

Western Bethlehem Governorate: The seven villages Al Walaja | Wadi Fukin | Battir | Husan | Nahhalin | Al Jab'a | Khallet Zakariya'

Seven villages lie between the Green Line and Bethlehem in the Etzion Block of settlements. Home to approximately 19,000 Palestinians, including 6,000 UNRWA-registered refugees, the area is considered the food basket of Bethlehem governorate. Since the closures in 2000, it has become increasingly difficult to transport and sell produce in the Bethlehem and Jerusalem markets.

Agricultural production is no longer undertaken for commercial purposes and households are increasingly planting for subsistence only. Access to land has also deteriorated due to the close presence of many Israeli settlements and the expansion of their security buffer zones. The United Nations is already feeding over 1,100 families in the area through direct food aid. This number is likely to increase if subsistence farming declines due to restricted access to farmland.

According to the Barrier route revision issued on 20 February 2005, six of the villages will no longer be isolated into enclaves, but will lie within a larger 72 km² 'closed area' of the Etzion Block between the Barrier and the Green Line. The village of Al Jab'a, will lie between the Barrier and Road 367, a restricted road used only by Israeli settlers commuting between the Etzion settlement Block and Israel.

An estimated 37,000 Israeli settlers live in 12 settlements and five outposts in the Etzion Block with construction ongoing in several of the settlements. The new route of the Barrier will ensure that all the Israeli settlements fall on the 'Israeli side', together with most of the Palestinian villages' agricultural land. Israeli plans indicate that settlement expansion will continue.

Currently the Palestinian residents of these seven villages travel on restricted roads. In the near future, the Israeli authorities intend to construct a tunnel and rehabilitate internal secondary roads enabling Palestinians in the western area to access Bethlehem, east of the Barrier. This will divert Palestinian traffic from the main West Bank roads - 60, 375 and 367 - which have been restricted for Israeli settler use over the last 4 years. In addition, the Barrier will redirect Palestinian movement in the entire southern part of the West Bank further to the east, on secondary roads.

Access to land will continue to remain the key issue. Currently, even without the Barrier, access to land is already problematic:

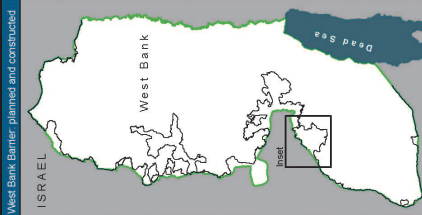
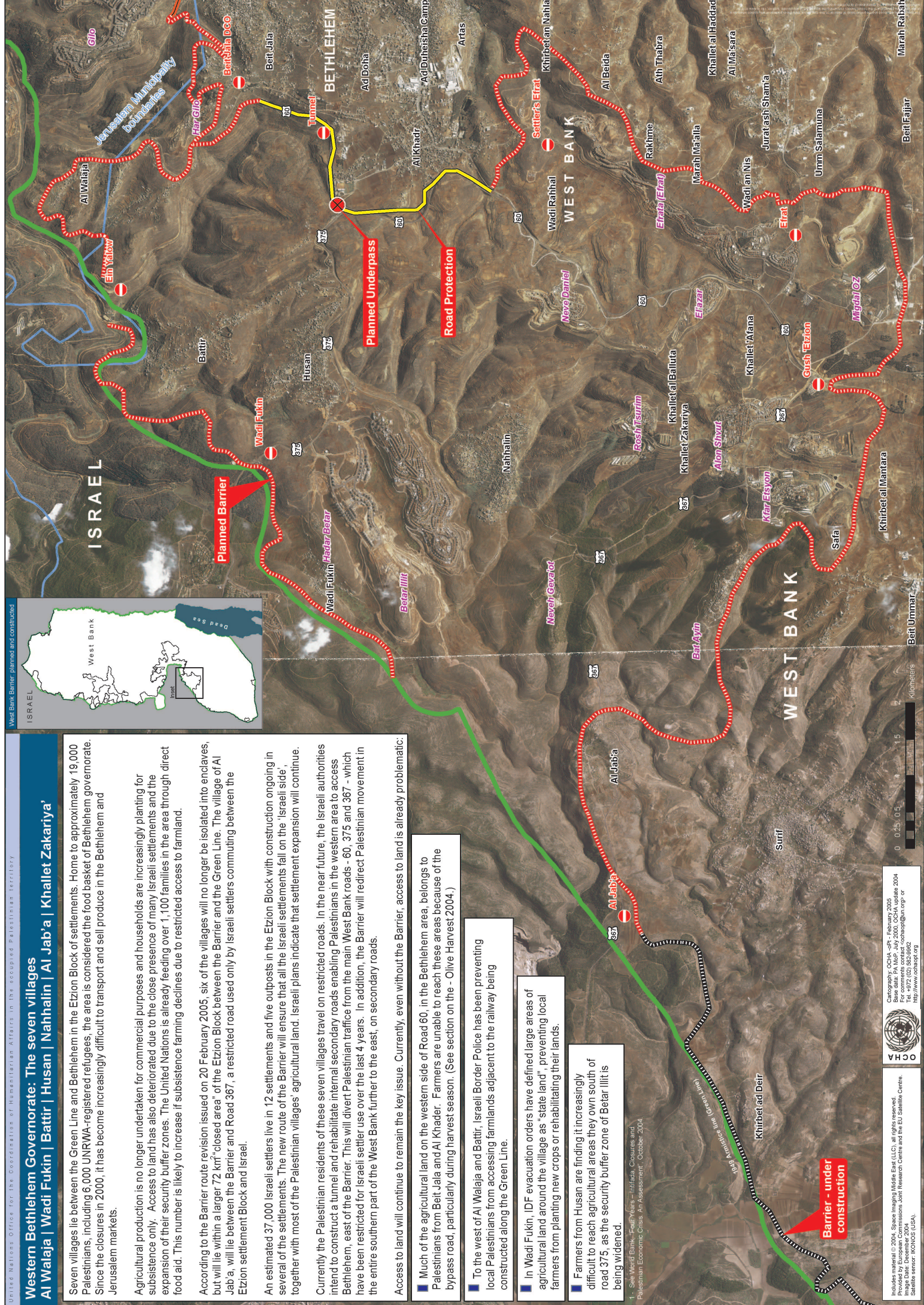
- Much of the agricultural land on the western side of Road 60, in the Bethlehem area, belongs to Palestinians from Beit Jala and Al Khader. Farmers are unable to reach these areas because of the bypass road, particularly during harvest season. (See section on the - Olive Harvest 2004.)

- To the west of Al Walaja and Battir, Israeli Border Police has been preventing local Palestinians from accessing farmlands adjacent to the railway being constructed along the Green Line.

- In Wadi Fukin, IDF evacuation orders have defined large areas of agricultural land around the village as 'state land', preventing local farmers from planting new crops or rehabilitating their lands.

- Farmers from Husan are finding it increasingly difficult to reach agricultural areas they own south of road 375, as the security buffer zone of Beter Illit is being widened.

1. See Wadi Fukin - Four Years - Infidels, Closures and Palestinian Economic Crisis, An Assessment, October 2004



West Bank Barrier planned and constructed