Life Under Occupation

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American Friends Service Committee

The Siege on Palestinian Life

Introduction

In the occupied Palestinian territories (oPt)[1], nearly every facet of life is controlled by Israeli military policies. These policies not only restrict movement, but also isolate and harass the civilian population. The state of siege, which relates in this context to fully or partially preventing residents from entering or leaving a certain area, while isolating the area from other parts of the West Bank[2], is marked by closures, regular curfews, roadblocks, checkpoints, electric fences, and walls, in addition to other obstacles which affect the normalcy of Palestinian daily life. Gaza suffers these restrictions and more, especially since the blockade imposed on Gaza after Hamas was elected in 2006. It is extremely difficult to move people or goods within or out of the oPt, which has devastating effects on the Palestinian economy, weakening its infrastructure and institutions. Israel's siege is a form of collective punishment that violates the dignity of the Palestinian people and their basic human rights. It also violates international law and articles of the Fourth Geneva Convention that govern the treatment of civilians in war and under occupation[3].

Freedom of Movement

Freedom of movement is a guaranteed right under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights[4] as well as the Declaration of Human Rights. According to a 2007 World Bank publication, "currently, freedom of movement and access for Palestinians within the West Bank is the exception rather than the norm contrary to the commitments undertaken in a number of Agreements between GOI (Government of Israel) and the PA (Palestinian Authority)."[5] The following elements of occupation inhibit freedom of movement in the oPt.

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Israeli soldier checks Palestinian IDs

Closure and Curfew

The term "closure" refers to the restrictions placed by Israel on the free movement of Palestinian goods and people across borders within the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, while "curfew" refers to a total lock-down of a Palestinian town. Closure takes three basic forms: (i) internal closure is the sealing off of Palestinian population centers within the oPt from one another, preventing movement within the West Bank; (ii) external closure is the sealing off of the West Bank and Gaza from Israel proper and from each other; (iii) and the closing of international crossings, severely constraining Palestinians' ability to travel abroad.[6]

•The severity of the closure changes as circumstances change. For example, after incidents of Palestinian violence against Israelis, authorities often impose a total closure on the occupied territories. Israel frequently imposes a total closure on the oPt during Israeli and Jewish holidays.

•Since the second Intifada (uprising) in 2000, Israel has imposed a total closure on the oPt and has prohibited most Palestinian movement between the oPt and Israel and between the West Bank and Gaza.

•During curfews, Palestinians remain under sustained house arrest, sometimes for days and weeks on end. Businesses are closed and life is largely forced to a halt. Curfew also applies to international aid workers.

•The Israeli military imposes curfews during military operations in West Bank villages and cities, and at times imposes curfew as punishment. Following stone throwing in a village, for instance, the army sometimes imposes a curfew on all or part of the village for a few hours or even a few days.

•Closures and curfews have prevented Palestinians from reaching their places of work and from distributing their products to internal and external markets, and have caused shortages.[7]

•At the end of a recent observation period, (September 2008 - March 2009) OCHA (UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs) recorded 47 curfews with a combined duration of 471 hours, a 15% increase from its previous period.[8]

Checkpoints, Roadblocks, and Forbidden Roads

One of the primary ways in which the siege is enforced is through the blocking of access roads to towns and villages by means of: permanent and temporary, or "flying" checkpoints (staffed), and roadblocks, in the form of dirt piles, deep trenches, or concrete blocks (not staffed).[9] Palestinians are required to show an identity card or crossing permit. Additionally, many roads are restricted to Israeli vehicles only. Since 1991, Israel has required every Palestinian in the oPt wanting to enter Israel to obtain an exit permit from the occupation authorities. Approvals are granted infrequently and according to changing criteria often unknown to Palestinians. The Oslo Accord signed between the Palestinian Authority and the Government of Israel provided that the movement of people and vehicles "will be free and normal and shall not need to be effected through checkpoints and roadblocks."[10]

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•74 % of the main routes in the West Bank are controlled by checkpoints or blocked entirely.[11]

•The movement restrictions have had devastating effects on the Palestinian economy and access to healthcare. Palestinians are often forced to wait for hours at checkpoints, keeping them from school and jobs, and making daily planning a challenging task.

•At the end of October 2009, there were a total of 578 closure obstacles within the West Bank (excluding border/Green Line crossings), including 69 permanently staffed checkpoints, 21 "partial checkpoints," and 488 unstaffed obstacles.[12]

•Physical obstructions leave no room for flexibility in crossing, as they are unstaffed, and there is no one to remove the obstruction even in an emergency situation.

