



ISRAEL'S ANNEXATION BY STEALTH: BETHLEHEM AS A BLUEPRINT



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Executive Summary

Israel's annexation policies have massively impacted the Palestinian land and people. However, they have a compounded impact on the remaining Christian community in Bethlehem. The systematic expansion of settlements, land appropriation, demolition policies, and a dense web of legal and administrative controls are eroding the daily life of Palestinians in the governorate, undermining any prospect of future Palestinian sovereignty and calling into question the continued presence of Palestinian Christians in the very birthplace of Christianity.

Where they were once a majority, Palestinian Christians in Bethlehem have become a minority. Pressure from Israel's annexation policies and its accompanying punitive security measures has driven high rates of emigration amongst Palestinian Christians from Bethlehem, and as a result, their community is shrinking and there is a risk it may eventually disappear.

The Bethlehem governorate is a microcosm of Israel's annexation by stealth to entrench Israeli control over land and resources in the West Bank and fragment Palestinian territory and communities. Israeli annexation and settlement of land has become *de facto* permanent, if not yet *de jure*. The myriad processes Israel has deployed to do this have been underway since the occupation of the West Bank in 1967, but have escalated in intensity under its current government. Israel has employed a dense network of procedural, administrative, legislative, and structural modalities, reinforced by the construction of settlements and infrastructure, and arbitrary and swingeing security measures backed by state and settler violence, to drive its project of annexation.

Bethlehem's Palestinian communities, both Christian and Muslim, are being systematically fenced in by settlements, increasingly separated from Jerusalem and other Palestinian localities due to walls, permit regimes, and the construction of settler-only roads. Makeshift checkpoints and barriers are becoming permanent fixtures, while mass demolitions and

settler violence, aided and abetted by the Israeli state, are increasing. Israel's practices amount to grave violations of international law, including indiscriminate transfer of its population into occupied territory, the displacement of Palestinians, apartheid, and persecution.

This report identifies the modalities of Israel's annexation and settlement policies in Bethlehem Governorate and their impact on the region's Christian community. Among the recommendations it makes to key stakeholders to pressure Israel into respecting the rights of the area's Christian and Muslim communities are the following:

- The UN should investigate and issue regular, periodic disaggregated reporting on Israeli violations to document instances within Bethlehem of demolitions, land appropriation, settlement construction, mass arrests, and forced displacement to help address the absence of reliable statistics specific to the governorate.
- The EU and its member states should support international legal efforts through, for instance, the International Criminal Court (ICC) to hold to account Israeli officials, entities, and individuals who violate international law through activities that advance Israel's de facto annexation policies, including land appropriation, forced displacement, and demolition of Palestinian communities and structures.
- The State of Palestine should develop and implement a strategy for much deeper engagement in supporting local municipalities, NGOs, protection committees, and communities, especially in Area C.

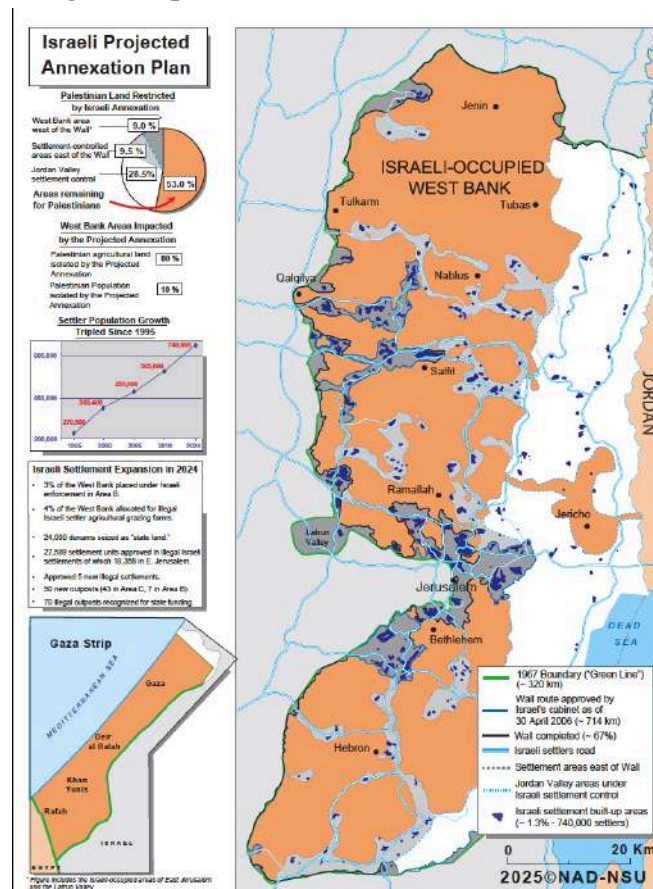
1. Introduction

As Israel ramps up the expansion of its settlements and the annexation of Palestinian land across the West Bank, the Palestinian Governorate of Bethlehem, the historical birthplace of Jesus, located a few kilometers to the south of Jerusalem, is in the eye of the metaphorical storm. Fifty-eight years after Israel took control of the governorate during the Six-Day War, under the leadership of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, the most extreme and far-right government in Israel's history has kicked the process of Israeli settlement and annexation in the area into high gear. The Palestinians of Bethlehem are already fenced in by Israeli settlements, their livelihoods hemmed in by the dense network of procedural, administrative, legislative, and structural modalities Israel has employed to drive its settlement project in the West Bank, their lives under threat from settler violence and the brutality of Israel's security forces. Their lives are going to become significantly more difficult.

This report examines and explains the modalities of Israel's annexation of the Bethlehem Governorate, a key locus of Israeli settlement activity in the West Bank. It details how Israel systematically violates the rights of Palestinians under international law and how reality on the ground there has made any form of Palestinian sovereignty unviable and even calls into question their future presence in their own land. It argues that Bethlehem is both a case study in how Israel's occupation works in practice and a test case for the international community and the grave crimes against humanity it is letting Israel commit with impunity.

