



ICAHD

The Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions
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ISRAEL'S DEMOLITION OF PALESTINIAN HOMES: A FACT SHEET

The extent of the destruction since 1948: at least 130,000 homes and other structures (farm buildings, reservoirs, mosques, community buildings, schools, etc.)

- In what became Israel during the Nakba of 1948 and in its wake: 52,000 homes, more than 530 entire villages, towns and urban areas.¹ The systematic demolition of Palestinian homes, mosques and other buildings emptied out in 1948 have continued until today.
- In the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT: the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza) since 1967: around 60,000.²
- Thousands of demolitions inside Israel separate from those of the Nakba still continue, with 2586 demolitions just in 2020.³

Why does Israel demolish Palestinian homes?

Zionism was (and is) a settler colonial movement that aimed to transform the Arab country of Palestine into a Jewish one by displacing the indigenous Palestinian population and taking its land.

Are house demolitions legal?

- The massive campaign of 1948 and thereafter to demolish the homes and take the lands of Palestinians who had been forced from their communities in the Nakba was patently illegal, going against international law, as well as UN resolutions, that requires that refugees be repatriated and their properties restored to them. Israel simply realized that the international community would not force it to comply.
- Likewise, the demolition of Palestinian homes in the OPT is illegal under the Fourth Geneva Convention, which prohibits an occupying power from “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” (Article 53).
- Demolitions within Israel may not be illegal on their face since Israeli zoning laws apply to sovereign Israeli territory, but denying people – especially a specific people – housing violates other international laws such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 (Art. 25(1)); the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights of 1966 (Art. 11); the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination of 1969 (Art. 5(e)(iii)); and the UN Convention on the Suppression and Punishment of the Crime of Apartheid.

How does Israel justify its demolition of Palestinian homes?

This process, which the Zionists/Israelis call Judaization, assumed different forms at different stages:

- In 1948 and its subsequent “cleanup,” the Israeli government merely demolished at will hundreds of Palestinian villages, towns and urban areas that had been emptied of their inhabitants. No justification was need, and none was given. After the destruction of most Palestinian communities in what became Israel, the remaining Palestinians (today numbering almost 2 million, or 21% of the Israeli population, *not including* the OPT) were confined to enclaves on just 3.5% of the land by regulation and practice (not allowing Palestinians to live in most Jewish communities) and by zoning (preventing the expansion of the communities remaining by zoning land as agricultural, military or for public uses only).
- “Routine” demolitions in the OPT are justified and carried out through bureaucratic and seemingly professional planning mechanisms. Immediately after the 1967 war Israel again demolished entire villages (such as Imwas, Yalo and Bayt Nuba where 1,464 homes were demolished and 10,000 inhabitants evicted, the ruins of which are now covered by Canada Park).⁴ Most of the 60,000 homes demolished in the OPT since 1967 have been by zoning regulations. Israel has zoned around 72% of the West Bank as “agricultural land” (even the barren areas of the Judean Desert), thereby denying Palestinians permission to build anywhere, even to enlarge their existing homes.
- As in 1948, tens of thousands of other Palestinian homes in the OPT have been demolished in Israeli military attacks since 1967. If they require justification to anyone, the Israeli military merely contends that they were legitimate military targets, that they had to be removed to allow military movement, or that a buffer zone needed to be created. Thus, in 2002, as part of Operation Defensive Shield, the Sharon government demolished 878 refugee homes and damaged more than 2,800 others, leaving more than 17,000 people homeless, while destroying entire infrastructures of almost all the Palestinian cities of the West Bank.⁵ In Gaza, just between the years 2000-2004, the Israeli military demolished over 2,500 Palestinian homes, more than 15,000 people made homeless,⁶ while during the three weeks of Operation Cast Lead (December 2008-January 2009), another 3,540 homes, 268 factories and warehouses, as well as schools, vehicles, water wells, public infrastructure, greenhouses and large swathes of agricultural land, were destroyed, and 2,870 houses were severely damaged.⁷ In Israel’s bombardment of Gaza in the summer of 2014, 18,000 housing units were destroyed or severely damaged rendering them uninhabitable, displacing 100,000 Palestinians.⁸ The explanation offered was that Israel was destroying “the infrastructure of terror.”
- “Punitive” Demolitions

When the issue of house demolitions is mentioned, the immediate knee jerk reaction is, “Well, they were houses of terrorists.” In fact, demolishing the home of people accused of violent attacks account for only 3% of all demolitions, negating the link Israel tries to forge between demolitions and security. Yet even if people commit a security offense, it is illegal to demolish their homes. The law provides for trial and punishment of the individual. Not only is demolishing their homes excessive punishment that has no legal grounding, but it constitutes collective punishment – punishing family and community members with no connection to the security offense – a war crime under the Fourth Geneva Convention.