•At some checkpoints, especially in Nablus, Israel occasionally prevents men of a certain age group, usually 16-35, from crossing.

•B'Tselem regularly documents many instances in which soldiers at checkpoints prevent or significantly delay medical patients and the wounded from crossing, which has sometimes led to deterioration of their condition, women giving birth at checkpoints, and even death.

© Reuters Photo by: Ahmad Jadallah

The Separation Barrier/Wall

"The construction of the wall being built by Israel... in the occupied Palestinian Territory, including in and around East Jerusalem... [is] contrary to international law. Israel is under obligation... to dismantle forthwith the structure... [and] make reparation for all damage caused..."
-International Court of Justice advisory opinion, July 9, 2004[13]

Israel began constructing the Wall in 2002. It consists of a series of 25-ft high concrete slabs, trenches, barbed wire, electrified fences, numerous watch towers, thermal imaging video cameras, sniper towers, and roads for patrol vehicles. Israel claims that the Wall was built to protect Israel proper from attacks and that it was to be a temporary structure. However, in September 2008, OCHA commented that, "what was once justified by the Israeli authorities as a short-term military response (...) appears to be developing into a permanent system."[14] The Wall does not only severely restrict Palestinian farmers' ability to tend to and harvest their crops, it also impairs them from selling their produce. The olive industry, which provides around 18% of the annual agricultural production income in the West Bank, has not only been harmed by the cutting down of tens of thousands of trees, but also by the lack of ability of the farmers to harvest and sell their produce. The overall damage caused by the destruction of land and property for the Wall's construction will take many years to recover, further hindering Palestinian development.

•In a November 2009 report, OCHA states that the Barrier continues to be the single largest obstacle to Palestinian freedom of movement.[15]

•As of October 2009, 60% of the Wall has been completed. Construction is ongoing in the West Bank districts of Qalqilya, Ramallah, Jerusalem, Bethlehem, and Hebron.[16]

•Approximately 16% of the Wall is being built on the 1967 Green Line, the accepted border between the West Bank and Israel proper, while 84% is located in the West Bank itself.[17]

•Approximately 35,000 West Bank Palestinians will be located between the Wall and the Green Line (an area known as "no man's land" or the seam zone). They require permits to live in their homes and can only leave their communities via a gate in the Wall.

