



State of Palestine
Palestine Liberation Organization
Negotiations Affairs Department

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The NAKBA of Beit Iskaria

The Struggle for Existence in the Face of Ethnic Cleansing

Introduction

Ever since the 1948 Nakba of Palestine at the hands of the Zionist movement, the Palestinian people have suffered from its social, political, economic and humanitarian effects that continue today. Since the Israeli occupation of 1967, the Israeli occupying authorities have carried out policies of ethnic cleansing, as a continued form of Nakba, to consolidate its occupation and its colonial settlement enterprise. Israel's policy of ethnic cleansing targets the people of Palestine so as to abolish their presence and erase their identity, thus replacing them with Jewish settlers in flagrant violation of international law and human rights conventions.

This media brief sheds light on Israeli policies of ethnic cleansing that include forcible transfer, home demolitions, closure and restrictions on movement to remove the civilian population through violence and intimidation. The village of Beit Iskaria is a paramount example of how a large number of Palestinian villages and towns are facing this policy, in violation of international law. Putting an end to these policies requires the international community to uphold its responsibilities, to adopt a firm position and take concrete steps, to end Israel's occupation toward embodying the sovereignty of the State of Palestine on the 1967 borders with East Jerusalem as its capital.

Israeli Annexation Laws and Continued Construction of Illegal Israeli Settlements Aim to Eliminate the Two-State Solution and to Impose the Policy of "Greater Israel on the Land of Historic Palestine"

The Case of “Gush Etzion” Settlement Complex



The Gush Etzion settlement complex, located south of Jerusalem and west of Bethlehem, was established in the early 1940's and was later rebuilt and expanded following the Israeli occupation of 1967. In doing so, Israel is committing a grave violation of international humanitarian law under the Fourth Geneva Convention, by transferring its own civilian population into the Palestinian territory Israel occupies.¹ Consequently, nearly 75,000 illegal settlers live in this complex that affects the lives of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians. Among them, 22,700 illegal settlers live on the lands belonging to the village of Beit Iskaria, in addition to the presence of eight additional illegal settlement installations (outposts) in this area. According to Israeli occupation plans, this whole area will be completely isolated once the segment of the Annexation Wall around it is completed. This will in effect isolate Beit Iskaria and more than 9% of the West Bank, from the remainder of the West Bank.

With the decision and approval on the Israeli official level, the past few years have witnessed a rapid acceleration in Israeli colonial plans for building and expanding the existing settlements in the Gush Etzion complex. Israel seeks to annex this complex to Jerusalem in order to complete its “Greater Jerusalem” colonial project; to unilaterally redefine the municipal boundaries of Jerusalem through replacing the existing Palestinian population with more Jewish settlers in and around the city. Benjamin Netanyahu officially announced this plan in 2012, wherein he declared that “Gush Etzion” would remain under the control of Israel.

The Battle for Existence in Beit Iskaria

The Palestinian village of Beit Iskaria is considered one of the most paramount examples that reveal the effects of the systematic Israeli policy of ethnic cleansing. Israel aims to forcibly transfer the Palestinians in this village and to seize large areas of their land by means of consolidating its colonial settlement enterprise towards altering the character of Jerusalem and its surroundings.

- The name of the village dates back to the Canaanite period, while the history of the village dates back to the Ottoman period, according to a 400-year-old document. Also, the shrine of Prophet Zakariyah is located in the village.
- It is located southwest of Bethlehem and consists of five sites: Beit Iskaria, Khalet Al-Baluta, Wadi Shkheet, Khilat Afana, and Shifa. The settlement complex of Gush Etzion sits on top of all of these areas.

¹ Art. 49, 1949 Geneva Convention IV.

- The surface area of Beit Iskaria is about 9,000 square dunums. Since 1967, Israel confiscated nearly 2,000 dunums by claims of military necessity and/or for the construction and expansion of illegal Israeli settlements.
- The village has been cut off since 1967 as a result of Israel's illegal annexation of its lands, and of other Palestinian villages and lands in the area, for the establishment of Israeli settlements.
- Beit Iskaria was destroyed more than seven times at the hands of Zionist forces, dating back even before 1967, and it was hence rebuilt by its residents following every demolition. According to a census conducted in 2007, the village consists of 95 houses.
- Approximately 650 Palestinians live in the village today, half of which are women and children. The villagers depend on agriculture and livestock for their livelihood. Beit Iskaria has a factory and a school located next to one another, one cemetery, but no medical clinic.