Punitive demolitions are not only inhumane and illegal, they are downright counterproductive to the point that in 2005 the Israeli army suspended the practice, having come to the conclusion that punitive demolitions actually enflame the population and lead to more attacks. Yet the logic of the Iron Fist is hard to dispel even when it works against one's interests. So, in response to calls for revenge, the punitive demolition of Palestinian homes was resumed in 2009 and reaffirmed as a policy by Netanyahu's government in 2014.

Current flashpoints

The campaign against house demolitions continues on both the activist and political levels. Indeed, Israel's practice of demolitions, which is relentless and is not even slowed by the Coronavirus pandemic which began in 2020 that has hit the Palestinian territory hard, has reached a critical peak as it seeks to dislodge Palestinians from key areas of East Jerusalem and the West Bank, thereby consolidating its control permanently. Among the most urgent flashpoints are:

- *Sheikh Jarrah*: Strategically located in East Jerusalem on a potential corridor between Israeli West Jerusalem and the Hebrew University to the east, the Palestinian neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah represents an opportunity for both a critical extension of the neighboring religious Jewish communities and the expansion of Israeli settlement and infrastructure over a key part of the Palestinian city. More than 65 families are threatened with eviction, of them twelve extended families, 27 households of more than 130 people, face imminent eviction by Israeli settlers who claim the land. Although their claims have not been upheld in Israel courts, they did succeed in registering the land with the Israel Lands Authority, and it is on that basis that evictions are proceeding.
- *Silwan*: Another strategic set of seven Palestinian neighborhoods with a population of some 45,000 people, located to the south of the Temple Mount/Kharam of the Old City, Silwan has long been coveted by the Israeli government as a major tourist site, and 88 homes, housing some 5000 residents in the neighborhood's center, have been slated for demolition to make way for an archaeological park. Well-financed settler organizations like El'Ad and Ateret Cohanim also invest considerable sums of money and legal effort to replace Palestinian residents with Jewish ones. Hundreds of other homes, either in blocks or individual family homes, face imminent eviction or demolition, while vast Israeli construction of housing projects (for Jews) and tourist facilities are planned. Much of the defense of Silwan has focused recently on the Sumarin family, struggling in court to prevent the Jewish National Fund from taking its home and passing it on to the El'Ad settlers.
- *Khan al-Ahmar*: Located in the center of the West Bank close to the settlement-city of Maaleh Adumim and its surrounding settlement-suburbs, this small Bedouin community houses part of the Jahalin Bedouin tribe that was illegally evicted from its lands in Israel's Negev Desert in 1951 and dumped in the then-Jordanian West Bank, where for now decades the Jahalin have been struggling against further evictions by settlers. Khan al-Ahmar is situated in Area C of the West Bank, which Israel is attempting to empty of its Palestinian population. So significant is the struggle of Khan al-Ahmar's 30 families to remain that it has become an Israeli election issue, with right-wing parties vowing to demolish it.
- *The Jordan Valley*: The Jordan Valley and the northern Dead Sea, a fertile strip of land that runs along the West Bank, spans some 160,000 hectares, comprising almost 30% of the West Bank. It is a place where 15,000 settlers occupy 90% of the land, designated as Area C under complete Israeli control, while 65,000 Palestinians are confined to enclaves on the remaining

10%, including the city of Jericho and 50 smaller communities, all controlled by the Palestinian Authority but surrounded by Area C. Sparsely populated (although it contained 250,000 Palestinians in 1967), the Jordan Valley is the largest land reserve for future development of the West Bank. Israel prevents Palestinians from entering or using about 85% of the area, be it for construction, laying infrastructure, shepherding or farming. Indeed, Israel is openly endeavoring to drive the inhabitants of more than 50 Palestinian communities in the Jordan Valley from their homes and land.

