

# Occupation and Resistance in the West Bank, Palestine



*A Report on a Visit to the West Bank*

**9-17 September 2016**

# Occupation and Resistance in the West Bank, Palestine

**A Report by *Stephen McCloskey***

## **Contagion of conflict**

In September 2016, I joined a delegation of Irish activists on a visit to the Palestinian West Bank to assess the situation on the ground following a worrying contagion of the conflict since October 2015. This flare-up of violence followed Israel's tightening of restrictions on Palestinian access to Jerusalem's Al Aqsa mosque, one of the holiest sites in the Muslim faith. At the time, UNESCO censured Israel for 'aggression and illegal measures restricting freedom of worship', particularly at Al Aqsa which became a flashpoint for violence. The escalation of violence included 'lone wolf' Knife attacks by Palestinians which was regularly met by lethal force on the part of the Israeli military and police. Over the past year, 250 Palestinians have been killed including 50 children with 30 Israelis having lost their lives in attacks in the same period. The human rights group Al Haq has alleged that many of the Palestinian deaths involved the avoidable use of lethal force in cases that amounted to 'unlawful killings'. These killings are regularly shrouded in controversy as Israeli forces often claim



**Separation Barrier, Aida Refugee Camp, Bethlehem**

that their victims were armed or engaged in a 'terrorist attack' and, later, retract and alter their narrative of events when it is flatly contradicted by eye witness testimony or video evidence. 'Over the last year', according to Al Haq, 'it has become increasingly clear that Israel has fully implemented a [shoot to kill policy](#) in the OPT' (Occupied Palestinian Territories). The Israeli human rights organisation, B'tselem, released a joint [statement](#) in October 2015 with eight other rights groups that condemned politicians and senior police officers who had 'openly called for the extra-judicial killing of suspects'. The statement said:

“No-one disputes the serious nature of the events of recent days, nor the need to protect the public against stabbing and other attacks. However, it seems that too often, instead of acting in a manner consistent with the nature of each incident, police officers and soldiers are quick to shoot to kill”.

This was the context to our busy itinerary of visits to Bil’in, East Jerusalem, Hebron, Jenin and Ramallah from our base in Bethlehem. We met with human rights groups, a settler, a representative of the Palestinian Authority, students from Birzeit University (who were on strike following a hike in



**A Palestinian man has his fingerprint scanned, Bethlehem**

tuition fees), Ecumenical Accompaniers monitoring the checkpoint in Bethlehem, and Omar Barghouti, the co-founder of the Boycott Divestment Sanctions (BDS) movement. Our guides included a former Israeli tank commander who now finds himself part of a radical, critical minority in a country increasingly polarised by the extremist policies of the far right government led by Benjamin Netanyahu. It had been ten years since my last visit to the West Bank and changes to the physical environment were immediately recognisable with settlement expansions accompanied by a lengthening of the Separation Barrier, an eight metre high concrete wall that has so impressed [Donald Trump](#).

### **Separation Barrier**

Contributing to a discriminatory – some say apartheid-like – dual citizenship perhaps more pronounced in physical divisions than apartheid South Africa, the 700km wall is twice as long as the Green Line, the armistice line which marked the 1967 boundary between Israel and the West Bank and East Jerusalem. Under the ubiquitous pretext of security, [85 percent](#) of the wall will be built inside the West Bank when completed,

annexing up to 10 percent of fertile Palestinian farmland and separating 35,000 farmers from their land. Started in 2002, much of the wall comprises a set of 2-metre-high, electrified razor-wire fences with a 60-metre-wide exclusion zone on the Palestinian side. By 2014, only [62 percent](#) of the barrier / wall had been completed due in no small part to the non-violent resistance of besieged Palestinian communities and international supporters who regularly put their lives on the line. Like so much of Israel’s security apparatus in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, it has been deemed



illegal under international law. In 2004, the International Court of Justice issued an [Advisory Opinion](#) 'that Israel's building of a barrier in the occupied Palestinian territory is illegal and said construction must stop immediately and Israel should make reparations for any damage caused'. By June 2015, the United Nations Human Rights Council had condemned Israel 61 times, more than the rest of the world's countries combined. This reflects the extent to which Palestinian rights have been violated under the yoke of Israeli occupation and colonisation.

