

Forcibly displaced in the West Bank

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Internal displacement - the Palestinian experience

Palestinians forced to flee their homes to escape armed conflict and human rights abuses during and since the 1948 and 1967 Arab-Israeli wars form one of the largest groups of refugees in the Middle East. Those who originated in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (oPt) of Gaza and the West Bank (including East Jerusalem), and sought refuge in other localities within those areas are known as Internally Displaced Persons. They are estimated to number in the tens of thousands.

The forced migration of Palestinians, which began in 1947 with the *Nakba* (catastrophe), continues to this day. Since Israel occupied the West Bank and the Gaza Strip in 1967, it has enforced a matrix of movement restrictions and closures, a restrictive system of travel permits and a discriminatory planning law that forces many Palestinians to build homes illegally, at the risk of seeing them demolished (see right).

In addition, Israel has effectively annexed many thousands of acres of Palestinian land to build illegal settlements and a separation barrier on confiscated Palestinian land in the West Bank. Violence by Israeli settlers is commonplace and is rarely prevented or punished by the authorities (see www.btselem.org).

All of these factors have forced many Palestinians to migrate and seek security elsewhere in the oPt. The psychological, social and economic impact of successive waves of displacement, which have affected 4.7 million Palestinians over more than six decades, is hard to measure.

What is internal displacement?

When civilians caught in the midst of armed conflict are forced to flee across borders, they become refugees or asylum seekers and are in theory protected by an international framework of laws on refugees' rights. But when people migrate within their own territory to escape armed conflict and serious human rights abuses, they become "Internally Displaced Persons" (IDPs). As such they do not come under the protection of refugee laws.

However, the United Nations Refugees and Works Agency (UNRWA), the UN body responsible for Palestinian refugees, does not distinguish between the two categories. Over 4.7 million Palestinians are registered with UNRWA. The changing nature of war, tending towards internal rather than inter-state conflict, means that IDPs now number around 26 million worldwide. (Sources: UNRWA, Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre).



House demolitions by the Israeli authorities are a major cause of Palestinian internal displacement.

(Photo: Stefan O., EAPPI)

There once was a home

Since 1967, Israel has demolished over 24,000 Palestinian houses in the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza, according to the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions (ICAHD).

House demolitions are a primary threat to Palestinians' security and a major cause of internal displacement.

Ecumenical Accompaniers (EAs) often witness house demolitions in East Jerusalem and Area C, which includes around 60 percent of the West Bank.

"When we arrived at the place where the house had been, women were crying aloud, men were staring with resignation at the ruins," reported EAs after a house demolition near Bethlehem.

"A little boy appeared, coming home from school and cried again and again: 'Where is my home?'"

The Israeli authorities issue demolition orders on the grounds that the structures are illegal, but they almost never issue permits for Palestinians to build in those areas, even on land they own. Thus they are forced to build illegally.

The 4th Geneva Convention prohibits occupying powers from destroying property except under absolute military necessity.

Forced to leave - twice

The residents of Sheikh Jarrah, near the old city of Jerusalem, are at risk of being twice removed.

Originally from Jaffa, Haifa and West Jerusalem, in 1948 they fled to Jerusalem after being forced out of their homes by Jewish militias.

East Jerusalem fell under Jordanian control, and the families settled for a while in a large refugee camp. In 1956, the Jordanian government commissioned UNRWA (see left) to build houses for them in Sheikh Jarrah, close to the Old City of Jerusalem.

But during the Six Day War of 1967, Israel seized East Jerusalem and the Old City. It later annexed the area and declared Jerusalem its capital – moves never recognized by the international community.

The refugees of Sheikh Jarrah were soon dragged into expensive court battles that lasted decades. Israeli settler groups claimed that the land of Sheikh Jarrah had belonged to Jews in the 19th century.

They demanded that the Palestinians either pay rent or leave. The area is strategically and spiritually important for the settlers, being close to the Old City of Jerusalem and containing the tomb of a Jewish priest, Simon the Just. The Israeli courts accepted the settlers' claims.

On 2 August 2009, two Palestinian families, the Hannouns and Ghawis, were evicted from their homes. Having been refugees for a generation, they now become Internally Displaced Persons as well. Fifty-three people, including twenty children, were made homeless, and Israeli settlers immediately took over the houses.



Making their mark: Israeli settlers have hung Israeli flags across the Al Ghawis' house in Sheikh Jarrah.

(Photo: Ingrid, Ecumenical Accompanier in Jerusalem)



Silent vigil: An elderly member of the Hannoun family outside a confiscated house in Sheikh Jarrah.

(Photo: Ingrid, Ecumenical Accompanier in Jerusalem)

“We can prove we owned our homes in Haifa prior to 1948. We should be able to move there, shouldn't we?”

The case shows a clear double standard: Palestinians have no means of claiming back their properties that were taken over by Israel after 1948.

“If the court accepts that Israeli settlers can move into our homes because they prove pre-1948 ownership, we should be able to do the same,” says Maher Hannoun, one of the evicted residents.

“We can prove we owned our homes in Haifa prior to 1948. We should be able to move there, shouldn't we?”

Hundreds of Israeli and international protestors have been protesting in Sheikh Jarrah every week since August 2009 in support of the evicted families.

Further reading...

Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement:

<http://www.idpguidingprinciples.org/>

EAPPI's report “Silently Displaced in the West Bank.”

<http://www.eappi.org/en/resources/eappi-publications.html>