

Jewish settlers are 'squatters'

The following is the latest column prepared for the South Florida Jewish Journal by our khaver, J. Zel Lurie:

"ISRAELI MAP SHOWS WEST BANK POSTS SIT ON ARAB LAND"

This was the sensational head on the lead story in the New York Times of November 21 [article by correspondent Steven Erlanger]. The subhead gave an additional detail. "One Third of Jewish Area Is on Private Property, Organization Says."

The organization is Peace Now, which published these Israel government figures after the government refused, for obvious reasons, to release them. This put the lie to the settlers repeated slogan through the years that their settlements are pure, that they have not displaced a single Arab. Actually one third is an understatement. In fact, it was over 90 percent.

On the continued portion of Erlanger's story, I found the following breakdown of land ownership where over 200,000 Jews have squatted with government assistance: Jews owned less than two percent. Owned by Palestinians – 39 percent. Owned by the state – 54 percent. For a bit under six percent, ownership is murky and Israel forbids construction, but this has not stopped the settlers from using it.

The key to my calculation is the 54 percent of state land. Except for a few acres in the Jordan valley, this is not land that was owned by King Hussein when Jordan was in charge of the West Bank between 1948 and 1967. Nor was it owned by the British Raj or by the Turkish Sultan before them. No, it was agricultural land on the outskirts of Arab villages, which was cultivated by residents of the village. To save taxes they had registered only the plots adjacent to or near their homes.

Here is an example of how state land was acquired: About 30 years ago, I visited the settlement of Shiloh. It was in ruins that had been occupied by bearded young men and long-skirted, kerchiefed women. It was surrounded on all sides by fields of winter wheat belonging to Arab villages. One or two of the villages could be seen in the distance.

"Where are you going to build your homes?" I asked one of the young men. "Where do you intend to farm?"

He waved his hand around to the surrounding fields. "Right here," he replied. "Soon all this will be ours."

"You mean when the Messiah comes," I laughed. But he had information on the government's plans which I did not have. The Messiah would not tarry long.

The Messiah arrived a month or two later. The government decreed that all land on which the Arab villagers did not have valid deeds belonged to the state and was available to Jewish settlers. So the Shiloh antiquity is now

surrounded by red-tiled Jewish homes.

"Whether individual rights were respected or not, the communal rights of the Palestinians were trashed," wrote James Carroll on November 27 in his column in the Boston Globe. The government has not honored individual rights and 39 percent of the settlements are squatting on Palestinian-owned land on which they have valid deeds.

Haaretz's Nadav Shragai explains how the government operated. Until 1979, Israel would set up settlements by seizing land "for urgent military purposes." This formulation was legal under the Geneva convention but it meant that the Army would have to issue notification every few years that it was still occupying the land, The ownership remained with the Palestinian owners.

"This was the custom until 1979," Shragai continued, "and dozens of settlements were built this way. In that year the army seized 700 dunams belonging to the village of Rujib, south of Nablus, for the establishment of Elon Moreh, The land owners petitioned the High Court of Justice and the state responded that one reason for the land seizure was "an urgent security need."

At this point the settlers intervened. They were tired of the rigmarole. They stated that Elon Moreh was not a passing security need, They stated, wrote Shragai, "that the settlement was built as a permanent site that served religious, Zionist and political ends. As a result, the court accepted the land owners petition and canceled the seizure orders. The state stopped issuing seizure orders."

But they did not stop building settlements on Palestinian-owned land. Male Adumim, for instance, a city of thousands, which did not have any "state land" in the vicinity, is built almost entirely on Palestinian land.

Until now this has been a secret to the many residents of Alon Moreh and other cities in the "blocs" that Prime Minister Ehud Olmert intends to swap with the Palestinians. Until now, this confiscation of Palestinian land, contrary to Israeli law, has been a secret to American Jewry. The question remains what will American Jewish organizations do about it, now that Peace Now has publicized Israeli government documents.

Are the quarter million Jewish settlers on the West Bank squatting on Palestinian-owned land? Yes they are. Are they fulfilling the Zionist dream? No, they are not.