

Urgent Action

In Focus

An insight into the stories behind UAs

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House Demolition in Israel and the Occupied Territories



A house in East Jerusalem (Beit Hanina al-Sharkiya), which was half destroyed in September 2001. The photo was taken during an Amnesty International mission to Israel & Occupied Territories.

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In the past several years, UAs on house demolition and forced evictions have been increasing slowly. Now, with AI's commitment to work on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ESCR), more UAs on house demolitions are likely to be issued.

The Israeli authorities have for decades pursued a policy of destroying Palestinian homes throughout the Occupied Territories. Since 2000, the destruction carried out by the Israeli army has reached an unprecedented level and has included vast areas of cultivated land and

other properties. Tens of thousands of Palestinians have been left homeless and destitute.

At the same time, the Israeli government continues to appropriate Palestinian land in the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and to build and expand Israeli settlements, in violation of international law (notably Article 49 of the Fourth Geneva Convention – which forbids an occupying power from settling its own citizens in occupied territories).

Four main purposes are served by Israel's destruction of Palestinian homes, land and other properties:

- 1) To use Palestinian land thereby obtained to accommodate the increase in number and size of illegal Israeli settlements and related infrastructure in the Occupied Territories;
- 2) To prevent the growth of Palestinian towns and villages in the Occupied Territories and to create buffer zones around illegal Israeli settlements and along roads used by Israeli settlers;
- 3) To punish the families of Palestinians involved, or suspected of involvement, in suicide bombing and other attacks against Israelis;
- 4) To exact revenge and impose collective punishment against Palestinian communities for attacks carried out by Palestinian armed groups against Israelis.

Officially, the Israeli authorities give these reasons to justify the destruction: "Military/security necessity"; "Deterrence"; and "Lack of building permits".

Most of the destruction of Palestinians' homes, cultivated land and commercial properties has been carried out on the grounds of "military/security necessity". The practice of destroying the homes of families of Palestinians known or suspected to have carried out attacks against Israelis has been widely used for decades. Such practice has never been used against Israeli Jews convicted of serious politically motivated crimes, such as the murder of the Israeli Prime Minister, or bomb attacks and murder of Palestinians.

Palestinian land destroyed and seized by Israel for military/security needs is supposed to be retained only temporarily. However, in practice it is never returned. The homes, buildings and agricultural land seized are destroyed and the land has most often been used to expand

Israeli settlements and roads and other infrastructure for these settlements. In practice land temporarily seized is permanently lost, and the military/security needs are fictitious. In the process, hundreds of thousands of olive, citrus, almond, date and other trees have been uprooted by Israeli bulldozers, thereby depriving many Palestinians of their livelihoods.

In January 2005, the United Nation Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA) calculated that nearly 12,000 Palestinian homes had been destroyed or damaged in the West Bank, between September 2000 and September 2004.

Of more than 4,000 Palestinian houses which were completely destroyed by Israeli forces in the Occupied Territories between 2000 and 2004, some 25% were destroyed for lack of building permits. In addition, tens of thousands of other Palestinian houses in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, are also at risk of being demolished because they were built without a permit.

The reason is that it is virtually impossible for most Palestinians to obtain a permit from the Israeli authorities to build a home in most of the West Bank and East Jerusalem. This was the case of Zarifa Abbasi, aged 76, and her husband, Mohammad Abbasi, aged 78, whose home the Israeli authorities are preparing to demolish on the grounds that it was built without a permit, despite the fact that they are in poor health and that if they were made homeless this could have dire consequences (See UA 305/05, MDE 15/053/2005, 6 December 2005).

Israel has confiscated or classified as state owned most of the land in the areas of the West Bank where it has jurisdiction over civil affairs (Area C under the Oslo Accords, which makes up 58% of the West Bank) and Palestinians are barred from building on state land. In addition, most of the privately owned Palestinian

land in area C of the West Bank and in East Jerusalem has been zoned as “green land” on which Palestinians are not allowed to build.

By contrast, Israeli settlements and roads for Israeli settlers continue to be built and expanded in these areas of the Occupied Territories. As a result, the reserves of available land on which Palestinians can build to accommodate the natural growth of their communities have been greatly reduced.

Frequently, house demolition takes place at night or in the early morning, with little or no warning given to the inhabitants. In the overwhelming majority of cases it is not possible to know in advance when the destruction of houses, land or other properties will be carried out, as the Israeli authorities’ choice of which properties will be destroyed and when does not appear to be based on any logical criteria. Only in some cases, usually in those of houses which are at risk of demolition for lack of permit, do the inhabitants may know in advance, either because they receive a demolition order or because they have exhausted all the possible appeal procedures.

In such cases, action at the national and international level can help to prevent or delay a demolition. For example, earlier this year the Israeli authorities issued a demolition order for 88 houses in Silwan, a Palestinian neighbourhood in the East Jerusalem area. After international pressure the authorities announced that they had decided to reconsider their plan to destroy these houses, though the demolition orders have not been formally cancelled.

For more details about the destruction of houses and other properties in Israel and the Occupied Territories, see Amnesty International’s report: *Israel and the Occupied Territories, Under the Rubble: House Demolition and destruction of land and property*, published in May 2004, at: <http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGMDE150332004>

Also see:

<http://www.btselem.org/English/Razing/Index.asp>

http://www.btselem.org/English/Planning_and_Building/Index.asp

http://www.btselem.org/English/Punitive_Demolitions/Index.asp