

THE NAKBA CONTINUES: THE SILENT TRANSFER OF AL WALAJEH COMMUNITY

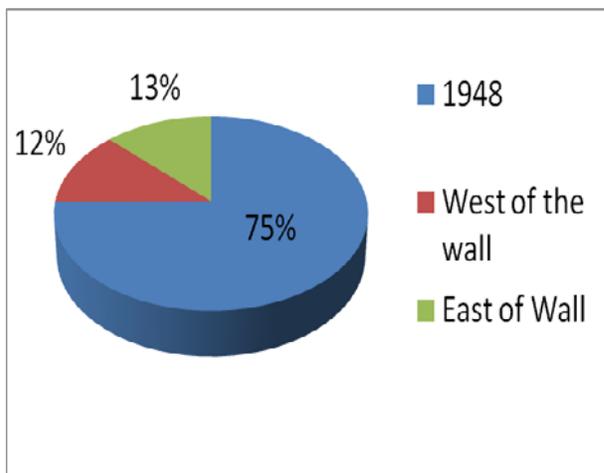
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Introduction

The Palestinian village of Al Walajeh, located 8.5 kilometers southwest of Jerusalem and 4 kilometers northwest of Bethlehem, is one of the many villages that have been drastically affected by the Israeli policies in Palestine. The creation of the Israeli Wall, a settler bypass road, checkpoints, and the neighboring Israeli settlements of Gilo and Har Gilo, as well as the planned settlement of Giv'at Yael, have all contributed to the continued decrease of Al Walajeh's population after its initial reduction in size in 1948. The revised route of the Wall encircles the village, turning it into an enclave with the only possible access to it through a future Israeli controlled checkpoint near Har Gilo settlement.

Historical Background

Time Line	Land available in (<i>Dunums</i>)
Total village boundaries	17,684
<i>See map: attached</i>	
1948	13,237
West of the wall	2,218
East of Wall	2,228
1967	4,446



Before the 1948 war, the village of Al Walajeh encompassed 17,684 dunums of land, with boundaries that lay beyond the 1949 Armistice Line (Green Line). The village was situated on a large hill, through which the Jerusalem-Jaffa railway passed daily to pick up produce grown by the villagers for sale in Jerusalem.¹

The night of October 21, 1948 witnessed the Zionist Etziyoni Brigade's attack and capture of the village, a mission that was a part of

Operation ha-Har.² After the war of 1948, the village lost 75% of its land, retaining only about 4,446 dunums of its original area. Many of the villagers were rendered refugees, with

¹ Khalidi, Walid. *All That Remains: The Palestinian Villages Occupied and Depopulated by Israel in 1948*. Washington, D.C.: Institute for Palestine Studies (1992), p. 322.

² *Ibid.*, p. 323.

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those owning property west of the Armistice line unable to return to their land. In fact, the whole village of Al Walajeh has been given refugee status by the United Nations Relief and Work Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA).

In 1967, not long after Israel occupied the West Bank and Gaza, the Israeli government began to redefine the municipal boundaries of Jerusalem. Sure enough, land confiscations increased in the 1980s when Israel annexed 2,490 more dunums of land, declaring it part of the municipality.

When the Oslo II Interim Agreement was signed between Israel and the PLO in 1995, areas in the West Bank, including Al Walajeh village, were classified into three varying areas of control: A, B, and C. Area A was defined in the agreement as areas where the Israeli military was supposed to pull out, fully transferring all responsibilities for internal security and public order to the Palestinian National Authority (PNA). In Area B, the PNA was to have full control over civil administration while Israel was to have overriding responsibility for security. Those areas that fall under the category of Area C are under full Israeli administrative and security control. Under the agreement, 113 dunums of land of Al Walajeh was designated as Area B, while the rest of the 1,956 dunums of land of the village fell under the category of Area C with Israel retaining full administrative and security control.

On February 2006, al Walajeh checkpoint was transformed into a border passage, taking away an additional 40 dunums of land from the already diminished village lands.³ Today, the village continues to face the threat of demolitions with military confiscation and demolition orders looming against it.