Israel's new far-right government accelerated its annexation by stealth in the West Bank from December 2022, but massively so under the cover of its massive military operation in Gaza since 7 October 2023. Though overshadowed by the human catastrophe Israel is inflicting on the Gaza Strip, the acceleration of Israel's project of settlement and annexation

in the West Bank is creating obstacles to the two-state solution, or any future peace between Israel and the Palestinians, just as intractable as those created by Israel's actions in Gaza. And while Israel's Operation Iron Wall has wreaked extensive destruction on Palestinian refugee camps in the north of the West Bank, Bethlehem, a historical centre for Christians in



the West Bank after Israel's creation in 1948 but long seen by the Israeli state as part of an expansive 'greater Jerusalem', is a critical locus of Israel's settler colonial project and a case study in how it is implemented on the ground.

The modalities of Israel's creeping annexation of the West Bank are multifold and mutually reinforcing. Legal and administrative changes are facilitating the acceleration of land appropriation, especially since December 2022, paving the way for the massive expansion of settlements and the infrastructure of occupation on the ground. Palestinian territory will become even more fragmented, and Palestinian cities, towns, and villages more isolated, with access to their agricultural hinterlands and the water resources they need to survive even more constrained. Meanwhile,

Israel's demolition of Palestinian buildings, homes, and neighborhoods, even in areas A and B, continues apace, respectively designated under the Oslo Accords as under exclusive Palestinian control and under Palestinian civil administration and Israeli security control. The future of Palestinians in the West Bank – if in the longer term they are allowed to remain on their land at all – may be in what amounts to a series of isolated ghettos, a new gulag archipelago, a close parallel to what could happen to Palestinians in [Gaza](#).

2. Bethlehem and the Israeli Occupation

Bethlehem became the main center for Palestinian Christians after the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, when the number of Palestinian Christians in historic Palestine dropped from 10-12% to 3% right after the Nakba¹, until it became less than a mere 1% now. However, it also, for the first time in modern history, lost its Christian majority with the creation of three refugee camps – Azza, Aida, and Dheisheh – for Palestinians displaced by Israeli forces after the Nakba. The Israeli military occupied the Bethlehem area along with the rest of the West Bank and East Jerusalem from Jordanian forces in the Six Day War in 1967.

¹ The Nakba "Catastrophe" of 1948 refers to the mass displacement and dispossession of 750,000 Palestinians and the destruction of 530 Palestinian villages in historic Palestine by the Israeli militias, to establish what is to be recognized later as present day Israel.

The West Bank was not formally annexed, which meant that the more than 1.5 million Palestinians who then fell under its control were not made Israeli citizens, as the Palestinians left inside what became Israel in 1948. This also meant that the Palestinians who came under Israeli rule in 1967 did not need to be afforded the full rights of Israeli citizens.

The construction of settlements in the Bethlehem area began less than a year after the 1967. Immediately after the West Bank was occupied. By not formally annexing the West Bank after its occupation, Israel did not formally change the status of the territory, but instead has worked to create a new reality of annexation on the ground that makes a de facto reality that makes the promises of Palestinian statehood made at Oslo null and void.

Much of the land confiscated was privately owned by Palestinians and especially in the Bethlehem area, by churches.²

Initially, under the Oslo Accords, 85 percent of the 660 square kilometers of the Bethlehem governorate was designated as Area C, under exclusive Israeli civil and military control.³ The only area of the Bethlehem governorate designated as Area A, under Palestinian security and administrative control, is the city of Bethlehem itself and its suburbs.

Israel imposed a tight permit regime during the Six-Day War itself on Palestinians in the territories they were then currently occupying. This permit regime has been expanded to cover all aspects of life, from holding foreign currency to building work, installing any water device, electrical work, importing and exporting, and operating any form of transportation, including donkey carts.

Israel's occupation has significantly reshaped the demographics of Bethlehem. Such policies resulted in the deliberate creation of a coercive environment, where fundamental rights are violated, without any dignity, freedom, or recourse. Christians have 'emigrated' in large numbers in search of lives and livelihoods not burdened by oppression, violence, and dispossession. **Between waves of refugees displaced by Israeli military operations and high levels of emigration, Christians have declined from 85 per cent of the population of the region in 1947 to ten per cent in 2017.**⁴ For Christians, there is a deep spiritual relationship between Bethlehem and Jerusalem, and the pillars of the Christian faith.⁵ The former was the site of the Nativity, while the latter was the site of the Resurrection. However, the infrastructure of Israel's occupation, including the Annexation Wall and its strict system of travel permits, has severed the connection for Palestinian Christians between Bethlehem and Jerusalem for the first time in their history. The restrictions have also severely affected tourism in the region, which, given the area's historical significance, has contributed significantly to the economy and local communities.⁶ **By June 2025, unemployment had risen to 31 per cent and the city was losing approximately \$2.5 million a day in tourism revenue.**⁷

² See for example, "[Christian groups seek to stop Israel's land confiscation](#)", Religion News Service, 19 November 2024.

³ "[Bethlehem Governorate: Fragmentation and Humanitarian Concerns – OCHA factsheet](#)", UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, January 2015.

⁴ See for instance, "[Another bleak Christmas in Bethlehem as Christian families quit West Bank](#)", Reuters, 2 December 2024. "[Estimated Population in the Palestine Mid-Year by Governorate, 1997-2026](#)", Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, State of Palestine. Date accessed: 20 July 2025.

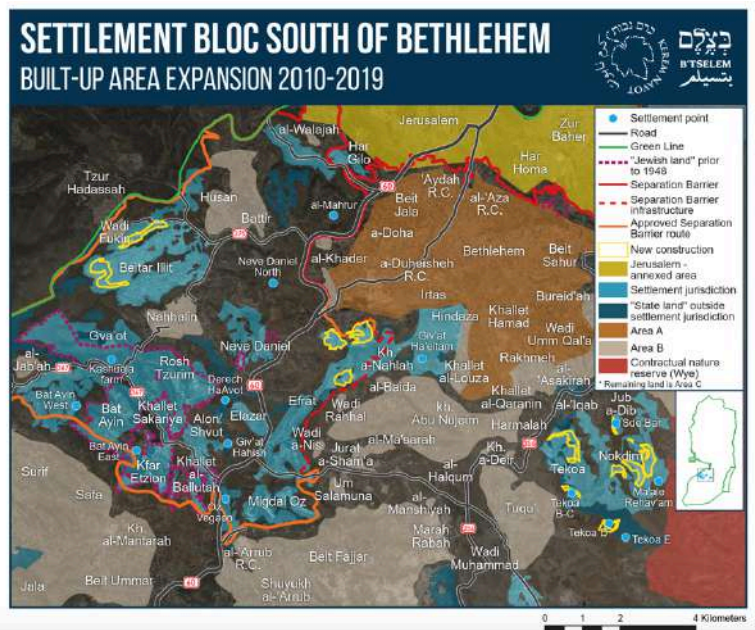
⁵ "[Annexing the Land of Grapes and Vines: Case Study of Al Makhroun Valley](#)", Balasan Initiative for Human Rights, June 2020.

