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Israel's House Demolition Policy in the Occupied Palestinian Territories

Speaker: Dr. Jeff Halper, Coordinator, Israeli Commission Against House Demolition
Participants: Mr. Christian Jouret, French Consulate; Dr. Horst Freitag, Head, German Representative Office; Mr. Ibrahim Shaban, Lecturer; Ms. Vanessa Kent, Planning & Development Department, PLC; Ms. Allison Hodgkins, World Learning; Dr. Mohammed Jadallah, Physician; Dr. Fawzy Naji, Palestinian Water Authority; Rabbi Arik Ascherman, Rabbis For Human Rights & Israeli Committee Against Home Demolitions; Ms. Åshild Kjæk, TIPH; Ms. Lena Johansson, TIPH; Ms. Sylvie Fouet, European Commission Delegation; Ms. Isabel Candela, European Commission Delegation; Mr. Matthew Brubacher, Badil Resource Center; Mr. Rami Shehadeh, Al-Haq; Mr. Ola Samzelius, Consulate General of Sweden; Mr. Jens Vang, TIPH; Ms. Adrienne Harchik, US Consulate; Ms. Carole Hawke; Mr. Marc George, TIPH; Mr. Chris Farah, *The Jerusalem Times*; Ms. Helen Grant, ANERA; Mr. Mutasem Al-Ashhab, German Representative Office; Dr. Mahdi Abdul Hadi, Head of PASSIA; Ms. Deniz Altayli, PASSIA; Ms. Sawsan Baghdadi, PASSIA.

The Speaker

Dr. Jeff Halper: First of all I want to thank PASSIA for inviting me to speak today on the subject of Israel's house demolition policy in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. I have just come from Al-Issawiyeh where, unfortunately, a house was demolished earlier today, and I have here a couple of bullets that I picked up along the way. I know that at least one young man was shot at close range, either in the face or throat, and is now in intensive care.

I am an anthropologist by profession, and although I hail from the United States, I have been living in Israel for the past 25 years and am the coordinator of the Israeli Committee against House Demolitions. Our organization is comprised of representatives from different Israeli peace organizations who came together about two years ago, each believing that his or her respective organization was not really doing enough on the ground in the battle against house demolitions. At that time, the issue of house demolition was becoming very hot again after a period in which the number of house demolitions had declined. Certainly, the election of Netanyahu and the political situation had a great impact on what was happening on the ground, including the expansion of the settlements and Israel's presence in the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem, and also in terms of how concrete limits were being applied to Palestinian life in the West Bank and East Jerusalem.

Some 20 years ago during the Begin government, Ariel Sharon embarked on an extremely systematic low-key campaign to – and here I use his words – “create facts on the ground.” It started in a semi-haphazard kind of a way – a settlement here, some land expropriation there, a little bit of a road here, a house demolition there, etc.- and it is only now that we are really beginning to see the cumulative result. One has to admit that he was clever in instigating a way for Israel to take over the whole of Palestine and create ‘irreversible facts on the ground’ and to do this whilst it was in the spotlight, being one of the major conflict areas in the world, without creating so much conflict that it would result in international condemnation and intervention.

I liken what has happened to what the Americans call 'low-intensity warfare' in Latin America. According to this strategy, you come in and maintain a constant level of conflict, keeping the flashpoints of conflict at a low enough level that there is never any one particular event, crisis or conflict that would provoke an international response. The Har Homa project, for example, is pushed ahead until there is an international outcry, and everything appears to come to a halt, but even though there are no bulldozers digging away, the estate agents are still busy trying to sell the apartments. Then, whenever something else occurs elsewhere in the world to grab the attention of the media and the international community, Israel will quickly and with as little publicity as possible complete another stage. It is a very conscious kind of approach.

We see the same thing with house demolitions. Today, the Israeli Ministry of Interior and the Jerusalem Municipality, reinforced by border police, soldiers and policemen went to Al-Issawiyeh to destroy a house. There are actually more than 40 houses in Al-Issawiyeh whose owners have been issued with demolition orders, and the forces that come in have the right to destroy as many houses as they want. All of these houses have gone through a sort of court process, which makes the demolitions legal, and the strategy is to go in, destroy one house, and if there is not too much resistance, go on and destroy a second house and sometimes a third. If there is a lot of resistance, you either withdraw and go demolish a house in another village or else withdraw for a week or two and then return. This pattern applies to everything, from house demolition to the wider approach of Sharon involving creating facts on the ground in the West Bank. The main thing is to prevent too much attention and resistance, but over a 20-year period, even working at a very low intensity can result in some very good results.

