

House Demolitions

“The bulldozer certainly deserves to take its rightful place alongside the tank as a symbol of Israel’s relationship with the Palestinians.”

Jeff Halper, Founder of the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions

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In the morning, my brother Nu’aman, who lives in Ramallah, called me. He cried throughout the conversation. I had to calm him and try to explain that it was not so awful, that it was not the first house demolished in Kafr Dan. The houses of many residents of our village had been demolished. . . . The demolition greatly affected my wife, both physically and psychologically. Since then, she has suffered headaches and her blood pressure has been low. She lost her appetite and sleeps a lot during the day. The demolition also affected my sons: Amer, who is 18 years old, and Muhammad, who is 20. Muhammad became much more contemplative and “spaced out.” He writes and draws a lot now. His drawings and writings express sadness over the [loss of the] house, which worries me. I am afraid that Muhammad will follow in the path of his brothers, who are in prison.¹

23,500 Palestinian homes have been reduced to rubble in the occupied territories since 1967.² Israel gives three different reasons for destroying Palestinians homes:

Punitive: Houses demolished as punishment for actions of a family member who lived in the house. This policy was ended by the Israeli Defense Forces in February 2005 when it decided that it did not deter future attacks; that in fact it tended to anger people and lead to more attacks. 11% of demolitions have been for punishment. Punitive demolitions are illegal under international law, as they are collective punishment of many people for the alleged violations of an individual.

Administrative: Houses demolished because the family did not have a building permit. What is not generally known is that it is virtually impossible for

¹ http://www.btselem.org/download/200411_Punitive_House_Demolitions_Eng.pdf

² STATISTICS ON HOUSE DEMOLITIONS (1967-2009)

ICAHD estimates that over 24,000 Palestinian homes have been demolished in the Occupied Territories since 1967, based on information gleaned from the Israeli Ministry of Interior, the Jerusalem Municipality, the Civil Administration, OCHA and other UN sources, Palestinian human rights groups, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and other sources.

Palestinians to obtain a permit, while construction for Israeli Jews is encouraged by state planners.

The authorities have continuously implemented a planning policy that stifles development in Palestinian areas. As part of this policy, Israel makes it difficult to register land under the names of Palestinians; refrains from large-scale planning on land that was not expropriated; zones large swaths of land in Palestinian areas as green areas, on which building is forbidden (only 11% of the planned area in Palestinian neighborhoods is available for construction); and permits lower building percentages than are permitted in Jewish neighborhoods. As a result of this policy, Palestinian residents find it almost impossible to obtain permits for new construction. Many are left with no option but to build without a permit. The policy has also led to housing density almost twice that in the Jewish neighborhoods. The shortage of housing has forced many Palestinians to leave the city and move to nearby communities in the West Bank.³ This type of demolition accounts for 33% of demolitions overall.

Military: Houses demolished in the course of military operations, as in the recent activity in Gaza. For example, there were at least 350 houses leveled in just 24 hours in the Jenin refugee camp in 2002 and some 1500 in Rafah in the south end of Gaza during that same period. The death of the young American woman Rachel Corrie happened as she stood in front of a Caterpillar bulldozer in an attempt to stop one such demolition. Military demolition accounts for about 56% of all demolitions. During the December 2008/January 2009 Israeli offensive in the Gaza strip, more than 4,000 buildings were destroyed, and more than 20,000 were severely damaged, rendering 50,000 Gazans homeless and 400,000 without running water.⁴

The Caterpillar connection

Based on extensive research in Gaza, Human Rights Watch determined in a 2004 report entitled "Razing Rafah" that the IDF destroyed many homes regardless of whether they posed a military threat, in contravention of international humanitarian law and human rights law. In Rafah alone, more than 16,000 people lost their homes between 2000 and 2004.

Of particular concern is the IDF's use of Caterpillar D9 bulldozers for these mass demolitions of private property in Rafah and other parts of the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT). The IDF purchases D9s through the US government's Foreign Military Sales Program. They are then armed by industries in Israel. In Gaza and the West Bank, they are the main tool and vehicle the IDF uses to destroy homes, raze agricultural land, and demolish infrastructure used

³ Human Rights in the Occupied Territories: Annual Report 2007. B'Tselem, The Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories, www.btselem.org.

⁴ http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/7846625.stm

by the civilian population.

“Razing Rafah” documents in detail this destruction and its harmful impact on the civilian population. In May 2004 the IDF used D9s to destroy large swaths of greenhouses without military justification. The “ripper” blade on the D9’s back tore up over 50% of Rafah’s roads and water pipes, causing sewage and drinking water to mix. More than 298 homes were destroyed.⁵

How long does it take to demolish a house? asked one of Israel’s leading authors in 1988. “It takes a year to build it. Sometimes a hundred years. And there are some houses that have always been there. How long does it take to demolish a house? Less time than is spent thinking about whether it should have been demolished. How much time is spent thinking about whether to demolish? Less time than the ring of the phone ordering the demolition. One shove and its gone. A hole gapes in the familiar landscape, and the family that had substance and a name and an address and human beings of all ages and relationships has in the blink of an eye become an example: the persons are punished.

“The same thought applies to the demolition. It does not involve human beings but abstract concepts: inciters, provocateurs, the punished, the deterred, and all the rest. Then the abstract rises up and demolishes the real. And life becomes a concept.

“At night, no one sees where the destroyed family has gone. No one knows what they are doing now. And where they are sitting now – in some corner, uprooted with their possessions, under heavens empty and heavy, is anything being noted down about them in some corner there now?”⁶

The Meaning of a demolished home

Demolition affects men, women, and children differently. For men it means humiliation, the failure to protect the family and the loss of a living connection to the family land. Women lose their entire social orientation and sink into crying, wailing, and depression. Children are traumatized to witness the fear and powerlessness of their parents.⁷

Rebuilding as Resistance

⁵ [Human Rights Watch Letter to Caterpillar, Inc.](http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2004/10/28/human-rights-watch-letter-caterpillar-inc), October 28, 2004, <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2004/10/28/human-rights-watch-letter-caterpillar-inc>

⁶ Leading Israeli author, Yizhar Smilanski Davar, 26 June 1988 http://www.btselem.org/download/200411_Punitive_House_Demolitions_Eng.pdf

⁷ Jeff Halper, *Obstacles to Peace*, Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions, 2004, 39.

The rebuilding of demolished Palestinian homes, whether destroyed by court order or under the guise of "security," is one appropriate response to the continuing Occupation and policies of repression. ICAHD's resistance to Israel's demolition of Palestinian homes, combined with its ability to bring hundreds of Israelis and Palestinians together to rebuild, is effective in exposing the workings of the Occupation. It also keeps alive that spark of common struggle for a just peace that will allow for reconciliation someday. House demolitions have become the hallmark of the Occupation.⁸

Additional Resources:

Enduring Occupation: Palestinians Under Siege in the West Bank, Amnesty International, June 2007.

⁸ Jeff Halper, Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions, www.icahd.org.