⁶ "[Bethlehem residents lose work and land as situation deteriorates](#)", Vatican News, 11 June 2025.

⁷ "[Emergency Program Provides Lifeline in Bethlehem](#)", Catholic Near East Welfare Association, 11 August 2024.

3. Annexation by Stealth

Annexation is usually conceived as a single, decisive act of extending sovereignty over a territory, after which state legal and procedural norms and administrative practices are extended to reinforce military and security control, and then the economics of the region, the infrastructure, and even its demographics may be reengineered.⁸ Annexation in the West Bank has not followed this paradigm. Since taking control of the territory in 1967, Israel has slowly but surely worked to annex the territory by stealth – implementing the administrative, procedural, legal, demographic, and economic reality of annexation and the infrastructure to support it without the legal recognition of the extension of formal legal sovereignty. The fact that this process of annexation has unfolded so gradually has worked to Israel's interests because it has made it more difficult to see – the progress Israel has made is clear only in hindsight – and this has given them a degree of cover and deniability.⁹



When Israel does formally annex the West Bank, it will only be the formal legal ratification of a process that has, in reality, been underway since the Six-Day War in 1967. The recent non-binding motion passed by the Knesset in July, overwhelmingly approved 71-13, was effectively a declaration of intent, stating that the annexation of the West Bank “will strengthen the state of Israel, its security, and prevent any questioning of the fundamental right of the Jewish people to peace and security in

their homeland.”¹⁰ A new reality has long since been created on the ground, even by the time of the Oslo Accords; the fiction of an independent and sovereign state Israel offered to Palestinians at the time, perhaps enabled by limited land swaps, has been critically undermined by Israel's creeping annexation by stealth since.

Massive construction of infrastructure and the new demographic reality Israel has created effectively preclude any substantial future concessions in the West Bank. The Israeli settler population of the West Bank has grown 6.5 times since the time of Oslo I in 1993 until today – from 115,700 to 750,000.¹¹ Israel paid the 8,475 settlers it relocated in its withdrawal from Gaza in 2005 between \$150,000 and \$400,000 each, even as it conducted a bait and switch operation, receiving international approval with then UN Secretary General praising it as a “courageous decision”, while Israel allowed the settler population of the West Bank to balloon by 15,800 in the same year.¹² The new reality Israel has created on the ground in the

⁸ See for example, “[Annexation \(prohibition of\)](#)”, How Does Law Protect in War? , International Committee of the Red Cross.

⁹ “[Update: Advancing Isolation for Annexation: Bethlehem Between E1 and Additional Movement Restrictions](#)”, Balasan

Initiative for Human Rights, 15 September 2025.

¹⁰ “[Israeli parliament approves symbolic motion on West Bank annexation](#)”, Al Jazeera, 23 July 2025.

¹¹ Avi Shlaim, “[It's now clear: the Oslo peace accords were wrecked by Netanyahu's bad faith](#)”, The Guardian, 12 September 2013; “[With attention on Gaza, Jewish settlers expand in the West Bank](#)”, NPR, 7 August 2024.

¹² “[Jewish Settlers Receive Hundreds of Thousands in Compensation for Leaving Gaza While Palestinians Working for Them Get Nothing](#)”, Democracy Now, 16 August 2005. “[Palestine: The Forgotten Reality](#)”, Le Monde Diplomatique, December 2005.

West Bank is too entrenched to be undone – politically, demographically, and financially – by the state of Israel, even with the assistance of generous foreign donors. It is no longer viable to assume Israel’s occupation is temporary, or that a two-state solution is viable for Palestinians, is on the horizon.

a. Modalities of Annexation

Israel has long used a matrix of procedural, administrative, legislative, and structural paths to drive its annexation by stealth in the West Bank. However, Israel’s far-right government has introduced changes that have fundamentally transformed the legal, structural, and administrative environment within which settlement in the West Bank is proceeding, as well as accelerating the process of settlement expansion on the ground. Since the 1970s, Israel has steadily transferred governance over Israeli settlements from military to civilian authorities, while West Bank Palestinians remain under military control. The appointment of hard right settler Bezalel Smotrich as both Finance Minister and Additional Minister in the Defense Ministry responsible for civilian affairs, the latter of which acquired significant powers in an extended tussle within the fragile governing coalition, has significantly accelerated this process.¹³ Smotrich engineered the creation of a new post, deputy head of the Civil Administration for Civil Affairs, and the appointment of Hillel Roth in that position without a public tender for the position.¹⁴ The existing head of the Civil administration then transferred almost all of his powers to the deputy position, giving Roth, Smotrich’s long-term ideological ally, control over the civil administration of the West Bank. This has effectively created a new government office inside the Israeli Defense Ministry – the Settlement Administration – under the control of the radical settler movement and amounts to a civilian takeover of what was a military prerogative.¹⁵

Further, on 11 May 2025, Israel announced a new land registration process in Area C, under exclusive Israeli control and home to what is believed to be 300,000 Palestinians, which will establish definitive legal ownership of the land.¹⁶ This will block the efforts of the Palestinian Authority (PA), created in 1994 under the Oslo Accords as an interim ruling body for the occupied territories, to register Palestinian-owned land in the area. Given Israel’s bias in dealing with Palestinian land claims in the West Bank in the past and the stated goal of the law according to Israeli Minister of Defence Israel Katz “to strengthen, consolidate, and expand Jewish settlement in Judea and Samaria” (What Israeli hardliners call the West Bank), it will likely result in the mass alienation of Palestinians in Area C from their land.¹⁷ The irreversible nature of this measure means that it is illegal under international law.¹⁸

The effects of this measure will be compounded by a proposed law titled “Elimination of the Discrimination in the Purchase of Real Estate in Judea and Samaria”.¹⁹ This would allow Israelis to directly purchase Palestinian land in the West Bank, entirely removing the process of obtaining “transaction permits” that has until the present limited land purchases by

¹³ [“Smotrich handed sweeping powers over West Bank, control over settlement planning”](#), The Times of Israel, 23 February 2023.

