

The Geopolitical Status of Bier Owna Neighborhood

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Bier Owna Profile

Historical Background

Bethlehem Governorate lies in the southern part of the West Bank south of Jerusalem. It extends from the western border of the West Bank to reach the Dead Sea in the east. Jerusalem governorate borders it from the north and Hebron Governorate from the south. Historically, the Governorate was always correlated with Jerusalem, due to the religious, economic and cultural ties.

In June 1967, Israel launched a war that ended in the Israeli occupation of the rest of mandate Palestine, the Syrian Golan Heights and the Egyptian Sinai Peninsula. Soon after the occupation, the Israeli Governorate embarked on a campaign to manipulate the demographic and geographical realities of the city in order to reinforce its claim to sovereignty over Jerusalem. The Israeli government expanded East Jerusalem's municipal boundaries; increasing the city's municipal area from 6.5 km² to 71 km²; including areas from 28 surrounding Palestinian villages. As a result, ¹Bethlehem governorate lost 18,048 dunums of its lands, out of which 6,844 dunums belonged to the village boundary of Bethlehem, Beit Jala and Beit Sahour cities; whereby, 2,487 dunums of Bethlehem village boundary were confiscated, that is 8% of the total Bethlehem lands; 3,147 dunums of Beit Jala village boundary were confiscated, which constituted 22% of the total Beit Jala lands; and 1,210 dunums of Beit Sahour village boundary were confiscated, that is 17% of the total Beit Sahour lands. The

Bier 'Owna: Location and Physical Characteristics

Bier 'Owna is a Palestinian neighborhood to the north of the town of Beit Jala², and south of the city of Jerusalem. It is located in the area that was illegally and unilaterally annexed from the city of Beit Jala in 1967 for redrawing Jerusalem municipality boundary. The neighborhood is bordered by the Israeli Segregation Wall and the settlement of Gilo from the north, Beit Jala city center from the south, 'Ayda Refugee Camp from the East and the Israeli Segregation wall and Al Makhroun Valley from the West. (ARIJ, 2022). The majority of Palestinians living in Bir 'Owna neighborhood are East Jerusalem ID card holders.

The Impact of the Israeli occupation on Bier 'Owna over the years

¹ Bethlehem Governorate lies in the southern part of the West Bank south of Jerusalem. It has an area of 658.6 Km² and is home to 242,222 Palestinian inhabitants (PCBS, 2022).

² Beit Jala City Profile

http://vprofile.arij.org/bethlehem/pdfs/VP/Beit%20Jala_cp_en.pdf

Over the years of the occupation, Israel initiated a campaign to manipulate the demographic and territorial status of the city of Jerusalem, mainly the eastern part³, which was unilaterally and illegally annexed to Israel in 1967. Bir ‘Owna neighborhood, one of five main neighborhoods in the city of Beit Jala, and a geographical area that remained under the illegally and unilaterally annexed area of Beit Jala city, has been exposed to the consecutive Israeli land confiscations for the various colonial purposes; beginning from the unilateral move taken by Israel back in 1967 to redraw the municipal boundaries of Jerusalem where 225 dunums, 69% of its total area (326 dunums), were lost from the neighborhood’s land area; followed by the land and housing restrictions which were imposed on the neighborhood’s inhabitants by the Municipality of Jerusalem over the years of the Israeli occupation to cease the neighborhood’s urban development; the construction and expansion of settlements, and lately but not last, the construction of the Israeli Segregation wall on the neighborhood’s land, and the separation of the neighborhood’s territorial contiguity with the city of Jerusalem.

It is worth noting that this part of Beit Jala city (and the rest of the area annexed to Israel in 1967 for the expansion of Jerusalem municipality boundary), was not subjected to the Oslo II Interim Agreement signed between the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and Israel on the 28th September 1995 which categorized the West Bank into areas "A"⁴, "B"⁵ and "C"⁶, instead, this part remained as it was before this agreement, under the control of Jerusalem Israeli Municipality while the remaining part of the neighborhood (and the city of Beit Jala) fell under the OSLO II land classification of 1995.

