

# ISRAELI **ANNEXATION** POLICIES IN THE **JORDAN VALLEY**

Destroying the Future of the State of Palestine



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The Jordan Valley is one of the main areas that the Israeli government aimed at annexing shortly after the 1967 occupation of Palestine. Nearly all of the Jordan Valley has been officially sanctioned by Israel as a land reserve for future settlement expansion.

The Jordan Valley represents 28.5% of the Occupied West Bank (1600 km<sup>2</sup>). It hosts 37 illegal Israeli settlements with a total settler population of around 10,000 people. Approximately 91.5% of the Jordan Valley is off limits for Palestinians, which has had a direct effect in the decrease of the indigenous Palestinian population from the area from around 250,000 people before Israel's occupation to 70,000 by 2013.

The Jordan Valley is a vital part of the State of Palestine. A unique area that offers opportunities in nearly all major economic sectors, it has a great potential for agricultural and industrial developments, while it is important for tourism and transportation as well. The area also contains pilgrimage sites for Palestinian Christians. Additionally, the Jordan Valley is the only territorial border between Palestine and Jordan.

## Palestine's Potential Stifled by Israel's Occupation

The Jordan Valley is the breadbasket for the future Palestinian State. The extensive water resources, combined with the large areas of land available in the Jordan Valley, offer Palestinians the means to grow and export a range of agricultural goods. Its microclimate allows for the natural harvest of fruits and vegetables such as strawberries, tomatoes and cucumbers four times a year. However, Israeli restrictions and the illegal settlement enterprise have restricted Palestinians to the cultivation of a mere 4.7% of the Jordan Valley's total area.<sup>1</sup> Today, Palestinians can only cultivate 5,300 square meters in the Jordan Valley. The Jordan Valley is a main source of export-oriented and high value agricultural products. The value of plants produced per km<sup>2</sup> in this region is the highest in the West Bank, nearly 4 -10 times more than that of other governorates.<sup>2</sup>

Israel has aimed at increasing control over the area by encouraging the illegal commercial exploitation of large portions of the land by Israeli companies, while preventing Palestinian access and use to the same territory.<sup>3</sup>



**Settlements:** Among the first Israeli settlements to be built in the State of Palestine were those in the Jordan Valley. In fact, in the decade following the 1967 war, 21 Israeli settlements were built in the Jordan Valley.<sup>4</sup> Currently, there are 37 settlements in the Jordan Valley, constituting some 20% of all settlements in the State of Palestine, with a built-up area of approximately 15 km<sup>2</sup>. In general, the settlements are isolated from one another, and are spread out over a vast area. These settlements depend mainly on agriculture, with the exception of Ma'ale Efrayim, which is an urban settlement.<sup>5</sup>

**Settler By Pass/Exclusive Roads:** The majority of settlements are located in the central Jordan Valley, with several in the north and a couple in the south. They are primarily concentrated along 2 major roads built to service the settlers exclusively: 1) Road #90, which runs north-south along the Jordan River; 2) and what is referred to as the Allon Road, built in the 1970s along the eastern slopes of the West Bank mountain range. Israeli settlements are also located along the east-west, settler by-pass roads that connect Road #90 with the Allon Road. One of these east-west links connects the Jordan Valley to Tel Aviv (the so-called Trans-Samaria Highway or Road #505), and another connects it to occupied East Jerusalem and then to areas in Israel (Road #1).<sup>6</sup>

(1) PBC DATA 2008 (2) PBC DATA 2008 (3) UNOCHA (4) UNOCHA

(5) YEHEZKEL LEIN, LAND GRAB: ISRAEL'S SETTLEMENT POLICY IN THE WEST BANK (JERUSALEM: B'TSELEM, MAY 2002) AT 94 [LAND GRAB] (6) PMG

**Movement Restrictions:** Israel has effectively severed the Jordan Valley from the rest of the West Bank through a series of severe movement restrictions. According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), all routes leading into the Jordan Valley north of Jericho are tightly controlled by four permanently staffed checkpoints, which prohibit the access of private Palestinian vehicles to the area, unless they are Jordan Valley residents.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, Palestinian travel along Route 90, the main Jordan Valley road, is heavily restricted, and settlers are the primary users of the road. Such restrictions lead to delays and detours, which undermine the livelihoods of the farmers.