Now, our committee started to work on the issue of house demolitions when it became apparent that the peace process was in a crisis and that Israel was very vigorously changing facts on the ground. It was expanding settlements, expropriating massive areas of Palestinian land, demolishing houses, and building a huge network of bypass roads, all of which was designed to keep the Palestinians in tiny enclaves and had a tremendous impact on the lives of the local people and all of us. Our committee developed, not as another peace organization that devotes its time to ideologies, but as a direct action group determined to resist and fight the various aspects of occupation on the ground, especially those that are ultimately going to determine whether or not the Palestinians end up with any kind of a viable state in which to create a viable society, economy, and political entity. I would like to point out that we all feel that what we are doing is important not only for the Palestinians, but also for Israeli society.

We work very closely with different Palestinian organizations, especially the Palestinian Land Defense Committee, which has committees in many West Bank villages. We also work with Law, CPT – the Christian Peacemaker Team – in Hebron and many other Palestinian and Israeli action-oriented organizations. Just last Sunday we worked together with an Israeli environmental organization, marking the first time that an environmental organization and a peace organization have cooperated to stop work on one of the bypass roads in the north of Jerusalem. If built, the road would have a

tremendous impact on land use of Palestinians and at the same time be a disaster from an ecological point of view.

I consider house demolitions more important than the other activities that I mentioned because they are the link between the grand political schemes and the actual effects of these schemes on the lives of entire Palestinian families. Your house is your home, an extension of yourself – Israel, incidentally, will never say “Today we destroyed two houses in Al-Issawiyeh” but will say “two structures,” – and the most intimate parts of our lives with our families are spent in our homes. For Palestinian women, the home is the domestic environment in which she proudly takes care of her husband and children, for Palestinian men, an important part of their status, and for everyone, it is embedded in the wider family, the land, and the networks of relationships. It is no surprise, then, that to destroy someone’s home is, to quote Palestinians whose homes have been demolished, “like killing us.” The wounds created by home demolitions are extremely deep and they traumatize not only the family itself, but also the community. Therefore, it is an extremely crucial focus for us and from that focus and from getting to know and working with the families, it is also a way of really beginning to link up the lives of Israelis and Palestinians.

I would like to try to describe what happens during a house demolition, using the example of a house in Anata. Most of Anata is within Jerusalem, while some of it is in area B enjoying Israeli-Palestinian control. Once the areas A and B were created, they became the only safe places in which to build, but that drove land prices out of the range of many working people, meaning they were forced to buy land on the peripheries of the towns and villages or simply to build on their own land. I should emphasize that all the houses that we are talking about have demolition orders and that 6,000 houses have been demolished since 1967 – approximately 2,000 since 1987 and the beginning of the *Intifada* - leaving approximately 30,000 people homeless, and another 2,000 demolition orders are in effect today. The Civil Administration of the West Bank had set itself a quota of destroying at least 300 houses a year. To our gratification in a sense, last year it only succeeded in destroying 158 houses in the West Bank due to our activities.

It is actually very unusual to witness a demolition, because there is usually no warning, even for the families, and our witnessing the demolition at Anata was really by chance. We were organizing together with Law, CPT and the Land Defense Committee a large protest opposite the Civil Administration in Beit El when we heard that the house of the Shawamreh family in Anata was about to be demolished. Usually the Civil Administration demolishes houses very early in the morning, but this particular day it had become very greedy - the Shawamreh house was the fifth house to be demolished that day – and by the time we heard about the demolition, it was early afternoon. What we did was to divert the buses of Israeli demonstrators coming to Beit El to Anata. Even Knesset member Naomi Khazan witnessed the demolition, and, with Anata being so central, there were also a lot of journalists, which means that the event received a lot of publicity and really brought into focus the whole issue of house demolitions.

