

Israel's unfair 'law of return'

While British Jews are offered property in the West Bank, Palestinian refugees are still denied the right to return

By Abe Hayeen

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The yearly drive to encourage British Jews to emigrate to Israel culminated last weekend in the Israel Property Exhibition in a north London synagogue. "Make your dream come true with your own home or investment in Israel," it urged. Although most of the property for sale is in Israel itself, some is in the occupied Palestinian territories. The Jewish Agency also placed ads in Jewish News and the Jewish Chronicle, which last month included a glossy pamphlet with programmes to "ease and speed up the process of immigration". Free flights and citizenship within 24 hours were on offer, together with generous financial and social benefits and tax exemptions.

The "community aliyah programme" shown in the pamphlet calls on UK Jews to "start a new life in a vibrant Israeli city" but of these, only three – Haifa, Modiin and Yad Binyamin – are within Israel proper. The other five are Jerusalem (evidently including the illegally annexed eastern part); Ariel, "located in the centre of Israel" (sic); Maaleh Adumim; Efrat (the capital of Gush Etzion); and the Gush Etzion bloc as a whole, which spreads south of Jerusalem into the heart of the West Bank. On YouTube, a Jewish Agency video shows a British family leaving their house in the suburbs, piling into their car and setting the sat-nav to "Home", eventually being raucously welcomed to Israel.

This drive to increase Jewish emigration has accelerated in recent years. One organisation, Nefesh B'Nefesh ("Soul by Soul"), says its core mission "is to revitalise aliyah [migration to Israel] and to substantially increase the number of future olim by removing the financial, professional and logistical obstacles that prevent many individuals from actualising their dreams". It adds: "We aim to educate and inspire the Jews of the diaspora as to the centrality of the Jewish state to the Jewish people and its desirability as a Jewish home."

The Jewish Agency is part of the parent World Zionist Organisation. It promotes and manages aliyah to Israel, purchases land in Israel and the West Bank through the Jewish National Fund, and plays a key role in establishing and funding the settlements there. The pamphlet shows the increasing aliyah figures from the UK (853 in 2009, a 37% increase from 2008). In effect, UK citizens are being encouraged to live in Israel and also in illegally-occupied East Jerusalem and the West Bank, whose settlements have been established and enlarged in direct violation of international law.

Although Israel is most keen to welcome Anglo-Saxon Jews from the US and UK, Jews from "lost tribes" such as the Bnei Menashe (Children of Menasseh) in India have also been fast-tracked in to subvert the settlement freeze. Even Peruvian Indians were brought in (provided they converted immediately to Judaism) and sent to West Bank settlements. Jewish people throughout the world have an automatic right to Israeli citizenship under Israel's "law of return", though many in the US, UK and Australia now are rejecting this right.

Today there are more than seven million Palestinian refugees around the world. Israel denies their right to return to their homes and land – a right recognised by UN resolution 194, the Geneva convention, and the universal declaration of human rights. Further, "an occupier may not forcibly deport protected persons... or transfer parts of its own civilian population into occupied territory" (article 49).

The Foreign Office emphasises that the UK's "policy on settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem is absolutely clear: Israeli settlements activity is not only illegal under international law, it is also in contravention of Israel's obligations under the Road Map to Peace and detrimental to the peace process. The prime minister made this point most recently in a letter to Prime Minister Netanyahu of 5 January."

The Israeli government continues to expand these settlements and encourage immigration in order to consolidate its hold on the occupied territories. The new Jewish-only settlement towns being built by the Jewish National Fund within Israel, in the Negev and Galilee, also continue Palestinian dispossession, by displacing Bedouin in "unrecognised villages". While Palestinians are being continuously dispossessed, imprisoned in enclaves, and prevented from building to house their families on their own land, Jewish people from any part of the world can be housed anywhere they choose within Israel and West Bank. Precious water resources are used lavishly in the settlements, while drastically limiting Palestinians' access. Use of the super-highways linking settlements to Israeli cities is denied to Palestinians, and sewage from the settlements is discharged into Palestinian villages and agricultural areas. The settlement freeze is a joke, and is ignored by Israel. It is more a settlement frenzy.

So far, the British government, while issuing protests to the Israeli government, has not taken proper measures, together with the Quartet, that would stop the settlement construction. Arguably, British citizens who settle in Israel may be accessories to a crime if they move to these illegal settlements in the occupied West Bank, contravening the 1977 additional protocol and the International Criminal Court Act 2001, which the UK has ratified. Unless Britain acts firmly to end Israel's impunity to international law and agreements, hopes of establishing a lasting and just solution for peace in the Middle East will be indefinitely delayed.

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