The Israeli Violations of International Humanitarian Law in Beit Iskaria

Closure:

- The Israeli occupying power imposes continued closures on the village with one military checkpoint at the main entrance leading to its five sites. The residents are permitted to enter and exit using private cars, but visitors, including ambulances, are obliged to apply for a permit from the occupying authorities to enter the village.
- Between 2000 and 2005, the village was under a complete closure, as the main road leading to the village was completely closed to Palestinians.

Denial of Freedom of Movement:

Since 2015, the Israeli occupying forces have targeted every Palestinian that walks beyond the military checkpoint by direct extrajudicial killing. Residents of the village are not allowed to walk on Route 60 and are completely prevented from even standing at the junction of Gush Etzion settlement complex.

Deprivation of Human Dignity:

The occupying soldiers deliberately humiliate and harass the residents of the village, including students, by arresting them at the military checkpoint, confiscating their identity cards,

photographing them and their cars, insulting them with obscenities and even stripping them of their clothes at times.

Land Confiscations: Ongoing Theft of Palestinian Lands

Currently, the lands of the village (and also lands belonging to al- Khader village) are being confiscated for the construction of a new illegal Israeli settlement (parcel 91), which was officially approved by the occupying authorities in February 2018. (See map)

Demolitions:

- Since 1967, the residents of Beit Iskaria have been denied the right to build or to even renovate their existing houses, and so they have continuously been received demolition orders. Most recently, they received two demolition orders on 23 January 2018. The restoration and construction laws also apply to the only mosque in the village that received a demolition order for its minaret per a military order issued in 1981. Additionally, the nearby settlement's council issued an order preventing the call to prayer (Athan) in the village.
- Currently, 33 structures are facing the threat of demolition by Israel – one-third of the total existing structures in Beit Iskaria, including homes.

Settlers Violence and Terrorism:

Settlers illegally cultivate lands owned by the Palestinian residents of this area. Additionally, the settlers surrounding Beit Iskaria village, particularly the settlers of "Beit Ein", systematically and continuously terrorize and attack the villagers, including harassment, destruction of property, uprooting of fruit trees and hatred-inciting graffiti calling for revenge.



Approximately 350 women and children live in the village. The women, like the rest of the Palestinian population in the area, suffer due to the lack of safety and security caused by the imposed closure on the village and the denial of their right to housing, to freedom of movement, to education, as well as their right to medical treatment. They are also denied the right to access the natural resources in the area or to even develop other resources. To confront this dire situation, the women of Beit Iskaria decided to form their own Women's Association in 2011, which consists of 42 women, to communicate with the outside world about the resulting suffering from continued Israeli violations and attacks on the village and its residents.

The women also subsequently formed the Beit Iskaria Cooperative Society to help preserve Palestinian presence in the village and to strengthen its economic potential; the co-op produces local agricultural and other products to sell to local markets (including pickles, jam, milk and others). For this purpose, a single room was built to produce local products, which the women called: "The Factory". However, the Israeli occupying authorities issued a demolition order for this room on the grounds of not having a building permit. The women are also still unable to sell their products overseas because of the imposed closure on their village.

TESTIMONIES

"There is no place in the world where women are denied the right to deliver their babies in a normal and humane way and to receive the appropriate treatment at the right time and place. This only happens in Palestine because of the Israeli occupation."

- Nihaya Saad

In 2012, Nihaya could not reach the hospital to deliver her baby because the Israeli occupying forces prevented the entry of a taxi and an ambulance through the military checkpoint situated at the entrance of the village, thus putting the life of the mother and her child in danger. The women of the village helped Nihaya in delivering her baby through the assistance of a doctor over the phone. Two hours after the birth of her child, a medic was allowed to enter the village.

"The school lacks the minimum required facilities for education. The classes are integrated with each other and students take joint classes. Students are also exposed to harassment and verbal abuse by the Israeli soldiers at the military checkpoint as well as by nearby settlers."

- Nisreen Issa, the Principal of Nabi Zakariyah Elementary Co-Ed School

Nisreen Issa lives in Dheisheh refugee camp in Bethlehem. She commutes to Beit Iskaria on a daily basis to carry out her duties as the principal of the school, which consists of 6 classrooms and 43 male and female students. Due to Israel's denial of building permits for the residents of the village, the school has hence merged the students from different grades in one classroom: first and second grades together, third and fourth grades together, and fifth and sixth grades together. Since the school only provides elementary education, the residents of the village are therefore obliged to move their children to the nearby school of Beit Fajjar to complete their secondary education using a single bus provided by UNICEF.

