

From Hallowed Grotto to **Israeli-Imposed Ghetto** THE GOVERNORATE OF **BETHLEHEM** in 2013

Bethlehem

is one of the major Palestinian Cities located in the north side of Bethlehem Governorate. It is bordered by Beit Sahur city to the east, Jerusalem city to the north, Beit Jala and Al-Doha cities to the West, Hindaza and Artas villages to the south.

- Consists of 10 municipalities, 3 refugee camps, and many village councils.

- Estimated total area of 608 km² [ARIJ 2013]

- Estimated total population is 204,929 [PCBS 2013]

- There are **21** Israeli settlements accommodating nearly **105,000** Israeli settlers on Palestinian lands in the Bethlehem Governorate. [ARIJ 2010]



“It is unconscionable that Bethlehem should be allowed to die slowly from strangulation”
(South African Bishop Desmond Tutu)

Almost 2013 years ago, in a little grotto in Bethlehem, a child was born- a guiding light for millions around the world. Today, this area, which is home to the oldest Christian community in the world, has effectively been turned into a ghetto through Israeli policies aimed at annexing vast swathes of Palestinian land, with no regard for the people who live there, or the cultural and spiritual heritage of the place.

The Palestinian government controls only 13% of the Bethlehem Governorate. The rest is controlled either by Israeli settlements or Israeli occupation forces. The reality now is that the Christian and Muslim Palestinian community of the Bethlehem Governorate is being hemmed into the built-up urban areas, while land around the city such as green areas, agricultural land and space for urban development is being seized. As part of this process, Bethlehem is being actively surrounded on all sides by various elements of the Israeli settlement enterprise.

For the first time in over 2000 years of Christianity, the holy cities of Bethlehem and Jerusalem are almost fully severed from one another, as are their communities- friends, families and colleagues who can no longer simply gather together in their own homes and country.

Elements Of The Israeli Settlement Enterprise Surrounding Bethlehem

All settlements, together with the elements of Israel's wider regime including the wall, bypass roads and movement restrictions, are illegal under international law. This illegal enterprise is a live, ongoing process throughout the occupied State of Palestine, of which Bethlehem sadly forms a useful illustration.



There are **32** physical barriers erected by Israeli occupation including checkpoints, roadblocks, dirt mounds and gates –in and around Bethlehem [OCHA 2009]

To The North:

Bethlehem is stifled by the Israeli settlements of Har Homa, Giva'at Hamatos, Gilo and Har Gilo, along with the Israeli annexation Wall. In this area Israel has unilaterally annexed 22000 dunums (22km²) of land belonging to the towns of Beit Jala, Bethlehem and Beit Sahour.

The monastery of Mar Elias is one of the holiest Christian places in Palestine and the starting point for the Christmas procession to Bethlehem every year. Once an integral part of Bethlehem, the Church, though it has never moved, now sits between the illegal settlements of Giva'at Hamatos and Har Homa. The land surrounding Mar Elias belongs mainly to churches and Christian Palestinian families from Bethlehem, although most of it has been illegally seized by Israel in order to expand settlements in the area, as part of an ongoing campaign of colonization.

Cremisan, another monastery to the North West, faces a similar fate as it waits to find out whether the Green areas belonging to 58 Palestinian families will be annexed into Israel by the Wall. A further consequence of the Wall in this area will be the ghettoization of the village of Al-Walajeh and the isolation of a kindergarten run by Salesian nuns and attended by over 400 Palestinian children.

A decision from the Israeli court on whether the Wall will be rerouted is expected around the end of 2013.

This process is stripping Bethlehem of the last of its green areas. Indeed, the illegal settlement of Har Homa sits on a hill which used to be a lush green forest called Jabal Abu Ghnam. This means that families can no longer access their olive trees and agricultural lands. Combined with the settlements of Gilo, Givat Hamatos, and the Wall, these 'facts on the ground' also mean that the traditional Christmas process from Mar Elias can no longer take place.

