



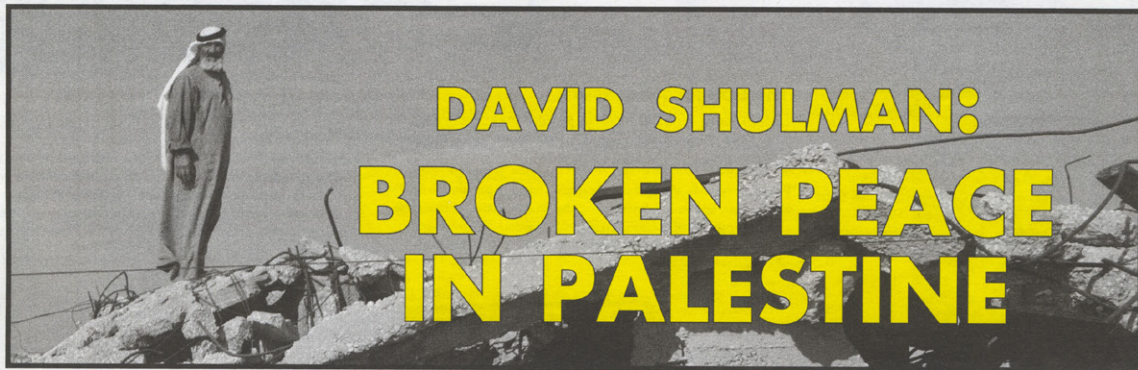
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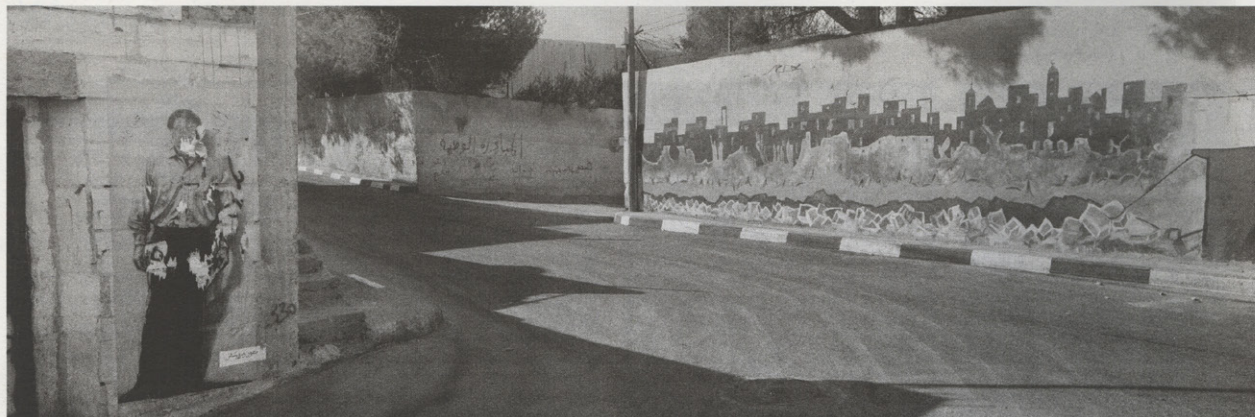
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Israel: The Broken Silence

David Shulman



Josef Koudelka/Magnum Photos

A poster of the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish (left), Aida refugee camp, near Bethlehem, West Bank, 2009; photograph by Josef Koudelka from 'This Place,' an exhibition of pictures by twelve photographers of Israel and the West Bank, at the Brooklyn Museum of Art until June 5, 2016

Popular Protest in Palestine: The Uncertain Future of Unarmed Resistance
by Marwan Darweish and Andrew Rigby.
Pluto, 211 pp., \$28.00 (paper)

Return: A Palestinian Memoir
by Ghada Karmi.
Verso, 319 pp., \$26.95

Disturbing the Peace: The Use of Criminal Law to Limit the Actions of Human Rights Defenders in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories
by the Human Rights Defenders Fund.
80 pp.; available at hrdata.org.il

Al pi tehom [At the Edge of the Abyss]
by Talia Sasson.
Jerusalem: Keter, 309 pp., 74.00 shekels

