

OCCUPIED BETHLEHEM: THE FLOATING ISLAND

“It was a way of stopping Bethlehem from moving toward Jerusalem”

Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu on March 15th, 2015, referring to the illegal settlement of Har Homa, built on Bethlehem’s lands during his first premiership in 1997)

INTRODUCTION

The Bethlehem Governorate, birthplace of Jesus Christ, lies a few miles south of Jerusalem, including the notable cities and towns of Bethlehem, Beit Jala, Beit sahour, Al Doha and Al Khader, as well as three refugee camps (Aida, Dheisheh and Beit Jibrin). It is also the home of 220,000 Palestinians, including 20,000 refugees.

Today, Bethlehem is an island floating in the center of Israeli illegal settlements and the Annexation Wall, which have swallowed it up from all directions in vast tracts. Despite the historical, religious, cultural and economic importance of Bethlehem to the lives and national heritage of Palestinians, the Israeli occupation policies are still aimed at reducing the size of the city and transform it into ghettos plagued by poverty, immobility and isolation.

- The total population of the Bethlehem Governorate is 220,000, including 20,000 refugees. The total population of Bethlehem City is estimated to be approximately 35,000. Additionally 6,000 residents are located in 17 residential areas in Area C, rendering it under complete control of the Israeli occupying forces.¹
- The population of the Bethlehem Governorate is approximately 4.8 percent of the total population of the Occupied State of Palestine.²

Since the belligerent Israeli occupation in 1967, Israel has employed several strategies to expand its colonization of Palestinian land, in violation of international law. The majority of northern Bethlehem has been stolen by illegal Israeli settlements and the Annexation Wall, which is built inside and around the city, thereby isolating Bethlehem from Occupied East Jerusalem.

Currently, more than 85 percent of Bethlehem’s land is designated as Area C, which is under the control of the Israeli occupier. Today the Palestinian government has a limited control only of 13 percent of Bethlehem, and has left the economy crippled under depleted industry with an unemployment rate of 26 percent. At the same time, the imposition of physical and administrative restrictions on freedom of movement for Palestinians, ranging from an ever-expanding network of checkpoints and roadblocks under a punitive permit regime limiting where Palestinians can live, travel and work.

1- Bethlehem Municipality official website <http://goo.gl/OAsr2z>

2- Bethlehem under Occupation <http://goo.gl/5bWRZl>

- Only 13 percent of the Bethlehem Governorate is under the control of the Palestinian Government.³
- More than 85 percent of the Bethlehem Governorate is designated as Area C, the vast majority of which is off limits for Palestinian development including almost 38 percent which has been declared as “firing zones”, 34 percent designated as “nature reserves”, and nearly 12 percent allocated for settlement development, which means that only 1 percent of Area C in Bethlehem has an outline whereby Palestinian construction would be acceptable under Israeli control.⁴
- The unemployment rate in the Bethlehem Governorate is 26 percent. 21 percent of the inhabitants are under poverty line.⁵
- In the Bethlehem area alone, 32 physical barriers erected by the Israeli occupying forces— including checkpoints, roadblocks, dirt mounds, and gates— prevent freedom of movement and access for Palestinian goods and people.⁶

THE ANNEXATION WALL

- The completed Annexation Wall will be 50 km long and will effectively seize approximately 64 sq. km of Bethlehem’s most fertile lands for the Israeli illegal plans, which make up nearly 11.5 percent of the province (608 km). This translates to the illegal confiscation of 70,000 dunums of Palestinians lands, forcing 20,000 Palestinians out of the city behind the Wall.⁷
- Palestinian residents in these areas will only have access to services via the Tunnels Road 60, the main road from Jerusalem to Hebron, meaning that the much shorter route on Road 60 will be used exclusively by Israelis.⁸

THE CREMISAN VALLEY

One of the recent examples of the Israeli annexation policies in the Bethlehem District, is the Cremisan community’s battle against the construction of the Annexation Wall. The Cremisan Valley, on the outskirts of Bethlehem is one of the last remaining agricultural areas. It is also the home of the Salesian Monastery, which includes a Palestinian vineyard and Salesian Sisters of Cremisan’s convent.

Today, Cremisan is in imminent danger of destruction after Israel announced plans to building the Annexation Wall on its grounds. The constriction of the Wall will directly impact 58 families, mainly Christians, denying their access to vital services and access to their community. In addition, it will block access to the Salesian Sisters Convent and School, which provides education to more than 400 children from the neighbouring villages.⁹

3- Bethlehem under Occupation, <http://goo.gl/5bWRZl>

4- UN: Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, occupied Palestinian territory, <https://goo.gl/DviiwX>

5- Bethlehem Municipality official website, <http://goo.gl/OAsr2z>

6- UN: Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, occupied Palestinian territory, <https://goo.gl/DviiwX>

7- The National Office for defending the land and resisting settlements – PLO, <http://goo.gl/s7LJqf>

8- UN: Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, occupied Palestinian territory, <https://goo.gl/DviiwX>

9- The Last Nail In Bethlehem’s Coffin: The Annexation Wall in Cremisan report’, <http://goo.gl/bd6JqU>

After years of Palestinian and international campaigns against the Wall, the Israeli Special Appeals Committee for land seizure, under an emergency law, released its decision in the case of the Cremisan Valley. The decision ruled in favor of the proposed alternative route of the Annexation Wall. However, this August (2015) a new Israeli court reversed the decision. The ongoing construction of the annexation wall in the area is an attempt at linking the two illegal settlements of Har Gilo and Gilo. This reversal in turn has returned the state of imminent danger and the community and land of the Cremisan Valley are again under threat of destruction.

