



Background Information on **Bethlehem**

May 2017

Key Facts:

- The Bethlehem Governorate has a Population of about 220,000 people (including over 20,000 living in three refugee camps managed by UNRWA: Dheisheh, Aida and Beit Jibrin,).
- Around 87% of the land of the Bethlehem Governorate is off limits for Palestinian Development, being declared by Israel either "Area C" or part of the unilaterally expanded boundaries of "Jerusalem".
- Bethlehem is one of the areas where illegal Israeli settlements have expanded the most: There are 18 illegal Israeli settlements all over the governorate with a total population of over 100,000 settlers, surrounding the city of Bethlehem from all sides (including Har Gilo, Gilo, Har Homa, Nokdim, Tkoua, Efrat, Neve Daniel and Betar illit among others)
- The latest developments in Israel's colonial-settlement expansion in the area come from the Cremisan Valley, where Israel is completing the construction of its illegal annexation Wall, affecting the lives of dozens of landowners, including churches. Several US based Christian communities have called upon the US government to take action on that case. In 2015, Bishop Oscar Cantu, on behalf of the US Conference of Catholic Bishops, called upon Secretary Kerry: "We urge you to press Israeli authorities to stop the work on the Separation Wall whose route is confiscating the private lands of Palestinian families in the West Bank. Such actions undermine the cause of peace and impair the possibility of a two-state solution".
- Israel's Annexation Wall is illegal under international law. The International Court of Justice has called upon Israel to dismantle the Wall and compensate affected Palestinians. It has also reminded all states that they are under "*an obligation not to recognize the illegal situation resulting from the construction of the wall (...) all States parties to the Fourth Geneva Convention... have in addition the obligation... to ensure compliance by Israel with international humanitarian law as embodied in that convention*" (July 9, 2004).





Heritage, archeological and religious sites

- The city of Bethlehem was first documented in the 14th Century BC. It is located 10 kilometers to the south of Jerusalem. The birth of Jesus' in Bethlehem, at the end of Herod's period, determined the future of the town, which has become a center of Christian pilgrimage.
- **The Nativity Church, built over the cave known as Jesus Christ's birthplace, was commissioned by Emperor Constantine in the year 327, and completed in 339.**
- According to the "Status Quo treaty", signed in Berlin (1878), the Nativity Church is divided between 3 main Christian denominations: Greek Orthodox, Latin (Roman Catholic) and Armenian Orthodox.
- It has been inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 2012. ("Church of the Nativity and the Pilgrimage Route").

Bethlehem's Old Town presents a mosaic of various denominations and a rich architecture:

This includes 22 churches, many of them historic, representing a variety of traditions: the Mosque of Omar Ibn Khattab, as well as churches belonging to the Syriac Orthodox, Syriac Catholic, Greek Catholic (Melkite), Coptic Orthodox, Ethiopian Orthodox, Maronite, Lutherans and a Salesian Monastery can be found in the proximity of the Nativity Church, in addition to the "Milk Grotto", where tradition says that Virgin Mary nursed baby Jesus. It is believed that Mary's milk fell onto a rock, turning it white.

Additionally, "Deir El Carmel", where the recently canonized Palestinian saint Mariam Baouardi lived, is also one of the main attractions of the city.

Other heritage, archeological and religious sites in the proximity of the City of Bethlehem are:

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| ▪ Mar Saba Monastery | ▪ Saint Nicholas Church in Beit Jala |
| ▪ Pools of King Solomon in Artas | ▪ Saint George's Church in Al Khader |
| ▪ Herodion Mountain (Jabal Al-Furdais) | ▪ Battir, including Wadi Makhroul (UNESCO World Heritage Site inscribed as "Land of Olives and Vines – Cultural Landscape of Southern Jerusalem, Battir"). |
| ▪ Shepherds' Field in Beit Sahour | |
| ▪ Saint Theodosius Monastery | |
| ▪ King David's Wells | ▪ Cremisan Valley. |

Places banned for Palestinians citizens:

Access to Rachel's Tomb – Bilal Bin Rabah Mosque, one of the most important sites in Bethlehem, has been seized due to the construction of Israel's illegal annexation Wall, as well as the Mar Elias Monastery where the Christmas procession begins every year. Though the Bethlehem Governorate reaches out to the Dead Sea, this area of Palestine also remains under full Israeli Occupation' Control.