The Conflict Shoreline: Colonization as Climate Change in the Negev Desert
by Eyal Weizman and Fazel Sheikh.
Steidl/Cabinet, 92 pp., \$40.00

This Place
an exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, February 12–June 5, 2016.
Catalog of the exhibition by Frederic Brenner and others.
MACK, 191 pp., \$50.00 (paper)

Israeli human rights activists and what is left of the Israeli peace groups, including joint Israeli-Palestinian peace organizations, are under attack. In a sense, this is nothing very new; organizations such as B'Tselem, the most prominent and effective in the area of human rights, and Breaking the Silence, which specializes in soldiers' firsthand testimony about what they have seen and done in the occupied territories and in Gaza, have always been anathema to the Israeli right, which regards them as treasonous.¹ But open attacks on the Israeli left have now assumed a far more sinister and ruth-

¹See my essay "Israel & Palestine: Breaking the Silence," *The New York Review*, February 24, 2011.

less character; some of them are being played out in the interrogation rooms of Israeli prisons. Clearly, there is an ongoing coordinated campaign involving the government, members of the Knesset, the police, various semiautonomous right-wing groups, and the public media. Politically driven harassment, including violent and illegal arrest, interrogation, denial of legal support, virulent incitement, smear campaigns, even death threats issued by proxy—all this has become part of the repertoire of the far right, which dominates the present government and sets the tone for its policies.

There is now a palpable sense of danger, and also an accelerating decline into a situation of incipient everyday state terror. Palestinians have lived with the reality of state terror for decades—it is the very stuff of the occupation—but it has now seeped into the texture of life inside the Green Line, as many on the left have warned that it would. Israelis with a memory going back to the 1960s sometimes liken the current campaign to the violent actions of the extreme right in Greece before the colonels took power, as famously depicted in the still-canonical film *Z*.

The witch-hunt began this time with a targeting of the ex-soldiers' organization Breaking the Silence by a strident chorus on the right, including Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Defense Minister Moshe Ya'alon, and other members of the cabinet, but also including prominent politicians and journalists from the wishy-washy center, including the highly popular *Haaretz* correspondent Ari Shavit. There have been calls to outlaw the organization entirely.

In Israeli parlance, Breaking the Silence is one of a group of so-called "leftist NGOs" (*amutot hasmol*) that are the object of a new bill now making its way through the Knesset, an initiative of the fanatical minister of justice, Ayelet Shaked, possibly the least just person in the country. Like many right-wing NGOs, leftist groups such as B'Tselem receive funding from donors both in Israel and abroad; the new law aims at forcing leftist and human rights organizations to disclose all foreign sources of support every time they appear in a public setting.

The proposed law is a transparent attempt to humiliate these groups and to limit their freedom of action. Initially, Shaked wanted representatives of left-wing organizations that receive foreign funding to wear identity badges whenever they entered the Knesset or other public spaces, but Netanyahu, still apparently capable of seeing the invidious analogy to the badges the Nazis forced Jews to wear in public, squashed this clause.

The steady stream of government-fueled invective and threats has also been channeled into the shadowy world of clandestine operations. In recent weeks several of the peace organizations have uncovered right-wing spies and moles that had worked their way into their ranks. It's hard to know who has been orchestrating this wave or how high up the operation goes. There are front organizations, including a newly registered group of Israeli settlers who call themselves Ad Kan (This Far and No Farther); I'll come back to them in a moment.

Among the more ludicrous cases is that of a private detective who targeted the office of Michael Sfar, an outstanding human rights lawyer. For about two years, this shady character apparently salvaged documents from wastebaskets and even proudly claimed to have run after municipal sanitation trucks in order to retrieve scraps of paper. By his own testimony, he was hired to do this by a far-right—and partly state-funded—organization called Regavim (Clods of Earth) that is active primarily in acquiring and colonizing Palestinian land in the occupied territories. (There is no other kind of land in the territories, notwithstanding claims by Israeli governments, which were upheld by Israeli courts, that so-called *miri*, or state lands, in the West Bank belong to nobody but the state.)

It's worth noting that the peace and civil rights organizations have nothing to hide, and the attempt to find documents that could somehow incriminate them is in itself a futile and paranoid gesture worthy of the Stasi-run East German state at its height. But in a way, transparency as an ethical principle no

longer matters. Israeli peace activists have graduated from being protesters, in theory, at least, protected by the law, to being dissidents—that is, legitimate targets for government-inspired attacks.