Land Confiscation and Home Demolitions

For the past sixty years, Palestinians have lived with the harsh reality of the occupation, facing possible land confiscation and home demolitions everyday. This is especially true in Walajeh where the villagers have watched the Israeli plunder of their land throughout the decades.

Head of village council, Salmah Halah, shares that since the beginning of the 1980s, 27 homes and farmlands have been demolished or destroyed. Due to Israeli demolition policy, many of the villagers have been displaced and have acquired refugee status. Some have been forced to take up residents in refugee camps established displaced caused by one of the Arab-Israeli wars.

³ Passia. "Jerusalem: Israeli Settlement Activities and Related Policies." < <http://www.passia.org/publications/bulletins/Jerusalem-Bulletin-2007-English/Jerusalem-bulletin-2007-%20pdf/page12.pdf>>. Retrieved on 06 July 2008.

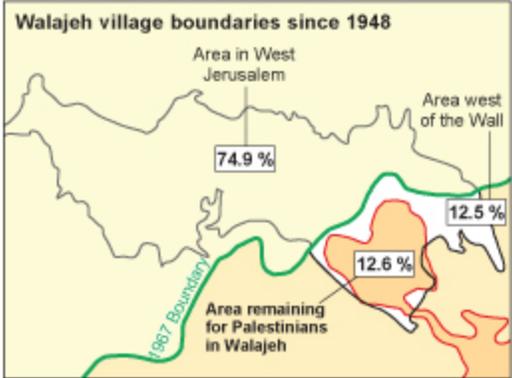
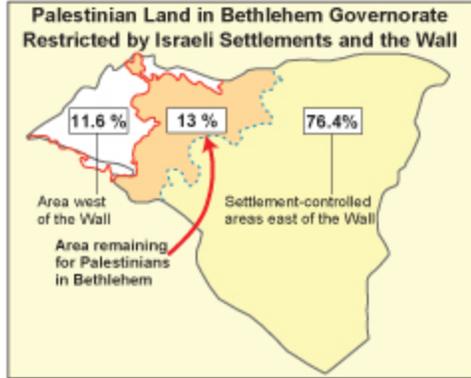
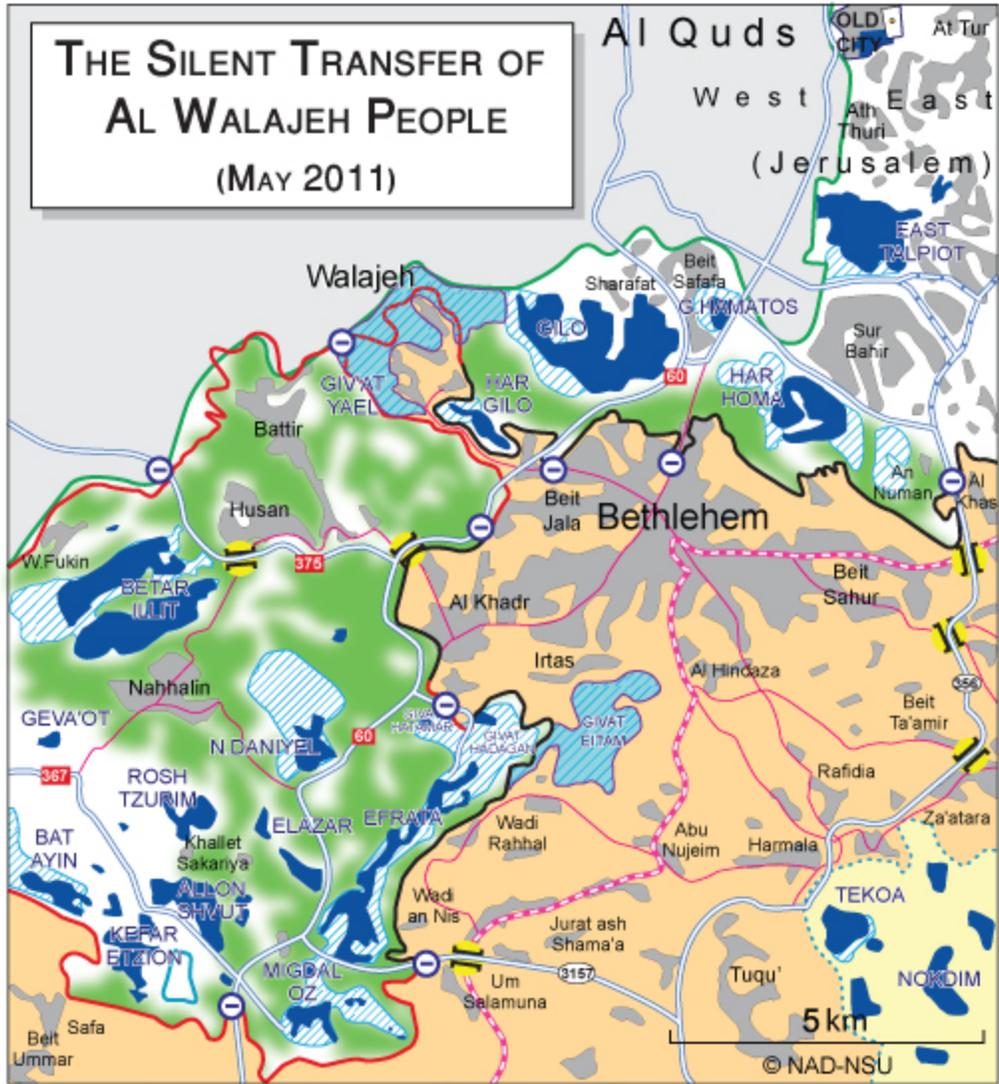
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According to Mr. Halah, when the Israeli military attempted to prevent the villagers from expanding the village's three-room schoolhouse that was inadequate for the needs of its 300 students, an Israeli court ruled that if they so much as laid down another brick, the whole structure would be demolished to the ground, leaving the village without a school. Although the village has registered refugee status, UNRWA has been unwilling to build a new school in the village that would serve as the main educational facility there so long as there is a significant risk that the structure would be demolished by Israeli authorities. As a consequence, many of the students are forced to rely on the neighboring villages of Bethlehem and Beit Jala for their education. Yet, when the construction of the Wall is finished, those students will be confined to their village. The Wall will surround the village on all sides with the exception of a single access point to the West Bank controlled by an Israeli checkpoint.

