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Dispatches From The Edge

Israel: Warped Mirrors & White House Sofas

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If anyone had doubts about the outcome of recent talks between Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and U.S. President Barak Obama, they were put to rest July 13 when Israeli authorities demolished three Palestinian houses and announced the construction of 32 new homes in East Jerusalem. According to the British Guardian, "A further 48 housing units are expected to be approved next week."

So much for the "freeze" on evictions and settlement building; so much for the "peace process" According to Jeff Halper of the International Committee against Home Demolitions, "The rule of thumb in this part of the world is that in the run-up to the U.S. elections Israel has a free hand. Israel is now taking advantage of that."

The collapse of the "freeze"-which wasn't a freeze in any case because it did not cover East Jerusalem or "existing settlements"-will spike any negotiations between the Netanyahu government and the Palestinians, and accelerate Israel's take-over of the West Bank. According to a recent study by the Israeli human rights group, B'Tselem, that process is rapidly reaching the point of no return.

The B'Tselem report found that settlers now control 42 percent of the West Bank, far more than was previously thought, and much of the land seized from private Palestinian landowners. Any settlement land in the Occupied Territories is considered a violation of international law, but taking privately owned land also contravenes rulings by the Israeli Supreme Court.

"The settlement enterprise has been characterized, since its inception, by an instrumental, cynical, and

even criminal approach to international law, local legislation, Israeli military orders, and Israeli law, which has enabled the continuous pilfering of land from Palestinians in the West Bank," the report states.

Settler councils have either fenced off or designated massive tracts of land for future expansion, and they have seized 21 percent of the privately owned land on the West Bank. This drive to take over the entire West Bank has been greatly aided by Israeli government policies, including subsidized housing, tax breaks, bypass roads, and the seizure of scarce water resources.

Israeli groups that oppose the settler expansion, or are critical of government policies vis-à-vis Gaza, are finding themselves increasingly under fire. In recent months demonstrators have been arrested for peacefully assembling and picketing, and a bill that demonizes non-governmental organizations (NGO) that accused the government of war crimes during the 2008-09 "Cast Lead" operation in Gaza is working its way through the Knesset.

The bill would outlaw any NGO that provides information to foreign or international organization, like the United Nations, that results in a charge of war crimes. When the Israeli government refused to cooperate with the UN's investigation of Cast Lead, groups like B'Tselem provided about 14 percent of the information that eventually went into the Goldstone Report. The Report found that both Israel and Hamas had committed war crimes.

According to the Forward, "The proposed legislation would apply to NGOs that provide information directly to accusers, or to NGOs that put information in the public domain that leads to such accusations."

Some 17 Knesset members from the Kadima Party and other rightwing parties have signed on to the legislation. Some observers say it has little chance of passing, but that will depend on the position of the government.

"Instead of defending democracy, the sponsors of this bill prefer to reduce it to ashes," reads a statement signed by 10 human rights NGOs.

Polls show the legislation ram-rodged by Kadima Knesset member Ronit Tirosh has support. A Tel Aviv University survey found that 57.6 percent thought that NGOs that exposed "immoral conduct" by Israel should not be allowed "to operate freely."

There is a growing chasm "between the slogans like, 'Israel is a great democracy,' and 'the army is the most moral in the world'-and the reality," says Professor Daniel Bar-Tal who conducted the poll. Israelis, he says, "do not look in the mirror" and do not wish to be reminded by NGOs about their image. The result, he says, is that "the foundations" of democracy in the country are under siege.

The mood to pull the wagons in a circle has helped revive a push by rightwing Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman to cancel Israeli citizenship for the country's 1.3 million Arabs, and transfer them to a "Palestinian state." The plan-which would violate international law-was first proposed in 2003, but then shelved. In the current atmosphere, Lieberman has dusted it off and put it back on the agenda.

The Obama Administration says Netanyahu accepts a two-start solution, but the Prime Minister has filled his pledge with so many caveats that there appears little possibility that such an entity could ever appear under his government. Indeed, his national security advisor and close friend, Uzi Arad, recently attacked the "magic" of the two-state solution and told a meeting of the Jewish Agency, "The more you market Palestinian legitimacy, the more you bring about a detraction of Israel's legitimacy."

Israel has never been so isolated internationally. Several nations recalled their ambassadors in the aftermath of the Israeli commando raid on the Gaza flotilla, and leading politicians, including Kadima leader Tzipi Livni and Vice Prime Minister Moshe Ya'alon, have decided to curb travel to Britain because they fear an arrest warrant.

This isolation is likely to get worse with the Goldstone Report coming before the UN's General

Assembly in late July and Turkey assuming the chair of the Security Council in September.

The current Israeli leadership is a major part of the problem. "Ever since the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin in 1995, Israel has been ruled by one of the stupidest and least responsible leaderships in the world. Their failings have been masked by propaganda and by Israel's American insurance policy," says the Independent's Patrick Cockburn.

Cockburn points out that the last Israeli military victory was the 1973 war against Syria and Egypt, and that over the past 37 years Israel has lurched from one failure to another. "Israel's only victories these days are won on the sofa of the White House."

The reason, he argues, "is that Israelis believe their own propaganda and their supporters abroad adopt a skewed view of events as if it was an article of faith. Israelis, leaders and followers alike, acquire a wholly distorted picture of the world around them. Hubris breeds self-righteousness and arrogance robs Israel of friends and allies and repeatedly leads its leaders to underestimate their enemies."

None of that is likely to be changed by refusing to look in the mirror or by killing the NGO messenger .