



Further Fragmented Reality: The Impacts of the War on Gaza on the Bethlehem Governorate

Introduction

When addressing the intricacies of the political situation in Palestine, it is critically reductive to consider the West Bank in isolation from the context of the Gaza Strip. Indeed, the aftermath of October 7th has ushered in an unprecedented surge in Israeli aggression against Palestinians in the West Bank, marking a drastic escalation from an already grave situation. It is imperative to acknowledge that even shortly before October 7th, the West Bank witnessed significant peaks in settlement expansions, settler terrorism, pervasive increase in checkpoints and blockades and an alarming rise of Palestinians killed by the Israeli Occupation Forces (IOF). This pre-existing turbulence sets the logical foundation of understanding the underlying context behind the violent and illegal escalations by the Israeli occupation in the West Bank.

The interconnectedness of the situations in Gaza and the West Bank necessitates a holistic understanding of the situation in the West Bank following October 7th. Ever since, the West Bank has become a militarized zone, with a significant spike in settlement activity and Israeli settler violence, overly surrounded by newly established checkpoints and blockades all across the West Bank. The year 2023 emerged as the deadliest year on record for Palestinians in the West Bank, with about 578 individuals being killed by Israeli settlers and soldiers, 344 of whom were killed after October 7th¹. Post this date, over 7,000 Palestinians have been arrested and subjected to dire

¹ The information provided by the UNOCHA and is subjected to date <https://reliefweb.int/report/occupied-palestinian-territory/palestinians-west-bank-2023-was-deadliest-year-record>, <http://surl.li/rmwlnl>

conditions in detention, alongside inhumane accounts of torture². Furthermore, the policy of forcible transfer and displacement has seen a dramatic increase, with about 1,208 Palestinians, including 586 children, being displaced since October 7th³. This disastrous situation expanded in the West Bank as a whole, and is rather very evident in the Bethlehem Governorate.

The Bethlehem Governorate– with all of its historical and cultural significance, has been facing an escalating crisis due to the ongoing war on Gaza. Israel’s war on Gaza following the events of October 7th and its ramifications on Bethlehem Governorate are indeed big concerns. The emergence of new and/or harsher forms grave violations of fundamental rights, including forcible displacement, movement restrictions, settler violence and terrorism and settlement expansion, as follows:

Restrictions on Movements

Immediately following the events of October 7th, the IOF have significantly raised the restrictions on movement for Palestinians in the Bethlehem Governorate, closing off the entrances of Palestinian villages and cities and separating them from one another. This was done through installing a total of 47 new military gates across the Governorate and 30 new cement blocks on agricultural roads that lead to main roads⁴. All these new constructed restrictions add to the already existing 21 military towers, 6 main checkpoints and the expansion of 17 km to the annexation wall in its different forms, either as cement blocks or electrified fences across the Governorate. It is important to highlight the egregious conditions Palestinians endure at checkpoints, where, after enduring prolonged delays, numerous people have reported instances of degrading treatment, including physical assault, torture, invasive inspections, and arbitrary detentions, often without any justification. With all these restrictions, the area is now marked with the highest number of checkpoints due to its strategic proximity to Jerusalem. This expansion of restrictions is deeply connected with the Israeli ideology of Bethlehem being a part of a “Greater Jerusalem”.

Such barriers have undoubtedly caused wide fragmentations between the Palestinian communities and kept them in isolation from one another. They have also severely inhibited Palestinians’ access to their lands in agricultural and open spaces, such as Al-Makhrour and Al-Khader, causing devastating economic impacts on rural economies. A main example is the damage of the olive harvesting season which marks a cornerstone in the Palestinian economy and cultural identity.