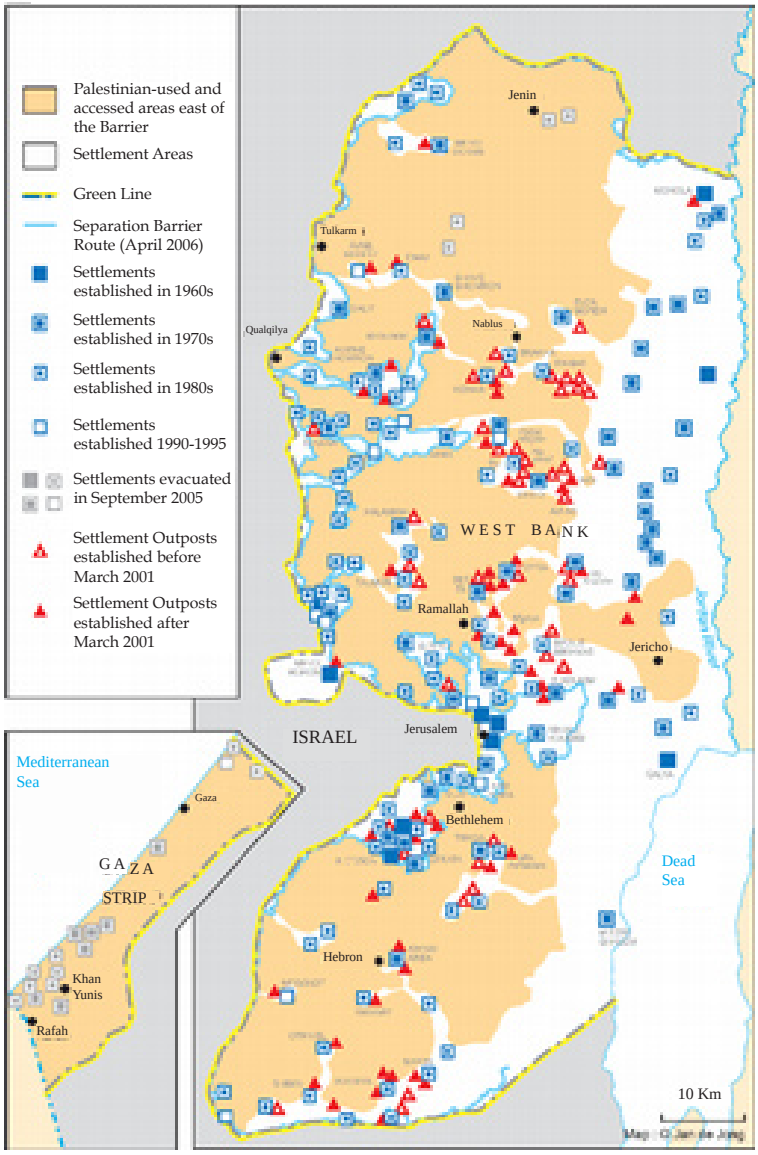
Settlements

"The United States does not accept the legitimacy of continued Israeli settlements. This construction violates previous agreements and undermines efforts to achieve peace. It is time for these settlements to stop."
-President Barack Obama, Cairo Speech, June 2009[25]

A May 2009 OCHA publication on movement and access in the oPt notes that Israeli settlements remain the most important factor shaping the system of movement and access restrictions.[18] Settlements are Israeli-only colonies established throughout the West Bank. The settlements are illegal under the Fourth Geneva Convention and the Hague Regulations.

• A July 2004 International Court of Justice Ruling stated, "Israeli settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, are illegal and an obstacle to peace and to economic and social development [... and] have been established in breach of international law."[19]

Settlements Established and Evacuated 1967-2008



Map Credit: Foundation for Middle East Peace

• A November 2009 UN report stated that there were 121 Israeli settlements and approximately 100 Israeli outposts built illegally on Palestinian land by the end of 2008. Israeli outposts are considered illegal even under Israeli law.[20]

• As of 2008, the total population of settlers was 475,380[21], 180,000 of whom live in East Jerusalem, whose annexation by Israel in 1967 is not internationally recognized.[22]

• The settler population has grown consistently between 4-6% per year over the last two decades, a much higher rate of growth than Israeli society as a whole (1.5%). Israelis moving to the West Bank accounted for more than a third of settler population growth in recent years, according to Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics.[23]

• Settlements are built on less than 3% of the area of the West Bank. However, due to the extensive network of settler roads and restrictions on Palestinians accessing their land, Israeli settlement councils control more than 40% of the West Bank.[24]

Settler Violence

• According to OCHA, 80-90% of the files opened against Israeli settlers following attacks on Palestinians and their property are regularly closed by the Israeli police without prosecution.[26]

• A new pattern of violence, which Israeli settlers call the "price tag" or "mutual responsibility" strategy, emerged during 2008. Groups of settlers exact a "price" against Palestinians and their property in response to occasional attempts by the Israeli authorities to dismantle "unauthorized" settlement outposts. According to one Israeli settler, "For every act of destruction [of an outpost] in the southern Hebron hills we will set fire to Samaria [northern West Bank]."[27]

• "Considering Israel's obligations under international law, the Israeli authorities must adopt all the necessary measures to prevent to the greatest extent possible attacks by Israeli settlers against Palestinian civilians and their property, in response to the removal of settlement outposts," a UN report stressed, adding that in 2009, on average 13 Palestinians per month were injured in settler-related violence.[28]

B'Tselem Photo by: Salma a-Dib'i

Palestinian vehicle damaged by settler attack

The Tightening Noose on Gaza

The Gaza Strip, a 25-mile long (4-7.5 mile wide) area of land along the Mediterranean Sea just north of Egypt, is home to 1.5 million Palestinians. About one-third of its residents are registered refugees living in camps established in 1948. Since Hamas won the 2006 Palestinian Parliamentary elections, the United States and Israel have led a campaign of sanctions and closures against the residents of Gaza. Gaza's border with Israel and its border with Egypt are heavily guarded, and Israel controls Gaza's airspace and territorial waters.

