

## **Annexation: The Ghettoization of Bethlehem**

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In recent years we have witnessed a certain pattern repeating itself in Israeli politics. This pattern has occurred within a context of change shaped by the election of President Trump in the USA, the rise of populism worldwide, the re-election of Netanyahu, weakened Arab countries, a divided Palestinian territory with political divisions (West Bank (WB) versus Gaza), and an Israel-friendlier Gulf region. The first move was made by President Trump in December 2017 when he recognized Jerusalem as Israel's capital,<sup>1</sup> followed by the opening of the US Embassy in the city six months later. In July 2018, the Israel Knesset passed the so-called Nation State Bill<sup>2</sup> that defined Israel as the nation state of the Jewish people. The next move came from President Trump in March 2019, when he recognized Israeli sovereignty over the occupied Golan Heights.<sup>3</sup>

The culmination of this process is the annexation plan announced by Netanyahu to take place in July of this year (2020). In all these moves, the pattern has been to legalize what is not legal, thus transforming a de facto status to a de jure one. This is true for the Palestinians inside Israel who comprise over 20 per cent of the population and who have been de facto second-class citizens; the new Nation State Law made them second-class citizens legally. East Jerusalem, the WB, and the Golan Heights are occupied territories<sup>4</sup> according to international law although they are effectively under Israeli control. The annexation plan aims to change the status of the WB from occupied territory to annexed land under full Israeli sovereignty. With the backing of President Trump, Israel believes that this is an opportune moment to fulfill a longstanding, exclusivist, settler colonial Zionist dream of Greater Israel. Although the US and Israel are so far isolated on the world stage and the plans have not been supported by any other country, Israel believes that might is right. The political impunity enjoyed by Israel to date strengthens that belief. Israel continues to be treated as an exception.

In this article I will look at the implications of annexation on one region of the WB: the Bethlehem governorate, to see what impact annexation will have on the land and its native population. What dangers will this plan pose to the future prospect of the quadrangle of cities at the center of the governorate: Bethlehem, Beit Sahour, Beit Jala, and Doha?

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<sup>1</sup> The White House. "Statement by President Trump on Jerusalem". Accessed June 11, 2020.

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/statement-president-trump-jerusalem/>

<sup>2</sup> "Final Text of Jewish Nation-State Law, Approved by the Knesset Early on July 19 | The Times of Israel." Accessed June 11, 2020. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/final-text-of-jewish-nation-state-bill-set-to-become-law/>.

<sup>3</sup> The White House. "Proclamation on Recognizing the Golan Heights as Part of the State of Israel". Accessed June 11, 2020.

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/proclamation-recognizing-golan-heights-part-state-israel/>.

<sup>4</sup> B'Tselem. "The Occupied Territories and International Law". Accessed June 11, 2020. [https://www.btselem.org/international\\_law](https://www.btselem.org/international_law).

Israel occupied the WB in June 1967. At that time the area of Bethlehem governorate was 658 square kilometers. Today Bethlehem governorate has a Palestinian population of about 230,000 people.<sup>5</sup> To the north, Bethlehem governorate was directly connected to East Jerusalem, to the south was the Hebron governorate, to the west the Green Line, and Jordan with the Dead Sea to the east. Since ancient times, Bethlehem's location on the main road between Jerusalem and Hebron was an important asset for the development of the city as a commercial hub. As the birthplace of Jesus Christ, the city is a key tourist destination. Its location between the fertile terraces to the west and the wilderness with its monasteries to the east made it a meeting point for farmers, shepherds, and city dwellers. The religious mix of Christians and Muslims was another important and unique feature of the city. Annexation will change all of that and will jeopardize the character of the city and its surroundings in the following ways:

Starting in the early seventies, Israel embarked on the construction of exclusive Jewish colonies on land belonging to the Bethlehem governorate. Today there are twenty-seven colonies (settlements) with close to 150,000 Jewish settlers.<sup>6</sup> If we look closely, we can see that these settlements are located in two main areas:

The so-called Gush Etzion bloc<sup>7</sup> consists of 22 Jewish colonies that strangle the Bethlehem quadrangle. The first set is located north of Bethlehem, with Gilo and Jabal Abu Gneim (Har Homa) being the two largest with close to 70,000 settlers; to the west of Bethlehem there are several colonies built around the largest and fastest growing colony of Betar Illit with its 60,000 settlers; to the south are further colonies with Efrat (11,000 settlers) the largest of them; and to the south-east, colonies around the settlement of Tekoa house close to 4,000 settlers.