One of the spies did some damage to Ta'ayush (Arab-Jewish Partnership), the group of Israeli and Palestinian volunteers with which I myself have been associated for the last fifteen years. Here there is a story to tell. Ta'ayush has focused its work on the South Hebron Hills, where we have had moderate success in defending Palestinian civilians from violence on the part of settlers and soldiers and from the relentless attempt by Israeli governments, using all the means at their disposal, to expel this Palestinian population from their homes and to take over their lands. In some cases, working together with our Palestinian allies in the field, adopting the classic methods of nonviolent resistance associated with Martin Luther King and Mahatma Gandhi, we have actually reversed the process of dispossession and helped Palestinian villagers come back home.

Well over a year ago, a young Israeli, Itzik Goldway, and his girlfriend Julia, both linked to Ad Kan and the extreme right, joined Ta'ayush on its weekly trips to South Hebron. They subsequently portrayed this "infiltration" as a heroic, James Bond-style act; in actual fact, anyone is welcome to take part in our activities, no questions asked. Itzik managed to win the confidence of Ezra Nawi, a pivotal and charismatic figure in Ta'ayush and, for that very reason, hated by Israeli settlers and the police serving in this region. Nawi has been arrested on false charges many times in the past, and has been awarded damages for this by Israeli courts; he was also jailed for a month for allegedly obstructing soldiers during violent house demolitions at the Palestinian village of Umm al-Khair in 2007.

For some months at least Goldway traveled with Nawi, surreptitiously recording and filming him to no particular effect, until a moment came when an apparent sting operation, no doubt masterminded from above, was set in motion. An alleged Palestinian land dealer, "Mousa," telephoned Nawi and tried to implicate him in the sale

of Palestinian land from the village of Susya to Israeli settlers. Nawi, never famous for circumspection in speech, fell straight into the trap and foolishly spoke to Goldway, whose camera was running, about turning Mousa over to the Palestinian Security Forces—who, he said, would possibly torture and kill him. It was an empty, though obnoxious, remark: no one has been executed in Palestine for the last ten years, although selling land to Jews remains on the books as a capital crime in the Palestine Authority. For the record, the shady land dealer is alive and well. Ezra later claimed that he considered turning to the Palestinian Security Forces in order to protect his name and standing among the Palestinian population of the South Hebron Hills.

A year went by. Then, in early January, a highly respected journalist, Ilana Dayan, devoted her television show, *Uvda* (Fact), an Israeli equivalent of *60 Minutes*, to Ezra Nawi and Ta'ayush, with the spy's video clips as centerpiece. Over the last twenty-two years, *Uvda* has specialized in muckraking and has uncovered many seamy ventures within Israel; this was its six-hundredth broadcast. It is perhaps telling that apparently none of the previous 599 reports ever focused on what goes on, hour by hour, in the occupied territories. In this case the *Uvda* team failed to meet even minimal professional standards and, in effect, allowed themselves to serve as a mouthpiece for Ad Kan.

As a result of the broadcast, Nawi was arrested, as were two other activists, and the case rapidly developed along the lines of clear-cut political persecution—as was, I suppose, evident from the start. Even before the arrests, Nawi had received death threats and was assaulted on the street outside his home after right-wing groups published his address on Facebook. After two weeks of incarceration under appalling conditions and nearly continuous interrogation, while being denied access to his lawyer (the most draconian rule in Israeli criminal law), with the police repeatedly demanding that his detention be extended, Nawi and a second Israeli activist were released by an honest judge who said, in effect, that there was no criminal case and that the police had their own agenda.