Israel's displacement of 700,000 Palestinians from more than 400 sacked villages in 1948 known as the '[Nakba](#)' or catastrophe continues apace today. Over [200 Israeli colonies](#) or settlements across the West Bank host more than 600,000 settlers serviced by interconnecting by-pass roads while Palestinian towns and villages are separated by more than [500](#) obstacles that include checkpoints, barriers and road blocks. We followed the pre-dawn flow of Palestinian workers through the permanent checkpoint at Bethlehem where a permit and fingerprint scan are needed to pass and commence the working day. A busy checkpoint can take hours to negotiate and the loss of employment can mean a revoking of permits and the right to travel. Settlements, checkpoints and the wall severely curtail the rights to work, worship and freedom of movement. [Amnesty International](#) has said: 'Settlement construction is the cause of forced displacement, a myriad of human rights violations and is a flagrant violation of international law'. It adds that 'Israel must immediately halt all construction of settlements and related infrastructure as a first step towards removing all settlers from the occupied territories'.

### Hebron settlements



Palestinian shops welded shut in the old city of Hebron

In Hebron, we witnessed the impact of settlements on Palestinian commerce where dozens of shop fronts had been welded shut by the Israeli military to accommodate 400 settlers in the heart of the city. A once bustling market place was eerily quiet as we watched fresh Israeli flags being hoisted by the military on to buildings that once housed Palestinian families. As we made our way into another

area of the old town where Palestinian commercial life carries on we found the market protected from above by a wire mesh that gathered debris thrown down from above by settlers. The proximity of settlers, often armed and attended in any event by a heavy military presence, makes a nonsense of the [area demarcations](#) outlined by the Oslo Peace Accords. Hebron, for example, is part of Area A designated by Oslo as residing under the control of the Palestinian Civil and Security Authority, but in reality Israel's domain holds forth. Human rights organisations have raised concerns about settler and military impunity in carrying out abuses against Palestinians. For example, Amnesty International's 2015-16 [report](#) found that: 'Israelis living in illegal settlements in the occupied West Bank frequently attacked Palestinian civilians and their property, sometimes in the presence of Israeli soldiers and police who failed to intervene'. Moreover, 'since 1987, no Israeli soldier or commander has been convicted of wilfully causing the death of a Palestinian in the Palestinian territories'.



**A wire mesh captures debris thrown from settlements on to the Palestinian market below in Hebron**

In a tour of settlements in East Jerusalem, we were told about an increasing number of house demolitions and the lack of citizenship rights for Palestinians living inside Israel. Amnesty International claims that in the past year in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, 'Israeli forces demolished at least 510 Palestinian homes and other structures built without Israeli permits, which are virtually impossible to obtain, forcibly evicting more than 610 people'. They also demolished or made uninhabitable 19 family homes of Palestinians alleged to have carried out attacks on Israelis as a form of collective punishment.

### **Prisoners**

Another issue that dominated our discourse with human rights groups in the West Bank alongside settlements, house demolitions and the wall was the arbitrary military justice system and, in particular, the use of Administrative Detention; arrest and detention without charge and trial for periods up to six months that can be indefinitely renewed. According to the Palestinian prisoner

support group Addameer, there are [7,000](#) Palestinians currently incarcerated in Israeli jails that include 700 administrative detainees, 340 child prisoners and 56 female prisoners. Most of the prisoners are from the West Bank with 500 from East Jerusalem and 340 from Gaza; 458 prisoners are serving life sentences. Many of those arrested are political leaders or influential figures in civil society such as writers, scholars, journalists, students and artists. 'Palestinians may be detained for up to [twelve](#) days without being informed of the reason for their arrests or being brought before a judge' and during this period can be subjected to torture and interrogated constantly. Amnesty International found that the 'Israeli military and police forces, as well as Israel Security Agency (ISA) personnel, tortured and otherwise ill-treated Palestinian detainees, including children, particularly during arrest and interrogation'. The methods of torture included 'beating with batons, slapping, throttling, prolonged shackling, stress positions, sleep deprivation and threats'.

The intolerable regime in Israeli jails and indefinite incarceration through Administrative Detention has resulted in [mass hunger strikes](#) involving hundreds of prisoners. In August, political prisoner Bilal Kayed suspended a hunger strike after [71 days](#) without food when the Israeli authorities agreed to release him from Administrative Detention in December 2016. Prisoners are being forced into the last resort of hunger strikes to secure a release date from detention. [Robert Piper](#), the United Nations Coordinator for Humanitarian Assistance and Development Aid in the occupied Palestinian territory, said in August 2015 that: 'The number of administrative detainees is at an eight-year high. I reiterate the United Nations long-standing position that all administrative detainees – Palestinian or Israeli - should be charged or released without delay'. At the root of the prison crisis in the West Bank is the use of a military justice system that is entirely separate from the civil justice system applied to Jewish Israelis, including settlers. Until this duality is ended, the Palestinian struggle in Israel's jails is set to continue.