All these colonies are organized in a regional council for the Gush Etzion bloc. The location of these colonies was not a matter of chance but of deliberate choice. First, for their proximity to the Green Line, thereby expanding the area of the State of Israel by encroaching deep into WB territory. Second, most of these colonies are built on the western slope of the mountain range that runs from Jerusalem to Hebron with an altitude of 750+ meters above sea level, an area with enough annual rainfall to ensure very fertile ground. It is not by chance that the Bible calls this area of Bethlehem the fertile ground (Micha 5:2). These Jewish colonies surround the Bethlehem quadrangle and are spread widely to encompass the maximum amount of Palestinian land for future expansion, while choking Palestinian towns and making it impossible for them to grow. Most of these colonies are separated from the Palestinian quadrangle by a 56 kilometer, eight meter high concrete wall<sup>8</sup>, two-thirds of which is completed, and all built on occupied land

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<sup>5</sup> PCBS. "Projected Mid -Year Population for Bethlehem Governorate by Locality 2017-2021." Accessed June 11, 2020. <http://www.pcbs.gov.ps/Portals/Rainbow/Documents/BethlehemE.html>.

<sup>6</sup> B'Tselem. "Statistics on Settlements and Settler Population." Accessed June 11, 2020. <https://www.btselem.org/settlements/statistics>

<sup>7</sup> Gush Etzion Foundation. "Gush Etzion." Accessed June 11, 2020. <https://gush-etzion.org.il/>

<sup>8</sup> International Court of Justice. *Conséquences Juridiques de l'édification d'un Mur Dans Le Territoire Palestinien Occupé: Avis Consultatif Du 9 Juillet 2004 = Legal Consequences of the Construction of a Wall in the Occupied Palestinian Territory :*

inside the borders of Bethlehem governorate. After the town of Qalqilya in the north-west of the WB, Bethlehem is the second city most affected by the annexation wall.

Under international law these colonies are illegal<sup>9</sup> and are therefore administered by the civil administration of the Israeli army. The annexation plan will trigger three major changes to these colonies. First, they will no longer be administered by the military civil administration and will fall under Israeli law and sovereignty as recognized cities within the State of Israel, thus enabling future development. Second, once under Israel sovereignty it will be much easier to claim more Palestinian land since the Palestinian owners, living less than a mile away behind the wall, will be declared absentees, thus legalizing the mass confiscation of property by the State of Israel. This phenomenon is already a familiar one to Palestinians inside the Green Line in the aftermath of the 1948 Nakba. Third, the plan for this settlement bloc is to become part and parcel of a greater metropolitan Jerusalem that will include Ma'ale Adumim to the east and Givat Zeev to the north-east of Jerusalem, as well as the Gush Etzion bloc.

The Greater Metropolitan Jerusalem Bill<sup>10</sup> introduced to the Knesset in 2017 aims to shift the boundaries of Jerusalem to include as many Jewish settlers as possible with as few Palestinians as possible, i.e., confiscating Palestinian geography while excluding Palestinian demography. It is a tool for demographic engineering that will bring the total population of the metropolitan area to around 1.5 million Jews. It will reduce the Palestinian population within the new boundaries to about 300,000 people, taking the percentage of Arab Palestinians from one third to one fourth. Although located within this metropolitan area, the Bethlehem quadrangle will be excluded from it and hidden behind the annexation wall.

The Palestinian towns of the Bethlehem quadrangle will be transformed into a ten square kilometer ghetto totally isolated from both Jerusalem and from its fertile land and fruit basket. The remaining two fertile areas west of Beit Jala, Cremisan and Makhroun,<sup>11</sup> are the last two fertile mountains to be annexed. The annexation of the Gush Etzion bloc will result in Bethlehem losing between 15-20 per cent of its prime, fertile land forever. Part of this area at risk of annexation is of utmost historic, religious, and archeological importance. Battir is a

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*Advisory Opinion of 9 July 2004.* The Hague: International Court of Justice, 2004; United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs - occupied Palestinian territory. "West Bank Barrier." Accessed June 11, 2020.

<https://www.ochaopt.org/theme/west-bank-barrier>.

<sup>9</sup> "Israeli Settlements and International Law". Accessed June 11, 2020.

