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Israel is Building Another 1,000 Homes on Palestinian land. Where's the Outrage?



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In the week that [Uri Avnery](#), the scourge of colonialism, died in [Tel Aviv](#), the Israeli government announced a further enlargement of its massive colonial project in the occupied [West Bank](#). Plans were now advanced, it said on Wednesday, for a further 1,000 “homes” in Jewish “settlements” – still the word we must use for such acts of land theft – and final approval had been given for another 382. Today, 600,000 Jewish Israelis live in

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about 140 colonies constructed on land belonging to another people, the Palestinians, either in the West Bank or east Jerusalem.

There is a state of normalcy about all this, the world's last colonial conflict; a weariness with the figures, a lacklustre response to the huge construction enterprise on Palestinian territory. Charting the spread of red roofs across the hilltops of the West Bank, the swimming pools and the lawns and smart roadways, the supermarkets and orchards – all encircled by acres of barbed wire and now also by the grotesque Wall – has become not so much a “story” for us reporters covering the Middle East, but a tired routine, a tally, a scorecard of land theft, a tale to be updated with each new “settlement” announcement and subsequent protest from Palestinians whose land is taken from them, and from the woeful and corrupt Palestinian Authority. The same is true of the small Israeli activist and leftist groups – B'Tselem, for example and Avnery's own Gush Shalom – who have bravely fought on, when even Israel stopped listening, to tell the truth of this unique form of aggression.

Never in the field of human rights has so much been owed by so many, to so few. The number of Jewish colonists living on Palestinian land – illegally under international law – rose from 80,000 at the time of the Oslo agreement in 1993, to 150,000 within seven years. Every one of those 70,000 new Jewish colonists was making a forbidden “unilateral step” – to use the Oslo prose for continued land seizures – when he or she crossed the threshold of their new home, but it mattered not.

Article 49 of the International Committee of the Red Cross's 1949 Geneva Conventions is quite specific: “The occupying power shall not deport or transfer parts of its own civilian population into the territory it occupies.” The UN security council and general assembly, the ICRC and the International Court of Justice agreed Article 49 applied to Israeli-occupied territories. This too, mattered not.

Enlarging the colonies in the West Bank was sometimes publicly stated to be not just a return to the Biblical land of Israel but a punishment for Palestinians. The Israeli government specifically stated in 2012 that an announcement of 3,000 new “settler” homes in the West Bank was a response to the UN decision to grant Palestine non member observer status. This week Avigdor Lieberman, Israel's defence minister – whose language has embarrassed his own right wing colleagues – said he would build 400 Jewish housing units as a response to the murder of an Israeli civilian by a Palestinian in the Adam colony.

No one disputes the violence of Palestinian groups – nor that the monstrous wall which encompasses even more Palestinian land has prevented suicide bombers from entering what we call “Israel proper” – the West Bank presumably being “Israel improper”. Indeed the wall and the colonies have become a concomitant part of the occupation. Cambridge scholar Yonatan Mendel has given us an explanation of the phenomenon which is breathtaking in its simplicity and honesty:

“A single settlement only marked the beginning of a ‘securing’ project: it was not enough in itself. Logic required that more settlements be built around it. Then, in order to secure the newly established blocks of settlements, a secure network of roads was needed to run between them. But in order to secure the roads, more settlements needed to be constructed along them. Which is not to forget the wall that is needed to secure Israelis from the Palestinians, as well as securing the army patrols that secure the fences around the settlements, which secure the roads that altogether, in a bizarre way, secure Israeli citizens living in Haifa, Tel Aviv and Beer Sheba.”

This evolving masterplan, Mendel wrote, which “ends with layer upon layer of security to secure security, ignores the crucial fact that the settlers and settlements were the central cause of security threats, and a major incitement to Palestinians. In other words, the security imperative is one of the greatest threats to Israel’s security.”

If this almost burlesque analysis prevents journalism from its primary task of explaining the facts in a comprehensible way – since the official Israeli and American version of the colonisation is so different from the reality – the response of the US government to the illegal act of dispossession has only added to our unwillingness to confront the truth.

Take then-secretary of state Madeleine Albright’s pusillanimous remarks during a Middle East tour in 1997. She urged Israel to “refrain from unilateral acts”, including “what Palestinians perceive as the provocative expansion of settlements, land confiscation, home demolitions and confiscation of IDs”. Colonies, property theft – confiscation – and the taking of identity papers, in the Albright lexicon, had become merely “what Palestinians perceive as provocative”. Did she not see these internationally illegal and morally disgraceful deeds as cruel and wicked, let alone provocative? How could she, when Ariel Sharon himself would describe “settlers” in 2001 as “a quality component of Israeli society”?

And thus we were confronted by the special language of colonisation: “facts on the ground”, a phrase coined by the Israelis, “new realities on the ground”, said George W Bush in his infamous 2004 letter to Sharon, “settlements”, “neighbourhoods”,

“suburbs”, “population centres” – all in a West Bank no longer to be referred to as the “occupied territories” according to a prohibition by former US secretary of state Colin Powell, but rather: “disputed territories”. And if Israelis were not present in “occupied” territories – only in “disputed” territories – surely the Geneva Conventions did not apply. And so it went on.

In these disputed territories, of course, there were “terrorist attacks” when Palestinians assaulted Israelis – but “deadly clashes” when Israelis shot Palestinians. The wall was not a wall but a “barrier” or “fence”, or “security barrier” or a “security fence” or “separation barrier”. A halt to colonisation would become a “freeze”, a “moratorium”, or – my personal favourite – a “time out”.

So why, the innocent reader or viewer might ask of us – we who reported this nonsensical stuff – did Arabs use violence against an innocent “settlement” on land which was “disputed” and marked off by a fence, something normally used to mark the boundary between gardens and fields? Surely, all this – neighbourhoods, fences, disputes – could be solved over a cup of tea or by resorting to lawyers? We had desemanticised this terrible conflict. Even Barack Obama, in his panegyric in Cairo nine years ago, spoke of the “displacement” and “dislocation” of Palestinians, rather than their dispossession and exile; as if they awoke one morning, checked the weather and decided to visit the beach in Gaza or enjoy a weekend in Lebanon, but then couldn’t get home again.

The statistics – dull, boring and indeed familiar – are available to all who wish to know. And the figure today is 600,000 Jewish settlers in the West Bank and east Jerusalem – and in the West Bank, of course, another 1,000 families on their way – all participating in what Avnery believed was a suicidal project which will create an apartheid Israeli state, because if a minority of Jews is to rule over a disenfranchised majority of Arabs – currently upwards of 2.75 million people – that will be the result.

Back to Avnery, I suppose.

Six years ago he told me things looked “pretty discouraging”. More so in the week of his death, I fear. He raged against Netanyahu, Trump, the president’s adviser and son-in-law Jared Kushner and Lieberman. He didn’t support the boycott campaign, by the way, but said in 2012: “I do believe there will be a break and a complete change along the way, something like the fall of the Berlin Wall, which no-one expected the day before.” And he used to love repeating Donald Rumsfeld’s most infamous expression: “Stuff happens!”

Right now, I’m not sure I agree.