

New Israeli Law to Grab Arab's Lands; Jewish Liberals Denounce It as 'Robbery'

By HAL DRAPER

For all who have at heart a democratic and socialist development for the state of Israel, the latest anti-Arab law passed by the Israeli Knesset (parliament) is another blow. Lacking as it is in virtually any possibility of justification even on official Zionist grounds, though indeed it stems from fundamental Zionist ideology, it aroused a wave of protest in Israel from liberal and enlightened Jewish elements as well as from spokesmen for the Israeli Arabs.

This "Land Acquisition Law" was passed by the Knesset on March 30 with all-Arab deputies voting against and all Jewish deputies for it, but outside the Knesset the Jewish reaction included big elements of protest.

The law authorizes the government to expropriate land belonging to Arabs living in Israel, without their consent, if that land is needed for the expansion of adjacent collective settlements or private Jewish farmers. Compensation is provided for, but on the basis of the 1950 land value, with an additional 3 per cent for each year thereafter, to be paid in Israeli currency at the present exchange rate. The big injustice, however, lies in the fact that, though they would be given money, Arabs are not permitted to acquire new land in Israel and once deprived of present holdings they will remain landless, uprooted.

Besides the above information, further details of the issue are given by the *Jewish Newsletter* (May 25) as follows:

During the long debate in parliament, the law "was strongly criticized by many Jewish deputies of the liberal, socialist and left socialist parties and by the liberal Israeli press as an 'unjust law,' which 'legalizes robbery,' and as an 'act of discrimination against the Arab minority in Israel.' It was denounced by Arabs and Jews alike as a measure which will further impoverish the small Arab

minority still living in Israel and will force them out of their chief occupation, agriculture; this will push them into the ranks of the lowest proletariat, and eventually force them to leave Israel."

During the debate, the *Ichud* (liberal group founded by the late Judah Magnes) wrote to the speaker of the Knesset that the law "gives a stamp of legality to acts and deeds which he would consider a grave injustice if they were directed against himself, or against Jewish property. . . . As Jews and citizens of the state of Israel, we find it our duty to cry out against a proposed law which will add no honor to that which is Jewish." It was signed by Professors M. Buber and E. Simon and Dr. Shereshevsky, but was never acknowledged.

On April 25 a public protest meeting was held in Haifa by the Society for the Defense of Arab Minority Rights in Israel, addressed by speakers from various liberal, political and non-political groups, including the League for the Defense of Civil Rights and *Ichud*. The speakers stressed that the new law does not even pretend to be based on security grounds but is an act of undisguised expansionist greed.

Speeches at this rally also revealed why not a single Jewish member of the Knesset voted against the bill, although many members of the Mapai and Mapam (collective farms) of both these two parties benefited directly from the law by acquiring the land grabbed from the Arabs. Chief beneficiaries are the Mapam kibbutzim Hamishmar and Kfar Masaryk. They acquired so much of the requisitioned Arab land that they now rent out parcels of it to some of the Arabs who previously owned it.

ON BEHALF OF THE JEWS

Sharp attacks on the law came from the liberal daily *Haaretz* and the *Letzte Naies*. The *Ichud's* organ *Ner* devoted its entire April issue to this protest. To

quote from one of the articles in it, an Open Letter by Dr. Shereshevsky to the Knesset sponsor of the law: the new law's "true meaning is robbery of land from people, inhabitants, of the state."

He goes on: "They are agricultural people, like you; they are citizens of Israel, like you. There exists only one difference between them and you: They are Arabs and you are a Jew. This difference seemed to you so great and decisive that you were ready to trespass for it all that is required by the Law of Israel and its tradition."

The name given the law, he continues, is "but a lie" to conceal the fact it means "an expropriation of lands that have been seized in an arbitrary and illegal way since 1948. This 'law' puts on a stamp of legality on criminal actions, 'the taking over of land by kibbutzim and settlements from Arab citizens only because these settlements wanted to enlarge their property' (Haaretz). One village of 7000 inhabitants, Um-el-Fahm, has thus lost 110,000 dunams and will remain with only 30,000 dunams. The village of Jatt, of 1450 inhabitants, remains with 1600 dunams. The village of Tireh (4000 inhabitants) is left with 9000 dunams. . . ."

Striking the note which is unfortunately alien to the thinking of the Israeli leaders, deeply sunk as they are in the chauvinist ideology of Zionist expansionism, Dr. Shereshevsky makes the basic point that the law is not only a crime against the Arabs but a crime against the real interests of the Jewish people:

"Do you know what you have done to the state of Israel? Do you know that henceforth the judges in Israel will have to judge according to a 'law' which both they and you as well as each of us know as 'robbery!' . . ."

"It is not on behalf of the Arabs that I am writing this letter. They will know how to defend themselves and their

rights. For no law, not even 'the Land Acquisition Law,' can cancel and obliterate what is written in the Land Register about the legal ownership of their lands. It is not on *their* behalf that I am writing but on *our* behalf, for God's sake 'whose name you have profaned among the nations,' for the name of the people of Israel, on behalf of our sons and daughters 'who have not sinned'!

"The Jewish people in the whole world will know about this 'law,' it will not put up with it, for our sake, and for its own sake, on our behalf and on its own behalf. It will not rest until this 'law' is abolished, for 'Zion shall be redeemed with judgment!'"

This is a key to the Israeli problem from a progressive Jewish point of view. Oppression of minorities in a state is an old story, and that the Zionist leaders of Israel have gone along this road too is disgraceful but not unexpected. What is somewhat different in the Israeli case is that this policy of anti-Arab oppression is suicidal from the point of view of the Jewish people, who live in an island within the Arab world and have to live with the Arab world too.

The most hopeful aspect of this last episode is the degree of protest which was aroused within the Jewish population itself.

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