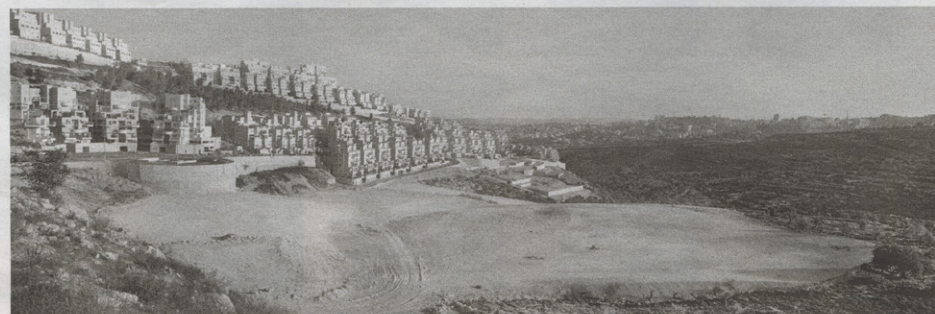
What happened to the third activist, a Palestinian from Susya whose family lands were at stake and a field worker for B'Tselem, is instructive. He was arrested by soldiers in the middle of the night with all the usual terrifying trappings of such actions. Two Israeli courts ordered him released because, they said, Israeli civilian courts had no jurisdiction over him: a Palestinian living in Palestinian territory who reports to the Palestinian police when his lands are in danger is using the only recourse open to him. The Israeli police then literally kidnapped him, defying the courts, and detained him in the military detention camp at Ofer, where he languished for several days before a military judge ordered him released.

We don't yet know how far the state will go in persecuting Ezra Nawi; newspaper reports, citing Nawi's lawyers, have said that the police kept trying to link him to the death of a Palestinian implicated in some other land transaction, although everyone knows that this man died of a stroke in his bed.

When the police claimed they hadn't had enough time to determine the circumstances of this death and needed to keep Nawi locked up until they could do so, his lawyer, Eitan Peleg, was quoted as saying: "If you really wanted to know, you could find out not within minutes but within seconds by simply telephoning your colleagues in the Palestinian Security Forces."

All in all, it's a sordid story, emblematic of this moment in Israeli history. Despite it all, or perhaps because of what has happened, Ta'ayush is flourishing; there has been a rush of volunteers for the weekly expeditions to South Hebron. But it's not hard to gauge how events are moving. Sarit Michaeli, a spokeswoman for B'Tselem, has said: "We are seeing a general assault by the government and right-wing

groups on those parts of Israeli society that are still standing up for democratic values. The aim is to silence us."



The Har Homa settlement, on a hill opposite Bethlehem, West Bank, 2009; photograph by Josef Koudelka from the exhibition 'This Place'

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A lucid discussion of how the Israeli right, with the government firmly behind it, is continually attempting to criminalize Israeli human rights activists can be found in *Disturbing the Peace*, published by the Human Rights Defenders Fund, which provides assistance to Israeli and Palestinian activists. This report also offers chilling firsthand testimonies of brutal arrests, savage beatings, and many accounts of inventive punishments and humiliations of activists (very often women) by police and soldiers. Those of us who have participated in demonstrations in Sheikh Jarrah, Nabi Salih, Isawiya, and other Palestinian settlements can vouch personally for the routine character of such acts.

Real danger accompanies peace work inside the occupied territories, but even greater danger may now threaten human rights workers inside the Green Line, in supposedly democratic Israel. One might be tempted to write off much of the current campaign as a particularly noxious form of McCarthyism. Ronen Shoval, one of the founders of a virulent right-wing organization called Im Tirtzu (Where There's a Will) has publicly expressed his deep admiration for Joseph McCarthy. Im Tirtzu has focused on Israeli academics, intellectuals, and artists; it recently put out a video clip in which four leaders of prominent human rights organizations are shown, named, and labeled *shutlim*—foreign spies, portrayed as actively supporting terrorism.

In late January, Im Tirtzu published an updated list of these so-called foreign agents; it includes hundreds of names and reads like a Who's Who of Israeli cultural and scientific life. Among those named are the writers Amos Oz and David Grossman, the fa-

overtly racist rationalizations of this aim any day on the public radio talk shows. Put simply, the occupation system as a whole is ruled by the logic of stark division between the privileged Israeli occupiers and the Palestinian occupied, who are totally disenfranchised and stripped of all basic human rights.