THE ILLEGALITY OF ISRAELI SETTLEMENTS

Today there are several settlements and outposts across the Governorate of Bethlehem. The network between Har Gilo, Gilo, Giv'at Hamatos and Har Homa illegal settlements and the Annexation Wall will isolate Bethlehem completely from Occupied East Jerusalem. This network could also potentially expand to the Eastern Bethlehem area, preventing any possible natural growth of Bethlehem toward the Jordan Valley (including the Dead Sea), all within the State of Palestine. One recent example highlighting this expansion is the Israeli announcement to confiscate 4,000 dunums of Wadi Fukin village, west of Bethlehem. Coupled with a recent decision by Israel to approve building 891 new illegal settlement units in the Gilo settlement, in violation of international law, the scope of these changes dramatically change the reality on the ground to the detriment of Palestinians.¹⁰

- There are 18 illegal settlements and outposts across the Bethlehem Governorate, which include over 100,000 Israeli settlers, including in those areas as a result of de fact annexation by Israel to the Jerusalem municipality. This makes 9 percent of Bethlehem's territories absorbed by illegal settlements and the future structural settlements scheme projects recently approved by Israel. The current total settlements construction is about 19 sq. km, which is 3.5 percent of Bethlehem.

The establishment of Israeli settlements violates international law, specifically Article 49 of the Fourth Geneva Convention, which prohibits the transfer of parts of the Occupying Power's own civilian population into the territory it occupies.

- Today the former Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman lives in the illegal settlement of Nokdim, senior Israeli member of Knesset (Parliament) Zeev Elkin lives in the illegal settlement of Teqoa and the Knesset speaker Yuli Edelstein lives in the illegal settlement of Nevi Daniel.

THE INCREASING SETTLERS TERRORISM

Israeli settler's terrorism against Palestinian civilians and their properties is directly connected to the existence and expansion of illegal Israeli settlements in the State of Palestine. Palestinians face daily violence and terrorism by illegal settlers, who attack them with impunity and in many occasions under complete protection from the Israeli occupying forces.

For example, in Hebron and Bethlehem, and especially, in the so called "Gush Etzion" area near Bethlehem, armed settlers commit regular attacks against Palestinians in the presence and under protection of the Israeli occupying forces. According to UN OCHA, 162 settler-terrorism attacks took place in that area from 2009-2014, resulting in Palestinian casualties and property damage.¹¹

10- PNN News: Israeli Municipality to build, <http://goo.gl/uz0oVw>

11- UN: Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, occupied Palestinian territory, <https://goo.gl/DviiwX>

ECONOMY OF BETHLEHEM, CLOSURES AND THE ANNEXATION OF TOURISM

The tourism sector, with its great potential, could contribute enormously to the Palestinian economy, which Bethlehem plays a vital role due to tourists and religious pilgrims. However, due to Israel's colonization policies, an artificial cap has been placed on developing the tourism sector. Tourism following signing of the Interim Agreement (Oslo Accords) was expected to emerge as one of the most promising pillars of a new economic era. However, the reality is starkly different. Today, Israel has imposed restrictions on movement, stripped Palestinian control over their tourism resources, accounted for a sizable outflow of tourism revenue, and contributes to the destruction of Palestinian cultural heritage.

- Contrary to the Paris Protocol, of the 185 Palestinian tour guides licensed by the Palestinian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, only 40 have permits to enter Jerusalem and Israeli-controlled heritage sites in the Occupied State of Palestine as well as Israel. In contrast, there are approximately 7,150 full-time and part-time Israeli tour guides.¹²
- Israel continues to promote hotels built in settlements, as well as settlement products to tourists and pilgrims visiting the Occupied State of Palestine, further undermining Palestine's tourist industry.
- According to the Palestinian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, tourists and pilgrims need to stay for a minimum of 3-4 nights in the Occupied State of Palestine to effectively contribute to the growth of Palestine's tourism industry. Currently, most of the tourists don't sleep over in Palestinian hotels.
- Israel has implemented a policy whereby tourists visiting Bethlehem, must exit the city from "Checkpoint 300", which has only one exit and one entry line for buses and cars alike, as opposed to foreigners visiting settlements in the Bethlehem area that are allowed to enter and exit the region through any checkpoint. This has created further delays at checkpoint for Palestinians, tourists, and pilgrims, making a visit to Bethlehem burdensome.¹³

CONCLUSION

The current reality and future of the State of Palestine in general, and Bethlehem in particular, is dismal and bleak. The Bethlehem Governorate, like all other regions in the Occupied State of Palestine, suffers from an ongoing campaign of colonization that has a severe and detrimental impact on Palestinians, present and future. Israel has effectively deprived Palestinians of reaching their full economic potential, just as it has disconnected the historic cities of Bethlehem and Jerusalem for first time in thousands of years, severely affecting the Palestinian social fabric.

12- A New Christmas Story: Bethlehem under Occupation, <http://goo.gl/emJNhG>

13- Bethlehem under Occupation, <http://goo.gl/5bWRZl>