

THE SETTLEMENT OF GILO: AN INTERNATIONALLY RECOGNIZED WAR CRIME



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The physical, spiritual and cultural connection between Jerusalem and its southern neighbors of Bethlehem and Hebron is thousands of years old. The historic “Jerusalem – Hebron Road” that links the aforementioned cities through Bethlehem, once had a unique landscape of olive trees, small villages, and archeological and religious sites, all of which have been heavily targeted by Israel’s plan to isolate Occupied East Jerusalem from the rest of the Occupied West Bank.

After the 1967 occupation, Israel unilaterally and illegally expanded the borders of Jerusalem, reaching the outskirts of Ramallah to the north and Bethlehem to the

south. This was followed by the mass expropriation of thousands of dunums of land used for the construction of several illegal settlements between Occupied East Jerusalem and the rest of the Occupied West Bank. The most prominent of these settlements in the southern area is known as Gilo, which was officially established in 1971 and today has a population of over 30 000 settlers living on 2700 dunums of illegally seized land. The total number of settlers in the Occupied State of Palestine is approximately 540000.

The illegal settlement of Gilo was built mainly over the “Al Slayeb” area of Beit Jala, as well as other areas from Al

Sharafat and Beit Safafa. It has prevented Beit Jala from expanding, while isolating Beit Safafa and severely restricting the agricultural activities of the villagers of Al Wallajeh. The settlement was built mainly over a quarry from which stones were used to build many Bethlehem and Jerusalem structures, including a number of historic churches. From the Cremisan Valley (in areas known as ‘Wadi Ahmad’ and ‘Bir Onah’), people can still see old Palestinian houses and agricultural terraces that Palestinian farmers can no longer access. As with all of the settlements in this area, Gilo has also restricted Palestinian access to natural resources, mainly water.



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“Al Slayeb (Gilo) is part of our heritage, our landscape that Israel destroyed. I can only boil when I hear Israelis describing the land as a ‘Jerusalem neighborhood,’ hiding that this was taken from us”
Nakhle, 70 years old, Beit Jala.

► What is the status of Gilo and other Israeli settlements under international law?

Gilo and other Israeli settlements built in the occupied State of Palestine are illegal under international law. This is the view of the United Nations, the International Court of Justice, the International Committee for the Red Cross, and all states except Israel. They constitute war crimes under the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (1998).

► Is the settlement of Gilo a Jerusalem “neighborhood”?

No. In addition to the fact that Gilo is a settlement and not a neighborhood, the area over which it was built has always been part of the Bethlehem District. The annexation of this land has been never recognized by the international community, as can be seen from UNSC resolutions such as 475 and 478. To say that Gilo is “part of Jerusalem” is to accept Israel’s unilateral expansion of

Jerusalem’s boundaries.

Therefore, referring to these settlements as “neighborhoods” or “communities” is misleading. A failure to describe these settlements in their accurate political context deprives audiences of the opportunity to understand a principal source of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict: Israel’s illegal confiscation and colonization of Palestinian land. The terms “neighborhood” and “community” conceal the reasons why such settlements are newsworthy: they are built on land illegally seized from Palestinian villagers who are prevented from accessing, cultivating or living on their ancestral lands.

► What are the Israeli plans in the area?

To the East, Gilo settlement aims at cutting the historic ties between Bethlehem and Jerusalem. To the south, Gilo settlement aims at linking Israeli settlements in Jerusalem with the Israeli settlements of the

Hebron District in the so called “Gush Etzion” area. Settlement infrastructure such as the Wall and Bypass roads are key to achieving this goal. In order to connect Gilo with Har Gilo, Israel plans to build a new settlement called Giv’at Yael, once again physically imposing Israel’s own concept of borders.

In order to achieve its southern expansion, Israel plans to complete its annexation Wall in the area at the Cremisan Valley in order to forcibly annex the remaining area around the settlements to Israel. Expanding the settlement of Gilo towards the Cremisan Valley will not only destroy one of the last green areas for the people of Bethlehem, but will physically restrict Palestinian development in the area. Gilo’s expansion is part of Israel’s attempt to annex the Western Bethlehem area (including the villages of Battir, Hussan, Wadi’ Fouk’in and Nah’halin which are now stranded between and around the Israeli settlements of Betar and Betar Illit.



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► What are the effects of Israeli settlement plans in the area for Palestinian villagers?

Such illegal settlement activities are catastrophic for the communities of Beit Jala, Beit Safafa, Wallajeh and the villages mentioned above. In addition to stifling the Palestinian communities in this area and paving the road for Israel to continue its settlement expansion towards the south (linking the settlements between Bethlehem and Jerusalem with those in the Hebron Area) more than half of Beit Jala's olive trees will be lost. The town's olive oil is considered one of the finest in Palestine.

