

## Israel News Today's

## Weekly Supplement

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**West Bank Construction****Creating Facts On the Ground**

*Yedioth Ahronoth* (p. B10) by Oded Shalom, Elisha Ben Kimon -- [Jan 10] The rocky hill in an open area in the heart of the West Bank enjoys an open view in all directions. We arrived on a greyish day, but lucky for us, the sun came out just as we got out of the car, making it possible for us to appreciate the marketing potential of the new project. Huge bulldozers labored on paving a network of new roads that they leveled and then covered with asphalt. Steel pillars nailed to the ground marked the borders of the plots, all together 150 dunams, 94 plots for detached homes, USD 60, 000 per plot. It is no wonder people boast of the site that is being established by TABO, the executive arm of the Palestinian real estate company UCI, which is carrying out the project—with its good clean air. In this case, there is truth in the advertising.

This is not just a story of a real estate opportunity in the territories. Behind the hill that is located above the Palestinian village of Turmus Aya, from which the houses of the new settlement of Amihai—established for the evicted residents of Amona—can clearly be seen, is an explosive story that is upsetting the tranquility of the settlers in Judea and Samaria. Throughout the West Bank, dozens of Palestinian projects are in the middle of various stages of construction, in areas that up until not long ago, were uninhabited. It seems that the Palestinians have learned a thing or two from the settlers about creating facts on the ground. They are building and developing, expanding the borders of the villages and moving into the open areas of Areas B and C. In Area B, which constitutes about 22% of the West Bank, civilian authority is that of the Palestinian Authority, and Israel is the authority responsible for security. In Area C, which comes to about 60 % of the West Bank, Israel has full authority, civilian and security. In some places, the construction is taking place very close to the settlements. The settlers allege that this is plan meant to create unilateral facts on the ground, to strangle the Jewish settlements and to prevent settlement contiguity. The Palestinian do not deny this and are urging the contractors and the developers to take to the hills and to build as quickly as possible.

**Maps on the Truck**

On a clear morning in the month of July about half a year ago, the residents of Amihai in the Shilo Valley noticed heavy machinery ascending the hill above their settlement and starting to work. Avihai Boaron, who moved to Amihai after heading the task force against Amona's removal, says that at first, nobody had any idea what was going on. "It was right above our heads, about 800 meters as the crow flies, at the edge of Area B, not far from the border of our settlement. We called the Civil Administration and they told us that the Palestinians were blazing agricultural roads. Three days later, we saw more machinery and feverish work on the hill, it looked a lot more significant than blazing roads for farmers to be able to reach their fields. We spoke to the authorities and we asked if they were certain that these were agricultural roads and we were told that the DCO had thoroughly examined the matter, and there was no doubt that this was for agriculture. A few days later, while the work continued, we decided to climb the hill and see with our own eyes. We met an Arab contractor who showed us the blueprints on the hood of his truck, and we couldn't believe our eyes. It turned out that the land was being prepared for dozens of plots for Palestinian construction, an actual community, and all coordinated with the Palestinian Authority."

The Amihai settlers learned from the Palestinian contractor the name of the company doing the work. A quick internet check informed them that the name of the project was TABO, a subsidiary of the giant Palestinian construction company UCI, owned by the Sabawi family from Ramallah. The CEO, Khaled Al Sabawi, 36, is a Palestinian millionaire, a native of Canada, the son of a family of refugees from the village of Salame, whose lands were east of Jaffa up until 1948. Sabawi, who studied engineering and filmmaking, is a developer who invests in high-tech and real estate, a man of the new generation in Ramallah that is spearheading the current Palestinian approach of actions with an eye to the future. TABO is basically the company that arranges the legal status of Palestinian lands near villages, buys it from the owners and registers it in the Palestinian land registry.

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After being registered, the company develops it for housing construction and markets the plots to young middle class couples and to Palestinian investors who live overseas. The company works together with the PA and its goal, in addition to making a profit, is “to protect Palestinian land from Israeli settlement expansion.” For the Palestinians, this is its most supreme interest.

“We were shocked that a huge town was about to be built a stone’s throw away above us,” says Boaron. “First the bridge commander arrived to see, after which he placed a call, in the field, to the division commander, who arrived the next morning to see for himself. The division commander said that this was Area B and that the army could do nothing against this construction because it did not have civilian authority. We told him that the hill overlooks Amihai, we asked that he stop this, and he told us, ‘we’ll examine what can be done.’ Two hours later, we got a phone call from the army, ‘OC Central Command Maj. Gen. Nadav Padan is on his way.’ The general comes, stands on the hill, looks around, and says these exact words ‘this is a strategic event, the Palestinians are trying to drive a wedge in the contiguity of Israeli settlement.’ I asked the general: so why don’t you stop it, and he answered, ‘we have to see how we will deal with this.’”

### **They Declare their Plans Openly**

For the Palestinians who dream of an independent state, construction throughout the West Bank is a national project. At the end of last August, the Palestinian government headed by Palestinian Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh announced its decision to do away with the division of Areas A, B and C, determined in the Oslo Accords and to relate to all parts of the West Bank as being under Palestinian sovereignty. As a result of the decision, PA Minister of Local Governance Majdi Al-Saleh spoke to the directors of the PA districts and to top officials in his office and told them to expand the master plans of the Palestinian towns and include the open areas that surround the villages, without taking account the divisions.