¹⁴ [“HCJ petition: Repeal the transfer of powers to Deputy Head of the Civil Administration, which means the annexation of the West Bank”](#), Yesh Din, 1 October 2024.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ [“The Cabinet Decides to Initiate Land Registration Process that would Dispossess Palestinians from their Lands the West Bank”](#), Peace Now, 12 May 2025.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ [“New Bill Seeks to Allow Unlimited Land Purchases by Settlers in the West Bank”](#), Peace Now, 15 November 2024.

Israelis and ensures the acquisition of land does not undermine Israeli government policy or exceed Israel's capabilities to provide security for Israeli lives and property. Especially given that it will open the door to questionable transactions and forgeries of sales by settlers, this law effectively 'privatizes' Israel's security and settlement policy in the West Bank and places it in the hands of potentially the most hardline elements of Israel's settler movement. **This law, together with the process of land registration, could potentially reshape the reality on the ground in the West Bank in a matter of years, penning Palestinians in isolated enclaves** as Palestinian villages, towns, and cities see the agricultural hinterlands that are the basis of the Palestinian economy in the territory eroded in piecemeal fashion.

b. Annexation on the Ground in Bethlehem

In an unprecedented move, Israel has also fast-tracked its annexation policies, issuing two military orders in July 2025 that effectively annex 167,000 dunums of land in the eastern Bethlehem governorate – 167 of the area's 644 square kilometers, more than a quarter of its total area and almost three percent of the total area of the West Bank.²⁰ Under the 1998 Wye Agreement, land in the governorate was moved from Area C (exclusive Israeli control) to Area B (under Israeli security control, Palestinian civil administrative control), and a lot of Area B was designated as "Contractual/Agreed-Upon Reserves". This latter designation was explicitly intended to prevent Palestinian construction in this area. With adjacent areas Israel has designated as "firing Zones", this extends lands under de facto Israeli sovereignty from Bethlehem all the way to the Dead Sea and the Jordan border.

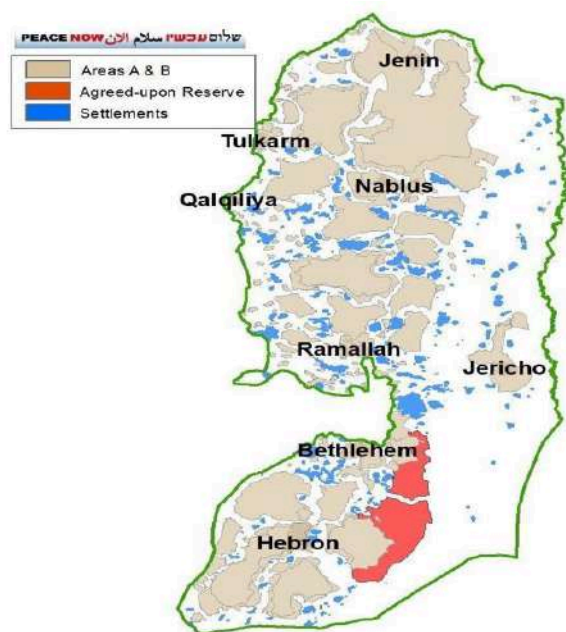


Figure SEQ Figure * ARABIC 4: "Areas A & B, Agreed-upon Reserve and Settlements", July 2024 (Source: Peace Now)

The first military order transferred the responsibility for the civil administration in the "Agreed-Upon Reserves" from the PA to the Israeli army, while the second retroactively bans Palestinian building and construction which means that as deputy head in effective control of the Civilian Administration, Smotrich's close ally Roth now has the authority to demolish any Palestinian structures he deems to have been built illegally in this area since 1998, with no right to appeal or reverse the order.

While these military orders are ostensibly to protect the natural environment of the "Agreed-upon

Reserve", Israeli settlers have been busy building infrastructure in this area, apparently to further their plans to establish settlements there. Smotrich himself confirmed these plans, as

²⁰ "Israeli Government Assumes Authorities of the Palestinian Authority in Area B", Peace Now, 19 July 2024.

when visiting the area in August 2024, he vowed to solidify Israeli settlers' illegal presence and control over these areas.²¹

Israel has also declared over 25,000 dunums (over 25 square kilometers) in and around the Bethlehem Governorate as state land in 2024-5.²² Declaring land as state land has been one of the main ways in which Israel confiscates Palestinian land in the West Bank, using a draconian interpretation of an Ottoman law from 1858 to do so.²³ Declarations of state land should not be used on privately owned Palestinian land, but in practice, this rarely limits Israel's land grabs, as most of this land is not registered. Israel has ensured that bureaucratic hurdles effectively prevent land registration by Palestinians, and the British and Jordanians only managed to register a third of West Bank land before 1967. Israel leases state land exclusively to Israelis.²⁴

The large settlement bloc Gush Etzion, south of Jerusalem and south and west of Bethlehem, is also being significantly expanded.²⁵ A new settlement, Nahal Heletz, is going to be built on a UNESCO-listed world heritage site – the Land of Olives and Vines-cultural landscapes of Southern Jerusalem, Battir – which, if it expands to incorporate surrounding land as settlements usually do, will cut Palestinian farmers off from their land.²⁶ Plans to build almost 1,000 new homes in the settlement of Efrat, south of Bethlehem, and also in the Gush Etzion settlement block, have also been announced.²⁷ Israeli outposts, often used for herding but which claim land around them for grazing, have increased across the West Bank by 50 per cent since 7 October 2023, and several of these have been established to the west and southeast of Bethlehem.²⁸ The latter concentration of herding outposts is linked to the displacement of multiple Palestinian Bedouin communities.

Israeli settlers have also significantly expanded the network of roads since mid-2023. A total of 139 new roads, stretching 116.4 kilometers across the West Bank, had been built, and many more existing paths and dirt roads had been upgraded by August 2024.²⁹ Though most of these roads were not authorized, they were built using state funds, and approximately two-thirds of them (75.3 kilometers) passed through Palestinian private land.³⁰ Palestinians are prohibited from using these roads, even when they cut through their land. Israeli forces have seized Palestinian land in the town of Tuqu' southeast of Bethlehem for the construction of a road.³¹ The town has already lost access to a lot of its land, and seven gates have been constructed around it, limiting access to surrounding villages and the town's agricultural hinterland.