Furthermore, Palestinians from the Bethlehem area will lose one of their most precious traditions: During

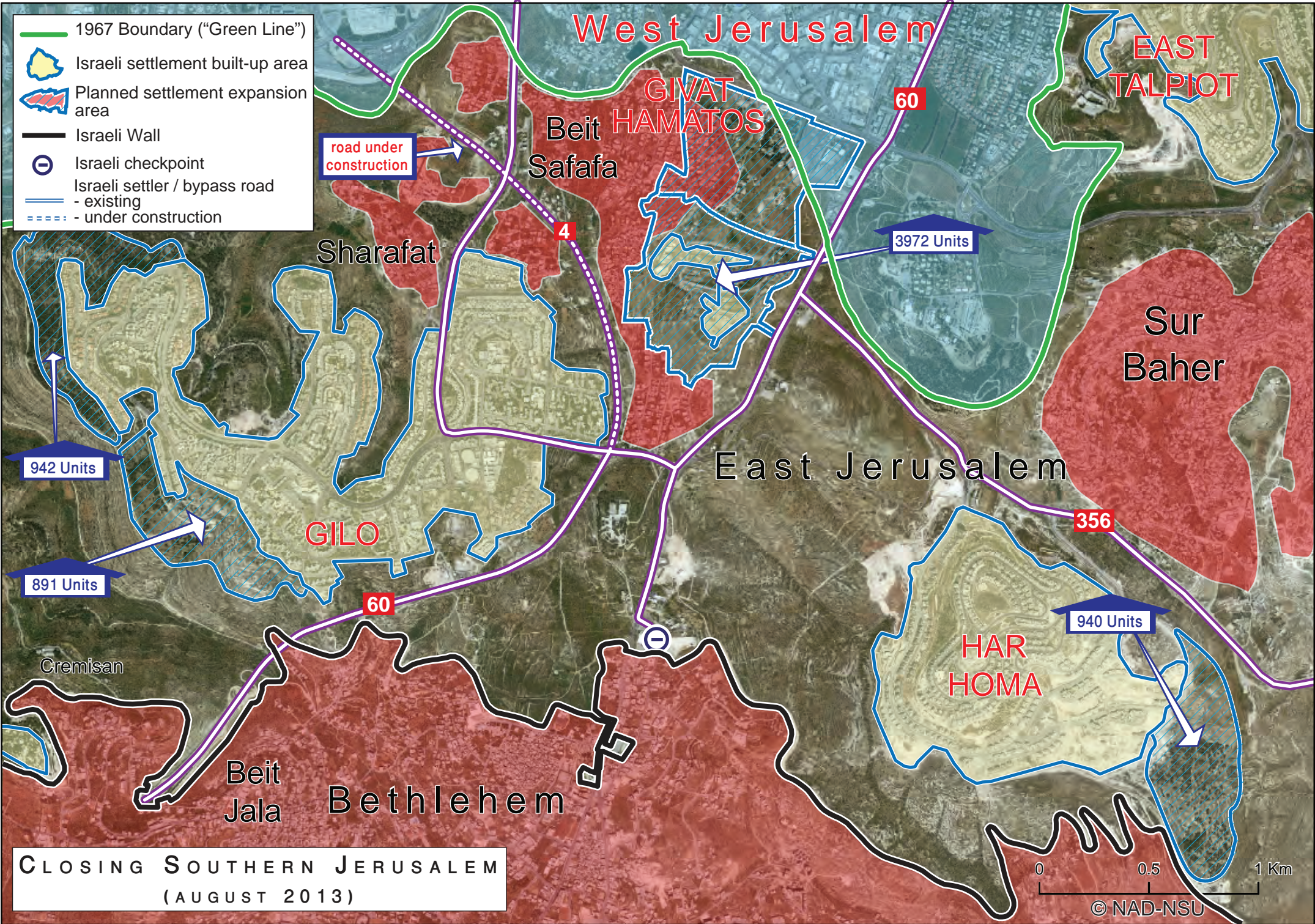
the last days of May, the Roman Catholic community conducts a procession from the statue honoring the Virgin Mary at Cremisan to the Church of the Annunciation in Beit Jala. The route of this procession will be completely severed by the annexation Wall.

A Catholic kindergarten run by Salesian nuns will also be heavily affected by the Israeli plans, while a Catholic Seminary and the winery run by Salesian Brothers, which employs workers from Beit Jala, will be left at the western side of wall, annexed into Israel.

► But isn't Israel building only in areas that, under any agreement, will be part of Israel?

No. This statement, though frequently repeated by

several Israeli officials, is completely incorrect. All Israeli settlements are illegal and illegitimate according to all the international community. The 1967 border is the only recognized future border between Palestine and Israel, according to both international law and consensus. This border must form the basis of any agreement, which means that such statements are baseless and meaningless. They are simply a part of Israel's public relations campaign to use peace negotiations as a smoke screen for more settlement activity, and a weak attempt to legitimize a war crime. Most importantly, in the current context of talks, it shows lack of sincerity and seriousness regarding the achievement of the two-state solution.



CLOSING SOUTHERN JERUSALEM
(AUGUST 2013)