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2019/01/chapter-3-israeli-settlements-and-international-law/>.

<sup>10</sup> Ir Amim. "Annexation Moves Intensify: Greater Jerusalem Bill Hits Ministerial Committee on Legislation on Sunday." Accessed June 11, 2020. <http://www.ir-amim.org.il/en/node/2121>.

<sup>11</sup> Eid, Xavier Abu. "Annexation of Cremisan - Makhroun." In *The Double Lockdown: Palestine under Occupation and COVID - 19*, edited by Saeb Erakat and Mitri Raheb, 2020. <https://www.nad.ps/en/publication-resources/publications/double-lockdown-palestine-under-occupation-and-covid-19>.

Palestinian World Heritage Site.<sup>12</sup> Khirbet Tekoa<sup>13</sup> is the birthplace of the prophet of social justice, Amos. Not far from Tekoa is Herodion mountain,<sup>14</sup> a major tourist attraction, built by Herod the Great around a castle in the first century B.C. to be his mausoleum. In the opposite direction we have Cremisan with its famous winery. To the north, Mar Elias monastery is a site for religious pilgrimage by native Palestinian Christians. All these areas will fall under Israeli sovereignty and access for Palestinians will be barred.

The second set of Jewish colonies in Bethlehem governorate was built along the Dead Sea shore and organized within Megilot Regional Council. It comprises seven small colonies with less than 3,000 settlers. The size of these colonies be misleading. Although small in size, they are very strategic in nature because they control 32 km of Dead Sea coastline, the longest strip on the west side of the Dead Sea. The east of Bethlehem governorate borders Jordan and Bethlehem should control this 32 km of the western Dead Sea shore and water, while Jordan controls the eastern shores. Under the annexation plan, the Trump maps show that Israel intends to annex the whole western Dead Sea shore and water resources that belong to Bethlehem. The Dead Sea is a major tourist attraction and a very important source of foreign currency income through international tourism, as well as for internal tourism. The Dead Sea is also a very rich reservoir of minerals and potash.

Until 1920, residents of Bethlehem held the rights to exploration of Dead Sea potash and minerals, the last of them being Ibrahim Hazboun,<sup>15</sup> a Palestinian Christian. In the annexation plan, Palestine will lose the Dead Sea, a unique, priceless cultural heritage, an environmental, therapeutic and touristic treasure. The Dead Sea is not the only attraction. This area was chosen by the Essenes to retire to under Roman rule, where they founded the Qumran<sup>16</sup> community. It is in those caves in January 1947 where Muhammad ed-Dib of the Ta'amreh clan discovered the Dead Sea Scrolls and brought them to the Syrian Orthodox antique dealer, Khalil Kando, to view.<sup>17</sup> He bought them and later sent them to the US via a Syrian Orthodox Bishop. Under international law the Dead Sea Scrolls are a Palestinian treasure that need to be reclaimed. Along the Dead Sea there are several freshwater springs:<sup>18</sup> Ein-Faschcha, Ein el-Ghuwer, and Ein et-Turabe. These are popular locations for leisure, picnics, and swimming for WB Palestinians. The area intended for annexation along the Dead Sea shore makes up around 10 per cent of the Bethlehem governorate.

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<sup>12</sup> "Palestine: Land of Olives and Vines – Cultural Landscape of Southern Jerusalem, Battir." UNESCO World Heritage Centre. Accessed June 11, 2020. <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1492/>.

<sup>13</sup> Keel, Othmar. *Orte Und Landschaften Der Bibel. Band 2: Der Suden*. Köln: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1992, 662-668.

<sup>14</sup> Keel, 650-660.

<sup>15</sup> Norris, Jacob. *Land of Progress: Palestine in the Age of Colonial Development, 1905-1948*. 1st edition. Oxford: University Press, 2013, 191-196.

<sup>16</sup> Keel, 455-470.

<sup>17</sup> Hanson, Kenneth. *Dead Sea Scrolls: The Untold Story*. 2 edition. Council Oak Books, 1997.

<sup>18</sup> Keel, 451-454.

In addition to the two settlement blocs discussed above, a third area is located west of the Dead Sea and east of Bethlehem. It consists of a strip in the Bethlehem wilderness currently declared a military zone and used by Israel for military training. This five km strip runs from north to south across the Bethlehem governorate and makes up 40 per cent of the land of Bethlehem governorate. Although called a wilderness, it sits over a good portion of the Eastern Basin Aquifer with over 125 million cubic meters of fresh water<sup>19</sup> and is also an important habitat for wildlife.