There should be no need to rehearse again the endless iniquities inherent in the occupation; those unfamiliar with them can easily find them discussed in detail in Neve Gordon's 2008 book, entitled *Israel's Occupation*,² or the recent Hebrew book by Talia Sasson, *At the Edge of the Abyss*, or in the many personal memoirs, such as Ghada Karmi's eloquent and moving *Return*, about life in occupied Palestine. Karmi also reveals the widespread corruption, ineptitude, and violence within the Palestinian Authority, in parts of the West Bank under its control. Graphic images of life inside the occupied territories can be seen in *This Place*, the record of a traveling exhibition of the works of twelve gifted photographers.

Sometimes a single moment can epitomize what the Israeli occupation means in human terms. On February 2, the army destroyed twenty-three Palestinian homes in Jinba and Halawa in the South Hebron Hills, leaving eighty-seven people, sixty of them children, without shelter in the depth of the freezing desert winter. The excuse: the army needs Jinba and the surrounding eleven villages for a "firing zone"—as if there were no empty spaces inside Israel for such exercises.³

²University of California Press.

³This particular firing zone, No. 918, has been the subject of widespread international protest; see Maya Sela,

Further demolitions are scheduled at Umm al-Khair, a shanty neighborhood bordering the Israeli settlement of Karmel, which sits on top of the lands privately owned by the people of Umm al-Khair. The village of Susya remains at high risk, with recent orders to demolish all its tents and shacks as well as its energy facilities that Israeli activists have painfully put in place. Numerous demolitions of Palestinian homes are also taking place in the Jordan Valley.

We are thus witnessing a brutal wave of accelerated demolitions in the West Bank: in the first six weeks of 2016 alone, 293 homes were destroyed by the army. The goal, in a word, is a form of ethnic cleansing. Israel wants these Palestinians who inhabit what is called Area C, the zone of intense Israeli settlement (some 60 percent of the West

Bank), to disappear. According to recent figures released by Dror Etkes, the most knowledgeable expert on this subject, already more than half the lands in Area C have been declared closed military zones, which means that Palestinians are completely barred from entering them.

The processes of eviction and appropriation have been going on for a very long time, and not only within the occupied territories. Eyal Weizman and Fazel Sheikh have produced *The Conflict Shoreline*, a small scholarly masterpiece beautifully illustrated by aerial photographs, on the sad story of Bedouin lands in the northern Negev. In particular, the fate of al-Araqib, a historic Bedouin site, is movingly described. Al-Araqib, whose people credibly claim possession of several thousand acres, has now been bulldozed more than ninety times, and each time its several dozen residents have rebuilt their homes, with the help of Israeli activists. Tenacity and perseverance count for something, but no one can say how long these people can hold on.

Random knife attacks on Israeli soldiers and civilians, mostly by Palestinian teenagers, have been taking place since September, when it looked as if Israel was about to change the status quo on the Haram al-Sharif, or the Temple Mount, as Israeli right-wingers like to call it.⁴ Over two dozen Israelis have been killed in these attacks. Well over a hundred Palestinians have died, some in the course of attempted knifings, and many thousands have been

"World Literary Stars Sign Israeli Petition Against Destruction of Palestinian Villages," *Haaretz*, September 2, 2013.

⁴See my essay "Jerusalem: Why Should Things Not Get Worse?," *NYR Daily*, November 4, 2015.

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wounded in clashes with the army. Intermittent Palestinian violence can usually be counted on to supply the Israeli right with whatever rationale it needs for its hard-line program. But none of this happens in a vacuum. Incremental acts of a fiercely hypernationalist character add up to a consistent, insidious, ultimately devastating attack on the very structure of Israeli democracy.

The minister of education, Naftali Bennett, one of the most extreme spokesmen of the fanatical right, has issued a blacklist of books that are to be banned from the curriculum of all Israeli schools on the grounds that they are not patriotic enough. (These include a popular novel by Dorit Rabinyan, *Borderlife*, about a love affair between a Palestinian man and an Israeli woman—a heinous crime in the eyes of the religious right.) If being Jewish means anything at all, after a more or less continuous history of some three millennia, I think it must mean that Jews are people who do not ban books.

To my mind, proscribing books is entirely consonant with the enormous theft of Palestinian land. The former nicely and subtly furthers the latter. The minister of culture and sport, Miri Regev, another fanatical nationalist, is also sponsoring a “loyalty in culture” bill; you can guess what she has in mind.

