



February 3, 2000

by Andrea Levin

Truth Demolition in an Anti-Israel Road Show

A poisonous anti-Israel road show is making its way across America for a second year, this winter landing in eighteen cities between January 16th and February 12th. Jeff Halper, coordinator of the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions, and Salim Shawamreh, a Palestinian whose house has been torn down by Israel because of zoning violations, have brought accusations of Israeli apartheid, Nazism and racism to universities, churches, community groups and even the occasional synagogue and Hillel. Newspapers and radio talk-shows too have been enlisted to reach the public.

The first tipoff that this is a propaganda effort are the national sponsoring groups, which include the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC) and the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC). In some cities Amnesty International, an organization with an unfortunate record of severe bias against Israel, helps promote the duo.

In his presentations, including on a Boston affiliate of National Public Radio, Jeff Halper alleges that Israel's zoning and building regulations are not ordinary laws, like those in every developed nation, providing for safe and orderly development for its populace. Rather they are malevolent edicts designed to "restrain Palestinians from building, to confine them in small ghettos in east Jerusalem." They are part of Israel's "agenda for control and occupation."

He even links Israel's legal system with the Nazi Nuremberg Laws, saying the German system was technically lawful too. All this, he claims, demonstrates "the great falseness...that the law represents justice."

Beyond such abhorrent characterizations of Israel's legal system, the specific charges about stifling Arab growth and expansion are nonsense. Arabs are building at an unprecedented rate, faster indeed than the Jews in the case of Jerusalem. Even Palestinian demographer, Khalil Tufakji, has said on CNN, "we can build inside Jerusalem, legal, illegal, rebuild a house...Maybe we lose ten houses, but in the end we build 40 more houses in East Jerusalem." Accompanying the Tufakji interview were scenes of unmolested Arab construction, a sight commonplace in the city.

Throughout Arab neighborhoods at every turn can be seen new additions on existing

houses, new multi-level houses, new apartment blocs. In Shuafat, Ras al Amud, E'Shuiah, Um Tuba, Sur Bahir and Silwan new structures are ubiquitous. Likewise, on the perimeters of the municipality, construction is massive, as in the case of the neighborhood of A-Ram. The wide-open climate for builders is such that some apartment blocs actually stand empty, erected to stake claim to the land and anticipating future occupancy.

Yet in the face of this manifest reality, the Halper/Shawamreh tour tells Americans in New York, Philadelphia, Boston, Chicago, Ann Arbor, Detroit, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Austin, Atlanta, Washington D.C., North Carolina and elsewhere, in meetings and in the media, that Palestinians are ravaged and homeless because of Israel.

And the Big Lie works. So severe is the pressure on Israel by media misinformation abetted by groups such as Halper's, so damaging the media images of occasional families evicted from illegally constructed houses (most demolitions are of partially built and uninhabited structures), that Israel has been largely unwilling to halt the vast wave of illegal Arab building.

A litany of false allegations underpin Halper's Big Lie. He claims Arabs must resort to illegal construction because they cannot get legal building permits. Not true. Despite the notorious heavy hand of the Israeli bureaucracy – which vexes Jewish residents too in securing building licenses – Arabs have received substantial numbers of permits. In the 1974-1995 period, for example, Jerusalem's Arab community received building permits for more square meters of residential construction than did the demographically similar (in terms of total numbers and family size) Jewish ultra-Orthodox community. Likewise, in 1998, 79% of Arab permit requests were granted as opposed to just 73% of Jewish requests.

Halper claims absurdly, "No demolitions take place among the Jews at all." Again, false. In 1996, the Municipality of Jerusalem carried out a total of six home demolitions in the eastern half of the city (where most Arabs live) and an equal number in the western (mostly Jewish) half. In 1997, there were seventeen in the east and 14 in the west. In 1998, there were 12 in the east and 13 in the west.

Halper's agenda is strikingly betrayed in his response to a call-in question during his Boston radio appearance. He was asked, given his group's fierce opposition to Israeli house demolitions, whether he was also outraged at the Palestinian Authority's destruction of Palestinian houses. He denied there is any such activity, but said if there were PA house demolitions that would be acceptable because, "we're not opposed in any way to a real legal system."

For the record, British, American and Israeli media have reported on the PA demolishing Arab dwellings in Gaza. To mention one, a Washington Post story (February 27, 1995) told of Fatima Abu Suayed's house being "flattened" with all her possessions inside because it was on "Palestinian state property." According to the account, "a bulldozer plowed down more than 20 homes."

Strikingly, the Halper tour proceeds as though Oslo had never happened and Israel had never ceded large amounts of land and autonomy to the Palestinians. The group speaks continuously about Israel "foreclosing" the chance for a real peace and preventing the creation of a "viable Palestinian state." Indeed, Halper's stump speech is a throwback to pre-Oslo anti-Israel propaganda. He claims incredibly that Israel wants to retain all the land between the Jordan and the Mediterranean!

In the wake of CAMERA's countering Halper's many false statements, a number of extreme Arab-American and Islamic groups rushed to denounce Israel. The Islamic Association for Palestine, a Hamas front group based in Texas, distributed a letter on the Internet accusing Israel of "genocide" and the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, co-sponsor of the Halper tour, followed with a "fact sheet" accusing Israel of "terrorism" in its housing practices.

Unfortunately, the many slanders against Israeli policy promoted by Halper have found their way as well, if in more sober language, into mainstream newspapers, wire services and other publications. Media embrace of the Halper road show demonstrates once again that in many media outlets, as among the hard-core Israel-baiters, an attack on Israel is still too appealing to check against the facts.

Copyright © 2000 by the Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting in America. All rights reserved. This column may be reprinted without prior permission.