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- 1967 Boundary ("Green Line")
- Palestinian city, town, village or neighborhood
- Palestinian territory west / east of the Wall
- Palestinian cultivation isolated by the Wall
- Israeli settlement built-up area
- Planned settlement expansion area
- Proposed new settlement area
- Area of Israeli settlement control
- Israeli military base
- The Wall
- constructed
- approved or planned
- Israeli settler bypass roads
- existing
- planned
- Israeli controlled tunnel or underpass for Palestinians
- local Palestinian roads
- Israeli-proposed "alternative" Palestinian road link
- Israeli checkpoint

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The Israeli Wall and Settlements



In 2002, the Israeli cabinet decided to construct a physical barrier to separate Israel from the West Bank with security as the primary justification given. The International Court of Justice, the UN Security Council, and the UN General Assembly have all condemned the Wall as illegal and in violation of international law, including the Fourth Geneva Convention and

various UN Security Council Resolutions. However, despite the ICJ's historic ruling on July 9, 2004 which declared the Wall and Israel's settlements (colonies) as illegal, Israel has proceeded with its construction, confiscating much of the land from villages such as Al Walajeh that are deemed to be in the way of their construction.

On April 30, 2006, the Israeli cabinet approved a revised route for the Wall near Jerusalem, annexing land belonging to many Palestinian villages including Al Walajeh.⁴

Salah Halmah, head of the village council of Al Walajeh, reveals that in 2006, Israel issued military confiscation orders for 2,218 dunums of land in their village alone. A huge chunk of this land is used for agriculture which is the main source of livelihood of the villagers. As a result, many of the people of Al Walajeh lost their main source of income, driving them into poverty.

