

# US/ME Policy Brief

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## 'FACTS ON THE GROUND' IN ISRAEL/PALESTINE

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*The author participated in a two-week visit to Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories organized by Interfaith Peace-Builders. The group met with a broad spectrum of Israeli and Palestinian civil society organizations and activists.*

### Jerusalem

Jerusalem effectively consists of two cities, one Jewish, one Arab. Whereas these cities were at one point geographically distinct—Jews living in West Jerusalem, Arabs in East Jerusalem—the Arab half of the city has lately seen its ethnic homogeneity rent by the construction of Jewish settlements in East Jerusalem, a process ongoing since the city was conquered in 1967. These Jewish settlements—illegal under international law—are clean, affluent-looking housing complexes that are well serviced by the Greater Jerusalem municipality. The Arab neighborhoods whose physical and social contiguity the Jewish settlements fragment, on the other hand, are visibly underserved and neglected. Traveling through them, I found these areas to be overcrowded and littered with trash; the roads were unpaved, the schools few and derelict. A visual

staple of the Arab neighborhoods was their black rooftop water tanks, used to offset the insufficient level of water pressure allotted them by the city.

The reason for the overcrowding in these neighborhoods is that it is nearly impossible for Arabs to procure building permits anywhere in Jerusalem. Permits are arbitrarily denied or left indefinitely in bureaucratic limbo. Arab neighborhoods are also forbidden to expand beyond their present boundaries, which have been the same since 1967.

The surrounding land (and this goes for all Arab villages and cities in Israel) was nationalized after 1948 and turned over to the dispensation of the Jewish National Fund, which does not sell or lease land to non-Jews. If an Arab family wants to expand their home or build a new one on a vacant lot, they must do so illegally, or not at all. If they build illegally, they risk having their homes demolished on short notice (often they are given ten minutes to vacate their possessions before the bulldozers arrive). That is why the landscape of East Jerusalem is riddled with the husks of demolished Arab

homes. Jewish neighborhoods and settlements, on the other hand, have no problem purchasing land or receiving expedited permits.

This systematic discrimination, along with discrimination in the provision of municipal services, cannot be seen as other than a calculated policy of slow-motion ethnic cleansing. The goal is evidently to immiserate Arabs until they leave Jerusalem.

Although Israel formally annexed Jerusalem after 1967, the Arabs who live there, unlike Arabs residing within Israel's internationally recognized borders, are not Israeli citizens. They have no citizenship. They are legally "residents" of Jerusalem, which entitles them to certain economic benefits like subsidized healthcare, but they cannot vote in Israel's parliamentary elections nor do they have passports or other national identity documents. Traveling outside of Israel, except to the West Bank, is an arduous process for them that requires multiple authorizations. Moreover, their residency (and accompanying benefits) can be revoked if they are absent from Jerusalem for a period of three years. On our delegation, we heard reports of Arab Jerusalemites who have studied abroad only to come back and find that their right to live in the city of their birth has been revoked. The same goes for those caught residing in the suburbs beyond Jerusalem's city limits, something Arab residents are often forced to do due to the overcrowding. The IDF launches periodic night raids in order to prove that these Arabs are living outside the city, so that their residency can be revoked.

Although the notion of partitioning Jerusalem is likely defunct thanks to the proliferation of Jewish

settlements, there do still remain small concentrations of Arab residents around the Old City that could potentially serve as a truncated Palestinian capital in the event of a two-state solution. For this reason, certain radical groups of settlers have been seizing or purchasing buildings in the heart of densely populated Arab neighborhoods in order to create a Jewish demographic foothold in these areas and, in this way, prevent partition. These settler dwellings are prominent for their Israeli flags and razor-wire ramparts. We saw several of them, and attended a weekly protest against one such cluster of settlements in the neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah, where using Ottoman-era documents of dubious authenticity a settler group recently secured the legal eviction of several Palestinian families who had been living in homes there since the 1950s. These houses were given to the families by the United Nations and the Jordanian government in compensation for homes in West Jerusalem from which they had been expelled by Jewish militias in 1948. Recently, however, an Israeli court ruled in favor of a settler group that claimed to hold the original deeds to these homes. The state then evicted the Arab residents and the settlers moved in. Needless to say, Israeli courts would never entertain the congruent notion that these same evicted Arabs could reclaim the West Jerusalem properties stolen from them in 1948.

## Galilee

The other day we traveled to the Galilee area, which is inside Israel proper. In the not too distant past, the Galilee was majority Arab. Today, due to the success of Judaization policies (which have their own ministry in Israel's government, the "Ministry of Development of the Negev and Galilee"), the

number of Jews in the Galilee has surpassed the number of Arabs. The same discrimination in land and services that I described above applies equally to the Galilee. While Arab-majority cities of the Galilee have indigenous mayors, which should theoretically make the degree of discrimination in municipal services lower, the cities' budgets are in fact determined by Jewish-controlled "regional councils" in conjunction with relevant state ministries (education, industry, infrastructure). According to an advocacy organization we met with, Israel's Arab community, which currently stands at 20 percent of the total population but has needs disproportionate to its size, receives no more than 5 percent of any given ministry's annual budget, and often less.