²¹ [“Smotrich Tours Land Near Bethlehem He Now Controls, Threatens Systematic Demolition of Palestinian Buildings”](#), Foundation for Middle East Peace, 23 August 2024.

²² [“The Government Declares 12,000 Dunams in the Jordan Valley as State Lands”](#), Peace Now, 3 July 2024.

²³ [“What is a declaration of state land?”](#), Peace Now, 8 September 2014.

²⁴ [“The Government Declares 8,000 Dunams in the Jordan Valley as State Lands”](#), Peace Now, 22 March 2024.

²⁵ [“Israel's Colonial Expansion in Bethlehem: Land Confiscation & Colonizer Attacks”](#), Badil, 25 August 2024.

²⁶ [“Israeli settlement on UNESCO heritage site an ‘imminent threat’ to area, campaigners say”](#), The Art Newspaper, 19 August 2024.

²⁷ [“Israel advancing plans for 1,000 new settler homes in Bethlehem”](#), The New Arab, 17 February 2025.

²⁸ [“Israeli outposts have proliferated in the West Bank since Oct. 7, analysis shows. Palestinians fear annexation could be next”](#), CNN, 20 March 2025.

²⁹ [“All paths lead to annexation”](#), Peace Now, 18 May 2025.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ [“Israeli forces raze Palestinian land in Bethlehem-area-town to build new colonial road”](#), Wafa News Agency, 10 July 2025.

c. Escalating Policies of Forced Displacement in Bethlehem

In an alarming escalation, Israel has also significantly expanded its policies of demolishing Palestinian structures, buildings, and homes to reach Area A, under exclusive Palestinian Authority (PA) control. Most of these demolition orders are intended to create 'buffer zones' of 75-120 meters around bypass roads or the Annexation Wall, but since 7 October 2023 has issued 'special emergency' regulations usually reserved for war to justify demolitions near Israeli settlements on security grounds.³²

The military orders that, in effect, opened the Agreed-upon Reserves to Israeli settlement and gave Smotrich's ally Roth control over the demolitions of Palestinian structures, buildings, and homes have significantly escalated the pace of demolitions in the area and the scale of Palestinian dispossession.



Figure SEQ Figure * ARABIC 5: Khallet an Nu'man in a 2018 United Nations map, showing access restrictions (Source: OCHA Opt)

Israel is also accelerating long-standing plans to destroy the tiny village of Khallet an-Nu'man, with the Jerusalem municipality issuing demolition notices for all of its 45 residential structures. Home to 150 Palestinians, including 40 children, it was incorporated into East Jerusalem in 1967. However, its residents were never granted East Jerusalem residence

cards, and since 1993, Israel has isolated and harassed residents to the extent that a UN special rapporteur said amounted to "indirect forcible transfer".³³ **The order means that the entire village is now at immediate risk of demolition and the displacement of its population.**³⁴ This is a significant escalation in demolition and dispossession, as in all of 2024, only 68 Palestinian structures in various locations around the Bethlehem governorate were demolished.³⁵

Land appropriation and settlement expansion in Bethlehem have accelerated since 7 October 2023, with the cumulative effect of reducing Bethlehem to 10 per cent of its original territory as settlements have been established and grown, and their economic hinterlands and buffer

³² ["Alarming: Israeli Demolitions Extended to Areas A and B of the Occupied West Bank"](#), 16 January 2025; ["Israel seizes more Palestinian land in occupied West Bank"](#), Middle East Monitor, 7 April 2025.

³³ ["Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967. Richard Falk"](#), UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 13 January 2014.

³⁴ ["Israel to demolish entire village east of Bethlehem in latest West Bank land grab"](#), The Cradle, 27 January 2025.

³⁵ "According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), Israel demolished 1,058 Palestinian structures in Area C of the occupied West Bank throughout 2024, including 192 residential buildings, resulting in the displacement of 860 Palestinians and adversely affecting approximately 38,000 others. The demolitions were mainly concentrated in Jerusalem, with 190, Hebron, with 172, and Bethlehem, with 68." ["Humanitarian Situation Update #299 | West Bank"](#), UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 26 June 2025.

zones expanded.³⁶ Much of the appropriation of land in the Bethlehem region since Israel's assault on Gaza has facilitated the expansion of settlements and the enhancement of their security with an eye to the creation of connecting settlement blocs and the establishment of a "Greater Jerusalem".³⁷

Israeli demolition operations in the Bethlehem Governorate have focused on refugee camps and surrounding villages. The camps, with the dense and tightly-packed urban architecture and their aggrieved, already displaced populations, have historically been natural centers of resistance to Israel's occupation, and post-7 October, the site of armed clashes with Israeli security forces. The house demolitions in these operations in and near the camps are part of a crackdown on actual and potential resistance and have been carried out as part of wider operations involving a mix of intimidation tactics, large-scale raids, campaigns of mass arrests, and highly intrusive investigations.³⁸ Homes have been marked for destruction with blue paint, Israeli flags have been raised above them, and leaflets have been dropped on neighborhoods threatening eviction.³⁹ These operations, centring on the Dheisheh, Aida, and Azza refugee camps, are preliminary to Operation Iron Wall, which has seen Israel expand its campaign against "the Iranian axis, wherever it extends" to "bolster the security in Judea and Samaria (what Israel calls the West Bank), taking brutal pre-emptive action against refugee camps across the West Bank to intimidate or stamp out possible future loci of resistance.⁴⁰ Operations against camps in the north of the territory have seen the leveling of Jenin, Tulkarem, and Nur Shams camps and the displacement of much of their population. The destruction has been compared to the destruction Israel has inflicted on Gaza. Other camps in the north of the West Bank have also suffered



Figure SEQ Figure 1* ARABIC 6: Palestinian Houses Demolished by Israeli Bulldozers in Bethlehem (Source: Palestinian Return Centre)



³⁶ ["Israel approves new illegal settlement on UNESCO site near Bethlehem"](#), Al Jazeera, 15 August 2024.

³⁷ ["Israel's Colonial Expansion in Bethlehem: Land Confiscation & Colonizer Attacks"](#), Badil, op. cit.

