



Demolitions in Beit Jala and the Ongoing Process of Annexation

On August 26, 2019, Israeli Occupation Forces raided the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Battir/Makhrour (registered as “Palestine Land of Olives and Vines – Cultural Landscape of Southern Jerusalem, Battir”), demolishing a restaurant and a home. This is part of Israel’s ongoing process of further illegal annexation of occupied Palestinian territory.

Here are some facts:

- The western Bethlehem area is of a tremendous strategic importance for the State of Palestine due to its archeological, agricultural, historic and geographic relevance.
- Israel considers the western Bethlehem Area as part of the so-called Gush Etzion settlement “bloc”. The definition of bloc, which is not a term under international law nor it has been accepted by Palestine, is an Israeli attempt at normalizing Palestinian land grabs. In other words, “bloc” means a network of illegal colonial-settlements within a determined area that Israel plans to annex.
- Israel has already illegally annexed vast parts of Beit Jala and the Bethlehem Area to the so called Israeli “Jerusalem Municipality”, including the illegal colonial settlements of Gilo, Giv’at Yael, and Har Homa.
- In July 2017, members of the Israeli government coalition introduced a bill to the Israeli parliament for a further unilateral expansion of the so called Israeli “Jerusalem Municipality” towards other areas of the occupied West Bank, including western Bethlehem (“Gush Etzion”).
- On 5 December 2017, the US Administration recognized Jerusalem as Israel’s capital. Since then, it has applied the Israeli definition of Jerusalem, including the illegally annexed areas since 1980, in contravention of UNSC Resolutions 476, 478 and 2334, among others.
- On 22 October 2018, the Israeli government approved plans to expand Bypass Road 60, which separates Bethlehem City from the western villages, including the World Heritage Site of Makhrour/Battir. This expansion threatens to expand the already inflicted damage in the area, including in the Cremisan Valley, Al Khader and Al-Ma’asara.
- On 18 December 2018, (and later on Christmas Eve), armed Israeli settlers raided the World Heritage Site in an attempt to illegally establish a new colonial-installation in the heart of the area, opening a road approximately 300 meters long.
- On 6 June 2019, Israeli settlers entered the area taking over a plot of land. They raised the Israeli flag and have controlled the property since then.
- On 8 June 2019, US Ambassador David Friedman said, “I think Israel has the right to retain some, but unlikely all, of the West Bank”¹, making it official that the US

¹ New York Times “U.S. Ambassador Says Israel Has Right to Annex Parts of West Bank” available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/08/world/middleeast/israel-west-bank-david-friedman.html> last accessed on August 27, 2019.

Administration tolerates further illegal Israeli annexation of occupied Palestinian territory, which constitutes a grave violation of international humanitarian law, including the Fourth Geneva Convention.

- On 23 July 2019, US Envoy Jason Greenblatt addressed the UN Security Council stating the “irrelevance” of international law, international consensus and UN resolutions to solve the Israel/Palestine issue².
- On 27 August 2019, Israeli Occupation Forces demolished a restaurant and a home belonging to a Palestinian family from Beit Jala in an area allegedly purchased by the Jewish National Fund (though the family disputes this). The land is located near the plot taken by Israeli settlers on June 6.

Why do we refer to “further annexation” rather than just “annexation”? Because illegal annexation of Palestine’s occupied territory has already taken place with East Jerusalem and the Latroun (in addition to the Syrian Golan Heights). The Israeli government, with the support of the US Administration, is looking for further areas to be illegally annexed.

Ongoing annexation: The area where the demolition took place is being annexed by Israel, whether through their national legislation or by actions on the ground, including settlement construction. The area in question is located between the illegal colonial-settlements of Har Gilo, Betar Illit, Neve Daniel, and Efrat.

Some administrative and legislative decisions taken that consolidate illegal annexation:

- The Jewish Nation-State Law (approved).
- Regularization law (approved).

The role of the Jewish National Fund (JNF): The JNF operates offices worldwide to raise funds for its activities, including dozens of projects located in occupied Palestinian territory. The Beit Jala case of expelling a Palestinian family from their land is not an unusual case, as JNF has also been recently involved in the forcible displacement of Palestinian families from Silwan. The JNF enjoys “charitable status” in various countries, including the US and some in Europe, making donations for those colonial-settlement projects tax deductible at the expense of the local taxpayer in those countries. Countries should assume their responsibility by preventing the JNF, and any other organization, from raising funds for the Israeli colonization of occupied Palestine, a war crime under international law³.

Illegal annexation is taking place as Israel continues to be allowed to violate international law with impunity, threatening any prospects left to achieve a peace agreement based on the internationally-recognized terms of reference, including the two-state solution on the 1967 border.

² United States Mission to the United Nations “Remarks at a UN Security Council Open Debate on the Middle East” available at <https://usun.usmission.gov/remarks-at-a-un-security-council-open-debate-on-the-middle-east-9/> last accessed on August 27, 2019.

³ Check our publication “No Charity in a War Crime” available at <https://www.nad.ps/en/publication-resources/publications/no-charity-war-crime> last accessed on August 27, 2019.