3, 2001; it was destroyed the next day on April 4. The house was rebuilt for a fourth time with the help of ICAHD and completed in April 2002. A year later, in April 2003, the home was again destroyed. Unable to endure yet another demolition, they have rebuilt their home for the fifth time, this time as a peace center in the name of Arabiya and dedicated it to Rachel Corrie and Nuha Sweidan, two women who died under Israeli bulldozers in Gaza during 2003.

Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions, www.icahd.org

Statistics:

Overall numbers September 2000 – September 2004

- 5,105 homes demolished, and 43,483 homes partially destroyed in the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

– Al-Haq, asp.alhaq.org

- According to UN figures, more than 14,000 people have been made homeless in the Gaza Strip since October 2000, almost 10,000 of them in Rafah.

– UNRWA, Press Release No. HQ/G/02/2004, 01/22/04

- During the first *intifada* (beginning in December 1987), Israeli authorities completely demolished 449 houses, partially demolished 62 houses, completely sealed at least 26 houses and partially sealed 118 houses. Israel temporarily ceased its policy of punitive house demolitions in 1997, but began again after the beginning of the Al Aqsa *intifada*. Between October 2001 and March 22, 2004, Israel completely demolished 532 houses, partially demolished two houses and sealed three houses.

– B’Tselem, www.btselem.org

- The severity of Israel’s use of punitive demolitions has dramatically increased since the beginning of the Al Aqsa *intifada*. During the first *intifada* 57% of those houses affected were demolished, either completely or partially (whereas 43% were sealed or partially sealed), during the second *intifada* 98% of those houses affected have been totally demolished.

– From the Al Haq Case Study: *“Israel’s Punitive House Demolition Policy: Collective Punishment in Violation of International Law.”*

Voices from the Region

My house is in the Rafah refugee camp, one meter from the Egyptian border, and west of the Israeli army post at Salah-a-Din Gate. I live with my family of fourteen. On Thursday [10 January], I was woken at about 2:00 AM by the sound of tanks and bulldozers that had come from the direction of the Israeli army post. I got out of bed and saw that my sons had also woken up. The bulldozers were approaching the house and we decided to leave immediately. We woke up the others and got out. We managed to proceed a few meters when three bulldozers reached the house. Immediately, one of them started to demolish the house. I stood in the rain for a few moments, unable to believe that I wouldn’t ever see my house again. The children were screaming, and one of them asked me to run away because he was afraid I would get hurt. We fled to the adjacent street. I stood there with my wife, children, grandchildren and others in my family and watched for ten minutes as the bulldozers destroyed our house.

(Testimony of Saleh Hussein Mustafa al-Babli, 47, married with ten children.)
B’Tselem, *“Policy of Destruction: House Demolition and Destruction of Agricultural Land in the Gaza Strip.”* 2/02. B’Tselem.org [website]; available from: www.btselem.org.

“The bulldozer has become as much a symbol of Israel’s Occupation as the rifle and the tank.”

Jeff Halper, Coordinator of the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions.



Palestinian boy sits in front of his house destroyed in the Rafah refugee camp during May, 2004.
Photo by: Palestinetoday.org/Mohammed Saber.