³⁸ See for example, ["Escalating Settler Violence in the West Bank: Lands Bulldozed in Khillet al-Outn, South of Bethlehem"](#), Balasan Initiative for Human Rights, 15 April 2025; ["Strategic Encroachment: Israel's Annexation Push into Al Khader, South of Bethlehem"](#), Balasan Initiative for Human Rights, 29 April 2025; ["Field Update: Systematic Intimidation and Escalating Measures in Wadi Fukin, West of Bethlehem"](#), Balasan Initiative for Human Rights, 12 May 2025.

³⁹ ["Israeli army raids Palestinian refugee camp in occupied West Bank amid escalation"](#), Andalou Agency, 4 February 2025.

⁴⁰ ["Iron Wall: Israel swoops on West Bank in new war goal"](#), Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, 21 January 2025.

extensive destruction, resulting in the displacement of over 40,000 Palestinians. Operations against the camps in Bethlehem have not reached that level of intensity, though Israel has threatened to escalate its operations in response to clashes in their vicinity.

Encouraged by Israel's extreme right-wing government, settler violence against Palestinians and their property had reached unprecedented levels in 2023, even before 7 October. It has since escalated significantly. Though settler violence is often seen as distinct from state violence in Israel's occupation, it is in fact an extension of it.⁴¹ Much as settlers are the leading edge of Israel's occupation of Palestinian territory, driving the acquisition of Palestinian land in the West Bank by the Israeli state and Israeli citizens, settler violence is in many ways the leading edge of the violence and dispossession the Israeli state inflicts on Palestinians. Since 1967, when the settlers left, the state has generally followed to protect them and help them consolidate their gains.

Israeli security forces 'stand idly by' and watch as settlers attack Palestinians and their property, often moving in to detain the Palestinians in the aftermath.⁴² Palestinians are effectively punished by Israeli security forces for being the victims of Israeli settler violence, while, as has been documented extensively, the settlers themselves enjoy almost total impunity.⁴³ The only time security forces restrain settlers is either for their own protection or the (usually short-term) interests of the Israeli state.⁴⁴ In other words, any restraint the Israeli state has exerted on the settler movement has usually been short-lived. Multiple instances of settler violence have occurred at ten different locales across the Bethlehem governorate – Sa'eer, al-Naqub, Masabeeh, Thahrit al-Nada, Keesan, Janata, 'Asakreh, Janata, Tqou, and the al-Makhroul Valley. All of these incidents saw serious damage to property, many involved serious violence to Palestinians, and many resulted in the dispossession of Palestinians from their land with no real chance of return.⁴⁵ With the de facto creation of the Settlement Administration under Roth, any restraint is likely to be a thing of the past. The impunity settlers enjoy and the violence they employ is intended to make Palestinians afraid; to terrorize them. But settler violence is not just state-sponsored terrorism; it is state-protected terrorism.

Since 7 October 2023, Israel has distributed over 150,000 guns to settlers in the West Bank and has relaxed gun licenses. The 89 militias on the West Bank before that date – private militias, those trained and equipped by the Israeli military and settlement guards – have been joined by 800 new settler militias.⁴⁶ Further, especially post-7 October, many of the soldiers in the West Bank are reserves that have been called up from the settlements. There have been reports that soldiers have changed into civilian clothes to engage in settler violence.

⁴¹ "[Settler Violence = State Violence](#)", The Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories. Date accessed: 20 July 2025.

⁴² See for instance, "[Standing Idly By: IDF soldiers' inaction in the face of offenses perpetrated by Israelis against Palestinians in the West Bank](#)", Yesh Din, 21 January 2015; and "[Settler Violence = State Violence](#)", B'tselem, 25 November 2021.

⁴³ "[Data Sheet: Law Enforcement on Israeli Civilians in the West Bank \(Settler Violence\). 2005-2024](#)", Yesh Din, 16 January 2025; and "[International community urged to act against Israel's repeated failure to stop settler attacks on Palestinian communities](#)", Norwegian Refugee Council, 17 April 2024.

⁴⁴ "[Israeli military detains 6 settlers after attack on forces in occupied West Bank](#)", CNN, 28 June 2025.

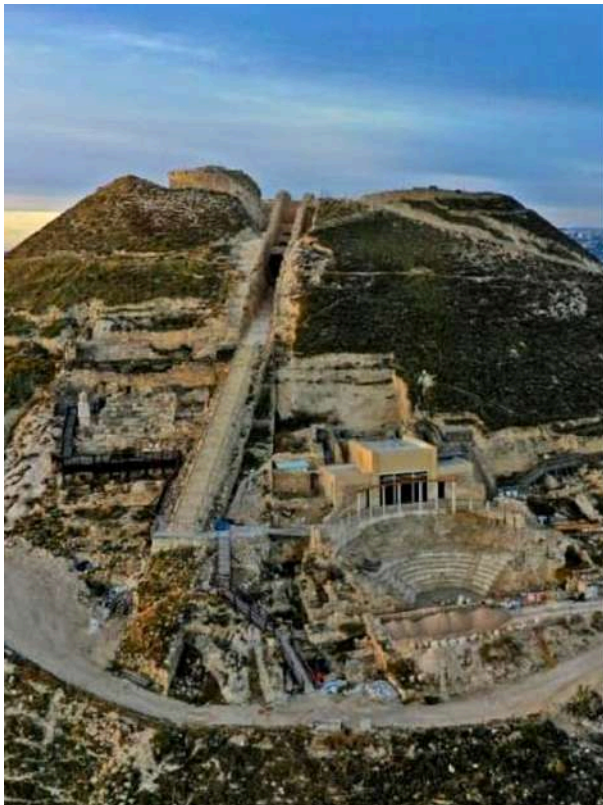
⁴⁵ "[Settler Violence in the West Bank: A Tool of Forced Displacement](#)", Balasan Initiative for Human Rights, 10 February 2025.

⁴⁶ "[How Israel is Arming Israeli Settlers](#)", Visualizing Palestine. Date accessed: 19 July 2025.