Nisreen compares between the wretched situation of the school and that of the settlers' school in "Alon Shvut" illegal settlement that is located only meters away from the village. The settlers' school has superior playgrounds, advanced scientific laboratories, swimming pools and vast spaces. Nisreen adds: "This is the racist reality we are living on a daily basis. I personally feel scared and terrified every time I enter the village as I am usually exposed to harassment, humiliation and inspection. I am also concerned about the feelings of the students as they travel on the bus having to compare their miserable lives to the lives of the settlers who live illegally on our land."

"Despite the fact that some of us have completed university education, we do not have employment opportunities like the rest of the women elsewhere because of the closure. I graduated in 2012 and I still cannot find work. The women, therefore, prefer to escape the closure and housing shortage by marrying a man from outside the village. This is what the occupation wants, to make us leave, but we are here and shall remain steadfast. We are rooted in this land and we will continue innovating methods to preserve our existence."

- Nura Saad

Nura talks about the difficulty in movement and the right to education. She explains that the closure and settlers attacks, in addition to the lack of transportation, pushes girls to drop out of school. She adds: "One of the girls in the 10th grade was harassed and assaulted by the settlers, which triggered anger among the people in the village. Under the circumstances, most of them decided to prevent their girls from going to school to preserve their lives. In effect, the occupation is responsible for the illiteracy of a whole generation. Nura says there are only eight girls from the village that have completed university studies.

“Despite the Nakba of ethnic cleansing, we will not carry our “Bukjeh”² and leave”

Mohammad Ibrahim Atallah, known as Abu-Ibrahim, who was the head of the village council between 2005 and 2017. The ancestors of Abu Ibrahim lived in the village for hundreds of years. He tells us: “Since the 1970’s, the colonizers have gradually confiscated the lands belonging to the village by building settlements and expanding them. They carried out daily attacks against the residents and their properties, burned crops, stole chickens, unleashed their dogs and pigs, demolished houses and stalls. They also tried to offer my father, Haj Ibrahim, a large sum of money in exchange for his land, but we refused any kind of offer or compensation. We are determined to cling to our land despite all the hardships”. Attallah also asserts that “All the properties in the village date back to pre-1967 -the people of the village are prohibited to even build a board of tin sheet or asbestos sheet. We suffer from a severe housing crisis that forces a family of six or seven people to share one living room, where we all live and sleep, including the husband, wife and children. These houses are inadequate and are prone to collapse, and they also lack an adequate health environment as it’s not allowed to renovate, restore, or expand them. Therefore, young men and women are forced to leave the village when they get married.”

Abu Ibrahim stresses that there is no natural growth in the village which lacks the most basic elements for life. He adds: “Population naturally increases anywhere, but it is not the case in the village of Beit Iskaria. Our population continues to decrease so we are becoming less over time due to the ongoing policy of forced displacement. Even the animals we raise in the village suffer from the aggressions of the occupation.”

In his message to the occupying power and the international community, which continues to observe the impact of the occupation policies without taking concrete measures to hold Israel accountable and make it pay the price for maintaining its occupation, Abu Ibrahim says: “We invite international and local organizations to attend the events we organize to draw attention to the village and the life of its inhabitants. We called one of the events “Bukjeh festival”, where we distributed local products wrapped in a “Bukjeh” to show our steadfastness and our determination to remain on this land. Our message for all was clear, particularly the occupation, that we are determined to preserve this “Bukjeh” and our presence here.