- The struggle over the Bedouin community of Khirbet Humsah (also known as Humsa al Bqai'a) in the northern Jordan Valley captures the wider struggle of Palestinian to remain in their homes. The Israeli Civil Administration first demolished it on November 3, 2020, in the largest mass demolition in the previous ten years, claiming that the area was needed for military exercises. Shocked at the destruction, the European Union and ten of its member states funded the rebuilding of 29 of the structures. But nothing, not even international condemnation by valued allies, will deter Israel in its campaign of demolitions. During February 2021, the Civil Administration returned, repeated destroy the community's housing and structures. On February 22, 2021, Khirbet Humsah was demolished for the fifth time, most of its residential structures, livestock enclosures and water containers destroyed or confiscated. Sixty-one people were left homeless, including 33 minors. Their struggle continues.
- *The South Hebron Hills*: This large area in the southern West Bank is home to some 4,000 Palestinian residents of some 30 Palestinian villages in the South Hebron Hills who subsist mainly on farming and shepherding. It is also an area of aggressive Israeli settlement. Invoking both its agricultural zoning and its need for military exercise areas, Israel has imposed on the South Hebron Hills an absolute ban on new construction, repeatedly demolishing homes, roads, water cisterns, irrigation works and even caves for livestock, all with extreme violence by security forces and settlers alike.

ICAHD, the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions

ICAHD is a direct-action Israeli organization that since 1997 has pursued as its central focus its campaign to end Israel's policy of demolishing Palestinian homes, whether in the Occupied Territory or within Israel's 1948 borders. Viewing Israel's massive demolitions as part of a broader process of Judaization, of transforming Palestine into the Land of Israel, ICAHD operates on three levels:

- *Resistance "on the ground."* ICAHD members physically resist the demolition of Palestinian homes and rebuild homes that have been demolished as political acts of resistance, together with its Palestinian partners and international supporters. Over the past 24 years we have rebuilt 189 homes.
- *Advocacy within Israel.* ICAHD attempts to reach the wider Israeli society through its informational materials in Hebrew, networking with other Israeli organizations and conducting Hebrew-language tours in the Occupied Territory.
- *International Advocacy.* ICAHD's familiarity with realities "on the ground," combined with its political analysis rooted in Israeli politics and society, gives it unique authority and political insight. Our views are frequently sought by diplomats, journalists, political delegations and fact-finding missions, church and Jewish groups, and the general public. ICAHD conducts extensive and systematic advocacy campaigns abroad supported by ICAHD USA, ICAHD UK,

ICAHD Finland and ICAHD Germany, along with many other partner organizations. ICAHD also initiates campaigns abroad and participates in international conferences.

In all our activities ICAHD works closely with other activist organizations, Palestinian, Israeli and international alike. Since Israel's policy of house demolitions touches on the essence of the "conflict" – one people attempting to displace another – ICAHD has broadened its political agenda from activism on the ground to active political advocacy for a just resolution to the "conflict": the establishment of a single democracy offering equal rights and inclusion to everyone living between the Mediterranean and the Jordan River, including the return home of Palestinian refugees. We see a direct operational link between house demolitions and displacement, which we resist, together with a political link between saving Palestinian homes and thus nurturing the seeds of coexistence in equality.

Visit our website <<https://icahd.org>>, feel free to use the many informational materials found there, and join our campaign to end demolitions and achieve a just peace. Contact the ICAHD chapter nearest you:

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Selected Sources of Information

Search online for reports on house demolitions from Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, UN OCHA, ICAHD, B'tselem and other human rights organizations.

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¹ Walid Khalidi, *All That Remains: The Palestinian Villages Occupied and Depopulated by Israel in 1948*. Washington, DC: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1992.

² ICAHD statistics, compiled from such sources of UN OCHA, B'tselem, the Israeli Civil Administration and other accounts.

³ Negev Coexistence Forum for Civil Equality <<https://www.dukium.org/articles-reports/house-demolitions-and-destruction-of-crops/house-demolitions>>; Exact figures for the entire country are not available.

⁴ Ghazi-Walid Falah, War, Peace and Land Seizure in Palestine's Border Area, *Third World Quarterly* 25 (2004): 955–975; Tom Segev, *1967: Israel, the War and the Year That Transformed the Middle East*. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007: 307-410.

⁵ *Report of [the UN] Secretary-General on Recent Events in Jenin, Other Palestinian Cities*, August 2002 <<https://www.un.org/press/en/2002/SG2077.doc.htm>>.

⁶ Human Rights Watch, *Razing Rafah: Mass Home Demolitions in the Gaza Strip*. October 18, 2004; *UNRWA Condemns a Week of Israeli House Demolitions in Rafah*, January 22, 2004 <<https://www.un.org/unispal/document/auto-insert-213634>>.

⁷ Human Rights Watch, "I Lost Everything": Israel's Unlawful Destruction of Property During Operation Cast Lead, May 13, 2010. <<https://www.hrw.org/report/2010/05/13/i-lost-everything/israels-unlawful-destruction-property-during-operation-cast-lead>>

⁸ B'tselem, 2019. <https://www.btselem.org/gaza_strip/20190303_13000_gazans_homelless_since_2014_war>