² The information provided is last updated on Feb, 13th, 2024
<https://english.wafa.ps/Pages/Details/141642#:~:text=09%3A25%20PM-.Over%20%2C000%20Palestinians%20detained%20by%20Israel%20in,since%20October%20%2D%20Detainees'%20institutions>

³ This information is provided by UNOCHA and is subjected to date
<https://www.ochaopt.org/content/about-4000-palestinians-displaced-west-bank-2023>

⁴ Interview with Mr. Hasan Brejeh- The Colonization and Wall Resistance Commission, 2024

Settlement Expansion & Settlers' Aggression

Post October 7th, the IOF, the Israeli Civil Administration (ICA) and the settlers have been working reciprocally in conducting mass aggressions against Palestinians, their lands and resources in the Bethlehem Governorate. Israel's illegal land grab and control of resources have been rapidly accelerating following the events of October 7th. This period witnessed increasing military orders of land confiscation and, at the meantime, new approvals for constructing new settlement units. Most recently, the confiscation of 700 donums of Arab Al-Rashayda's and Arab Al-Ta'amra's lands to the favor of building new settlements or constructing new streets connecting settlements to each other. Notable incidents include the confiscation of vast areas (around 1500 donums) for the expansion of the Ma'ale Amos settlement and the creation of a new settler road linking Husan, Wadi Fukin, and Al-Jaba to facilitate further settlement activities⁵. This settler expansion not only displaces Palestinian families and causes losses of agricultural lands, but it also aims to solidify control over strategic areas, posing a significant threat to the Palestinian presence in those areas.

Shortly following October 7th, settler violence has been drastically increasing, with over 94 recorded incidents of aggression against Palestinians and their properties (including demolishing buildings and uprooting trees) in the Bethlehem Governorate alone. Notably, 10 families were also forcibly transferred from their homes in areas such as Tuqoa, Ubaydiya, Zatara, Rashayda, Beit Tamar and Kisan. Moreover, in the rural areas of the Bethlehem Governorate, Palestinians were even forcibly displaced from the caves they inhabited in their own lands, while Israeli settlers have published video advertisements to promote "touristic settlements" in the caves from which Palestinians were forcibly displaced since they overlook the Dead Sea.

In the last period, the IOF also confiscated caravans, sheep, and agricultural machinery that were later given to settlers. Additionally, the Israeli government has significantly relaxed gun restrictions for settlers in the West Bank and called for the free distribution of weaponry. This has unequivocally weaponized settlers' violence, intensified their aggression towards more brutal attacks, further radicalized their actions, and systematically banned Palestinians from accessing their lands and practicing their basic human rights.

The expansion of settlements and the increasing number of settlers' violent acts have been met with full impunity provided by the Israeli authorities. The situation in Battir is a clear example of a widely expansive settler activity. Palestinians have tried to lodge complaints within the ICA to prevent illegal settler activities in their privately-owned lands near Battir and the notably

⁵ The information provided is last updated in February 2024 <https://cwrc.ps/file/attachs/2041.pdf>

increasing settler attacks have been met with no response, allowing for further expansion of settler colonialism in and around the Bethlehem Governorate to be imposed as facts on the ground.

More evidence on the forced displacement of Palestinian communities is particularly clear in the case of Shoshahla, where all buildings, including even significant historic ones, dating as far back as 1878, were massively destroyed Post October 7th by the ICA to make way for settlement roads and more vicious expansion of settler control.

The war on Gaza has given settlers the chance to exploit these events to impose more irreversible facts on the ground, ranging from settlements expansion, roads construction, displacing Palestinian families, restrictions on movement and even colonial pastoral activities. Settler colonialism is now more evident than ever, where a complete illegal land grab and resources is taking place, legitimized by the Israeli government and geared by illegal settlers in the West Bank. This brutal war on Gaza has clearly had a plethora of devastating effects on the West Bank, including the Bethlehem Governorate, where basic human rights are infringed upon, and the economic, cultural, and social fabric of Palestinian communities in and around the Bethlehem Governorate are threatened on a daily basis.

Lastly, it is imperative to recognize that the deteriorating situation in the West Bank unfolds amidst a clear consensus within International Law regarding the illegality of such actions. Yet, this unfolds within a context of seeming impunity to the Israeli authorities. The international community's failure to hold Israel accountable has emboldened a cycle of increased violence and constant violations against Palestinians' basic human rights. The situation in the Bethlehem Governorate, and throughout the West Bank, is worsening by the day, and will continue to escalate without an end to Israel's impunity.