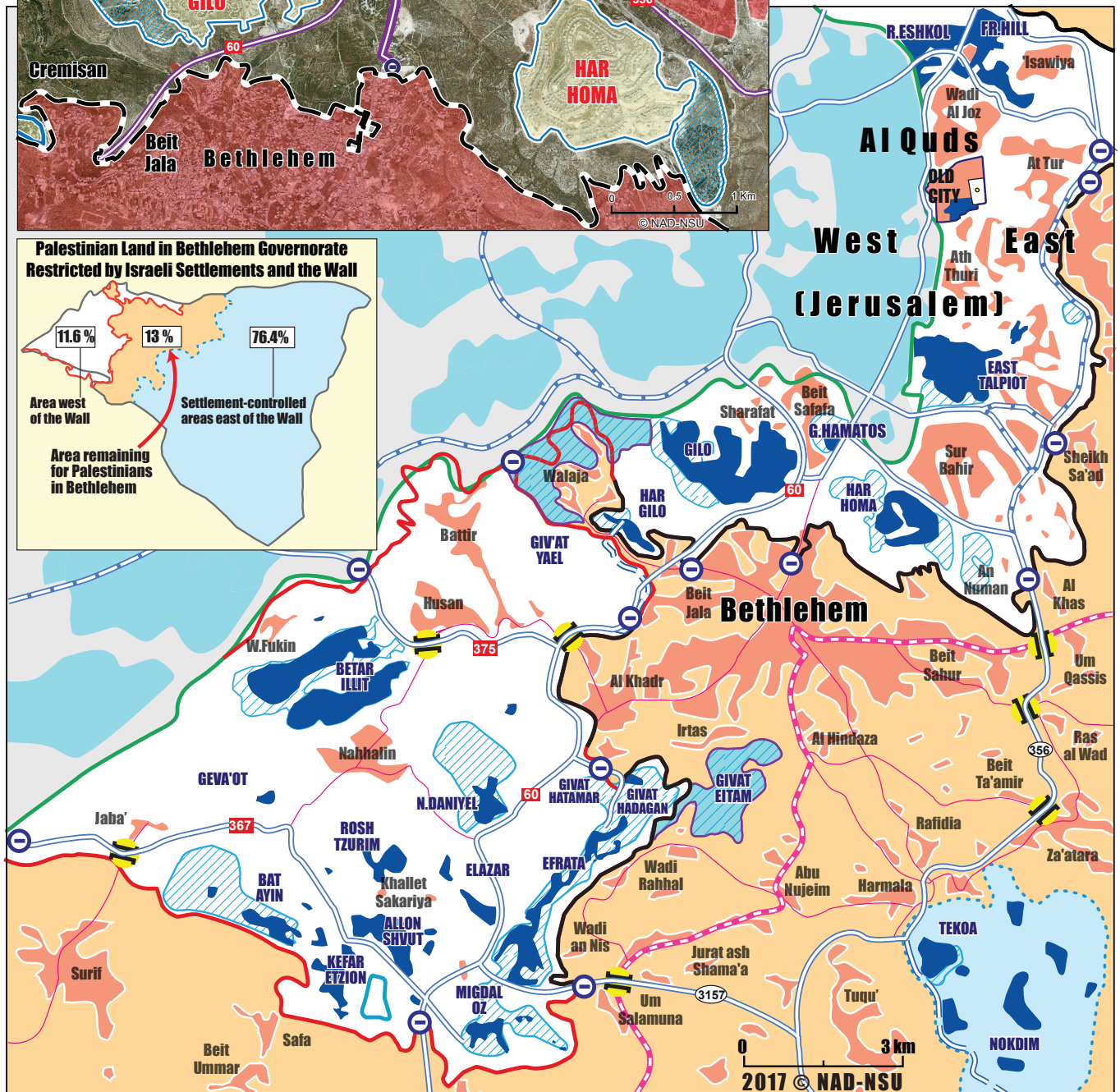
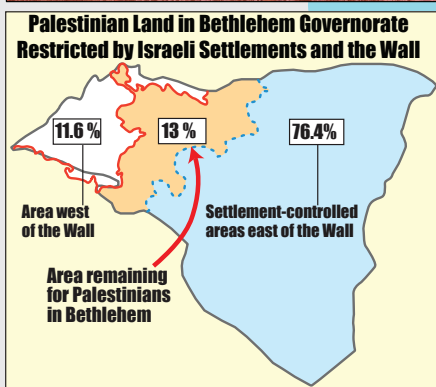
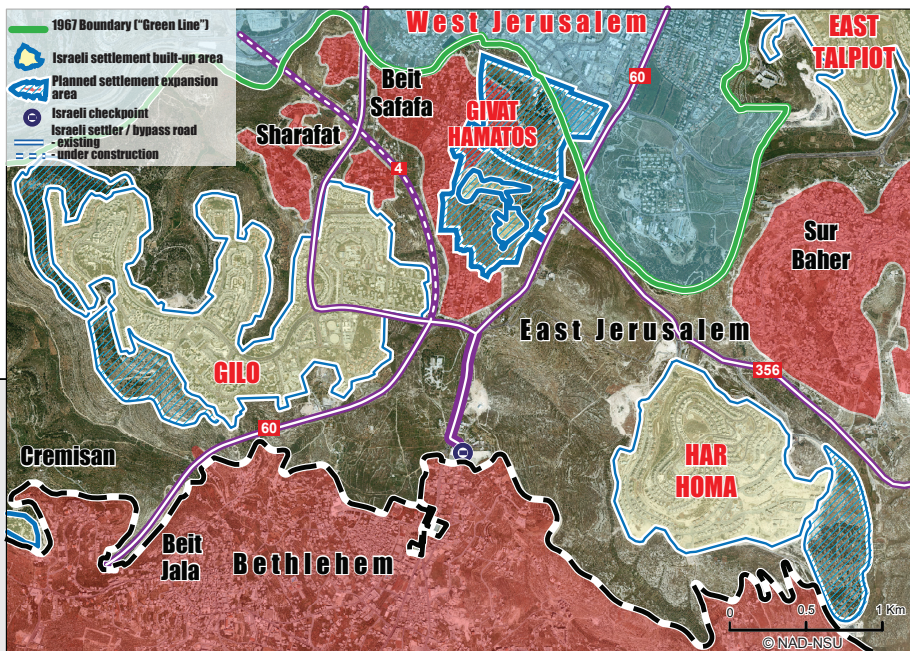


Tourism and Economy:

- During 2016 Palestine received about **2.3 million visitors**.
- **US citizens** were the second largest group of visitors to Palestine (over 90,000) , only after Russia (115,000).
- Despite its economic potential, Israeli restrictions continue to dominate the economy of Bethlehem, with an **unemployment rate of almost 29%** according to the Bethlehem Chamber of Commerce.



Downsizing Bethlehem



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