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Illegal Dispossession of Palestinian Refugees Underway: It Will Never Be Just

By Khaled Amayreh

May 21, 2005

Al-Ahram Weekly, 19 - 25 May 2005, Issue No. 743.

The right-wing Israeli government has started a process that will make irreversible the dispossession of millions of Palestinian refugees of their land and homes in what is now Israel. Prime Minister Ariel Sharon this week gave a green light to a proposal by a quasi-governmental committee, known as the Gadish Committee, to transfer the ownership of land in Israel from the state to Jewish individuals.

The committee reportedly proposed allowing Jewish home-owners to register their homes under their own names. Nearly all homes in Israel are leased by the state to citizens, usually for 99 years. Until now, the ownership of many of these homes legally belongs to Palestinians, many of whom still retain property deeds dating back to the Ottoman and the British Mandate authorities. The same thing applies to thousands of square



Earth, a planet hungry for peace

Apartheid Wall



The Israeli Land-Grab Apartheid Wall built inside the Palestinian territories, here separating Abu Dis from occupied East Jerusalem. (IPC, 7/4/04).



The Israeli apartheid (security) wall around Palestinian population centers

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kilometers of mainly arable land the deeds of which are still in the possession of the original Palestinian owners.

*in the West Bank,
like a Python.
(Alquds, 10/25/03).*

In 1948, the newly established Israeli government, headed by David Ben Gurion, decided to confiscate up to 90 per cent of lands that had been owned by Palestinians for many generations. In all, 18,865,000 dunams, or 18,865 square kilometres (about 93 per cent of Israel's area) was seized by the so-called Custodian of Absentee Property. A few years later, the lands were transferred to the Development Authority and then to the Land of Israel Authority, a quasi-government agency answerable to the Jewish Agency.

Earlier -- a few months after Israel's creation -- Ben Gurion sold 2.4 million dunam (one dunam is equal to 1,000 square metres) to the Jewish National Fund. Most of the original owners of these lands were expelled at gunpoint or terrorised into leaving by Jewish forces. Indeed, massacres such as Dair Yassin, Dawaymeh, Tantura and Qastal, to name but a few, cast fear in the hearts of Palestinian villagers who became convinced that they would be murdered en mass if they stayed. In addition to those refugees, tens of thousands sought refuge in larger Arab towns inside what became Israel.

Even those "present" and not "absent" were treated as "absentees", their land confiscated on the grounds that they were no longer in the country. The number of those "present absentees" living in Israel now is estimated at 250,000, or 23 per cent of the total

size of the Palestinian minority in Israel.

It is not clear why the Sharon government has chosen this time to take this step, rightly described as "daylight robbery" by Palestinian right of return activist Salman Abu Sitta.

Some Palestinian officials told Al-Ahram Weekly that the timing reflected Israel's growing concerns and anxiety regarding the Palestinians' enduring commitment to the right of return.

"This step is an attempt to forestall any chances for the repatriation of Palestinian refugees. This is a manifestly racist process constituting a clear violation of international law," Abdullah Al-Hourani, head of the Refugee Department in the PLO, told the Weekly.

Al-Hourani added that Israel might also be trying to lure refugees into agreeing to receive compensation for their lands and homes and other property seized by the state. "Israel is now taking advantage of America's worldwide hegemony in order to kill the right of return. But I tell Israel, the United States and the world at large this conflict will continue to smolder as long as the refugee problem is not resolved," Al-Hourani said. "The solution is the implementation of the right of return," he added.

Al-Hourani accused the Palestinian Authority (PA) and the "entire Arab regime" of not taking a decisive stand on the issue of the refugees' rights, thus giving a green light to Israel to arrogate and confiscate the refugees'

lands and homes.

A spokesman for the Palestinian Authority told the Weekly that the PA would raise the issue with the Quartet (the US, EU, Russia and UN) in an effort to get Israel to respect international law.

However, while the right of return remains the paramount issue for the estimated five million Palestinian refugees now scattered around the four corners of the globe, the PA seems preoccupied with more immediate issues such as the continued expansion of Jewish settlements in the West Bank, the construction of the gigantic separation wall and continued Israeli repression of Palestinian civilians.

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