

Israel is “Targeting Christian-Palestinian Communities in the West Bank”. Confiscating Lives, One Hectare at a Time

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The expansion of Israel's 'separation barrier' is targeting Christian-Palestinian communities in the West Bank, reports Noreen Sadik.

On 17 August, Issa al-Shatleh, of Beit Jala, Palestine, started his day with news that Israeli soldiers were on the land that had belonged to his family for hundreds of years. When he arrived, he found 'they were destroying the land, and cutting my ancient olive trees, some hundreds of years old'. 'They came without a warning,' he said.

And it is not just al-Shatleh's land that is being confiscated. Close to 3 hectares of private land were razed that morning and 45 trees, some of them over 100 years old, were uprooted. As landowners tried to stop the destruction, violent clashes broke out, sending al-Shatleh's brother to the hospital.



The Cremisan valley has long been a source of dispute: here, in 2013, men plant olive trees to protest the land confiscations taking place. at the © Labour Palestine

Beit Jala is located in the Cremisan Valley, near the Bethlehem area in Palestine. It lies between the illegal Israeli settlements of Gilo in East Jerusalem and the illegal West Bank settlement Har Gilo. Approximately 16,000 people live there, the majority of whom are Christian. Christians number about 2% of the population of the West Bank.

The Cremisan Valley is home to the Salesian Sisters' Convent and school, and to the 19th-century Salesian Monastery and Cellars.

The green, fertile land is a source of livelihood for many local families, and is dotted with pine, apricot and olive trees, as well as other agricultural delicacies, including grapevines, used by the Cremisan winery. Not only is it a place of spirituality, it also serves as the last piece of agricultural and recreational land available to residents of Bethlehem.

For years, it has also been a source of contention and legal battles between Israel's Ministry of Defense and the residents of Beit Jala, including the Salesian Monastery and the Salesian Convent.

Extending the wall

In 2006, the Israeli military declared its plan to extend the already-existing Separation Barrier, which had gaps in it, thereby dividing the land of Beit Jala.

The army's original plan would have led to the confiscation of privately and church-owned land, and would separate 58 Palestinian families from their agricultural lands, affecting their livelihoods.

It would also have left the monastery and orchards on the Israeli side of the barrier, and the convent and school on the Palestinian side. Access between the two sides would have had to be given via an agricultural gate. With the convent and school surrounded by the barrier, and a military road nearby, hundreds of schoolchildren would essentially be living in a military zone.

On 24 April 2013, the Special Appeals Committee of the Tel Aviv Magistrate's Court approved the land confiscation for the Separation Barrier along a route that would have annexed 75% of the convent's property and enclosed it on three sides.

Two years later, this past April, after years of fighting to keep their lands, the residents of Beit Jala enjoyed the sweet taste of victory when the Israeli Supreme Court ruled against the Ministry of Defense's proposal. The Court ordered the Ministry to find a route which would be less disruptive to the Palestinians.



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On 6 July 2015 however, Beit Jala residents were shocked when the Court reversed its April decision, thereby permitting the Ministry of Defense to begin building the extension following an alternative route. The Ministry was instructed to leave monastery and convent lands untouched.

According to NGO Stop the Wall, 'The Supreme Court ruling applies the need to re-route the Wall only as far as the lands surrounding the Salesian Sisters' Convents and the Salesian Monastery and its agricultural lands. The court ruled that the Israeli authorities can initiate building the Wall on privately owned lands in Beit Jala.'

Construction of the Separation Barrier between Israel and the West Bank, also known as the Wall, began in 2002. Israel claims that it is a security measure designed to prevent attacks by Palestinians in the West Bank. In 2004, the International Court of Justice declared that the 'construction by Israel of a wall in the Occupied Palestinian Territory and its associated regime are contrary to international law'.

Hundreds of hectares were confiscated from Beit Jala to build the 3 settlements of Gilo, Har Gilo and Giv'at Hamatos, as well as the part of the wall currently standing. The new extension to the wall is going to destroy another 350 hectares.

Residents of Beit Jala consider it to be a land grab, a means of linking Gilo and Har Gilo, and therefore annexing further Palestinian land to Israel.

According to Israeli human rights organization B'tselem, 85% of the barrier's planned route of 709 kilometres runs through Palestinian land, rather than on the Green Line (representing the 1948-established borders). Upon completion, 46% of Palestinian land will have been annexed, and the barrier will be almost twice as long as the border, as it zigzags around Palestinian communities.

'What can we do if the world doesn't stand with us? The land of Jesus is calling you. Stop the aggression against us. We are human and we have rights. We just want to live in peace'

Meanwhile, Catholic leaders have been holding vigils every Friday in the Cremisan Valley since 2011, drawing international, diplomatic and media attention. Over the years, appeals for help have been made to several world leaders, including Pope Francis, who visited the area last year.

On 30 July 2015, the Society of St Yves Center for Human Rights, representatives of the Convent, submitted a new petition to the Supreme Court. It requested that 'the Ministry of Defense reveal and present its whole planned route of the Separation Wall in Cremisan before it proceeds with building it in the privately owned lands'.

St. Yves also requested the High Court issue an order 'to prevent the army from building the Wall before such a route plan is presented, and after allowing all parties and petitioners to submit their objections, especially for the landowners, who will incur severe damages from the construction of the Separation Wall'.

But in spite of that, while the landowners and residents of the community were waiting for yet another decision from the Israeli Supreme Court, the bulldozers rolled in, beginning the construction of the extension of the barrier.

A solidarity tent has been set up on the land, and public events and protests have been organized.

'We are calling on the European Union and the international community, including the Vatican, to go beyond their statements of concern and condemnations, and to put real pressure on Israel to stop the construction of the Apartheid Wall, dismantle the Wall and the settlements and to respect international law and human rights,' Stop the Wall declared.

In Beit Jala, frustrated and angry, al-Shatleh says: 'What can we do if the world doesn't stand with us? The land of Jesus is calling you. Stop the aggression against us. We are human and we have rights. We just want to live in peace.'

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