Since June 2007, Israel has prohibited many materials from entering Gaza, forcing 90 percent of industrial enterprises to cease operations.[34] In March 2010, Israel began allowing shoes into Gaza for the first time in three years. More than a year after the Dec 2008-Jan 2009 Israeli assault on Gaza, "Operation Cast Lead," which left 1,3000 Palestinians dead, over 5,000 injured, and more than 50,000 homeless, the humanitarian crisis in Gaza is severe. UN Under-Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator John Holmes, upon arriving in Gaza on 2 March, 2010 stated: "It is disturbing to see that more than a year after "Cast Lead, " the unacceptable blockade continues and all that we can offer to the people of Gaza is limited to temporary shelters and emergency assistance. No meaningful reconstruction has started yet. I could see for myself today the continuing erosion of livelihoods and people's ability to lead anything resembling a normal life."[35]

Between January-December, 2009, Oxfam reports only 41 truckloads of construction material were allowed to enter Gaza, making it impossible to rebuild homes, hospitals, schools, and water networks.[36] In August 2009, poverty stood at approximately 80% and unemployment at 60% in Gaza.[37] UN Security Council Resolution 1860 "calls for the unimpeded provision and distribution throughout Gaza of humanitarian assistance, including of food, fuel and medical treatment."[38] The World Bank June 2009 report on Palestinian Economic Prospects stated that the schemes for recovery in Gaza have not yet led to any impact on the ground due to the continued closure.[39]

Due to the complete closure in Gaza, many Palestinians rely on underground tunnels with Gaza's Egyptian border to obtain supplies that are denied by the blockade. However, in December 2009, Egypt began construction on an underground steel wall along its border with Gaza in an attempt to prevent smuggling. The Egyptians are being assisted by American army corps engineers who designed the wall. The wall will take 18 months to complete and will be 6-7 miles long, extending 18 meters below the surface. Abed Elrahman al-Assouli from Khan Younis, Gaza, commented, "When we get a political solution, there will be no need for tunnels. I don't think this new wall will affect the smuggling, we are talking about thousands of tunnels."[40]

"As long as Israel has control of the transfer of necessities and the supply of humanitarian needs to the Gaza Strip, it is bound by the obligations of international humanitarian law to allow the civilian population to have access, inter alia, to medical facilities, food and water, as well as additional humanitarian items."
-Justice Beinisch, UN Fact Finding Committee [41]

Voices from the Region
From B'Tselem

Imad a-Natur, 17 years old, November 2009

"I started working when I was 13, because I'm the eldest and there was nobody else in my family to support us…Two years ago, I saw young people my age working in the tunnels and getting paid every day, even though they were minors. I realized this was the most worthwhile place to work, so I quit school and began to work in the tunnels... I work at lowering and moving the goods from the opening on the Egyptian side to the opening on the Palestinian side. Sometimes, I work during the day, sometimes at night. I work a 12-hour shift – from six to six...I'm always in danger of being killed. We often hear about a person who was killed or injured in the tunnels, and sometimes we see it happen. The Israeli planes bomb the tunnels every time a rocket is fired from the area at Israel. The bombs destroy the tunnels and kill and injure people working in them. When the Egyptians find a tunnel, they arrest the workers and bomb it. Sometimes in the winter, we stop working because rain enters the tunnel, and that can cause it to collapse, killing us. We are afraid, but what can we do? We won't stop working. If we did, we'd turn into street beggars. This is the only work to be had in the Strip nowadays. The siege and the closure have halted everything in the city. Factories and businesses closed, so many of the owners of the businesses and factories, laborers, and merchants went to work in the tunnels...That's our life in Gaza. It's a hard life, full of poverty and degradation."[44]

B'Tselem Photo by: Muhammad Sabah

Focus on International Law: Is This Legal?

Many of the aspects of the Israeli occupation violate international law and International Humanitarian Law. Most notable are the violations of the Fourth Geneva Convention. The Fourth Geneva Convention, adopted in 1949, addressed the treatment and protection of civilians in times of war and conflict.

On July 15, 1999, the Conference of High Contracting Parties to the Fourth Geneva Convention, issued the following statement: "The participating High Contracting Parties reaffirmed the applicability of the Fourth Geneva Convention to the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem."[42] Palestinians fall under the definition of protected persons, defined in Article 4 of the Fourth Geneva Convention: "Persons protected by the Convention are those who, at a given moment and in any manner whatsoever, find themselves, in case of a conflict or occupation, in the hands of a Party to the conflict or Occupying Power of which they are not nationals."[43]

The following are examples of Articles from the Fourth Geneva Convention that are violated by the Israeli military occupation:

Humane treatment for protected persons (Art. 27): **Protected persons are entitled, in all circumstances, to respect for their persons, their honour, their family rights, their religious convictions and practices, and their manners and customs. They shall at all times be humanely treated, and shall be protected especially against all acts of violence or threats thereof and against insults and public curiosity.**