4. Glimpses of Annexation and Settler Violence Across the Bethlehem Governorate:

1. Al-Makhroul Valley: UNESCO Site Under Siege

On 17 July 2024, Israeli settlers forcibly evicted the Kisieyh family from their land in Al-Makhroul, Bethlehem's last green area and part of a UNESCO World Heritage site, paving the way for settlement expansion despite its cultural and ecological importance (Source: BIHR, Urgent: Israeli Settlers Forcibly Evict Palestinians from Al-Makhroul).



2. Mount Herodium: Archaeology as Annexation

On 22 February 2024, Israel intensified archaeological works at Mount Herodium National Park, using historical narratives to justify annexation and obstruct Palestinian access to surrounding lands (Source: BIHR, Judaization of Bethlehem: The Case of Mount Herodium).

3. Dheisheh Refugee Camp Raids

On 5 August 2024, during a military raid on Dheisheh Refugee Camp, Israeli forces marked homes for demolition, adding to a pattern of punitive measures aimed at collective displacement (Source: BIHR, Israel Marks Homes for Demolition During Military Raid on Dheisheh Refugee Camp).



4. Khillet al-Qutn Land Bulldozing

On 20 May 2024, settlers, under military protection, bulldozed agricultural land in Khillet al-Qutn, south of Bethlehem, erasing livelihoods and advancing territorial control (Source: BIHR, Escalating Settler Violence in the West Bank: Lands Bulldozed in Khillet al-Qutn).

5. Al-Khader Encroachment

On 29 April 2024, new settler roads and infrastructure projects in Al-Khader strategically fragmented Palestinian territory and isolated communities from their agricultural lands (Source: BIHR, Israel's Annexation Push into AlKhader, South of Bethlehem).



6. Wadi Fukin Siege

On 12 May 2024, Wadi Fukin faced systematic intimidation, including raids, road closures, and settlement expansion, threatening its unique agricultural ecosystem and community resilience (Source: BIHR, Systematic Intimidation and Escalating Measures in WadiFukin, West of Bethlehem).

7. War on Gaza Fallout in Bethlehem

On 18 March 2024, the war in Gaza further fragmented Bethlehem, with new checkpoints, settlement activity, and roadblocks severely limiting movement and access to livelihoods (Source: BIHR, The Impacts of the War on Gaza on the Bethlehem Governorate).



5. International Law

After decades of prevarication, the international human rights mechanisms that were established after the Second World War have repeatedly found Israel's occupation, annexation by stealth, and its associated practices against the Palestinians to be illegal. While in January 2024 the International Court of Justice (ICJ) found a plausible risk that Israel was committing genocide in Gaza, and an October 2024 report from UN Special Rapporteur Francesca Albanese warned of the risk of genocidal intent in the West Bank and concluded that there were "reasonable grounds to believe that Israel had committed acts of genocide in Gaza", and that "The devastation inflicted on Gaza is now metastasizing to the West Bank, including East Jerusalem... The only inference to be reasonably drawn from all this is of a clear intention to attack 'the group's capacity to renew itself, and hence to ensure its long-term survival' ".⁴⁷ This report focuses on the crimes Israel has committed and is committing in the Bethlehem Governorate in the West Bank to drive its annexation of Palestinian land: a permanent and therefore unlawful occupation, forced displacement, apartheid and persecution. It clearly outlines that "Consequently, components of conduct, such as repeated forced displacement, that result in the disconnection from the land ... must be considered 'significant as indicative of the presence of a specific intent ... inspiring [other genocidal] acts' ".⁴⁸

Under International Humanitarian Law (IHL), military occupation (also called belligerent occupation) is meant to be temporary, but this law does not define what temporary means. While IHL does not explicitly prohibit a 'prolonged' occupation, it clearly specifies that the

⁴⁷ ["Genocide as colonial erasure – Report of Francesca Albanese, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967"](#), United Nations, 1 October 2024.

⁴⁸ Ibid, para 47.

occupying power may not implement any measures that make the occupation permanent.⁴⁹ A former UN special rapporteur and the UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, and Israel have both concluded that the changes Israel has made to the occupied West Bank since 1967, including the establishment of settlements, the annexation of land and the exploitation of natural resources – notably water – are steps Israel has taken to make its occupation permanent, which thereby becomes illegal.⁵⁰

It is hardly credible that the presence of 750,000 settlers and the massive infrastructure Israel has supported to protect and sustain them is intended as anything but permanent. Further, the statements of the Israeli government and the settlers themselves to the effect that ‘Judea and Samaria’ – the anachronistic and historically misleading terms Israel lifts from history to refer to the West Bank – are integral parts of Israel, is strong evidence that Israelis and their government do not view the occupation as temporary. The fictions Israel has employed to obfuscate the permanence of its occupation, from avoiding formal legal annexation and the pretense that Palestinians in the West Bank are governed under Jordanian law to the ‘peace process’ which would lead to a ‘two-state solution’ that Israel actively undermined by continuing and expanding its settlements on Palestinian land, are just that: fictions.

Further, the Fourth Geneva Convention makes it clear that an occupying power deporting or forcibly transferring the civilian population of an occupied territory or transferring its own population into that occupied territory is illegal.⁵¹ These acts are considered to be war crimes and grave breaches of international law, and as made clear in this report in its settlement enterprise, Israel has clearly committed both of these crimes.

The crime of apartheid is more than an emotive and pejorative term intended to liken Israel to the former situation in South Africa. It is defined in international law as “inhuman acts committed for the purpose of establishing and maintaining domination by one racial group of persons over any other racial group of persons and systematically oppressing them.” Israel’s occupation and annexation by stealth in the West Bank clearly meets the three primary elements of the crime of apartheid as established under the Apartheid Convention and the Rome Statute: an intent to maintain a system of domination in the West Bank by Israelis over Palestinians, systematic oppression by Israelis over those Palestinians, and *inhuman acts* carried out on a widespread or systematic basis by Israelis against Palestinians pursuant to those policies.⁵² As set out in this report above, Israel’s systematic dispossession of Palestinians in its annexation by stealth clearly meets this definition, accurately describing the situation in the West Bank. In July 2024, the ICJ found that Israel’s entire presence in the oPt is unlawful, and that it was responsible for the crime of apartheid, ruling that Israel should immediately cease all settlement activity, repeal all

⁴⁹ [“The \(il\)legality of Israel’s Prolonged Occupation of the Palestinian Territory: Perspectives From the UN Special Rapporteur and Commission of Inquiry’s September 2022 Reports”](#), *Opinio Juris*, 07 March 2023.