Building Restrictions

The successive Israeli governments have deliberately failed to regulate Palestinian land and neighborhoods in the part that was illegally expanded and annexed to Jerusalem (the East Jerusalem part)⁷; and imposed endless complex laws and restrictions on construction

³ The Eastern Part of the city or the J1 area, the part inside the borders and under the control of the illegally and unilaterally expanded Jerusalem Municipality and includes the old city of Jerusalem (Beit Al-Maqdis), Beit Hanina, Beit Safafa, Sharafat, Al Isawiya, Jabal Al Mukkabir, As Sawahra Al Gharbiya, Shu’fat and Shu’fat Camp, Silwan and Athuri neighborhood, Sur Baher and Um Tuba, Kafr Aqab and the northern part of Bethlehem Governorate which includes the lands that were annexed from Bethlehem, Beit Jala (including Bir ‘Owna neighborhood) and Beit Sahour lands for the expansion of Jerusalem municipal boundaries.

⁴Area A: over which the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) has full (security and administrative) control.

⁵Area B: where the Palestinian National Authority has a complete control over civil matters but Israel continues to have overriding responsibility for security.

⁶Area C: where Israel retains full control over security and administration related to the territory. In area C Palestinian building and land management is prohibited unless through a permit given by the Israeli Civil Administration. Most of the lands lying within the area “C” are agricultural land and open areas, fertile and rich in natural water sources, which constitute a major source of income for Palestinian families.

⁷ The Jerusalem Governorate is divided into two main regions: (J1 area) which is located inside the borders and under the control of the illegally and unilaterally expanded Jerusalem Municipality. The J1 area includes many Palestinian Jerusalemite communities such as the old city of Jerusalem (Beit Al-Maqdis), Beit Hanina, Beit Safafa, Sharafat, Al Isawiya, Jabal Al Mukkabir, As Sawahra Al Gharbiya, Shu’fat

permits which prevented Palestinian construction entirely in some areas and incurred high costs for those Palestinians applying for construction licenses in others while at the same, allowed for settlement construction and expansion. This forced Palestinians to build without permits to house the growing population, and therefore, their homes became subjected to the threat of demolition; Below is a breakdown of the demolition incidents that took place in Bier 'Owna neighborhood during the last few years under the claim of building without license:-

- 16 August 2016: the Israeli Occupation Authorities and bulldozers stormed Bir 'Owah area, where the construction of the Segregation wall started few months ago, and demolished two homes belonging to local resident Mohammad Zreina, and his family, adding that each of the demolished buildings was 200 square/meters. The Israeli bulldozers also demolished a large room, belonging to the same Palestinian. The two homes, and the room provided shelter to twenty persons, and belonged to him and his five brothers; the family constructed the two homes 25 years ago. The Israeli bulldozers also bulldozed the lands where the homes stood, and uprooted several trees owned by the family.
- 29 January 2018: three Israeli bulldozers accompanied by Border Police personnel arrived at the Beit Jala neighborhood of Bir 'Owna, which had been annexed to East Jerusalem and destroyed two buildings under construction containing a total of nine housing units under the pretext of being constructed without a permit from the Israeli side. The buildings and their lands, are owned by Walid Zreina and Issa Awad.
- 13 February 2019: Israeli bulldozers accompanied by Border Police personnel invaded Beit Jala city, and surrounded Bir 'Owna neighborhood, adjacent to the Israeli Segregation Wall, before storming the home of Mohammad Mousa Zreina, assaulted him and his family, before forcing them out of their home, and demolished the property under the claim that the house was not licensed.
- 2 April 2019: the Israeli Municipality of Jerusalem accompanied by Israeli bulldozers and border Police demolished a Palestinian home, owned by a lawyer in Bir 'Owna area, in Beit Jala city, west of Bethlehem, in the occupied West Bank. The Israeli border Police closed the entire area, and prevented the Palestinians from entering or leaving it, before demolishing the property. The demolished property is owned by a lawyer, identified as Basima Issa, and was a three-story building; under the claim that the home was built without a permit.
- 9 April 2019: the Israeli Municipality of Jerusalem delivered a demolition order, to the home of Ayman Rizq Zreineh, in Bir 'Owna neighborhood of the city of

and Shu'fat Camp, Silwan and Athuri neighborhood, Sur Baher and Um Tuba, Kafr Aqab and the northern part of Bethlehem Governorate which includes Bir 'Owna neighborhood.