By the time we reached Salim Shawamreh's house, the soldiers were already there and were moving the furniture from the house. It was a small, modest three-room building, surrounded by a wall and a beautiful garden with all kinds of trees, in which Salim was living along with his wife and six children. Salim had received the demolition order four years earlier: imagine, for four years, you go to work every day not knowing if your house will still be there when you return in the evening. Now his worst nightmare was being realized, and the entire section of Anata was encircled by somewhere in the region of 150 soldiers, border police, regular police and Civil Administration personnel. I should note at this point that the jeeps of the Civil Administration have created more nightmares among Palestinian children than anything else. The distinctive white jeeps constantly zoom through the villages, their passengers out to note even the slightest alteration to a building, whether it be new windows or even a chicken coop; a 'house' that was demolished in Kufr Hares about a month ago was actually two rooms and a bathroom, built within the courtyard of an existing house, which had a permit. Certainly, one of the worst things about the Civil Administration personnel is their lack of respect for privacy; they walk around with their cameras, in the kitchen, in the bedroom, on the roof, and now when they come they bring along helicopters that hover ten meters above the houses while someone leans out taking photographs, which is particularly frightening, especially for young children.

The behavior of the Civil Administration personnel is extremely aggressive and they seem to delight in intimidating the local population. They all have names; everyone within the whole region north of Jerusalem knows Micha, while in other areas it is the name of Asher or Captain Rami that fills the locals' hearts with dread. The 18 area supervisors of the Civil Administration have almost absolute power on the ground, and it is interesting to note that all the supervisors in the Civil Administration are settlers, as is the Head of the Planning Department of the Civil Administration and the Head of the Supervisors Department. There is certainly a conflict of interest here; the very people who were given the responsibility for planning for the Palestinian population in the West Bank are themselves settlers.

When a demolition takes place, it inevitably results in violence; just today several people were shot. Contrary to what some people believe or what others would have them believe, the 'rubber' bullets that we are always hearing about are not really 'rubber' bullets at all, but real bullets covered with plastic, and during the Shawamreh demolition, a 13-year-old child lost a kidney after being shot with one. What happened was that Salim and his family were sitting having lunch, when all of a sudden the soldiers burst in, asked whose house it was, and on being told by Salim that it was his, said, "No it is not, it is our house," and told the family to "get out." One has to remember that even if you merely pull away from or touch a soldier or clutch your wife or children, it is considered 'resistance', and the minute it is resistance, the whole force of the Israeli army is on you including beatings, pushing, firing, etc. What this meant for Salim and his wife, who did not simply put down their knives and forks and leave the house, was that they were both severely beaten. In the case of Kufr Hares, the soldiers threw tear gas into the house in order to clear it, and a two-year-old child who had panicked and run in the wrong direction was plucked from a bedroom floor, unconscious, just as the

bulldozer was about to demolish the house. Even trying to protect your neighbor is considered resistance, which could be the reason why the 13-year-old was shot. One of our advantages is our being Israelis helps us to lower to some degree the violence.

The demolition itself is carried out by contractors, who receive about \$1,500 per house, which means they are motivated to demolish as many houses as they can each time they are called out. The contractors employ African guest workers who remove the family's belongings. Sometimes the family gets half an hour to remove the belongings, sometimes 15 minutes, in Salim's case no time at all. Could you empty your house in just 15 minutes? No one goes in with a screwdriver to unscrew the bedroom set, the living room set or whatever, so the families suffer a great deal of material damage in the way of furniture, papers, toys, and everything else, especially if it happens to be raining.

Once the soldiers and workers had removed Salim's belongings and pushed the family and all the neighbors down the hill, the bulldozer arrived and began its way towards the house, where it proceeded to flatten everything in sight: the wall, the garden, and finally the house. Whilst all this was happening, the soldiers closest to the house simply stood there chatting, about the elections, about football, as if nothing out of the ordinary was happening; none appeared to spare a thought for the man who had spent six years working in Saudi Arabia to save the \$25,000 he needed to buy a piece of land and build a house. Meanwhile, Salim just sat there, unable to do anything but watch.

Salim had not intended to build the house without obtaining a permit. In fact, he had applied for a permit on four separate occasions, but his application was rejected, first on the basis that the land was agricultural land, then on the basis that the slope on which he wanted to build was too steep, and then on the basis that a new bypass road was going to be built in the valley down the road and the house would be too close. Of course, when he bought the land Salim had no idea about the road; the Civil Administration, after all, does not take the trouble to make its plans known to the local population.

One of the things that our committee does is to rebuild the houses of some of the families whose homes are demolished, or at least pay for the building of the basic structure. Our motives are political: we want to confront the occupation and expose the injustice of this policy, and in this particular case we brought out several hundred Israelis from all over the country together with Palestinians and the CPT in order to rebuild Salim's house, knowing very well that it would probably be destroyed again. The idea is to keep rebuilding and confronting the authorities until we expose what is going on and the price in terms of publicity becomes too great for Israel. On the other hand, we have to balance that with the welfare of the family; we go home, but the family is often beaten and its members arrested, which means that even though the families have a very high political consciousness and are willing to work with us, they often get tired and scared, in which case we do not push them to rebuild.

