

# Briefing on Bethlehem for Settlements debate



Saving the world's oldest Christian community

Open Bethlehem is a film and advocacy project that works to bring greater understanding of the challenges that face Bethlehem today with a special focus on the Christian community in Bethlehem, whose numbers are being depleted because of the general instability and political and economic strife in the Palestinian territories.

Our mission is to help reverse this trend and to preserve the unique social fabric of our town which has been home to both Christian and Muslim communities for centuries. If we succeed, we would be preserving a desperately needed model in our region which would help shape a positive future for us and for our neighbours.

## **Choked by settlements**

Bethlehem today has a population of more than 220,000 people, including more than 20,000 living in three refugee camps. There are 100,000 Israeli settlers surrounding the town, including within the Israeli-expanded and annexed "Jerusalem municipality".

Settlements breach international law (e.g., Art. 49(6) as stipulated by the Fourth Geneva Convention: "The Occupying Power shall not deport or transfer parts of its own civilian population into the territory it occupies") and various UNSC resolutions (e.g., Res. 465 of 1 March 1980 calling on Israel "to dismantle the existing settlements"). Likewise, the Road Map of 30 April 2003 called for the "freezing" of all settlement expansion, including natural growth of settlements. However, fact is that Israeli settlements continue to expand unabated.

Between the settlements, the roads that connect them and the system of military and security zones that protect them **Bethlehem has now been reduced to less than 13% of its original territory.** As Xavier Abu Eid, a Palestinian Christian and senior adviser to the Palestinian Negotiations Affairs Department said: "*Bethlehem's connection with Jerusalem, its twin city, has been cut for the first time in 2,000 years of Christianity by an illegal annexation wall built by Israel.*"

The most prominent of the 20 Israeli settlements in the Bethlehem area are Gilo and Har Homa to the north; Har Gilo, Beitar Illit and Neve Daniel to the West; Efrat to the south and Nokdim and Tekoa to the East.

A lot of the land on which settlements are built was seized from private owners in Bethlehem many of whom have then decided to leave the town to seek a better life abroad. These settlements – and the Wall and checkpoints that surround Bethlehem as a result - are the main reasons why the city has the second higher unemployment rate in Palestine, only after Gaza. Unless we can reverse this urgently it is unclear if our city can have a future.

## **Bethlehem's historic and affluent past**

In better times Bethlehem was an affluent and thriving centre, but it is also a Palestinian town. As such, people face the same hardships as in other Palestinian cities and their fate is going to be determined by the prospects of a comprehensive solution that would bring lasting peace. The international community's decisions and actions in the next few years could determine whether Bethlehem rises or falls and whether the oldest Christian community in the world, can remain in the Holy Land.

## **Why Christians are leaving Bethlehem**

The lands and properties in Bethlehem were seized primarily from Christian Palestinians. Being the oldest community means that Christians have been in a better position to benefit from the town's thriving tourism industry. They owned most of the hospitality sector and of course most of the land and properties in town. Now that the future looks bleak and that the expansion of the Israeli settlements is taking even more land from the city, many more are

choosing to leave while they still have reserves to build a life abroad. The Christians are leaving in greater numbers precisely because they have the means to do so and reports warn that we might cease to be a sustainable community within our lifetime.

### **Israel's Wall in Cremisan**

For years, Palestinians have campaigned to save their land, particularly in the Cremisan area. Located between the illegal settlements of Gilo and Har Gilo, both built mainly on Beit Jala's lands, Cremisan is the latest major loss to the Bethlehem District.

The construction of the Wall will impact Palestinians ability to access their land. The valley Israel plans to further confiscate is owned by 58 Palestinian Christian families as well as by churches. More than half of Beit Jala's olive trees are located at Cremisan. A kindergarten run by Catholic Salesian nuns will be critically affected by the Israeli plans, just as the ability to reach and develop the area around the Cremisan Seminary and Winery, which employs workers from Beit Jala.

In August 2015, Israel commenced with the construction of the Wall in the northern Bethlehem Area around the Cremisan Valley in Beit-Jala.

### **Preventing Palestinian Development of Cremisan**

What could be a flourishing area of agricultural and tourist development, is being closed to Palestinian access, let alone development. It could be integrated to stimulate the Palestinian tourism sector in Bethlehem area. Furthermore, the construction of the Wall prevents Palestinians from holding traditional religious practices. For example, during the month of May, the Roman Catholic community celebrates 'May devotions to the Blessed Mary – May Crowning' – the Israeli government's plans would eventually block such a procession.

### **We choose hope – a call for action**

Israel's Wall is illegal and must be dismantled. The Bethlehem Area, and particularly Beit Jala, will not be able to survive without being able to have full control over their land and natural resources, including the Cremisan Valley.

We join with the Palestinian authorities in asking the international community to take all measures necessary to pressure Israel to permanently cease its Wall construction and excavations in and around the Cremisan Valley, as well as to refrain from further illegal actions in violation of its obligations under international law and signed agreements.

We ask the UK Government to recognise Palestine. Palestine is recognised by over 130 countries worldwide. The United Kingdom, a permanent member of the UN Security Council, should now do so as a major contribution to a two-state solution to this conflict.

As Leila Sansour, film maker and Chief Executive of Open Bethlehem says: *"It is impossible to imagine peace without ensuring an end to the Israeli occupation. Whatever the challenges ahead to end the occupation might be, we know that there is simply no other way forward."*

We choose to hope and because we do want to see a real lasting peace that would give both Palestinians and Israelis a better future.

Further information from the Palestinian Negotiations Unit: <https://www.nad.ps/en/media-room/media-brief/bethlehem-2016-facts-and-figures>

<https://www.nad.ps/en/publication-resources/factsheets/israel%E2%80%99s-colonialist-enterprise-and-archeological-excavations>

A detailed UN map is available: <http://data.ochaopt.org/humatlas2015/#/16>