

The Eastern Wall: Closing the circle of our ghettoization

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More than a year has passed since the Occupation Forces declared the first section of the Apartheid Wall - running from Zaboba near Jenin to Masha in the Qalqiliya district - complete. Today rapid construction marks the second phase of the project surrounding Jerusalem, Ramallah, Bethlehem and Hebron. Meanwhile, away from public attention, the Occupation has started the third phase of the Wall project and begun annexing and ethnically cleansing the Jordan Valley. Under the official title of "development", the Jordan Valley has become a "Major Governmental Project" for settlement expansion. The result has been the destruction of Palestinian land, fresh house demolitions, and the expulsion of Palestinian Bedouins. This week the Occupation closed two of the four "terminals" that control Palestinian movement in or out of the Valley and begun the isolation of northern areas. In the South, "flying checkpoints" make any presence of Palestinians without Israeli permit - including landowners, Bedouins or family members - impossible.

The final step in the annexation of the Valley has begun.

Judaizing the Jordan Valley

The Jordan Valley has always been a key target for Zionist expansionism. It provides access to the water reserves of the River Jordan. The hilltops yield control over a significant portion of the West Bank, providing the means for the Occupation to seal their grip over this part of Palestine and encircle towns and villages. The first Zionist settlements in the West Bank were established in the Valley, and today the Apartheid Wall continues the project of Palestinian expulsion.

Since 1967 the Occupation has built 21 colonies in the Jordan Valley, currently held by around 6300 settlers. They have been boosted by the arrival of a new group of settlers, redeployed this summer from the "Gush Katif Bloc" in Gaza. They control a major part of the Valley which accounts for around 28% of the Palestinian West Bank lands. The Zionist development project invested the sums of 60 million NIS (\$13 million) in 2004. This was joined by an additional 58 million NIS (\$11 million) in 2005, and a further 85 million NIS (\$19 million) is slated for 2006- 2008. Pumping an additional 203 million NIS of money in 5 years - for the colonization of the Jordan Valley - threatens to extinguish the presence of Palestinians in the area.

Binyamin Rom, the Occupation's agricultural minister, pronounced in an interview with Ha`aretz newspaper (8/9/2004) that Israel's intentions are to confiscate 32,000 dunums of land to expand the settlements here. This number includes 3,200 dunums used as military camps that will be evacuated and handed over to the Jewish settlers. The remaining 28,800 dunums will be confiscated directly from the Palestinian population.

Rom explained how the vast amount of land should be secured for Jewish rule and supremacy: "The plan which has already won approval from within different ministries will increase the number of residents in 21 settlements by 50 percent in a year and then by a further 50 percent in the following year."

The full extent of the land theft is laid bare from some basic statistics. Out of 2,400 km² that make up the territory of the Jordan Valley, 455.7 km² is already considered as "military closed areas." This project will put a total of 1655.5 km² of lands under the control of already existing settlements. Even though the Occupation declared its intention to lower the "security area" confiscated at the border with Jordan from 650 km² to 243

km², the total of confiscated lands will total 2354.2 km². This leaves only 45 km² of lands for Palestinians use, 10km² taken up by built up areas.

That process is well underway. Away from the glare of the world's media, a fresh wave of Palestinian expulsion is occurring. Land confiscation is intensifying. Settlement expansion, house demolitions and continuous harassment combine to make life impossible for Palestinians. Soon, what will remain of the Valley will be a ghetto of Jericho city, a cluster of small isolated villages without land, and the conditions necessary for a catastrophic Palestinian exile.

The Expulsion of the Palestinian population

The Occupation started this project with a series of "official orders". First, military orders for Bedouins forcing them to leave the area starting in the north of the Jordan Valley, next to Tubas, running to the south and the Arab Rashaideh area. Secondly, the demolition of tens of houses and barracks in Palestinian villages. These have threatened to ruin the entire village of Aqaba (north east Tobas). Finally, land confiscation of thousands of dunums to expand and strengthen already existing settlements.

Palestinian Bedouins, as a population that dwell across large areas of land, have been a central target of the Occupation since 1948 when 50,000 Bedouins were expelled from the Negev (Naqab) desert to Jordan, and to the vast areas of land between Jerusalem and Jericho in the Jordan Valley. In the latest phase of aggression, for the last remaining Bedouins in the Negev as well as in the Jordan Valley, definitive expulsion is an imminent threat.

In the Jordan Valley, the violence escalated a few months ago. In April 2005, Occupation Forces forced 300 Palestinian families (1500 persons) from the eastern areas of Tobas to leave their lands. The families of Herni, Daragma, Milhim and Abu Amer used to live on 10,000 dunums of land which fed around 6000 cattle and on which they planted wheat and rice.

Later this year, hundreds of Bedouins in Sawahreh Al-Sharkiya (in the central region of the Jordan Valley) were ordered to abandon their land. These Bedouins depended upon 22,000 dunums of land for grazing with their 7000 strong herd of cattle, and used 300 dunums of it for farming. This expulsion came with a confiscation order of 212 dunums for the footprint of the Apartheid Wall. The Wall here aims to isolate the Bedouins from all these lands that extend from the checkpoint east of Sawahreh at the outskirts of Jerusalem to the Dead Sea and up to Khan Ahmar to the north of Jericho.

