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Bold declarations

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Settlements are **the** issue for Palestinian farmers

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu began the New Year with a bold declaration. He was willing to negotiate non-stop with Mahmoud Abbas, if, and only if, the Palestinian President quit harping on a settlement freeze as a precondition for their talks. *Settlements. Shmettlements.* According to the Israeli leader, the Palestinians should stop obsessing about them and consider the broader issues instead.

Anyone who has visited the West Bank knows the absurdity of Netanyahu?s request. Here on this scrap of territory the Palestinians hope to claim for their state, the Jewish settlements are impossible to ignore. Their red-roofed, Lego-like structures sit atop the hills, encircling East Jerusalem and Bethlehem, pressing down upon towns and villages in the north and the south. Gazans must endure periodic raids from Israeli forces but for West Bankers, settlements, with all their attendant infrastructure, are the weapon of incursion -- Israel?s mundane means for stealing Palestinian land.

No one knows this better than the residents of Bi?lin. The West Bank village has the great misfortune of being in the way of the ever-expanding Modi?in Illit, the largest Jewish settlement in the West Bank. A city of more than 40,000 and an annual growth rate of at least 9 percent, Mod?in Illit has spawned a settlement outpost that is consuming Bi?lin land. For more than five years, Bi?lin farmers, often accompanied by Israeli activists and internationals, have held weekly protests at the Israeli barrier delineating this appropriation.

The Friday demonstrations have been creative and gutsy. (Early protests included Israelis chaining themselves to Bi?lin olive trees to dramatize the human cost of land theft.) But more often than not, they unfold like a tragic dance. Carrying colorful flags and chanting optimistically, the marchers process from the village center to the barrier. Israeli soldiers fire tear gas or rubber-coated steel bullets. Some marchers scatter into the surrounding olive orchards to weep and wretch. The more experienced dodge the wafts of noxious smoke and press on to the fence to cajole or shout at the soldiers to go home and let them have their land. As the march dissipates, the stone-throwing youth emerge. Rocks are thrown and more tear gas launched until the boys and soldiers tire.

CS, the U.S.-manufactured tear-gas used in Bi?lin, burns your eyes and constricts the throat, evoking a feeling of panic and a desire to gag. At high concentrations or after prolonged exposure, it can even cause death, according to a 2003 study published by four Israeli army doctors. At the Friday march, I attended in December 2009, a young Israeli wisely brought a gas mask that his family acquired during the first Gulf War. Fearing a chemical attack from Saddam Hussein, the Israeli government distributed the masks to its citizens. Ironically, the young man was now using the government?s gift to protect himself against Israeli soldiers.

Bil?in?s efforts to reclaim its land have been more than symbolic. There have been international conferences on nonviolence to highlight the village?s plight, visits from Nobel Laureates and European Union officials, and legal appeals. In 2007, Israel?s High Court ordered the barrier to be rerouted and half the stolen land returned. The barrier never moved. Instead, Modi?in Illit?s outpost continued to expand, the Lego blocks rising within view of Bil?in?s kitchen windows. During the summer of 2009, Mohammed Khatib, a leading member of the

Bi?lin Popular Committee Against the Wall traveled to Canada to pursue a war crimes case against Montreal-based Green Park and Green Mountain International, construction companies involved in the construction and selling of residential units for Modi?in Illit. The Geneva Convention prohibits an occupying power from transferring its people to occupied territory; attorneys arguing on Bil?in?s behalf hoped the Canadian court would adjudicate against the companies for their violation of international law. The case was dismissed in August 2010.

Israel?s response to the Bil?in campaign has been repression and more repression. During the summer of Khatib?s Canadian venture, soldiers stepped up their night raids in the village, smashing doors and windows, ransacking living quarters, and dragging men and youth from their beds while terrified women and children look on. By the end of 2009, more than 30 activists had been arrested, including Khatib, who was badly beaten during one raid, and Abdullah Abu Rahmah, an English high school teacher, eloquent advocate of nonviolence, and leader in the Bi?lin campaign. Snatched from his home on Dec. 10, Human Rights Day, Abu Rahmah remains in Ofer Prison.

In December, Bil?in made its own bold declaration. 2010 was to be ?the last year of the Wall.? More than a thousand people attended the Friday protest on New Year?s Eve. Circumventing Israeli roadblocks, the demonstrators walked into the olive groves and cut through the fence in three areas. The Israeli military?s massive use of tear gas killed 36-year-old Bil?in resident Jawaher Abu Rahma. She collapsed, foamed at the mouth, then died of cardiac arrest the following morning, New Year?s Day, the same day Netanyahu made his bold declaration. That night, Israeli activists tossed spent tear gas canisters on the lawn of the U.S. ambassador?s residence.

(The Israeli Defense Force has since claimed Jawaher was not at the protest and died from previous health complications. Jonathan Pollak, an Israeli participant in the New Year?s Eve demonstration, refutes this claim, offering eye witness reports and medical records. See http://www.huffingtonpost.com/democracy-now/eyewitnesses-describe-dea_b_804215.html)

Bil?in?s trials are not unique. There are popular committees in villages all over the West Bank, valiantly protesting the Israeli barrier and its land grab. At least 21 protesters have been killed and thousands injured. But the toll on the Abu Rahma family seems unbearably high. In 2008, Israeli forces shot and injured Jawaher?s brother, Ashraf, with rubber-coated steel bullets. In April 2009, an Israeli soldier killed another brother, Bassem, a leading nonviolent activist in Bil?in, firing a high-velocity tear gas canister at his torso.

Last week, Ahmed Abu Rahmah, brother of Jawaher spoke to *Ha?aretz*, an Israeli daily, about the family?s losses. ?The whole house feels a sense of catastrophe,? he said, adding that he bears no hatred toward the Israelis. ?They are only people just like myself. We don?t seek vengeance against the Israelis. We want the return of our lands and the struggle won?t end until our property is restored.?

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