



Media Brief on Israeli Settlements in the Western Bethlehem Area

August 2017

The Israeli occupying authorities are currently discussing a project for further annexation of occupied Palestinian territory in the western Bethlehem area. Known by Israel as the “Etzion Bloc”, the western Bethlehem area is rich in water and agricultural resources as well the Makhroul Valley, a UNESCO World Heritage site and Battir, a historic Palestinian village. This move is further proof of Israel’s relentless policy of destroying the prospects for a negotiated peace and an independent Palestinian state, living side by side with the State of Israel in peace and security on the 1967 border.

Western Bethlehem Area

There are 10 Palestinian villages in the western Bethlehem area. The largest of these are Al Walajah, Battir, Husan, Nahhalin and Wadi Fukin, which are home to over 26,000 people. The area is known as the breadbasket of Bethlehem (formerly of Jerusalem) and is known for its ancient agricultural terraces, olive groves, and irrigation systems. In June 2014, the Battir area (including the Makhroul Valley in Beit Jala and Al Khader) was inscribed as a World Heritage Site in the State of Palestine at UNESCO. According to Israeli plans, this entire area will be separated from the rest of Bethlehem after the Annexation Wall is completed, obstructing Palestinian access to lands, jobs, hospitals, schools, universities, heritage and religious sites, as well as to commerce.

Until 2016 these localities have received a total of 470 demolition orders¹, of which 96 were carried out. The rest are either in the process or waiting for implementation.

Demolition Orders

Locality	Population	Total (2016)	Executed	Waiting for execution
Battir	4,993	54	10	2
Husan	6,986	85	35	5
Wadi Fukin	1,470	25	1	3
Nahallin	8,592	69	1	5

¹ <http://data.ochaopt.org/demolition-sys.aspx>

Al Jaba	1,128	42	9	2
Khallet Sakariya	233	77	17	5
Khallet Affanet	N/A (<100)	26	8	2
Khallet Balluta	N/A (<100)	17	2	
Al Walajeh	2,569	75	13	1
Sum	25,971	470	96	25

Facts on Wadi Fukin:

Wadi Fukin, the village to the far west of this area, is strangled between the illegal settlement of Beitar Illit and the 1967 border. Wadi Fukin like most border villages suffered loss of village land in 1948 and are today losing more land to illegal Israeli settlements. The largest land confiscation order was for 4,000 dunums in 2014, that not only Wadi Fukin, but five other Palestinian villages were affected by.²

Because of the existence of illegal Israeli settlements Wadi Fukin suffers on daily basis from land leveling, heavy sewage contamination of the land from nearby illegal settlements, polluted natural springs, inability to cultivate land due to sewage contamination, as well as living in an environment infected with disease-carrying insects.

From the time of the British Mandate until 1948, Wadi Fuqin's municipal boundaries encompassed 12,000 dunams of terraces and pasture land. However, three quarters of the village's land was confiscated, and today it is left with only 3,000 dunams of agricultural land.

Israel continues to expand its colonial-settlement enterprise

By 19 June 2017, the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics (ICBS) published a report stating that between April 2016 and March 2017, construction in illegal Israeli settlements had increase by 70 percent compared to the same period the year before. Between the period of January and August 2017 alone, 73 colonial-settlement plans had been advanced and 7,851 tenders for housing units in illegal Israeli settlements were published. **These include 56 plans for 4,909 housing units** and 17 tenders for 2,942 housing units. The 4,909 units represent an increase of 85 percent compared to all of 2016.

Palestinian Position on "Settlement Blocs"

Israel created the term "settlement bloc" to refer to a fixed area unilaterally defined by Israel, representing all the illegal settlements in that area and the land and infrastructure in between. The use of this terminology is deliberate, and is meant to facilitate the

² 4,000 dunums ≈ 988 acres.

colonization of more land and to thwart the emergence of a genuinely independent and contiguous Palestinian state, making a negotiated outcome implausible. It is important to note that there is no difference between Israeli settlement blocs and other Israeli settlements. Any attempt to legitimize settlement blocs is in violation of international humanitarian law and relevant UN Security Council Resolutions such as 2334.

The “Gush Etzion” Settlement Area

The area that Israel refers to as “Gush Etzion” is a network of nine Israeli settlements located mainly on the western side of Bethlehem linked by settler bypass roads. It stretches from Beit Jala in the north to Beit Ummar and expropriates over 72 km squared of occupied Palestinian lands from the districts of Bethlehem and Hebron. It is promoted by the Israeli Ministry of Tourism as “picturesque rolling hills adorned with grape arbors and olive groves,” including various settlement business, mainly wineries. The total population of Israeli settlers in the area is about 75,000. The largest settlements in the western Bethlehem area are Beitar Illit, with a population of over 50,000 settlers (population in 1995 was 5,500 settlers) and Efrat (with almost 10,000 settlers, compared to the 3,500 right after the Oslo Agreement was signed in 1993). There is an extension of Etzion called by Israel “East Etzion”, including the settlements of Tekoa, Nokdim and Kfar Eldad, in the eastern side of Bethlehem.

There is a plan to expand the illegal settlement of Efrat also known as E2 plan, with 2,500 housing units aimed at preventing any natural growth for the city of Bethlehem to the south.

Israeli plans of annexation would mean the connection of the Western Bethlehem Area with the illegal settlements that are currently separating Bethlehem from East Jerusalem, including Gilo, Giv’at Hamatos and Har Homa. Currently Israel is building the illegal Annexation Wall in the Cremisan Valley, thus connecting the illegal settlements of Gilo and Har Gilo, considered by Israel to be the first settlement of the “Gush Etzion” area.

“Gush Etzion” Severely Damages The Prospects Of A Sovereign State Of Palestine

Israeli settlement activities in this area constitutes a belligerent act against the Palestinian people. Israel’s colonial-settlement enterprise, including settlement construction, land confiscations, demolition orders and theft of natural resources, among others, threaten the viability and sustainability of the State of Palestine. Such activities are part of Israel’s settlement policies that aim at controlling most of the Occupied West Bank, particularly in and around Occupied East Jerusalem and the Jordan Valley, among other areas.

From an environmental and water perspective, the area west of Bethlehem is considered a high water production zone in relation to the lower part of the water

aquifer. Annexation of this area will prevent the Palestinian communities from the two basic pillars of their livelihoods: The land and its water resources.

Settlement Expansion in Beitar Illit Settlement:

Established in 1985, Beitar Illit has grown 10 times its size since the interim agreement and commencement of the Peace Process. The below chart shows the illegal settlement's expansion rates from 1994 to 2015.