Beit Jala, in the southern West Bank. The Israeli authorities ordered the two-story home of Ayman and his 3 sons Rizq, Muhammad, and Saleh Zreineh, be destroyed. The Jerusalem Municipality ordered Ayman to demolish the home himself, but he refused to sign the self-demolition order. As a result, the family was forced to pay 230,000 Israeli shekels (\$63,575) as bail, and, if Israel demolishes the home, Israel will force the family to pay for the demolition as well as additional fines. The reason for the demolition order was not stated.

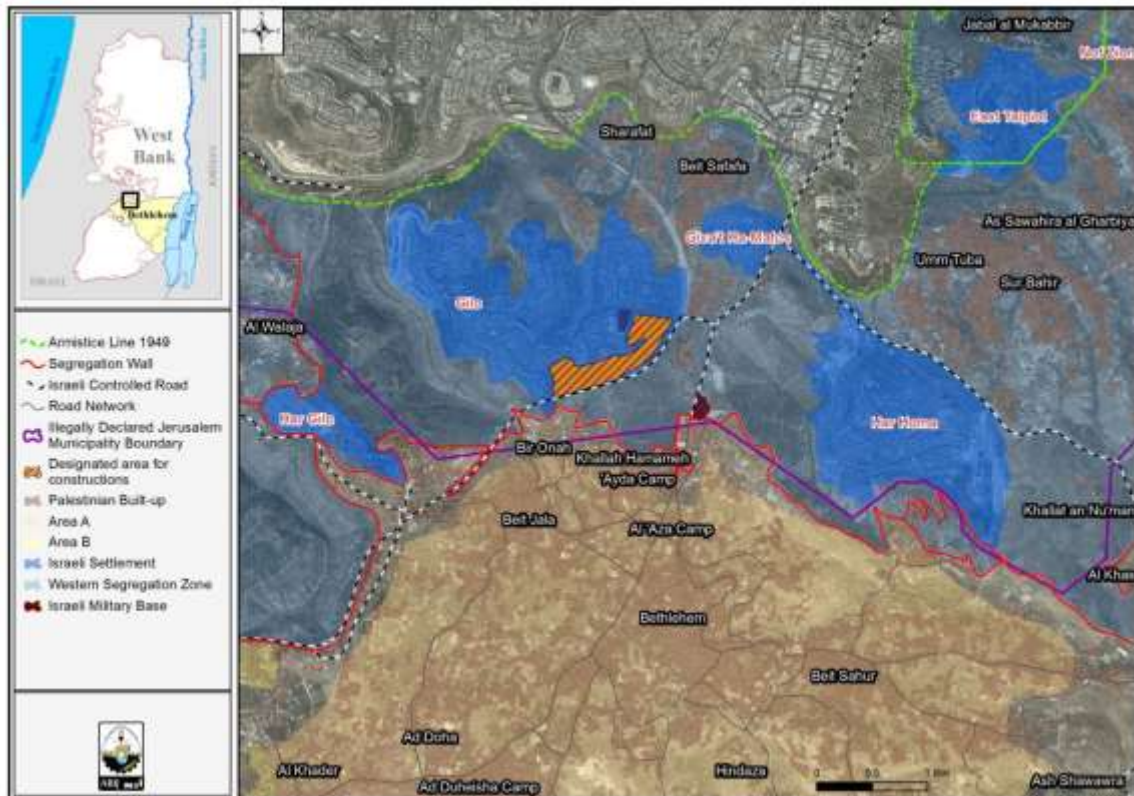
- 11 June 2019: the Israeli Municipality of Jerusalem and bulldozers demolished a residential structure and four barns in Bier ‘Owna neighborhood in the city of Beit Jala. A large Israeli military force escorted a bulldozer to the neighborhood, cordoned the area off before they proceeded to demolish four barns and a residential room purportedly for being built without a license. The owner of the structures was identified as Mohammad Zreineh. The Israeli army randomly opened fire at residents who attempted to counter the demolition, injuring Zreineh’s son with a rubber-coat bullet in the foot and beating other family members.
- 6 August 2019: The Israeli Municipality of Jerusalem demolished 4 tin-shacks in Bir Owana neighborhood in the city of Beit Jala belonging to resident ,uhammad Musa Zreneh. The demolition process also included a base of un under-construction house belonging to citizen Daoud Ghneim.
- 16 January 2020: The Israeli Municipality of Jerusalem escorted by Israeli border Police raided Bier ‘Owna neighborhood in the city of Beit Jala, west of Bethlehem, and demolished a residential tent and a number of sheds for raising sheep belonging to Muhammad Zareina, claiming that they were built without a permit.
- 28 April 2020: The Israeli Municipality of Jerusalem notified the demolition of a Tin-shack in Beit Jala, belonging to Muhammad Musa Zreneh, in Bier ‘Owna neighborhood, under the pretext of not being licensed. Zreneh was given 96 hours to file legal objections against the demolition notice.