An Ongoing Process:

- ❖ Har Homa: On June 28, the eve of resumed negotiations under the auspices of U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, the Israeli government approved 69 units, followed by 210 units ⁽¹⁾ on August 11 and a further 130 on November 3 2013.
- ❖ Gilo: On August 16, the date of the first agreed prisoner release within the framework of negotiations, the Israeli government announced 891 units. This was followed by an announcement of 311 units on November 3 and 397 on November 4.

(1) [Peace now 'Bibi's settlements boom: March-November 2013'](#)



To The East:

The bypass/settler road 356 runs south from Jerusalem, acting as a physical barrier between Bethlehem and other parts of the occupied State of Palestine, mainly the Jordan Valley and the Dead Sea. Road 356 is mostly closed to Palestinian traffic. It is dubbed the “Lieberman road” as it leads to the Israeli Foreign Minister’s house in the illegal settlement of Nokdim.

Oush Ghurab (“Crows Nest”) is a hill and surrounding area in the village of Beit Sahur in the Bethlehem governorate. The settlement road 356, which incentivizes Israelis to become settlers by making access from occupied Palestine back to Israel quick and easy, runs close to Oush Ghurab. Until 2006 the hill was physically occupied by a military post. Following the dismantling of the post, settlers claimed the hill under the name ‘Shdema’ and argued that Palestinian inhabitation of the hill would threaten traffic on their illegally built bypass road (356).

Despite some limited development, including a Palestinian recreational park in 2008, Oush Ghurab very much remains under the continued threat from Israeli settlers who intend to establish a settlement there, which will not only confine Bethlehem further but also pose a serious security risk to Palestinian communities at the hands of violent settlers. The

An Ongoing Process:

- ❖ In September 2013, an Israeli plan to build a bypass/settler road between settlements in the Bethlehem Area and the Jordan Valley was unveiled. This road, when built, will provide further incentives for Israeli settlement expansion alongside the road, facilitating further annexation of occupied Palestinian land.

action of the settlers, protected by Israeli occupation forces, has already prevented the development of several projects in the area, including a hospital for the local community. After the Israeli annexation of the northern Beit Sahour Area (Jabal Abu Ghneim), this is the only area available for the town’s urban expansion.

Slightly to the north of Oush Ghurab, the Palestinian village of Nuaman has been completely trapped between Har Homa settlement, the annexation Wall and road 356. Only one entry point to the village now exists, which is an Israeli checkpoint that does not allow public transport to reach the village. So that Mr. Lieberman can get from his illegal home in the occupied State of Palestine to his office in Jerusalem in 15 minutes, the children of Nuaman now have to walk 6km each way to get to school.

The most obvious physical landmark in this area is the Herodion site, which sits on top of a mountain overlooking the entire Bethlehem district and overseeing the illegal Israeli settlements. The Israeli occupation authorities list Herodion as a national heritage site despite being located firmly within the occupied State of Palestine. The site is currently being managed by the Israeli Parks Authorities, which controls other sites within the occupied State of Palestine such as Qumran in the Jordan Valley.

To The South:

In the South East, the settlement of Efrat and the annexation Wall seize yet more Palestinian land, limiting and threatening the Palestinian villages near them. Meanwhile, to the South West, approximately 9km into the occupied West Bank, the settlements of Tekoa and Nokdim, along with the settler bypass road 356, confines the Bethlehem district from the South west. Settlement construction is continuously promoted alongside Israeli bypass/settler roads and eventually it will seal the connection between Bethlehem and Hebron for Palestinians.

Israeli settlers have prepared the ground for a further expansion of the Efrat settlement towards the village of Khirbet Nakhle, in the proximity of the ancient Artas village (where the pools of King Solomon are located). This is one of the most dangerous settlement plans unveiled during 2013.



© NAD-PLO

- In Bethlehem's northern area (including Beit Jala and Bait Sahour) Israel has illegally confiscated around **22,000** dunums of land (**22 km²**), in which **18,000** dunums were annexed to the so-called "Jerusalem municipality". In addition, the Illegal Israeli Annexation Wall has effectively annexed **4,000** dunums of land belonging to Bethlehem itself.

