

# Bethlehem under Occupation

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## Fragmented and isolated

The Bethlehem Governorate is home to around 180,000 Palestinians, including 20,000 refugees expelled from villages in what is now Israel. Since 1967, some 86,000 Israelis have illegally settled in the governorate, mostly in settlements strategically located above water sources.

Only around 13% of Bethlehem's land is available for Palestinian use. Israel's separation wall, expanding settlements and road closures fragment Palestinian land and block both urban and rural development. They also severely disrupt the historically strong religious, economic and cultural ties between Bethlehem and Jerusalem.

Israel refuses to grant building permits to Palestinians in around 66% of the governorate, which the Oslo Accords placed under Israeli control. As a result, many are forced to build "illegally" and risk their homes being demolished. Palestinians in these areas also face severe harassment and violence by Israeli settlers and soldiers (see right).

The completed Fence/Wall will effectively annex around 64 sq km of Bethlehem's most fertile land to Israel. It will strand 22,000 Palestinians on its western side, forcing them to access services in Bethlehem via tunnels under Road 60, the main road from Jerusalem to Hebron. USAID is providing funds for an alternative road from Bethlehem to Hebron, meaning that the much shorter route on Road 60 will be used exclusively by Israelis.

Bethlehem's isolation and fragmentation has damaged the economy by increasing transport costs and delays. Tourism, the town's main industry, has been particularly hard hit.

## Recommendations

The international community should pressure Israel to act in accordance with international law and end its occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Israel must dismantle the parts of the fence/wall that are inside the West Bank, open "closed military zones" and nature reserves. It should freeze settlement construction and stop seizing Palestinian land, so as to prevent further economic and social deterioration and allow for sustainable Palestinian development on the governorate's land. In the mean time, the Israeli authorities should provide effective protection to Palestinian communities affected by settler violence.

Source: United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA)



Hamed in his hospital bed (Photo: G. Stenback., EAPPI)

## Millimetres from death

One Saturday evening, Israeli soldiers stopped three young Palestinian men driving into the Bethlehem governorate village of Husan. A while later they shot all three. We met one of them, Hamed, in the Intensive Care ward in Beit Jalacv.

He told us that after stopping them, the soldiers had released them and then shot them from behind without any warning. The seats of the car reduced the speed of the bullets. But all three young men were hit, including the driver who had to then drive them to the clinic in the village. The army refused to let an ambulance enter the village.

When Hamed finally reached the hospital, he had lost 3-4 litres of blood and had a bullet in his chest.

"He was given 11 bags of blood. When we stopped the bleeding we had 25-minutes left for the life saving operation," the surgeon told us.

We also met the father of Ismail, 16, who was also in the car. He told us that the Israeli Military claims the boys tried to enter Jerusalem illegally.

"They also claim that they first shot in the air, but we have five witnesses, who can testify against this. The soldiers shot at the car directly, but the witnesses are afraid to testify because of the risk of losing their permits to work in Jerusalem," he said.

# Forced to leave - twice

George Sa'adeh, the Deputy Mayor of Bethlehem, told us his story. One evening in March 2003 he, his wife and their two daughters, went shopping in Bethlehem. Along the way, they passed three Israeli Military trucks. Suddenly the shooting started. George was hit by nine bullets in his back. Marian (15) was wounded and Christine (12) was instantly killed. Only his wife managed to escape harm's way. The soldiers who shot at them approached the vehicle, understood that they had made a mistake and called an ambulance. When the ambulance finally arrived, it took them to the Bethlehem Checkpoint, where they had to wait for an Israeli ambulance to transport them to a Jerusalem hospital.

George and Marian recovered, but they had lost Christine. Many people felt the family's pain and almost 30,000 people attended her funeral.

A month after the incident, George received a call from an Israeli man who invited them to Parents' Circle, a forum that brings together families of Israelis and Palestinians who lost loved-ones as a result of the conflict. He, his wife and his daughter attended the meeting, and have been regulars at their gatherings ever since. When asked how it felt to go there and meet Israeli families, he said:

"It was strange at first, but when we got to know the others and understood that everyone was suffering from a loss, we could understand one another on a deeper level and help one another cope. I do not hate the Israelis, I hate the occupation; it is the occupation that is the problem. The occupation has to end and we have to have



The wall that annexes around 64 km<sup>2</sup> of Bethlehem's best land to Israel. (Photo: S. Jones, EAPPI)

**"There is no war. It is an occupation and the Israeli army is responsible for our security."**



Making their presence felt - Israeli army activity in Bethlehem. (Photo: C Werner, Ecumenical Accompanier in Bethlehem)

peace with justice and mutual respect. Without justice there can be no peace. The wall has to be removed, we have to meet each other, learn to trust each other and to develop mutual respect, and it has to be done soon. As a Christian, I am ready to forgive, but the occupation must come to an end and there has to be justice and equality.

When asked why they were shot at, he said "at first the Israeli Army claimed we had tried to run over the soldiers, but there were too many witnesses, so that story did not hold. The soldiers were actually out to kill two men who reportedly had the same exact car as the one that I had."

He has taken his case to the Israeli Courts, but after 5 years, the case was dismissed. Now he is waiting for the decision of the Supreme Court. "I have to keep hope", says George. The only official response that he received from the Israeli Military was that the incident was a mistake and that such things do happen in war. However, he refutes this.

"There is no war. It is an occupation and according to international law the Israeli army is responsible for our security. They are obligated to protect us, not to kill us."