The 2,218 dunums of land that was issued military confiscation orders went beyond the boundaries of the municipality of Jerusalem, proof that the proper justification for the Wall is not security but expansion. Some of the land confiscated was incorporated in the settlement construction of Giv'at Yael. Furthermore, Salmah Halah discloses that the building of bypass road 436 has played a further role in the shrinking of the village. The said bypass road is constructed for the use of settlers alone with the purpose of connecting the surrounding Israeli settlements to each other.

⁴ Passia. "New Census Helps Palestinians in Jerusalem Numbers Game." <http://www.passia.org/palestine_facts/pdf/pdf2007/Jerusalem-Diary/Diary%202007%20Agenda%207%20-%20Jerusalem.pdf>. Retrieved on 06 July 2008.

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In early March 2010, the Israeli Defense Ministry resumed Wall construction in the Bethlehem area on land belonging to Beit Jala, a predominantly Christian city that lies between Bethlehem and East Jerusalem. If completed, this portion of the Wall will isolate more than 40% of the town's total land area. The current Wall construction is underway next to Road 60 and the Gilo tunnel that connects the Etzion settlements with Gilo settlement south of East Jerusalem. On June 8, 2010, the Israeli military uprooted more than 80 olive trees in Al Walajah village for the construction of a portion of the Wall connecting it with the section in Beit Jala.

In the past four decades, the major cause of the shrinking of Al Walajeh has been the illegal construction of the neighboring settlements of Gilo (established in 1971), Har Gilo (established in 1972), and Giv'at Yael or Nof Yael. The Giv'at Yael plan was launched in June 2004 with the intention of providing approximately 13,600 housing units to 60,000 settlers, thus linking Jerusalem and the Etzion settlement bloc and completing the circle of settlements that completely severs East Jerusalem from the rest of the West Bank.⁵

In July 2010, two new town plans were submitted for areas east of Gilo settlement (#13676 and #13677) along Route 60, the Tunnel Road. The new plans were submitted by the Israel Lands Authority. Upon approval another 300 new housing units will be built in that area. Also in the fourth quarter of 2010 another plan were submitted (# 13261) for other 1380 settlement units⁶

A Case Study: Mr. Abed Abd Raba

Abed Abd Raba, 55-years-old, owns property that encompasses around 20 dunums of land in the village of Al Walajeh that has been with his family for more than four generations, approximately two hundred years. Prior to 1948, his family used to live in Old Walajeh, but was forced to flee the area and move to New Walajeh, situated on the eastern part of the 1967 border. Abed was born in 1960, seven years before the Six-Day- War in 1967 when Israel occupied the West Bank and Gaza Strip, resulting in his family being displacement from their land for a second time. The were forced this time to move to one of the refugee camps.

This land that Abed is guarding day and night is all that his family of ten has left after being repeatedly driven away from their home and forced to flee to the Dheisheh (Bethlehem) and Shu'fat (East Jerusalem) refugee camps. While his wife and eight children stay in Dheisheh, Abed spends most of his time on his land for fear that if he leaves, it would get bulldozed and there will be nothing for him to come back to.

⁵ Passia. "Jerusalem: Israeli Settlement Activities and Related Policies." <<http://www.passia.org/publications/bulletins/Jerusalem-Bulletin-2007-English/Jerusalem-bulletin-2007-%20pdf/page11.pdf>>. Retrieved on 06 July 2008.

⁶ <http://www.ir-amim.org.il>

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Since the Wall was constructed, Abed's land has been separated from Al Walajah. He is one of many farmers who are suffering from land confiscations and the Wall. To protect his land from imminent confiscation or destruction, he is staying in a cave near his land. He visits his wife and eight children in the refugee camp once a week.

Conclusion

Al Walajah is the quintessential illustration of the harsh realities of the Israeli occupation. What village land that remained in the hands of its Palestinian owners after the 1948 Arab-Israeli War has been slowly plundered by Israel through different measures, e.g., through the Jerusalem boundary extension, Wall construction and settlement expansion. Unless the illegal construction of the Wall and the land confiscations stop soon, the people of Al Walajah will become prisoners trapped in what is left of their village.