

The Village of Susiya: A Hopeful Tale?

The village of Susiya is home to only 55 families in the hills near Hebron in the Palestinian West Bank, but last week the US State Department cautioned Israel to keep the village safe. Though the US has avoided endorsing the Palestinian BDS movement, clearly the growing international support for BDS has helped to shine a light on the plight of Susiya.

At its heart, BDS is a non-violent strategy for pressing Israel to address three major injustices that have stood in the way of resolving the Israeli/Palestinian conflict for more than seven decades. Those injustices are: unequal legal rights and protections for the 20% of Israeli citizens who are Palestinians; Israel's refusal to acknowledge the rights of refugees to return home or be compensated after the wars of 1948-49 and 1967; and Israel's refusal since 1967 to end the military occupation of Palestine and respect the rights of Palestinians. For the little village of Susiya, it is the injustice of occupation that has become an immediate threat.

Under international law, military occupation is only legitimate as a temporary situation until the local population can take charge of its own affairs. If an occupier refuses to leave quickly, the occupation begins to look like a conquest, and UN members are pledged not to expand by conquest. Occupiers must also use their temporary authority to serve the local population; they may not create permanent settlements and institutions in the occupied land. But Israel has consistently disregarded these limitations for 48 years. It has subjected the local population to a military police state largely immune to legal oversight even by Israeli courts, and has built permanent Israeli settlements in the West Bank, financed Israeli settlers, carved up the territory with roads that are off limits to the local population, and seized Palestinian property to make way for Israeli projects.

Tiny Susiya would have been only the latest community destroyed by these policies without any notice taken outside of the West Bank, but growing awareness promoted by the BDS campaign has insured that, whatever happens to Susiya, the world will notice.

Susiya's residents knew that colonial settlements in Hebron were eager to expand and displace villages like theirs. The villagers decided to present the occupation authorities with a professionally designed plan for the

future of their village. But the planning authorities dismissed their plan, saying only that they would be better off to move somewhere else. The villagers appealed the planning decision to the Israeli military occupation court, and the IDF (Israel Defense Force) responded by announcing the imminent seizure of the village. Now the villagers turned to the Israeli supreme court, requesting only that the IDF be restrained until the military occupation court could at least hear their case.

Israel's supreme court is often praised as a highly principled upholder of the rule of law, but the court told Susiya that it had no authority to intervene in the decisions of the IDF administration in the West Bank, even to ensure that a pending lawsuit could be heard. The way was cleared for the bulldozers to level the village and displace the 55 families.

But the destruction did not occur, and it has still not happened as this is written in late July. Suddenly, worldwide attention fell on Susiya. The BDS case against an unjust occupation was here on open display. The Israeli group, Rabbis for Human Rights, also helped mobilize world opinion to support the villagers, against a power structure designed to ignore them.

A conscientious Democratic Congresswoman from California, Anna Eshoo, wrote to the State Department pleading for pressure to be brought on Israel to leave Susiya alone. Within days her letter had 8 co-signers and the US administration went on record cautioning Israel not to mistreat the villagers and arouse intensified feelings and conflict in the region.

The US response did not acknowledge the injustices of the occupation that were being employed against Susiya, but it did interrupt the IDF's plan, at least for the moment. And while 8 members of Congress signed Eshoo's letter, there were, sadly, no Connecticut signers. Either they do not understand the depths of the injustices rooted in the occupation, or they believe it would be politically inconvenient for them to complain about Israel, the recipient of the largest portion of US military aid. Maybe growing public support for BDS will help change their minds.

—by JEWISH VOICE FOR PEACE NEW HAVEN 7/26/2015 Contact us at JVPNH.org

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