Furthermore, in the southern part of Jordan Valley, southeast of Bethlehem, the Occupation has expelled 6 families from the area. They destroyed the 20 animal shelters used for around 22,000 head of cattle and 500 camels which belonged to the people here. This area, known as Arab Rasheideh, has more than 20 water wells and has always been targeted for such water resources. Since 1967, the Occupation has confiscated 5000 dunums in the area to facilitate the building and subsequent expansion of the Ma`ale Amos settlement.

Other than the land confiscation, cattle has been continually "detained" by the Occupation and only restituted to the owners after payment of fines. This week, the first cases are reported in which the cattle are being simply stolen from their Palestinian owners.

The confiscation of the lands in the Jordan Valley, running south until Hebron, combined with the harassment of shepherds and farmers has systematically undermined the Palestinian cattle industry and depriving our people of yet another vital source of income.

Demolitions

It is not just animal shelters and livelihoods which have been destroyed. Dozens of houses have been demolished in the Jordan Valley in an ongoing process. Four houses were demolished in Fasayel village in north Jericho. The 1500 inhabitants of Fasayel are forbidden to engage in any construction activity, and the village has been denied access to the necessary infrastructures required for basic services such as water and electricity. On top of this, regular harassment and attacks from settlers in both Tomer (south of the village) and Beitzaal (north of the village) have rendered life subject to the most ruthless and brutal military Occupation.

Jeftlik is another example of the attack on the Palestinian villages in the Jordan Valley. Here, 4 buildings, which were home for 35 people, have been demolished. Additionally, 12 animal shelters were destroyed. The people totally lost their two main sources of living: farming and income from animal products.

Meanwhile, a total disaster threatens to engulf Al-Akaba village. Most of the population (700 of 1000 people) were expelled after the 1967 war and prevented from going back to the village. Now, the head of village council, Sami Sadek, has received 16 demolition orders threatening most buildings within the village. This includes the village kindergarten, the health center, mosque, power station, local farmer's union building and many other houses. Life here is already determined by drastic conditions, with continual confiscation of animals and ID cards, and arbitrary detention of villagers in the nearby military camp.

Settlements building and expansion

Alongside the Gaza settlers arriving to colonize the Jordan Valley, fresh confiscation orders are bringing about the conditions for Palestinian ghettoization. Three months ago settlers in the Rotam colony fenced-off a 1000 dunum bloc of land to expand the settlement. Meanwhile construction activities are ongoing next to Miskyot settlement, south of Rotam. Huge construction equipment and bulldozers are working daily to prepare land and infrastructure for a new settlement in that area close to the main road connecting the north Jordan Valley with Tobas and Tamoon to the west, isolating Palestinians in the Jordan Valley from the rest of the West Bank.

This settlement activity is bolstered by the request for price quotations being undertaken by the Occupation housing ministry. The cost quotes are currently being developed for 700 new units to be built in two main settlements in the area. Furthermore, a huge agricultural project has been approved, including the planting of wide tracts of land, free watering services and around 22 million dollars assets for any new settlers who decide to join this project.

The third phase of the Apartheid Wall project

Racist Occupation laws and a "development" scheme for colonization brings with it a horrific reality of expulsion and ghettoization, known all too well throughout the West Bank. Fenced-in roads, military zones and settlements serve to slice up the land and isolate Palestinians. The third phase of the Apartheid Wall project, uses the above infrastructure and deploys razor wire fencing, checkpoints, trenches and roadblocks in a contiguous form to mirror the cement walls that enclose Palestinians from the west.

The vicious mixture of military zones, settlements, settler-roads, checkpoints and simple expulsion orders for the Palestinian population from their lands and houses, reflects a racist project of ethnic cleansing being driven forward with the most devastating zeal. The same practices of house demolitions and restrictions for construction that serve the relentless Judaization of Jerusalem, are being driven to new extremes in all corners of

the West Bank. While Palestinians in the Jordan Valley are forced to live in shacks and host entire schools in tents, Zionist settlers are building a new era of racist dispossession, oppression and expulsion.

The third phase of the Wall is becoming a reality in the Jordan Valley. The final aim is to ensure the region, once emptied of the Palestinian population, becomes a major asset of the Zionists` strategic interests and provides large-scale agricultural and natural resources to sustain their economy and expansion. To the South, the eastern Wall has started north of Eizarya to encircle Bethlehem and Hebron area from the East and to cut the West Bank effectively in half.

Palestinian governmental representatives are invited to the tables of global diplomacy, yet the Palestinian people and their struggle are systematically isolated from the rest of the world and the region. Physical isolation and ghettoization is part of the plan to further fragment the Palestinian struggle, as well as to put walls between our struggle and the struggle for Arab self-determination.

The noose wrapped around the neck of the Palestinian people is tightening rapidly.

While the ethnic cleansing of Jerusalem takes away the urban and commercial center of Palestinian life, the annexation and isolation of the Jordan Valley is aimed at depriving Palestinians from the bulk of their land, water resources, agricultural and cattle production.

In the face of this reality, the frenzied debates on whether the world has found in new Labor leader Peretz a "peace dove" within the Zionist camp - to promise once again a "Palestinian state" - seem outlandish. They serve to avert the worlds attention from the current conquest of Palestinian land, a process that has always been carried out with a fervent rampage be it Labor or Likud administrations, and to sooth the urgent Palestinian calls to isolate Apartheid Israel. At this stage, a two state solution theoretically might be controversial; practically it is simply an impossible aim to achieve. Negotiations for statehood without borders, its capital and land are a deception towards our own people and the rest of the world.