What we saw in the Galilee, however, was far more disturbing than these statistics. Our group toured a number of "unrecognized villages"—Arab and Bedouin shantytowns that existed before 1948 but were never recognized by Israel following the creation of the state. Because they were not recognized (for reasons unspecified), their land was declared state land by the government and their homes were summarily bulldozed. Instead of emigrating, however, many villagers rebuilt their homes after each demolition, evidently using industrial detritus. The situation today is that these villagers (or what remains of them) live in corrugated iron shacks, up to fifteen in a house, without electricity, running water, or indoor plumbing. Because they are unrecognized, the state refuses to hook them up to the electricity grid or sewage system. Meanwhile, many of them are located within clear view of fully-serviced Israeli cities, some built just a few years ago on land that was originally theirs. One village we visited was almost fully encircled by the Russian-Jewish

settlement of Karmiel. The villagers live literally feet from this affluent suburb of sparkling white high-rises but lack paved roads, sewage, electricity, and schools (the children must drive or walk to a nearby village to attend class). According to another civil society advocate, there are more than 40 such villages in Israel, all of them Arab, and all of them facing possible demolition. Most notable among these is the village of al-Araqib in the Negev, which has now been demolished more than twenty times.

### Bi'lin

So far I have been discussing what happens within what Israel considers to be its legitimate borders (despite East Jerusalem's status as an occupied territory under international law). But nearly identical strategies of Judaization are also being applied in the West Bank, which has been under Israeli military occupation since 1967. Our delegation spent a night in the village of Bi'lin, which on a clear night is within view of Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, but located across the Green Line that demarcates the pre-1967 border. Bi'lin is an agricultural village whose farmers rely on their thousand-year-old olive trees to make ends meet. However, in 2002, under the pretext of security, Israel erected a wall in the West Bank that cut the villagers off from most of their agricultural lands, effectively annexing them for the expansion of nearby Israeli settlements, which at the time of our visit were undergoing further construction. The olive trees in the path of the wall were uprooted.

For the last few years, the residents of Bi'lin have mounted weekly non-violent protests against the wall. These protests have been brutally suppressed by Israel's military. According to videos we

screened, it appears that protesters are routinely fired upon with high-velocity tear gas canisters, rubber-coated steel bullets, and live ammunition—all of which can be fatal. We toured the site of the protests and discovered shell casings, spent tear gas grenades and even live bullets littering the ground. One large patch of earth emitted a foul, fecal odor that was the product of Israel's latest crowd-control method: spraying protesters with what our guides described as "sewage water." The spray was last deployed a month ago and the stench remains to this day.

There are also midnight kidnappings and imprisonment of protest leaders and participants by the IDF, including children. The twenty-year-old son of the family I stayed with was abducted from his home by soldiers in the middle of the night, dragged to a nearby olive grove, and nearly beaten to death. His brother, Abdullah, was still on the lam after being targeted for abduction. The charge against them was arranging non-violent demonstrations. In addition, several protesters and innocent bystanders have been killed by Israeli soldiers in Bi'lin, including a woman who recently died of respiratory problems after inhaling tear gas and sewage water. Our group screened a video of a soldier firing a tear gas canister directly into the chest of a local protest leader name Bassem, killing him instantly. He was unarmed.

In 2007, an Israeli court ruled that the wall should be moved back 500 meters. That decision was implemented only last month. In the process of moving the wall, the IDF set fire to much of the land being returned to Bi'lin, destroying a number of olive trees. The ground there is visibly charred. Either way, the 500 meter alteration in the wall's

path has not ended the protests, which continue to demand the dismantling of the wall altogether.

There are several other villages like Bi'lin, where the wall annexes agricultural lands and aquifers for the use of nearby settlements. But there are also other cities that have it worse. Qalqiliya, for example, is a West Bank city of 60,000 inhabitants that is entirely encircled by the wall. Gates in the wall open twice a day for two hours; otherwise, its residents are imprisoned. In the area of East Jerusalem, the wall cuts off certain Arab suburbs that once formed an organic part of the city, disrupting family, labor, and religious ties. According to a former IDF soldier, the thousands of Palestinian laborers who penetrate the wall each week in search of work belie its security justification as a bulwark against suicide terrorism. Its only ostensible purpose is land theft.

## Hebron

We also visited Hebron. Hebron is unique among West Bank cities. It has an Arab population of 250,000, and a Jewish population of around 800 armed, highly ideological settlers that have underhandedly purchased or seized homes in the heart of the city. According to locals and the testimony of a former IDF soldier stationed in Hebron, these settlers perpetually antagonize and attack the Arab population. What is more, they do so with near impunity due to the fact that they are protected by 1,200 IDF soldiers whose orders are to arrest or kill any Palestinian that defends him/herself against settler assaults. The Palestinians know this and are forced to passively absorb all measure of abuse. To illustrate this, the soldier we spoke with told the following story. Responding to cries, he entered a marketplace one day to find

several settler women violently beating the shopkeepers with rolling pins. When he demanded to know they were doing, one of them replied, "What does it look like? We're beating the Arabs." The soldier surmised they were doing this in order to provoke a violent reaction from the shopkeepers, which would oblige him (the soldier) to shoot or arrest them.