⁵⁰ [“Israeli occupation of Palestinian territory illegal: UN rights commission”](#), United Nations News, 20 October 2022.

⁵¹ [“Rule 129: The Act of Displacement”](#) and [“Rule 130: Transfer of Own Civilian Population into Occupied Territory”](#), International Humanitarian Law Databases, International Committee of the Red Cross.

⁵² [“A Threshold Crossed: Israeli Authorities and the Crimes of Apartheid and Persecution”](#), Human Rights Watch, 27 April 2021; [“International Convention on the Suppression and Punishment of the Crime of Apartheid”](#), G.A. r.,es. 3068 (XXVIII), 28 U.N. GAOR Supp. (No. 30) at 75, U.N. Doc. A/9030 (1974), 1015 U.N.T.S. 243, entered into force July 18, 1976; [“Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court”](#), International Criminal Court.

discriminatory legislation and measures, and provide full reparation for damage caused to Palestinians.⁵³

Under international law, the crime of persecution stands with apartheid as a crime against humanity. Persecution, as established by the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC), is the intentional and severe deprivation of fundamental rights on racial, ethnic, and other grounds.⁵⁴ There are two elements to this crime, both of which, as set out in this report, Israel, in its occupation and annexation by stealth of the West Bank, clearly meets: severe abuses of fundamental rights committed on a systematic basis, and discriminatory intent.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The legal consequences of Israel's commission of the crimes of genocide, apartheid, persecution, and its obviously unlawful and permanent occupation of Palestinian territory for all states are clear. Third, States must not recognize, render aid or assistance in maintaining the situation in the occupied Palestinian territories created by Israel's illegal measures, including those aimed at advancing the annexation in those territories occupied by Israel since 1967. However, Israel's occupation of Palestine has long proven immune to the pressure of international law, protected as Israel is by the active support of the US, which, in terms of key international institutions, occupies a central and hegemonic position, and the tacit complicity of the EU. In cases like Israel, in which international law is clear and the violations are and have been obvious to all impartial parties for a long time, states need to stop treating international law like an option, not an obligation.

Given the US veto and the fact that many EU states will not comply with their international legal obligations vis-à-vis Israel and its occupation/creeping annexation of Palestinian territory, this report advocates for a multifaceted approach in which international good faith actors continue exerting pressure and put an end to Israel's systematic violations. Bethlehem, as a key locus of settlement in the West Bank in which Israel's project of confiscating, settling, and annexing Palestinian land and dispossessing and persecuting Palestinians is arguably the most advanced, is an ideal test case for the international community in how to counter it effectively.

Pursuant to this goal, the BIHR recommends that the UN, EU, and state actors pursue an approach that mixes diplomatic pressure, legal accountability, and financial and practical support to Palestinian communities and civil society organizations in response to activities that advance Israel's annexation by stealth of the Bethlehem governorate and the broader West Bank. Cooperation, trade, and diplomatic relations with Israel should be linked directly to measurable progress toward halting and reversing annexation and settlement activities.

Support should aim to address both: i) the immediate impact of Israel's activities on Palestinians in the governorate; and ii) the legal elements of Israel's annexation policy. Where necessary, member states of the EU (for instance) should not delay collective action at

⁵³ [“World Court Finds Israel Responsible for Apartheid”](#), Human Rights Watch, 19 July 2024; [“Legal Consequences arising from the Policies and Practices of Israel in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem”](#), International Court of Justice, 19 July 2024.

⁵⁴ [“Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court”](#), International Criminal Court.

the multilateral level in the absence of unanimity and instead pursue plurilateral policies with other like-minded member states, especially to increase diplomatic pressure on Israel and impose meaningful costs on the Israeli government, senior officials, and entities implicated in perpetrating violations of international law in Bethlehem.

The United Nations agencies, including the UN Human Rights Council and Special Rapporteurs, should:

- Issue regular, periodic disaggregated reporting on Israeli violations to document instances within Bethlehem of demolitions, land appropriation, settlement construction, mass arrests, and forced displacement to help address the absence of reliable statistics specific to the governorate.
- Weave disaggregated statistics and geospatial data into regular reporting from, for instance, the UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, which currently covers instances in the broader West Bank but does not consistently cover violations in the governorate and their specific impacts on the remaining Palestinian Christians.

The EU and its member states should:

- Encourage and facilitate international investigations into forced displacement, settlement expansion, and land appropriation in Bethlehem, with their specific impacts on the remaining Palestinian Christian presence and the broader West Bank.
- Support international legal efforts through, for instance, the International Criminal Court (ICC) to hold to account Israeli officials, entities, and individuals who violate international law through activities that advance Israel's de facto annexation policies, including land appropriation, forced displacement, and demolition of Palestinian communities and structures.
- Provide funding to local human rights and civil society organizations working to monitor and document such violations in Bethlehem to help fill these gaps in reporting. Issue meaningful sanctions and measures to hold the Israeli government, senior officials, and entities to account for violations of international law.
- Continue imposing targeted sanctions, specifically asset freezes and travel bans into the Schengen zone—on individuals and entities directly involved in planning or implementing annexation policies or linked to serious human rights abuses in Bethlehem and the West Bank more broadly.
- Prohibit the import of goods and services originating from settlement areas to ban trade with Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories.
- Prohibit national individuals and companies in their respective jurisdictions from investing in or providing support to settlement expansion.
- Pursue the partial suspension of trade provisions and benefits granted to Israel in response to the repeated violations of human rights and international law with the EU-Israel Association Agreement, and the pact's Article 2 that links the trade relationship to respect for human rights, being a key tool for the bloc's members to impose significant measures against the Israeli government.
- Implement wider financial and business measures, including the suspension of an aviation agreement and limiting scientific and technological cooperation with Israel.

The State of Palestine should:

- Develop and implement a strategy for much deeper engagement in supporting local municipalities, NGOs, protection committees, and communities, especially in Area C.
- Promote more energetically the touristic and agricultural importance of the Bethlehem region, especially given Bethlehem's historical significance and its tourist potential. This includes the availability of information, promotion of touristic activities, subsidies to the Palestinian farmers and developers, regularization of land deeds, and other incentives for land development and usage.
- Further international diplomatic advocacy around the plight of local communities within Bethlehem.

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