Getting international publicity and turning house demolitions from a non-issue into an issue is very important for us. We do not put so much emphasis on publicity within the

Israeli press because in Israel everybody knows who is for and who is against. I think that we have had some success – I am not saying, of course, that we are the only force on the ground – and now Madeleine Albright mentions house demolitions quite a lot, while Clinton mentioned house demolition explicitly when he was in Gaza and little groups in the European Parliament are bringing up the issue now and then, making it something that Israel is becoming very sensitive about. I think that the decrease in the number of house demolitions over the last six months or so probably reflects our success in highlighting this issue.

The human interactions that take place are also very important - we have just held a series of six Ramadan dinner with families whose houses were demolished - and once the new roof was put on Salim's rebuilt house, there was this wonderful celebration on the Saturday night, with about a hundred people, including Salim, dancing on the roof. It was all very emotional, knowing that we had brought this house together ourselves, but we were aware of the fact that it was probably only a matter of time until the Civil Administration would come and demolish the new house. The next day happened to be a Jewish holiday mourning the destruction of the Second Temple, so it was unlikely that they would come then, but the morning after that, some Land Defense Committee people, some CPT people and I woke up at 5.30 am to find we were already surrounded by soldiers. I myself was in the army, our children are in the army, our friends are in the army and so on, and to wake up and see the silhouette of a soldier on top of the hill, knowing that he is out to harm you, is an awful experience. I am writing an article now called 'An Israeli in Palestine', which tries to deal in part with what it feels like to come to terms with what is happening to the Palestinians. Sometimes in our work, we slip through this invisible membrane between Israel and Palestine; you might, for example, be driving in a Palestinian service taxi to Hebron and suddenly notice things that you have never noticed before, or you might get some hassle at the checkpoint and find that suddenly, the soldiers are no longer on your side; the type of things that Israelis never notice when they stay on their side of the membrane.

So, here we are at 5:30-6:00 in the morning, and here too are the soldiers and the white jeeps of the Civil Administration. We did our best to rush inside the house in order to resist, but in vain, and this time the bulldozer came and destroyed not only the house that we had rebuilt, but also what had remained after the first demolition of the outer wall and garden. Even though Salim knew that this was likely to happen, it was heartbreaking to see the look on his face, a look of – it is hard to explain – resentment, anger, disappointment, sadness, and even disbelief. I know that his wife, who is Jordanian, was in a terrible state after the second demolition and spent a month with her family in Jordan trying to get over the trauma of the demolitions. It is worth noting that the families whose houses are demolished are not given alternative housing, nor even allowed to set up tents, and in Salim's case the tent he erected was destroyed twice. One of the problems that the Bedouins have in the West Bank is that even erecting a tent without a permit makes it an illegal structure.

[At this point Dr. Halper distributed some photographs: one of a family whose seven members were obliged to live in a small tent on top of a hill in Hebron during a freezing

winter and who were beaten several times; another, of Ata Jabber whose house was rebuilt and demolished a second time, and who was beaten severely, causing extensive damage to his spine; and another, showing Walajeh in Jerusalem; when Walajeh was annexed to Jerusalem, Israel took the land but not the people, which means, in effect, that it is illegal for a man living in Walajeh to return to his home in the evenings because he has a West Bank identity card and is returning home to Jerusalem without a permit.]

I think that one of the tragedies of what we are talking about is what we call the 'criminalization' of Palestinian life. There is almost nothing that a Palestinian can do, certainly in the West Bank and to some degree in Jerusalem, that is not a criminal act, from building a house, to getting a job, to smuggling himself in, to changing money, to getting married to someone who does not have the right to live in a certain area because he or she does not possess the necessary permit. I think that the stress that Palestinians live under carries a great cost in terms of domestic violence, in terms of your ideas for the future, your fears for your children, etc. All these things that stretch between the political and the personal are so intertwined, which is why we use them as effective examples when trying to get the message of occupation out to the general public.

[Dr. Halper, showing the audience a map that portrays areas A, B and C of the West Bank explained that the darker areas are A, the white areas B and all the other areas – 70 percent of the West Bank - C.]