The wildlife and biodiversity of this area are of utmost important and will be lost if annexation takes place. This area is also important for its monastic heritage. In the fourth to sixth century A.D. this area became a magnet and center for monastic life. Within three centuries, over 150 monasteries were established in the Bethlehem wilderness. Monastic life was triggered by St. Chariton who came from Asia Minor in the early fourth century and settled in a wadi that was later given his name: “Wadi Khretoun”.<sup>20</sup> His students Euthumius and Theoktisis established another monastery in Khan el-Ahmar<sup>21</sup> where the parable of the good Samaritan took place. Half a century later, St. Saba established the Mar Saba monastery that became one of the most significant centers for Palestinian monasticism.

Through Mar Saba, several other monasteries were established in the Bethlehem wilderness, the most well-known among them is Kastellion in Hyrkania.<sup>22</sup> In the 8<sup>th</sup> century St. Saba monastery became the home of John of Damascus, whose father had served as a treasurer under the caliph Abd al-Malik and who played an important role in the icon debate. Mar Saba monastery,<sup>23</sup> following the stance of John of Damascus on iconography, became an important safe haven for hundreds of ancient Christian icons that survived invasions and turmoil throughout the centuries. Mar Saba monastery played also a major role in the Arabization of theology. It was in and around this monastery in the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> century that the first projects of Arabization of theology and Bible translation from Syriac and Greek into Arabic took place. Through John of Damascus, Theodore abu Qurrah and others, Mar Saba monastery developed to become one of the earliest centers for Christian theological engagement with Islam.<sup>24</sup>

Besides the Christian monasteries, the Bethlehem wilderness has several Muslim shrines. The best known is Nebi Musa<sup>25</sup> where, according to Muslim sources, the prophet Moses was buried. Nebi Musa gained importance at the time of Saladin as a location for a major Muslim festival

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<sup>19</sup> El-Fadel, M., R. Quba'a, N. El-Hougeiri, Z. Hashisho, and D. Jamali. “The Israeli Palestinian Mountain Aquifer: A Case Study in Ground Water Conflict Resolution.” *Journal of Natural Resources and Life Sciences Education* 30, no. 1 (2001): 50–61. <https://doi.org/10.2134/jnrise.2001.0050>.

<sup>20</sup> Keel, 461.

<sup>21</sup> Keel, 472-474.

<sup>22</sup> Keel, 587-592.

<sup>23</sup> Keel, 594.

<sup>24</sup> Griffith, Sidney H. *The Bible in Arabic: The Scriptures of the “People of the Book” in the Language of Islam*. Reprint edition. Princeton University Press, 2013, 110-118.

<sup>25</sup> Keel, 477.

and a place of Muslim pilgrimage. Much of this area belongs to Palestinian Christians in Bethlehem. If the area is annexed, Christians will lose access to their land and will ultimately lose their property as well. The annexation will separate Palestinian Christians and Muslims from their monasteries and shrines. It will cut the spiritual connectedness and fabric between people and their spiritual havens, making these places empty shrines without living worshippers and communities. Apart from its religious importance, the Bethlehem wilderness is a tourist site with enormous potential for wildlife observation, hiking, camping, sky gazing, mountain climbing, desert biking and quad biking. If the area is annexed, this potential will be lost.

It is not clear yet if Israel will implement its annexation plans on July 1<sup>st</sup> or which areas it will decide to annex. This very much depends on pressure exerted by the European Union, the Arab League, the UN, and the international community. If the pressure is evident and there is no American green light, Israel may postpone its annexation plans. However, if it decides to pursue these plans, there are several possible scenarios. The first scenario would be to annex the Gush Etzion bloc as there is agreement on this between the coalition parties and Israel may claim these colonies as part of a land swap in a future peace agreement. If implemented, 15 per cent of the Bethlehem governorate area will be lost, the current wall built entirely on West Bank territory will become a semi-final border, and 12 Palestinian communities will be separated from the rest of the governorate. The Christians of Beit Jala will lose the land they need for any future expansion. Bethlehem will be separated from Jerusalem entirely, will be disconnected from Hebron except through a tunnel, and will be totally isolated economically.