As always in such situations, a huge majority of otherwise decent Israelis passively go along with the new cultural and political regime. The Tel Aviv Museum of Art, the strongest art museum in the country, recently canceled an exhibition of works relating to refugees and refugee camps by the renowned Chinese artist and dissident Ai Weiwei along with photographs by Miki Kratsman, winner of the prestigious EMET Prize. Kratsman's photographs included some three thousand portraits of Palestinians from the camps. The museum made vague noises about difficulties in scheduling, which might even have been true; the director, Suzanne Landau, denied that the decision to cancel had anything to do with politics. Yet in the present rabid climate, there is a potential price to be paid by those rare institutions that have the courage to stand up for what they believe in or once believed in.

Sometimes, on a good day, I think that the very starkness and horror of the occupation will eventually bring it to an end. Both in Hebrew and, I think, outside of Israel, throughout the world, the term “occupation” has by now acquired something of the specific gravity of the word “apartheid” in the days before the South African system collapsed. Apartheid regimes—and the word is, alas, eminently suited to the occupation of Palestine—do sometimes collapse. Michael Sfar, the human rights lawyer, recently published a humane and hopeful statement: one day, he said, the occupation will crumble, probably all at once. Sfar is not alone.

The most astute political commentator in Israel, Dmitry Shumsky, has written in *Haaretz* of the somewhat paradoxical character of this latest round of right-wing terror; there is, at the moment, no electoral threat whatever to the continued rule of the far right and no clear sign of effective pressure from outside. Why, then, is it so intent on hunting down its enemies? Shumsky thinks that on a subtler, more hidden level, even the Israeli right is

beginning to sense that its hold on Palestine is becoming untenable. I myself am less sanguine; the far right in Israel very readily opts for totalitarian modes of thinking and acting, and it's not clear who is left to stop it.

On February 9 Netanyahu announced that he is building a huge fence around the entire country to protect it from the “wild beasts” out there. He has, as always, failed to notice his own responsibility for extreme violence inside this fence-to-be, including his part in purveying paranoid hatred and as the active persecutor of a Palestinian population of millions entirely without rights. Like many, indeed most, of those around him, he has substituted the false and often fatal notion that citizens exist only to serve the state for the democratic notion that the state, a nonmetaphysical entity not meant to mediate collective identities, is there to foster and serve its citizens. Dark days lie ahead.

Probably no more than a few hundred human rights and peace activists are still in the field in Israel—a few hundred too many in the eyes of the far right and, I guess, of large parts of the political center as well. These remaining activists are nevertheless certainly supported by much wider circles; and it's important to note that some parts of the democratic apparatus of the state still function. The courts, despite an ambiguous, indeed often appalling record on matters relating to the occupation, still can exert some kind of constraint on the government. So far, one can still speak and write more or less freely, although new moves to censor social media have been announced.

Marwan Darweish and Andrew Rigby, authors of *Popular Protest in Palestine*, discuss many of the major settings for Palestinian nonviolent resistance to the occupation—the villages of Bil'in, Nabi Salih, the Jerusalem neighborhoods of Silwan and Sheikh Jarrah, the South Hebron Hills, and so on. It is certainly true, as I can attest from personal experience, that one meets many remarkable, courageous, and astonishingly articulate people in these settings. (The right-wing extremists of Ad Kan have recently released a contrived and mendacious film clip attempting to discredit these Palestinian activists and the Israeli peace workers who have demonstrated alongside them.)

But Darweish and Rigby also set out the minimal conditions or prerequisites for “sustainable unarmed resistance” in Palestine: a strong sense of solidarity throughout the subject population, organizational resilience, and external support from state and nonstate actors. These conditions are still, for the most part, very far from being realized; Palestinian society is rife with internal division (as the recent wave of strikes by Palestinian schoolteachers against the Palestinian government makes clear). So far the Israeli system has succeeded in keeping nonviolent protest a highly localized and mostly small-scale phenomenon lacking a strong leadership that goes beyond local protest. Indeed, the occupation rests to a large extent precisely upon the fragmentation of the occupied territories into many tiny, discontinuous, fenced-in enclaves. Still, fences, even or especially barbed-wire fences, will prove to be a feeble foundation on which to build a future for the state when those trapped inside them decide to become free. □