- The total length of the Illegal Israeli Annexation Wall in the Bethlehem Governorate is **80.4 km** starting at the eastern rural area (north of Al Khas village) then runs through Beit Sahour, Bethlehem and Beit Jala, and south of Al Khader town. Then it runs towards Wadi an Nis. Nearly **26 km** have been completed. [ARIJ 2011]

An Ongoing Process:

- ❖ At the end of October 2013, Israeli settlers began to develop a 300 dunum (0.3km²) plot as an "agricultural farm". This plot is next to a 1400 dunum (1.4km²) area that settlers have named 'Giv'at Eitam'. A plan for 2500 units in this area is currently pending due to legal action taken by Palestinians who own the land. The development of this farm, however, remains a dangerous first step. ⁽²⁾
- ❖ Recent reports ⁽³⁾ suggest that the illegal settlement of Efrat is expected to grow by 60% in the next five years. On February 15 2013, the construction of 41 units and a shopping mall were announced. During the first month of resumed negotiations in August 2013, a further 149 units were announced. ⁽⁴⁾
- ❖ Tekoa: 200 units were given the green light by the Israeli Defence Minister on January 31 2013 ⁽⁵⁾, with a further 24 units promoted on April 29. ⁽⁶⁾
- ❖ Nokdim: On January 31 2013, 146 units were given the official go ahead ⁽⁷⁾, with a further 40 promoted on August 1st. ⁽⁸⁾
- ❖ In August 2013, Maan News reported that around 2024 dunums (2km²) of private Palestinian land was confiscated by the Israeli occupation authorities to build in the area. Palestinian residents of the nearby village of Jannahtah also reported that the construction of 40 new settlement units had already been built in the al-Uqban neighborhood of their village, in preparation for a new settlement. ⁽⁹⁾

(2) [OCHA, Humanitarian Bulletin, October 2013, p. 4-6,](#)

(3) [According to the Head of the regional council of Gush Etzion, who has jurisdiction over Efrat settlement, November 22nd, 2013](#)

(4) Peace now, 'Bibi's settlements boom'

(5) [Applied Research Institute Jerusalem \(ARIJ\) and the Land Research Center \(LRC\)](#)

(6) Peace now, 'Bibi's settlements'

(7) [ARIJ and LRC,](#)

(8) Peace now, 'Bibi's settlements boom'

(9) [Maan News Agency.](#)

To The West:

The Israeli annexation Wall cuts off a Palestinian area that is a place of natural beauty, a living Palestinian village and a potential world heritage site.

Battir is home to beautiful ancient stone terraces and a famous variety of eggplant, which are both heavily threatened by Israel's annexation wall. A file has been fully prepared for the submission of Battir to UNESCO as a world heritage site.

Battir is also a living, working Palestinian village. A number of Palestinian families make their livelihoods from these terraces which have trees and crops planted on them, and receive water from a natural irrigation system which dates back to the Roman period. This system allows different crops and plants to be grown almost year round and is therefore of great value to the farmers of Battir and the Palestinian agriculture sector as a whole.

The area west of Bethlehem is affected by a network of Israeli settlements part of what Israel refers to as the "Gush Etzion" area. The Israeli Ministry of Tourism promotes tourism in the area. On their website it states: "In 1967 Gush Etzion was re-established. Among the first to arrive were young adults who had lived there as children before 1948, conveying new meaning to Jeremiah's comforting words to Rachel (who gave

birth to Benjamin not far from here): "And there is hope for your future; your children shall return to their country"⁽¹⁰⁾

There are several villages in the Western Bethlehem area, including Nahhalin, Husan, Wadi' Foukin, Jaba', Khallet Sakariya and Battir. The western Bethlehem area also includes the Wadi' Makhrouf area, which is a historic part of Beit Jala, as well as lands belonging to Al-Khader village. According to the map of the Israeli annexation Wall, all of these are in the process of being separated from Bethlehem, where most of their services are, including hospitals, schools and universities, as well as businesses and jobs. Their only remaining link with Bethlehem is a tunnel built under bypass/settler Road 60, consolidating the system of segregated roads in the district.