A second scenario would be for Israel to annex the Gush Etzion bloc, the Jordan Valley, and the Bethlehem wilderness. These three areas make up 66 per cent of the Bethlehem governorate. If Israel were to annex all three areas, there will be little left of Bethlehem. Israel would steal all the prime land of the Bethlehem governorate and leave Palestinians with only one third of their territory and no resources whatsoever.

Another scenario would be for Israel to continue its incremental annexation. It might start in July with the annexation of Gush Etzion and await another opportune moment to annex the Jordan Valley and the Bethlehem wilderness. If a settler government were to be formed, Israel may go further to annex an additional 20 per cent of the Bethlehem governorate designated as a nature reserve. In the Oslo Accords, 20 per cent of the Bethlehem governorate was declared a nature reserve. This is the area between the Bethlehem wilderness and the villages to the east of the quadrangle which is thinly populated, mainly with Bedouin tribes. According to the Trump plan, the Palestinians will have the possibility of this 20 per cent being included in a future Palestinian state, if they behave and prove worthy of it. Jewish colonizers who oppose the Trump plan want to include the nature reserve in the area they control, thus leaving Palestinians with only 15 per cent of the total territory of Bethlehem governorate, which is mainly the crowded built-up area.

Whichever scenario is pursued by Israel, the annexation is a violation of international law. It will represent the end of the two-state solution and the legalization of an apartheid system. Bethlehem governorate, indeed the whole WB, will look like a piece of Swiss cheese where Israel gets the cheese and the Palestinians are pushed into the holes. We will have two groups of people with unequal rights on the same territory of Bethlehem: Israeli colonizers will have sovereignty and supremacy while Palestinians will have to live under Israel's knee. The same territory will have two separate road systems and two different legal systems. One group of people will have access to the outside world and to resources, while the others will become aliens in their own homeland. The Bethlehem quadrangle will resemble a native American reservation without land or natural resources, and with no potential to unlock it. There will be no access to the outside world. Everything will have to be imported and exported via Israel. International solidarity groups, visiting scholars and exchange students will be unable to visit the Palestinian people and volunteers will not be able to stay in Palestine at all.

Annexation will lead to de-development, rising unemployment, social tension, and crime. This is not a natural catastrophe but a man-made catastrophe. At heart, this represents a recipe for the silent transfer of Palestinians. Shrinking space, increased oppression, and lack of opportunities will lead many Palestinians to look for their future elsewhere. The brain drain will make the remaining Palestinian population poorer and more vulnerable. The fact that 50 per cent of the Palestinian Christian community live in the Bethlehem quadrangle will accelerate Christian migration and rob Palestine of a very important component of its colorful tapestry.

Let me end with a personal note. If Israel is allowed to pursue its annexation plans, I will no longer be able to listen to any western politician talking about human rights or international law. I'm afraid that these values we were trained to believe in are meant only for privileged white supremacists and not for Palestinians, not for people of color, not for indigenous peoples. It will be the ultimate proof that Israel is the last prevailing western settler colonial project that seeks ultimately to exterminate the native people of the occupied land. If Israel proceeds with its annexation plans, I will no longer be able to listen to Jewish theologians preaching to me about the Christian church that remained silent in the face of Jewish pogroms. I don't see many Jewish rabbis raising their voices against Palestinian oppression or annexation plans. To me, this will be the end of Jewish innocence.

Last but not least, annexation will mean the end of any possibility of peace during our lifetime. The Christian preacher Tony Campolo is known for his saying: "It's Friday, but Sunday is coming", meaning that we might live now in a difficult situation, but relief is coming. If annexation takes place, then we will be stuck in a long Saturday behind a heavy wall that strangles our cities. We will continue to live for another generation with an Israeli knee pressing our neck, stealing our breath, and holding our bodies hostage. If annexation takes place, liberation will disappear from the horizon. It will be a dark, cold and long Saturday with no light

whatsoever at the end of the tunnel. Yet, the South African experience has taught us that an apartheid system has no future. The events in East Germany showed that walls will ultimately fall. The demonstrations in the aftermath of the lynching of George Floyd in the US and across the world are proof that institutional racism will be exposed and fought. Yes, we are living in the Trump era with its white supremacy, but it is also the George Floyd era where black lives matter. We are experiencing Israeli supremacy, but Palestinian lives matter. The annexation plans are thus at this intersection of might and right, of racism and equality, of oppression and liberation.