Protection from unnecessary destruction (Art. 53): **Any destruction by the Occupying Power of real or personal property belonging individually or collectively to private persons, or to the State, or to other public authorities, or to social or cooperative organizations, is prohibited, except where such destruction is rendered absolutely necessary by military operations.**

Access to healthcare and hygiene (Art. 56): **To the fullest extent of the means available to it, the Occupying Power has the duty of ensuring and maintaining, with the cooperation of national and local authorities, the medical and hospital establishments and services, public health and hygiene in the occupied territory… Medical personnel of all categories shall be allowed to carry out their duties.**

Access to food and medical care (Art. 55): **To the fullest extent of the means available to it, the Occupying Power has the duty of ensuring the food and medical supplies of the population; it should, in particular, bring in the necessary foodstuffs, medical stores and other articles if the resources of the occupied territory are inadequate.**

Assuring an adequate standard of living (Art. 39): **Protected persons who, as a result of the war, have lost their gainful employment, shall be granted the opportunity to find paid employment…Where a Party to the conflict applies to a protected person methods of control which result in his being unable to support himself, and especially if such a person is prevented for reasons of security from finding paid employment on reasonable conditions, the said Party shall ensure his support and that of his dependents.**

Protection from collective punishment (Art. 33): **No protected person may be punished for an offence he or she has not personally committed. Collective penalties and likewise all measures of intimidation or of terrorism are prohibited.**

Assuring humanitarian access (Art. 59): **If the whole or part of the population of an occupied territory is inadequately supplied, the Occupying Power shall agree to relief schemes on behalf of said population, and shall facilitate them by all the means at its disposal…All Contracting Parties shall permit the free passage of these consignments and guarantee their protection.**

Water

•Only in 16% of Palestinian communities does the per capita supply of water exceed 100 liters per day, which is the minimum amount recommended by the World Health Organization (WHO).[29]

•In most of the Gaza Strip, salinity levels in water wells are above the limit established by the WHO and nitrate concentrations exceed WHO guidelines.[30] Only 7% of available water in Gaza meets WHO standards.[31]

•Israeli West Bank settlers domestically consume 280 liters of water per day, per person compared to 86 liters per day available for Palestinians in the West Bank.[32]

•The preceding statistics represent only the 69% of Palestinian communities that are connected to water networks. The other communities are not reached by pipelines at all. Communities without linkages must rely upon rainfall, springs, wells, and water purchased by private suppliers.[33]

Top Right: Water crisis in Jenin District

B'Tselem Photo by: Atef Abu A-Rob

AFSC principles and positions

AFSC's position on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and its commitment to nonviolent action for social change is based on the Quaker belief that there is that of God in every person. Within the framework of international law and the UN Declaration of Human Rights, the AFSC strives for a lasting peace between Israelis and Palestinians that provides justice and security for all peoples living in the region.

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AFSC Photos (Top and Bottom Left)

Conclusion

The daily life of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza is full of struggle and restrictions, a life under siege. The siege severely restricts civilian freedom of movement between Gaza and the West Bank and within the territories. It prevents families from seeing each other for months and years. Traveling even short distances often entails a lengthy, costly, and potentially dangerous journey. Detours to avoid blockades, checkpoints, and closed areas frequently take civilians miles out of their way and involve the risk of being turned back, harassed, beaten, or sometimes shot.[45] The lack of freedom of movement leads to the suffering of basic services like medical care and education. It complicates routine acts such as purchasing goods, visiting relatives, and studying at a university. In many cases, these routine acts are impossible. Economic development under military occupation is severely hampered, and often impossible. As UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon said, "Palestinians have waited too long for an end to occupation."[46] The siege on Palestinian life is not a guard against violence, it is a systematic form of violence.

Five things you can do to help

1. **Write a letter to the editor or Op Ed for your local paper.**
2. **Call your local newspapers and media stations to complain when they run erroneous reports on Israel's occupation - and to thank them when they get it right.**
3. **Contact your elected city, state, and national representatives to demand that U.S. policy support a just peace based on human rights and international law, and stop military aid to Israel until it ends the occupation.**
4. **Join a local peace and justice group and/or your local Quaker meeting and suggest a reading group or workshop series to learn more about the conflict.**
5. **Get your local group to join the U.S. Campaign to End the Israeli Occupation (www.endtheoccupation.org) to combine your efforts with others around the nation.**