### **Israel's strategy**

From illegal settlements to house demolitions, checkpoints, permits and the military justice system it seems that just about every facet of Palestinian life has been shorn of fundamental rights so what is Israel's endgame for the West Bank and East Jerusalem? Well, we already know that a two state solution is impossible given the disconnection of the West Bank from Gaza and the contiguous network of Bantustans created by the settlements, wall, checkpoints and barriers. The majority of settlements are in Area C which represents 60 percent of the West Bank and 'officially' administered by Israel which means that Palestinians are unable to build there. Nor can they secure permits to build in East Jerusalem where 'illegal' dwellings are ruthlessly demolished. This restricts Palestinians to smaller parcels of land with limited access to natural resources and subjected to a battery of policies, according to [Ben White](#), that are 'intended to make normal life — and a continued Palestinian presence — untenable'. For example, settlements are connected by by-pass roads that also feed into the Israeli transport grid while avoiding Palestinian towns and villages. The latter, however, are enclosed by the wall and checkpoints which heavily impedes transport around the West Bank and, in a larger sense, is limiting the prospects for growth and socio-economic development. In the absence of any kind of meaningful peace negotiations or third party state pressure on Israel, colonialism continues apace in the West Bank which is placing a greater premium on the agency and activism of civil society movements in Palestine and across the world.



## BDS

Resistance to the rapacious settler colonialism within Palestine and beyond is growing thanks chiefly to the now global Boycott Divestment Sanctions (BDS) movement. Our group was addressed by the inspirational co-founder of BDS, Omar Barghouti, who charted the origins of [BDS](#) in Palestinian civil society as a non-violent movement to extend economic pressure on Israel to comply with international law. He talked about a new [task force](#) established by the Israeli government to step up its campaign against activists supporting BDS and he himself has been the subject of a call for a '[civil targeted killing](#)'. Israel's ramping up of aggression toward BDS and its leaders is due to the recent successes of the movement in persuading multinational giants [Veolia](#) and [G4S](#) to abandon their investment in Israel. A current priority target is [Hewlett Packard](#) which supplies the IT equipment used for gathering biometric data at checkpoints. Irish activists have been among the first to embrace BDS and helped to secure the withdrawal of Irish corporation Cement Roadstone Holdings from its complicity in the construction of the Separation Barrier. Where more work is needed, however, is in the implementation of sanctions particularly by the European Union, which is Israel's biggest trading partner under the auspices of an [Association Agreement](#). More pressure is needed on European Union institution's and member governments to have this pivotal agreement suspended pending Israel's compliance with international law. The giant strides already made by BDS show that this is within our compass. Similarly, the United States, which recently pledged [\\$38bn](#) in military aid to Israel over the next ten years, needs to end its seemingly unconditional diplomatic, military and financial support of Israel if significant headway is to be made in advancing meaningful dialogue toward peace.



A settler colony overlooking the village of Bil'in

Our visit ended when we joined Palestinian activists in the village of Bil'in in their weekly protest against the Separation Barrier which is swallowing up their land. For eleven years [Bil'in](#), a small village of 1,800 residents situated 12 km west of Ramallah, has maintained its weekly demonstration which was famously documented in the Oscar nominated film [5 Broken Cameras](#). Similar non-violent protests are mounted in villages across the West Bank every week but Palestinians recognise that a people under military occupation, subjected to suffocating forms of subjugation, can not win the struggle for freedom alone. They need the support of civil society movements across the world to shake complicit governments from their support of occupation. Nelson Mandela recognised how crucial that same international support was to the ending of apartheid in South Africa when he said 'We know too well that our freedom is incomplete without the freedom of the Palestinians'. Achieving that freedom, as Omar Barghouti emphasised to us, is as much about a mental resistance as it is a resistance to colonisation of Palestinian land when he said:

**"Ultimately, Israel is intent on not just colonizing our land but also our minds, searing into our consciousness the futility of hope and the impossibility of resisting its hegemonic and unjust order. Hope, after all, can be contagious. Despite decades of dispossession, occupation, and brutalities, Palestinians have not given up; we continue to resist oppression and to assert our quest for equal rights to all humans".**



**A Palestinian flag flies aloft the wall in Bil'in**



## References

Addameer (2016) 'Statistics on Prisoners', available: <http://www.addameer.org/statistics>, (accessed 2 October 2016).

