

Attempts to prevent displacement in the occupied Palestinian territories

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Prevention has become a strategy increasingly adopted by the humanitarian community in addressing forced displacement in the occupied Palestinian territories, as well as responding to immediate emergency needs for families displaced or at risk of displacement.

While strategies for the prevention of forced displacement gain value in the humanitarian community in addressing displacement situations, Israeli actions and policies in the occupied Palestinian territories (oPt) continue to directly and indirectly lead to the forced displacement of Palestinians. Such policies are applied with a view to acquire land, redefine demographic boundaries and divest Palestinians of ownership. UN experts and NGOs alike have condemned repeated and recurrent Israeli actions that both directly and indirectly, have caused forced displacement in the oPt.

Although there are no comprehensive figures available on displaced in the oPt, figures compiled from local and international NGOs and the UN indicate that since 1967, more than 270,000 people have been displaced across the oPt, including those temporarily displaced, with more than half of all displacements occurring in the last five years. In the Gaza Strip, 15,700 people remain displaced as a consequence of the Israeli military operation 'Cast Lead' that lasted from December 2008 to January 2009.

In 2009, the Representative of the UN Secretary General on the Human Rights of IDPs listed the main causes of internal displacement in the oPt as: incursions and military clearing operations; evictions; land appropriations; house demolitions; building of settlements and related infrastructure; the construction of the so-called 'separation fence' or 'Wall'; violence by settlers; and revoking of residency rights in East Jerusalem.¹

Alongside those displaced, entire communities in the Jordan valley in the West Bank as well as an estimated 93,000 in East Jerusalem are thought to be at risk of displacement. Several Palestinian communities are among the most at-risk: rural communities in the Jordan Valley; communities close to or affected by the Wall and Israeli infrastructure and settlements; residents of East Jerusalem living in places subject to evacuation or house demolition orders; Palestinians at risk of having their residency revoked or family reunification rights restricted; and residents in Gaza living within or in proximity to the buffer zone along the border with Israel and subject to Israeli incursions or extension of the buffer zone.

Resilience and vulnerability

People's desire to remain is found in everyday actions in urban neighbourhoods and rural communities across the territories. Palestinian communities and individual households have sought to prevent or mitigate the effects of Israeli policies that lead to displacement. The tenacity of people who remain – reflected in the concept of *sumud*, or steadfastness – is explained by the desire to retain one's home, one's land, and

equally not replicate the fate of Palestinian refugees whose current situation is a stark reminder of the consequences of displacement and dispossession.

For many the choice to remain is also defined not only by a desire to retain one's land but also by the lack of assets, property or livelihoods, which limits the ability of families to move elsewhere. In the context of the oPt, for most there are few alternatives, if any.

Communities have strived to develop despite attempts to dislodge them, sometimes mobilising limited resources to construct infrastructure that is ultimately at risk of demolition. Scores of villages and neighbourhoods in East Jerusalem have invested time and resources to develop alternative development plans for their communities. These are submitted to the Israeli authorities but rarely have any of these plans been approved. Development plans throughout the oPt have, in effect, been frozen for over 40 years.

Strategies to prevent displacement in the oPt are in that sense enmeshed in the fabric of daily life. Within this, Palestinian civil society – through individual acts, social mobilisation and activism – has been at the forefront of attempts to prevent displacement. Throughout the West Bank and East Jerusalem protests are held by Palestinian communities, as well as by Palestinian, Israeli and international activists, against Israeli policies. Thousands of Palestinian households have contested demolition orders, appropriation of land, the revocation of residency or denial of family reunification through the Israeli courts, at great expense and over protracted periods of time. It is not uncommon for such litigation to last for years and in some cases close to a decade, often at great personal expense.

Palestinian communities and activists face intimidation, arrest and violence. For the majority merely seeking to remain in their homes, the costs are high and cannot easily be calculated. Farmers in proximity of the buffer zone in Gaza, or near settlements in the Jordan valley, face risks simply to access their land. Palestinian households contesting attempts to evict or demolish their homes can face intimidation and violence by Israeli settlers, and uncertainty (sometimes for years) over their cases in Israeli courts.

The impact – social, financial and psychological – on the well-being of individuals, families and their children is cumulative. They experience vulnerability, trauma and anxiety, balancing the risks they face against the need to retain their properties and their possessions. Palestinian societal pressures may also add to the



Paul Jeffrey/Action by Churches Together

The eight-metre-high Wall (or 'separation fence') surrounds the West Bank town of Qalqilya.

difficulties faced by households who are unable or justifiably unwilling to remain in such precarious situations. The stigma associated with having relented to Israeli policies or actions can be significant.

Mitigating risks and promoting prevention

The humanitarian community, including both Palestinian and Israeli NGOs, has increasingly sought to assist these communities at risk to mitigate the risks of displacement by providing assistance which is preventive in nature. This includes the provision of emergency assistance to families whose homes could face demolition; livelihood assistance to rural communities to facilitate access to land or other means of livelihood; legal action by and on behalf of victims of eviction or demolition orders; and appeals against the revocation of residency, family unity or access rights.

Various Israeli, Palestinian and international agencies provide a protective presence in areas at risk of Israeli settler violence, as well as monitoring access through the checkpoints that are found across the West Bank and at the gates in the Wall. UN, Palestinian, Israeli, and international activists and associations have also raised awareness of the international community on the situation of forced displacement and extensively advocated on behalf of those displaced and at risk.

Displacement nevertheless continues to occur, while the pressures and costs of remaining and opposing Israeli policies of encroachment are high. Civilians who protest against demolitions or evictions as these take place are subject to fines, harassment and arrest. There have been incidents in the West Bank of Palestinians and others being killed while trying to prevent house demolitions.

Without denying the value of assistance provided by various UN and national and international agencies, communities affected by or at risk of displacement have underlined the failure of the international community of states to address the situation in areas under Israeli jurisdiction, and that such failure renders it complicit in a process of forced displacement. Though the international community has repeatedly condemned Israeli policies and actions that have resulted in further forced displacement, it has not held it accountable for actions it has committed and continues to commit.

The humanitarian community has and continues to play an important role in mitigating the level of displacement. Its impact, however, in putting an end to forced displacement is limited. The continuing displacement raises a question as to the humanitarian community's capacity to prevent displacement in the face of a state apparatus intent on driving people from their land.

The response of the humanitarian community should not detract from the need for the international community to ensure international humanitarian and human rights law is upheld and further displacements prevented.

This echoes the repeated appeals put forward by Palestinian, Israeli and international advocates that have highlighted the need for the international community to support Palestinian and humanitarian efforts at prevention, and the need to engage with the Israeli state in a manner which renders it accountable to international law.

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1. Report of the Rapporteurs on human rights in the oPt, March 2009 <http://tinyurl.com/UNHRC-03-09>

FMR issue 26 (August 2006) on 'Palestinian displacement: a case apart?' included 28 articles by UN, Palestinian and international human rights organisations, Palestinian scholars in the diaspora and Jewish and Israeli activist groups examining the root causes of the displacement of Palestinians, the consequences of the failure to apply international humanitarian law in the occupied Palestinian territories, and Palestinian entitlement to protection and compensation. Online at www.fmreview.org/palestine