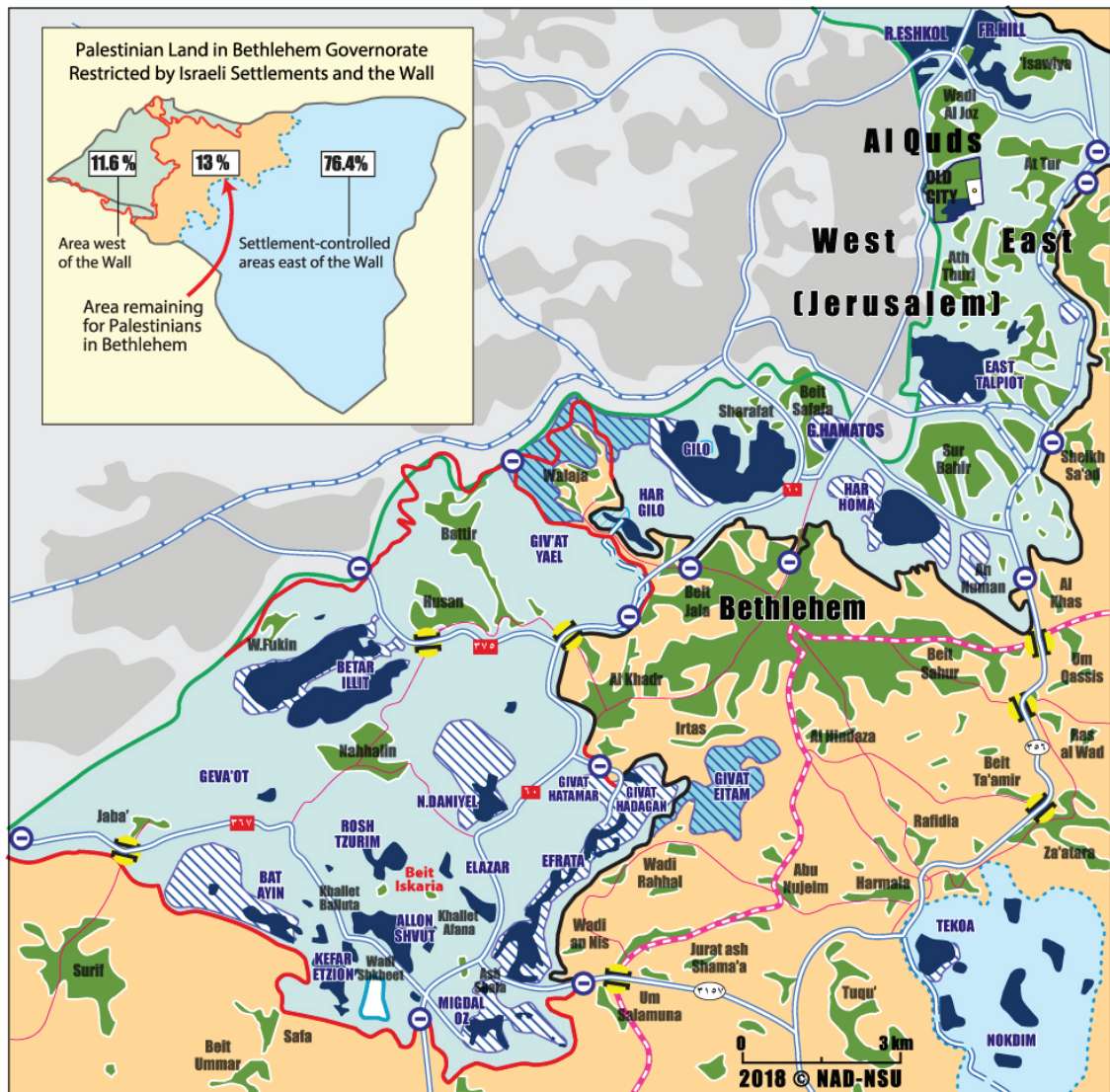
On behalf of the women and men in the village, Abu Ibrahim appealed to the International community, the United Nations, and all human rights organizations, calling upon them to provide immediate protection to Beit Iskaria villagers and nearby villages that pay a high price because of the continued Israeli occupation, half a century on. He added that it’s time to resolutely intervene to hold the Israeli authorities and its settlers accountable for carrying out systematic crimes against the Palestinian people and their properties.



We won't carry our
“Bukjeh” and leave
as in 1948 when the
Zionist gangs expelled
our people by force”

**Mohammad Ibrahim
Atallah, known as
Abu-Ibrahim**

² Bukjeh: A Palestinian word in the local dialect that means a cloth bag. It can wrap clothes, food or any other light item. It indicates all that the Palestinian people carried of food, clothes, and utensils from their homes when they were forcibly expelled during the Nakba of 1948. Each carried the “Bukjeh” with the hope of returning back to his/ her original home in the near future.



- 1967 Boundary ("Green Line")
- Palestinian city, town, village or neighborhood
- Palestinian territory west / east of the Wall
- Israeli settlement built-up area
- Planned settlement expansion area
- Proposed new settlement area
- Area of Israeli settlement control
- Israeli military base
- The Wall
 - constructed or under construction
 - approved or planned
- Israeli settler / bypass roads
 - - existing
 - - planned or under construction
- Israeli controlled tunnel or underpass for Palestinians
- local Palestinian roads
- Israeli-proposed "alternative" Palestinian road link
- Israeli checkpoint