As you can see from the map, there are some 70 islands or enclaves in which the Israelis are trying to contain the Palestinians that define the areas A and B. Netanyahu says all the time that 95 percent of the Palestinians are living under the rule of the Palestinian Authority, which means that Israel has granted to the Palestinians not autonomy, but independence. One can see, however, that these population centers are basically small, crowded, economically unviable, and disconnected. Here in white you see the settlements, the bypass roads that connect the settlements and in a sense the entire grid that has been created that will annex *de facto* Area C to the body of Israel according to this government's policies.

There are many things we do not see, again, because of this low-intensity warfare kind of approach. One is the fact that the 160 or so little dots throughout the West Bank that represent the settlements are actually starting to be connected by bypass roads and industrial parks. If you look at the actual physical building, most of the settlements are very small, but if you look at the master plan and the legal frameworks in which the settlements exist, they take up a tremendous amount of the West Bank. Moreover, if you look at the road simply as a line on the map, it does not seem that important, but if you take into account that a bypass road – or, using another name for it, a 'security road' – has margins of a 150 meters on each side, then you really begin to see what is going on. As an Israeli, I find it very painful to say that Israeli officials are using the term 'cleansing' in talking about their activities in the West Bank, of 'cleansing' Area C of its population, of having sanitized zones around the settlements and along the bypass roads. By noting that all these bypass roads are something like 350 meters wide –

something like four football fields – and multiplying that figure by hundreds of kilometers of road, one begins to understand the impact that all this new building is having. This is the brilliance of the Likud approach; one day they work on a road near Al-Khader, another on a road in the Jordan Valley, and then, a month or even a year later they will come back and join the two together. A few meters here, a few meters there - it is this approach that gives Israel its power.

In Jerusalem, things are slightly different. Israel has an official policy of maintaining a 70 percent Jewish majority in the city and of encircling it with Jewish satellite cities, neighborhoods and roads, thereby confining the Palestinians to small areas in East Jerusalem and in the south of the city, where, once again, the Palestinian population centers are very disconnected. Here in Jerusalem, it is not the Civil Administration, but rather the Municipality together with the Ministry of Interior that are the real actors in terms of the reinforcement of the policies.

Discussion

Dr. Abdul Hadi: This is all very depressing. Where do we go from here? Will mobilizing public opinion be enough to guarantee that a political decision is made to put an end to this situation?

Dr. Halper: What we are trying to do in our small way is simply to try to expose what is going on. Today, there will be a small news item in Israel about the demolition that took place in Al-Issawiyeh, but the Israeli public and I think the world public in general does not have a conceptual framework for putting it in, so it is an isolated incident that does not connect to anything. One of the important things that we are trying to do is to expose the political agenda behind the seemingly legal kinds of processes that are going on, things that are represented as being for the welfare of all the population, part of good administration, etc. Once it has been exposed, people will begin to make coherent issues out of what are today isolated actions that they really do not connect with people and, hopefully, having understood the implications will link up with others - human rights groups, political groups, whatever – and take the steps that are necessary to change things for the better.

Rabbi Arik Ascherman: In June-July, we started a campaign and it was followed by a drastic reduction in the number of house demolitions. Unfortunately, however, we do not see people – Faisal Hussein, for example - coming and expressing concern over what is happening

As far as I can see, there is a real need for a fund for people whose homes have been demolished, taking into account that rebuilding a house costs somewhere in the region of \$25,000. I was most impressed by the fact that if any home is demolished in Walajah, the entire neighborhood gathers together to rebuild it.

Dr. Abdul Hadi: Has anyone ever been able to stop a house from being demolished?

Dr. Halper: Yes, the house of Nayef Oubeid in Al-Issawiyeh, for example, was 'saved' from the bulldozer just today. After our actions, especially last summer, the Civil Administration announced two major changes of policy: one, to not destroy houses that are close to recognized village boundaries or the borders of master plans - there are something like 700 houses that would have been demolished were it not for our actions – and two, to not demolish houses that are populated. Of course, that has not been completely the case, but this is what it announced. We see our efforts as a direct political struggle and in spite of the fact that the Israeli legal system appears to be specifically designed to 'legalize' the political actions of the government, we try to avoid getting caught up in talk and dialogues about plans and laws.

Dr. Abdul Hadi: Is there any comparison between the struggle to stop house demolitions in the Occupied Territories and the struggle of the Arabs in Israel who, in some cases, succeeded in building public opinion and creating a real crisis in the Israeli society in order to stop decisions pertaining to demolitions being made and implemented?