Israel also utilizes a strict permit regime to control access to the Jordan Valley. Permit requirements have a significant negative impact on the livelihoods of farmers who live in cities outside of the Jordan Valley, but who own and cultivate land in the area. These farmers cannot drive vehicles in or out of the Jordan Valley area, forcing them to spend money on transportation, thus increasing their operation costs.

**Demolitions, Evictions, Fire Zones and Permits:** Currently, the Palestinian population in the Jordan Valley is restricted to only six percent of the Valley and,<sup>8</sup> UNOCHA reports, “[i]n almost the entirety of the Jordan Valley, Palestinian construction is prohibited.”<sup>9</sup> Israel has illegally declared much of the land “state land” and, as such, has required building permits for construction thereon. In this scheme, the Israeli Civil Administration has the sole authority to issue valid building permits, which are rarely granted to Palestinians. In fact, the Israeli Ministry of Defense admits that between January 2000 and September 2007, 94 percent of Palestinian applications to build in Area C were rejected.<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, Israeli fire zones and nature reserves prevent construction on an additional 44 percent of the Jordan Valley. Fire zones are closed military zones used to train Israeli troops. However, many of these fire zones have been strategically placed to offer a physical separation between the Israeli settler population and Palestinians. Fire zones specifically target vulnerable herder communities who reside in such areas or who use them for grazing land.

Due to these severe restrictions on construction, Palestinians are often forced to build on their land without Israeli permission, which then leaves them in danger of forced eviction or property demolition. In fact, home demolitions are one of the most significant issues affecting Palestinians in the Jordan Valley today.



**Military Zones:** Under the pretext of “security”, Israel has declared more than 400 km<sup>2</sup> of the Jordan Valley (18% of the occupied West Bank) as “closed military zones”.<sup>11</sup> These areas include open-fire zones, military training sites, and dozens of minefields located east of Road #90, behind a 20-meter-wide fence structure that Israel set up along the Jordan River after the 1967 war.



## Al-Zubeidat

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The village of Al-Zubeidat is located in the Jordan Valley and has a population of around 2000. It is located to the west of the Jordan River and the Tubas Governorate, and dates back to the year 1948: its residents are originally indigenous Bedouin from Bir as-Sabe' area. More than 90% of the labor force work in the agriculture sector.

The village is divided into areas "B" and "C", according to the Oslo agreements. Only 36 dunums (1% of the total village area) were classified as area "B" while approximately 4,087 dunums (99% of the total village area) are classified as area "C"; where Israel retains full control over security and administration related to the territory.

Thousands of dunums have been confiscated for the

establishment and development of the Israeli settlement of Argaman and the Israeli bypass road no. 90. Argaman was established in 1970 with the population of 165 settlers. This illegal settlement has caused severe environmental problems to the village through wastewater leakages into the water basins. This causes groundwater and spring pollution which results in the contamination of the Palestinian Al-Zubeidat well, due to its water being mixed with wastewater flowing from the settlement.

**On top of a hill in the village of Al-Zubeidat sits the house owned by Hassan Jerme.** His home overlooks the Jordan Valley and the hills across the border in Jordan. From a distance, and beyond the

military fence, one can see a lush area with thousands of palm trees sticking out from the valley. The Israeli military, in cooperation with settler investors, have been clearing the area, allowing for Israeli companies to invest in the valley. The area was originally full of land mines which the Israeli military has been clearing in the last few years. Zorganica is one of the leading agriculture settlement companies in the Jordan Valley and operates in several settlements. It produces and exports a wide range of herbs, spices and dates. Many of these products are packaged under various names is sold in supermarkets worldwide<sup>12</sup>, bearing no trace of the company's illegal activities and the deprivation of Palestinians of their land and livelihoods.