After these announcements and after the construction above Amihai began, Boaron and his colleagues conducted an inquiry. Helped by a drone, they went north and south, scoured the roads of the West Bank, and obtained aerial photographs from previous years in order to be able to compare them to development on the ground. Near the Bruchin junction, between the villages Salfit and Brukhin, not far from Ariel, they documented a new network of roads and plots being developed, on some of which houses had since been built. Near Maale Levona, on a ridge not far from the village Sinjil, they documented the paving a network of roads and supporting walls for plots designated for construction. In the area of Taibe, not far from where Amona was located, in the direction of Ofra, they documented a new network of roads, a terraced construction project and a pool. They documented throughout the West Bank and found more and more construction sites in Area B, close to settlements.

Meir Rubin, the director of the Kohelet Forum, a research institute affiliated with the right wing that works to apply Israeli sovereignty on the West Bank, says that this is deliberate construction encouraged by the PA and its only goal is to strangle the Jewish settlement “The Arabs openly declare this and the Israeli government, in response, swallowed an entire box of sleeping pills in an act of suicide. The Palestinians are using European funding with the goal of strangling the Jews in Area C and taking over as much open area as possible in Area B so that on the day that the Oslo Accords are canceled, they will have as much land as possible of the West Bank.”

Boaron is concerned by the new reality that will be created on the ground. “If the Israeli government does not stop the Palestinian construction, the entire area will be filled with ghettos. The settlements will find themselves surrounded by Palestinian villages, like Gush Katif. How long can they last? How long did Gush Katif last? What normal person will want to live in a place where the army has to clear the roads before the children can go to school? Look at how they are taking over, they can see the houses of Amihai, they can see Keida, and beyond the hill is Esh Kodesh. Look at the bus now driving on the road that goes through the Shilo settlements, it is carrying children, why do they have to build specifically here?”

### **Pressure by the Base**

As the work on the hill between Turmus Aya and Amihai progressed, the settlers began to protest. One morning, after the Palestinian workers arrived, they found that their machinery had been damaged and that writing saying *Am Yisrael Hai* [the Jewish people lives] had been spray-painted on the rocks. Later, groups of settlers put up a protest booth not far from the construction site and clashed with the workers. The army tried to quell the protest, but nothing helped.

In October, the work was stopped at an order issued by the Civil Administration, for security reasons. Khaled Al Sabawi petitioned the High Court of Justice on behalf of this company against the work being stopped. Attorney Michael Sfard, who submitted the petition, says that this is a business project of a public company that is traded on the stock exchange. “He wants to make money, there is no hidden plan about taking over. In order to build in Area B, the Palestinians do not need to receive permission from Israel, but the settlers are opposed to any Palestinian development plans. As far as they are concerned, the entire land is theirs and any Palestinian construction takes away land that belongs to them. As they see it, the Palestinians should live on the moon.”

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For now, work on the hill has not resumed. The state must reply to TABO's petition in the next few days. This will be a test for the state regarding Palestinian construction in Area B, after the Palestinians declared that they no longer recognize the division of authorities.

In the other sites, the construction work is continuing according to plan. Kobi Eliraz, who was re-appointed last week by Naftali Bennett to the position of defense minister's adviser on settlement affairs, told us a short time before receiving the appointment, that the Palestinians were following an orderly plan and that the Israeli government was doing nothing. "It is sleeping stand up," he says, "I've been shouting and warning for years about what is taking place on the ground and nothing happens."

Aside from awaiting to hear the High Court of Justice's position, various parties from the settlement in Judea and Samaria, including the Binyamin Regional Council, settler representatives and the Kohelet Forum, are behind an initiative to get a security cabinet decision to revisit Israeli government policy regarding Palestinian construction in all of Areas A,B and C. Up until the new policy is decided, Boaron and his colleagues are demanding that the security cabinet ministers order all the work stopped, both planning and work in the field. In light of the fact that Israel is headed to elections and the prime minister is feeling pressured and wants to be forthcoming toward his right wing base, it is quite possible that a decision will be made that will satisfy the settlers, even if the practical significance is the annulment of the Oslo Accords.

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The IDF Spokesperson's Office issued a statement: "The Civil Administration, together with the IDF, are responsible for enforcing planning and construction laws pertaining to the Palestinian sector solely in Area C. Therefore, the IDF, together with the Civil Administration, is monitoring the illegal construction taking place in Area C and is taking steps to prevent it. In those places where new construction in Area B poses a new security challenge, steps are being taken to ensure the safety of the residents. Any steps taken against construction in Area B is only in the security context. In the specific location of the construction in Area B in the area of Turmus Aya and Amihai, a petition was submitted to the High Court of Justice and the issue will be addressed in the legal sphere."

The Office of the Coordinator of Government Activity in the Territories issued a statement: "The Civil Administration is responsible for implementing civilian authorities in Area C only, according to the Oslo Accords. Palestinian construction outside of these areas is not the responsibility of the Civil Administration."

Peace Now asserts that any decision taken by the security cabinet on changing the division of authorities in the West Bank will be disastrous. "With the help of the backing that the settlers receive from the extremist government that has been functioning without a mandate for over a year," says Shabtay Bendet, who heads Peace Now's Settlement Watch monitoring unit, "they are taking steps to change reality and to regress us 30 years back. Time after time we pay the price for the fact that the security establishment does the bidding of an extremist minority and accedes to its dangerous whims. The extreme right wing wants to erase all the diplomatic achievements that were made up until today with the Palestinians and to reinstate the Israeli occupation in the heart of Palestinian civilian life."

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