Bypass/settler Road 375 links the settlement of Beitar Illit, built on Wadi Foukin's lands, to Road 60, facilitating access to Jerusalem for the mainly Jewish Orthodox settler population of this area. This has provided a further incentive for Israelis to become settlers. Beitar Illit's population has increased from 5500 settlers in 1995 to an astounding 46 000 today. The expansion of Beitar Illit causes yet further ghettoization in the occupied State of Palestine, in this case it is the village of Wadi' Foukin that is trapped between the Israeli settlement and the 1967 border.



© NAD-PLO

An Ongoing Process:

❖ On November 3 2013, Israel approved the construction of 238 units in the settlement of Beitar Illit.

(10) www.goisrael.com

Attacks Against Freedom Of Worship

Israeli attempts to annex the vast majority of the occupied State of Palestine continue to affect freedom of worship for Palestinians. The physical elements of Israel's settlement regime, together with a whole series of discriminatory policies, completely disregard Palestinian religious sites and traditions.

This Includes:

- ❖ **Mar Elias:** The construction of the Giv'at Hamatos settlement will change the landscape of Mar Elias, the starting point for the annual Christmas Procession. An expansion of Har Homa settlement towards Giv'at Hamatos would further isolate Mar Elias from Bethlehem.
 - ❖ **Rachel's Tomb/Bilal Bin Rabah Mosque:** Since the year 2000 Israel has restricted access to Rachel's Tomb/Bilal Bin Rabah only for Israeli Jews. The place, also holy for Christians and Muslims, has been surrounded by the annexation Wall, cutting off the historic Jerusalem – Hebron Road and thus forcing pilgrims going from Jerusalem to Bethlehem to alter their traditional route.
 - ❖ **Cremisan – Holy Spirit Procession:** Every year the Roman Catholic Community of Beit Jala conducts a procession from the Cremisan Monastery towards the Annunciation Church in Beit Jala's Old City. This procession will be interrupted if the Israeli annexation Wall is built.
- The Cremisan Monastery, a place for Christian prayers and spiritual retreats, will be off limits for Palestinians.
- ❖ **Total disconnection between religious communities:** Palestinian priests, monks and nuns are disconnected from their patriarchates located in occupied East Jerusalem as well other communities through the occupied State of Palestine. The Israeli movement restrictions, and their associated permits' regime, has caused the Palestinian people in general, including the churches, increased problems when trying to reach their communities and places of worship. This has affected the ability to celebrate prayers for many religious people, including foreign clergy who have had problems obtaining visas from the Israeli occupation authorities. Some examples are the difficulties faced in the transportation between Bethlehem and the Gaza Strip. Palestinians from the Gaza Strip have almost no opportunity to worship in Bethlehem through the year.

Conclusion

The reality in Bethlehem is bleak. In a period of negotiations, during which Palestine and Israel are supposedly trying to reach the end goal of the internationally endorsed two-state solution, it is clear that the current Israeli government has no intention of reaching such a solution. The Bethlehem Governorate, like all other areas throughout the occupied State of Palestine, is suffering from an ongoing campaign of colonization which has a severe and detrimental impact on individuals, families and communities, as well as taking us further and further from the prospects of a just and lasting peace.

Surrounded by all sides, Bethlehem continues to be denied of its potential while Israeli settlements continue to take over most of Bethlehem's land and natural resources. Despite this truth, the people of Palestine remain hopeful. This year in particular, Palestinians are eagerly awaiting the visit of His Holiness Pope Francis, who represents and guides millions of Christians around the world. Palestinians will be honored by His Holiness' visit to these Holy places and the communities who care for them- the Christians and Muslims of the State of Palestine. It is hoped that His Holiness, a great leader in the quest for justice around the world, will also be able to shed light on the grim reality of occupation, which becomes darker and more critical by the day. Finally, through this very special visit, the people of this land will continue to reach out to their brothers and sisters worldwide, to join them on their path towards freedom and independence.