Al Haq (n.d.) is 'an independent Palestinian non-governmental human rights organisation based in Ramallah, West Bank', visit: <http://www.alhaq.org/about-al-haq/about-al-haq>, (accessed 2 October 2016).

Al Haq (2016) 'The Killing of Mahmoud Badran: The IOF's Excessive Use of Force and Shoot to Kill Policy', 23 June, available: <http://alhaq.org/advocacy/topics/right-to-life-and-body-integrity/1055-the-killing-of-mahmoud-badran-the-iofs-excessive-use-of-force-and-shoot-to-kill-policy>, (accessed 2 October 2016).

*Aljazeera* (2016) 'Hundreds of Palestinian prisoners join hunger strike', 5 August, available: <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/08/palestinian-prisoners-join-hunger-strike-160805203005117.html> (accessed 3 October 2016).

Amnesty International (2012) 'Israel must halt construction of West Bank settlements', 3 December, available: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2012/12/israel-must-halt-construction-west-bank-settlements/>, (accessed 2 October 2016).

Amnesty International (2016) 'Israel and Occupied Palestinian Territories 2015-16', available: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/middle-east-and-north-africa/israel-and-occupied-palestinian-territories/report-israel-and-occupied-palestinian-territories/> (accessed 2 October 2016).

Apps, Sara (2016) 'G4S leaving Israel shows that the boycott, divestment and sanctions campaign is winning', 11 March, *The Independent*, available: <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/g4s-leaving-israel-shows-that-the-boycott-divestment-and-sanctions-campaign-is-winning-a6926051.html>, (accessed 3 October 2016).

Beaumont, Peter (2016) 'Israel-Palestine: outlook bleak as wave of violence passes six-month mark', 31 March, *The Guardian*, available: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/31/israel-palestine-violence-knife-attacks-west-bank-gaza>, (accessed 2 October 2016)

BDS (2015) 'BDS marks another victory as Veolia sells off all Israeli operations', 1 September, available: <https://bdsmovement.net/news/bds-marks-another-victory-veolia-sells-all-israeli-operations>, (accessed 3 October 2016).

Boycott, Divestment Sanctions (BDS) (n.d.). Visit: <https://bdsmovement.net/>, (accessed 3 October 2016).

B'tselem (2015) 'Human Rights Organizations in Israel: Politicians' calls to police and soldiers to shoot rather than arrest endorse the killing of Palestinians', 14 October, available: [http://www.btselem.org/press\\_releases/20151014\\_summary\\_execution\\_joint\\_statement](http://www.btselem.org/press_releases/20151014_summary_execution_joint_statement), (accessed 2 October 2016).

EU Neighbourhood Library (2014) 'EU Israel Association Agreement', available: <http://www.euneighbours.eu/library/content/eu-israel-association-agreement> (accessed 3 October 2016).

Five Broken Cameras (2014). Visit: <http://5brokencamerasthemovie.com/> (accessed 3 October 2016).

Jacobs, Ben (2016) 'Donald Trump links Mexico border wall plan to Israel's 'successful' separation barrier', 26 September, *The Guardian*, available: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/sep/26/donald-trump-links-mexico-border-wall-plan-to-israels-successful-separation-barrier>, (accessed 2 October 2016).

Murphy, Maureen Clare (2016) 'Four Palestinian children killed in five days', 23 September, *The Electronic Intifada*, available: <https://electronicintifada.net/blogs/maureen-clare-murphy/four-palestinian-children-killed-five-days>, (accessed 2 October 2016).

Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs occupied Palestinian territory (OCHA) (2011), 'Barrier Update: Seven years after the Advisory Opinion of the International Court of Justice on the Barrier: The Impact of the Barrier in the Jerusalem area', July, available: [http://www.ochaopt.org/documents/ocha\\_opt\\_barrier\\_update\\_july\\_2011\\_english.pdf](http://www.ochaopt.org/documents/ocha_opt_barrier_update_july_2011_english.pdf), (accessed 2 October 2016).

Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs occupied Palestinian territory (OCHA) (2014), '10 Years since the international court of justice (ICJ) Advisory Opinion', 9 July, available: [https://www.ochaopt.org/documents/ocha\\_opt\\_10\\_years\\_barrier\\_report\\_english.pdf](https://www.ochaopt.org/documents/ocha_opt_10_years_barrier_report_english.pdf) (accessed 2 October 2016).

Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs occupied Palestinian territory (OCHA) (2016) 'Movement and Access Restrictions', 13 June, available: <http://www.ochaopt.org/content/2015-overview-movement-and-access-restrictions#WestBank>, (accessed 3 October 2016).

Palestine Solidarity Campaign (2014) 'The case against Hewlett-Packard', 13 August, available: <https://www.palestinecampaign.org/case-hewlett-packard/> (accessed 3 October 2016).

Pappe, Ilan (2006) *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*, Oxford: One World publications.

Piper, Robert (2016) 'Statement by the United Nations Coordinator for Humanitarian Assistance and Development Aid in the occupied Palestinian territory, Mr. Robert Piper, on Israel's continued practice of administrative detention', 20 August, available: <http://www.unsco.org/Documents/Statements/SC/2016/Statement%20by%20UN%20Coordinator%20for%20Humanitarian%20Assistance%20and%20Development%20Aid%20Piper%20-%2020%20August%202016.pdf>, (accessed 3 October 2016).

Reuters (2015), 'UNESCO condemns Israel for limits on al-Aqsa mosque access', 21 October, available: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-israel-palestinians-unesco-idUSKCN0SF1RI20151021>, (accessed 2 October 2016).

Samidoun (2016) 'Palestinian Prisoners Factsheet', available: <http://samidoun.net/site/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Prisoners-Factsheet.pdf>, (accessed 2 October 2016).

Silver, Charlotte (2016) 'Bilal Kayed suspends hunger strike as prison struggles continue', 24 August, *The Electronic Intifada*, available: <https://electronicintifada.net/blogs/charlotte-silver/bilal-kayed-suspends-hunger-strike-prison-struggles-continue>, (accessed 3 October 2016).

Silverstein, Richard (2016) 'Israeli Minister Calls for "Civil Targeted Killings" of BDS Leaders', 30 March, available: <http://www.richardsilverstein.com/2016/03/30/israeli-minister-calls-for-civil-targeted-killings-of-bds-leaders/> (accessed 3 October 2016).

UN News Centre (2004) 'International Court of Justice finds Israeli barrier in Palestinian territory is illegal', 9 July, available: [http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=11292#.V\\_FaoSgrLIV](http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=11292#.V_FaoSgrLIV), (accessed 2 October 2016).

UN Watch (2015) 'In 9 years existence, UNHRC condemned Israel more times than rest of world combined', available: <http://www.unwatch.org/report-in-9-years-existence-unhrc-condemned-israel-more-times-than-rest-of-world-combined/> (accessed 2 October 2016).

White, Ben (2010) 'Beit Sahour: a microcosm of Israeli colonization', 19 April, *The Electronic Intifada*, available: <https://electronicintifada.net/content/beit-sahour-microcosm-israeli-colonization/8790>, (accessed 3 October 2016).

White, Ben (2016) 'Settlements Explained', 25 September, *Middle East Monitor*, available: <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20160925-explained-israeli-settlements/>, (accessed 2 October 2016).

Wilson, Nigel (2016) 'Hundreds mark 11th year of protests in Bilin', 19 February, *Aljazeera*, available: <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/02/hundreds-mark-11th-year-protests-bilin-160219161932421.html>, (accessed 3 October 2016).

Zahriyeh, Ehab (2014) 'Maps: The Occupation of the West Bank', 4 July, *Aljazeera*, available: <http://america.aljazeera.com/multimedia/2014/7/west-bank-security.html>, (accessed 2 October 2016).

**Stephen McCloskey** is Director of the Centre for Global Education. Since 2011, the Centre has been delivering education projects in the Gaza Strip, Palestine aimed at providing psycho-social support and education services to children aged 7-12 years.

**All photographs: Stephen McCloskey**  
**Centre for Global Education**  
**9 University Street**  
**Belfast**  
**BT7 1FY**

**E-mail:** [info@centreforglobaleducation.com](mailto:info@centreforglobaleducation.com)  
**Tel:** 02890241879  
**Web:** [www.centreforglobaleducation.com](http://www.centreforglobaleducation.com)  
**Facebook:** <https://www.facebook.com/centreforglobaleducation>  
**Twitter:** @CGEBelfast

**October 2016**