## Fasayel



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Fasayel village is located in the Jordan Valley and classified as Area C under the Oslo Accords, which the Israeli authorities later classified as 'State Land'. The Fasayel Bedouins are predominantly refugees from 1948 or descendants of those refugees, originally from Ein Gedi. Following the 1967 occupation, many of its residents fled to Jordan, and its current residents are shepherds.

The Israeli occupation has confiscated approximately 3,363 dunums of Fasayel privately owned land (7.2% of the village total area) for the establishment of four Israeli settlements: Tomer, Gilgal, Pezael and Netiv Hegdud, as well as the bypass roads no.90 and no. 505, which connect these settlements with other settlements close by. Moreover, 67 dunums were confiscated to establish the Israeli military base to guard the Israeli illegal settlements in the area.

In the last few years Fasayel village, like other villages in the Jordan Valley, has been systematically targeted by the Israeli occupation forces, who are pressuring the residents to leave their land. The Israeli occupation forces distributed military demolition orders to local residents and then stormed the village and demolished their homes and sheep barns. Israel is continuing with its plan to ethnically cleanse Fasayel village, along with the rest of the Palestinian villages and communities in the Jordan Valley, in order to pursue its settlement enterprise, i.e. colonization of the area.

In 2007, members of the Fasayel community and others started to build a school. The school originally consisted of a single room built from mud, with few pupils to begin with. In 2008, the school was expanded to accommodate about 75 pupils. Today there are approximately 140 young boys and girls who attend the school. The Israeli Army, which has not allowed for the village main road to be paved, has also issued three demolition orders against the school, which is now fighting for its survival.

This demolition follows the very recent demolition of the Rashayda family home on September 2<sup>nd</sup> in the same area, two further examples of Israel's alarming trend of colonization.

## Khirbet Makhoul: Israel's colonization of Palestine continues unabated: demolition, eviction and forced displacement.



Yousef, a young man sitting under a tree near the rubble that used to be his home, says: "We never thought that we would be dispersed like the other communities in the Jordan Valley, but today we have faced the same destruction of our homes and displacement of our families and animals."

The Bedouin community of Khirbet Makhoul is located in Wadi Al-Maleh in the northern Jordan Valley. The community has a population of 100 (including 30 children and 20 women) whose main source of livelihood is animal grazing. The community is close to military camps and the agricultural settlements of Hmeidat and Roi, which, as all settlements, are illegal according to international law.

"All authorities and international actors shall respect and ensure respect for their obligations under international law, including human rights and humanitarian law, in all circumstances, so as to prevent and avoid conditions that might lead to displacement of persons."

### UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, Principle 5

"I remember being as young as 5 years old and playing in this area." Mohammad Ali Mahmoud Bsharat, aged 54, was born in Khirbet Makhoul. His family lived there before Israel's occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip in 1967. He explains what happened: "On Monday, 16th September [2013], we were woken up at 5:00 am to the sound of Israeli military bulldozers, escorted by Civil Administration teams, who started demolishing the houses in the area without prior warning." More than twenty families have instantly become homeless as part of an Israeli plan to deport indigenous Palestinians living in the area, which is deep inside the occupied State of Palestine. The displaced families have been forced to turn to the Tubas governorate for shelter and help.



Even with the presence of humanitarian agencies such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) who brought tents to temporarily house the displaced families, saw these tents destroyed by the Israeli occupation forces. The military ordered the humanitarian agency to leave the area and not to assist the community. The ICRC truck, which was loaded with more tents and other supplies, was therefore forced to abandon the displaced families.

Demolitions like these are often carried out under the pretext of Palestinian homes being in an Israeli-designated “firing zone”, which in itself has no legal basis according to international law, as these areas are within occupied Palestinian land. In this case, however, even according to the Israeli map, the area is not considered a “firing zone” but a residential area.

Due to the fact that the Jordan Valley contains some of the richest water resources and the most fertile land for agriculture, Israeli demolition policies in the area aim at erasing Palestinian presence in order to allow for further settlement expansion and colonization of Palestinian land. For the Palestinian communities and farmers on this coveted land, it means that the Israeli government devastates their lives and livelihoods, and utterly denies their basic human rights.