Dr. Halper: In this respect, the 'Green Line' does not really exist. If you see what happened in Um Al-Fahem and with the Bedouins in the Negev, for example, there are very few differences; it was still an illegal process. Obviously, the Palestinians in Israel are treated as citizens and they have a certain advantage over Palestinians living here, but I do not think that that in itself is particularly meaningful as far as Israel is concerned, although they are starting to become a critical mass with the ability to influence the elections and so forth.

Mr. Ibrahim Shaban: I find it impossible to trust the so-called High Court of Justice when it concerns Palestinian issues because they refer to laws that are not based on laws that do not protect basic human rights, so I think you are right to say that this is a political battle. Embassies can do something and the EU can do something, and in this respect I find it a great pity that the EU and the Western countries do not consider the option of imposing sanctions on Israel. I do not want to underestimate the EU representatives and their role here, but surely they are aware of the need to take action, especially in light of the fact that demolition is never used as a punishment in the Israeli sector, even with regard to the houses of murderers.

Concerning a fund, I do not think that this will solve the problem. I too was at Al-Issawiyeh today and saw a person get shot in the head.

Dr. Abdul Hadi: I am imagining the 'unimaginable' now, but if those Palestinians whose homes were demolished started a movement and demolished a house in an Israel settlement for every Palestinian house that is demolished, what do you think that the Israeli reaction would be?

Dr. Halper: You have to confront the issue of power. Israel has the power and its soldiers and border police or even the settlers themselves will simply turn around and shoot them. We are some of the first Israelis to put ourselves in sensitive situations and

I myself was recently arrested, which reminded me once again that one should never underestimate the Israeli reaction.

I have another suggestion, which I mentioned to Faisal Hussein. I do not understand why the Palestinians do not buy a house in West Jerusalem, in Talbieh, in Katamon, in Baqa'a, or somewhere like that, move a family there and - in a nonviolent way – reveal the double standards. Netanyahu is always saying things like “We are doing everything we can while you Palestinians are not, we are the democracy, we are the law-abiding society, etc.” and if we could expose the hollowness of that talk and expose the racism, discrimination and oppression and so on, it would certainly help. All Jerusalemites have the right to live wherever they want in Jerusalem, so let's see what would happen if a Palestinian wanted to move to West Jerusalem.

Ms. Allison Hodgkins: Whatever the Palestinians do is criminal, according to Israel, which has been very successful in getting the average American, for example, to believe this to be true. All it takes is a few simple facts to expose lies. Take the fact, for example, that Palestinians in Jerusalem, despite contributing on an equal footing with their Israeli counterparts to the municipal budget, receive far less in return. The average Palestinian is not aware of these facts, the average American is not aware of these facts, the average journalist is not aware of these facts. I think everyone who is motivated to address these injustices has an obligation to discover this information and use it because once you have it, it is like having a series of balls in the air and balancing them.

Ms. Isabel Candela: Where do your funds come from?

Dr. Halper: We rely on donations. We have applied for funds for the peace education campaign, and we have been given a tentative approval by the Tel Aviv office; if that comes through, then we will have some funds. Each rebuilding of a house shell costs about \$4-5,000 and we have already succeeded in rebuilding three, but if Israel steps up its demolition campaign there is no way that we can rebuild every single house. There are three or four families that we work with including the Shawamreh family in different parts of the West Bank and East Jerusalem and what we would like to do is to build three or four houses at the same time, the idea being that were the Civil Administration to demolish them, there would be a lot more noise and much more of an outcry than if it only demolished one. We do not need money for salaries or office space, but we do need it for rebuilding and legal aid.

Mr. Shaban: But rebuilding three or four houses would not solve the problem.

Dr. Halper: It is meant to be a political statement.

Mr. Shaban: To be quite honest, many international donors are willing to consider any project in the West Bank but not in Jerusalem out of a fear of annoying the Israelis, and this is something that should be tackled.

Dr. Halper: In the wake of what happened to the Shawamreh house, Salim was invited to tour the US with the Quakers and the Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee. Now Salim's English is not so good, but he is very articulate and quite a character, and over the course of a month, he traveled to 17 American cities, where he spoke to many university groups and radio and television stations, etc, which was an excellent way of getting our message across.

Dr. Abdul Hadi: Thank for you efforts. I hope that all those present will continue to learn more about the topic of today's meeting.