During our visit I personally witnessed a soldier striking a young boy because he was walking on a road accessible only to Jews and internationals. Our group also saw the mesh canopy that overhangs the Arab marketplace located below the settler houses. The canopy had caught cinder blocks, metal chairs, garbage, eggs, knives, and other objects thrown by the settlers onto the Arabs below. One of the overhangs had been eaten away by battery acid poured from above, and we heard reports of settlers urinating out of their windows onto the marketplace. All this, it appears, takes place in full view of an IDF watchtower. The soldiers do nothing to prevent settler rampages. It's not part of their orders. On the contrary, many of them are subservient to the settlers. We witnessed one settler command an IDF soldier to arrest our Arab guide for walking on a street where Arabs were forbidden. The soldier, who had been ignoring us hitherto, quickly began to oblige (luckily we eluded him).

In order to hear the widest variety of perspectives on the situation in Hebron, we also met with a spokesperson for the settler community, a man named David Wilder. Wilder described a situation in which Jews, not Arabs, were the party facing ethnic discrimination in Israel and the West Bank. Jews, he said, were confined to 3 percent of the city, both by agreement with the Palestinian Authority and by the disinclination of local Arabs to sell them

property. (In fact, Israel's security control of Hebron, a city with 800 Jews, ranges over 30 percent of the city, including its holiest site, the Cave of the Patriarchs.) He described what he considered Arab incitement—including the practice of shooting off fireworks to celebrate high school graduations—and cited instances of terrorism directed against Jews in Hebron during the Second Intifada. He denied the existence of premeditated settler violence, describing any attacks on the local population as the work of undisciplined youth reacting to Arab provocations. (Shortly after this meeting, our guide Issa, a local activist, recalled David Wilder holding a loaded pistol to his head as he attempted to videotape a settler pogrom.)

## South Hebron Hills

After our delegation concluded, I joined a small group of Israeli activists called Ta'ayyush ("Coexistence") in the South Hebron Hills, where they gather each Saturday to assist the local population with reconstruction and agricultural projects (at its request). As a group of Israelis and internationals, Ta'ayyush's very presence also provides these Palestinians with a measure of protection from violent settlers and apathetic military personnel who together conspire to make their lives unlivable.

Upon arrival, we split into two groups. The first was to accompany local shepherds who had lately been assaulted by settlers as they tried to bring their flocks to pasture. The purpose of this activity was not only to protect the shepherds, but also to document settler rampages that would otherwise be ignored by the military. The second group (my group) drove to the encampment of Bir al-Id to help

an older man named Hajj Ismail and his family clear rocks and debris from the ruin of their demolished home. Following a fruitless court battle, the military had carried out its demolition order a month earlier on the typical grounds of "illegal construction."

Hajj Ismail and his family are members of the most neglected substratum of Palestinian society. They are of a class referred to by village- and town-dwelling Palestinians as "cave people," for the fact that many of them inhabit (and have from time immemorial) relatively well-provisioned caves in the South Hebron Hills. In recent times, however, population growth has forced families like Hajj Ismail's to leave their caves and establish hilltop encampments like Bir al-Id, which are then declared illegal by the occupation authorities and slated for demolition. Meanwhile, these same authorities actively facilitate the creation of new Jewish settlement outposts in the area (allegedly "illegal" under Israeli law) by provisioning racist bands of Israeli "hilltop youth" with water, electricity and security. One such "illegal" outpost, whose power lines and massive cisterns strike a familiar contrast with the makeshift structures of Bir al-Id, was perched less a kilometer from Hajj Ismail's ramshackle tent.

After a few hours the two groups reunited to perform a "direct action" at the illegal outpost of Bat Maon, from which settler attacks on Palestinian schoolchildren had recently originated. (According to an Italian NGO worker who has been accompanying the children to class for several

months, settlers from Bat Maon had only days earlier beaten two American activists with lead pipes as they attempted to film these attacks.) Camcorders in hand, our group circumnavigated Bat Maon in hopes of drawing the military's attention to what was going on there. We were immediately encircled by armored vehicles and asked to leave. One of our activists demanded to know why so many soldiers had been dispatched to quell Ta'ayyush's nonviolent action while none had been tasked with investigating the recent stabbing of a Palestinian by a masked settler. Such attempts to shame the military, he later told me, had in the past succeeded in achieving marginal improvements in the conditions of the local Palestinians.

Driving back to Jerusalem, I asked one long-time member of Ta'ayyush, a mathematician named Danny, how many "leftists" of his stripe he thought existed in Israel today. He guessed a couple of hundred. (Israel's Jewish population currently stands at 5.8 million.)

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