

How 20 Tents Rocked Israel: Palestinians Take the Fight to their Occupiers

By [Jonathan Cook](#)

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When the Palestinian leadership won their upgrade to non-member observer status at the United Nations in November, plenty of sceptics on both sides of the divide questioned what practical benefits would accrue to the Palestinians. The doubters have not been silenced yet.

Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas has done little to capitalise on his diplomatic success. There have been vague threats to “isolate” Israel, hesitant talk of “not ruling out” a referral to the International Criminal Court, and a low-key declaration by the Palestinian Authority of the new “state of Palestine”.

At a time when Palestinians hoped for a watershed moment in their struggle for national liberation, the Fatah and Hamas leaderships look as mutually self-absorbed as ever. Last week they were again directing their energies into a new round of reconciliation talks, this time in Cairo, rather than keeping the spotlight on Israeli intransigence.

So instead, it was left to a group of 250 ordinary Palestinians to show how the idea of a “state of Palestine” might be given practical meaning. On Friday, they set up a tent encampment that they intended to convert into a new Palestinian village called Bab al-Shams, or Gate of the Sun.

On Sunday, in a sign of how disturbed Israel is by such acts of popular Palestinian resistance, Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu had the the occupants removed in a dawn raid — despite the fact that his own courts had issued a six-day injunction against the government’s “evacuation” order.

Intriguingly, the Palestinian activists not only rejected their own leaders’ softly-softly approach but also chose to mirror the tactics of the hardcore settlers.

First, they declared they were creating “facts on the ground”, having understood, it seems, that this is the only language Israel speaks or understands. Then, they selected the most contentious spot imaginable for Israel: the centre of the so-called E-1 corridor, 13 square-kilometres of undeveloped land between East Jerusalem and Israel’s strategic city-settlement of Maale Adumim in the West Bank.

For more than a decade, Israel has been planning to build its own settlement in E-1, though on a vastly bigger scale, to finish the encirclement of East Jerusalem, cutting off the future capital of a Palestinian state from the West Bank.

The US had stayed Israel’s hand, understanding that completion in E-1 would signal to the

world and the Palestinians the end of a two-state solution. But following the UN vote, Netanyahu announced plans to build an additional 4,000 settler homes there as punishment for the Palestinians' impertinence.

The comparison between the Bab al-Shams activists and the settlers should not be extended too far. One obvious difference is that the Palestinians were building on their own land, whereas Israel is breaking international law in allowing hundreds of thousands of settlers to move into the West Bank.

Another is that Israel's response towards the two groups was preordained to be different. This is especially clear in relation to what Israel itself calls the "illegal outposts" — more than 100 micro-settlements, similar to Bab al-Shams, set up by hardcore settlers since the mid-1990s, after Israel promised the US it would not authorise any new settlements.

Despite an obligation to dismantle the outposts, successive Israeli governments have allowed them to flourish. In practice, within days of the first caravans appearing on a West Bank hilltop officials hook up the "outposts" to electricity and water, build them access roads and redirect bus routes to include them. The spread of the settlements and outposts has been leading inexorably to Israel's de facto annexation of most of the West Bank.

In stark contrast, all access to Bab al-Shams was blocked within hours of the tents going up and the next day Netanyahu had the site declared a closed military zone. As soon as the Jewish Sabbath was over, troops massed around the camp. Early on Sunday morning they stormed in.

Netanyahu was clearly afraid to allow any delay. Palestinians started using social media over the weekend to plan mass rallies at road-blocks leading to the camp site.

However futile the activists' efforts prove to be on this occasion, the encampment indicates that ordinary Palestinians are better placed to find inventive ways to embarrass Israel than the hidebound Palestinian leadership.

Senior PLO official Hanan Ashrawi extolled the activists for their "highly creative and legitimate nonviolent tool" to protect Palestinian land. But the failure of PA officials, including Saeb Erekat, to make it to the site before it was cordoned off by Israel only heightened the impression of a leadership too slow and unimaginative to respond to events.

By establishing Bab al-Shams, the activists visibly demonstrated the apartheid nature of Israel's rule in the occupied territories. Although one brief encampment is unlikely by itself to change the dynamics of the conflict, it does show Palestinians that there are ways they themselves can take the struggle to Israel.

Following the Israeli raid, that point was made eloquently by Mohammed Khatib, one of the organisers. "In establishing Bab al-Shams, we declare that we have had enough of demanding our rights from the occupier — from now on we shall seize them ourselves."

That, of course, is also Netanyahu's great fear. The scenario his officials are reported to be most concerned about is that this kind of popular mode of struggle becomes infectious. If Palestinians see popular non-violent resistance, unlike endless diplomacy, helping to awaken the world to their plight, there may be more Bab al-Shamses — and other surprises for Israel — around the corner.

It was precisely such thinking that led Israel's attorney-general, Yehuda Weinstein, to justify Netanyahu's violation of the injunction on the grounds that the camp would "bring protests and riots with national and international implications".

What Bab al-Shams shows is that ordinary Palestinians can take the fight for the "state of Palestine" to Israel — and even turn Israel's own methods against it.

Jonathan Cook won the Martha Gellhorn Special Prize for Journalism. His latest books are "Israel and the Clash of Civilisations: Iraq, Iran and the Plan to Remake the Middle East" (Pluto Press) and "Disappearing Palestine: Israel's Experiments in Human Despair" (Zed Books). His new website is www.jonathan-cook.net.

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