Israeli Settlements construction on Lands of Beit Jala

In 1971, Israel has commenced the construction of Gilo settlement to the north of Beit Jala city (north of Bier ‘Owna neighborhood) on the part that was illegally and unilaterally annexed by Israel to redraw the Jerusalem Municipality Boundary. Over the years, the settlement has expanded to become one of the largest settlements in the occupied West Bank with an area of 3077 dunums and more than 31,000 Israeli settlers. Bier Owana village lost 10 dunums of its lands for the construction of Gilo settlement.

Israel has also unleashed several expansion plans in the settlement of Gilo over the past few years that will significantly increase the size of the settlement consequently increase its population in the future. The following is a detail of the plans as published by the Israeli sources.

- Israeli Town Planning Scheme No. 13261 – Gilo’s southern side: The plan was approved on the 12 of August 2013 and states the construction of 891 settlement units on 269 dunums of lands of Bethlehem, on Gilo’s southern side.
- Israeli Town planning scheme No. 13157 - Gilo’s southwestern side: The plan was approved on the 12th of October 2012 and states the construction of 734 settlement units on 229 dunums of lands of Bethlehem, on Gilo’s south western side.
- Israeli Town planning scheme No. 125195 - Gilo’s southeastern side: On the 8th of August 2016, the Israeli developer Nehemiah Davidi and architect David Guggenheim advanced a new plan to build about 2992 new housing units on 268 dunums of Palestinian land in the settlement of Gilo, in the direction of the Tunnel Road and Beit Jala, between Jerusalem and Bethlehem Governorates. The area tracted in the plan has become off access to Palestinians due to the construction of the Israeli Segregation Wall and will border Bier ‘Owna neighborhood if implemented on the ground.



The Construction of the Israeli Segregation Wall

On June 2002, the Israeli Government launched its policy of unilateral segregation within the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT) by establishing a Segregation Zone along the western terrains of the occupied West Bank. The Western Segregation Zone is the area west of the Segregation Wall that reaches to the 1949 Armistice Line (Green Line) and covers substantial and significant land areas, rich with natural resources (water aquifers)

as it runs along the western part of the West Bank from north to south, seizing the most fertile agricultural lands, isolating Palestinian communities in enclaves, undermining the territorial contiguity between the Palestinian villages and cities, controlling the natural resources, and encapsulating and protecting most of the illegal Israeli settlements.

Based on the characteristic nature of the area through which the Segregation Wall runs, the type of structure is determined based on whether the area is agricultural land or a densely populated village or town. The Segregation Wall as a fence cuts through vast agriculture lands. The Segregation Fence is more devastating to the land than the 8 meters wall as it requires an area of 40-100 meters in width to complete. Moreover, it is a double-layered fence, reinforced with barbed wires, trenches, military roads and footprint-detection tracks, and includes a 4-5 meter high electrified metal fence, equipped with security surveillance cameras. In the other case, in areas with sizeable population and/or in close proximity to the Green Line, the Segregation Wall consists of 8-12 meter high concrete partitions, with military watchtowers appendages lined-up 250 meters apart.

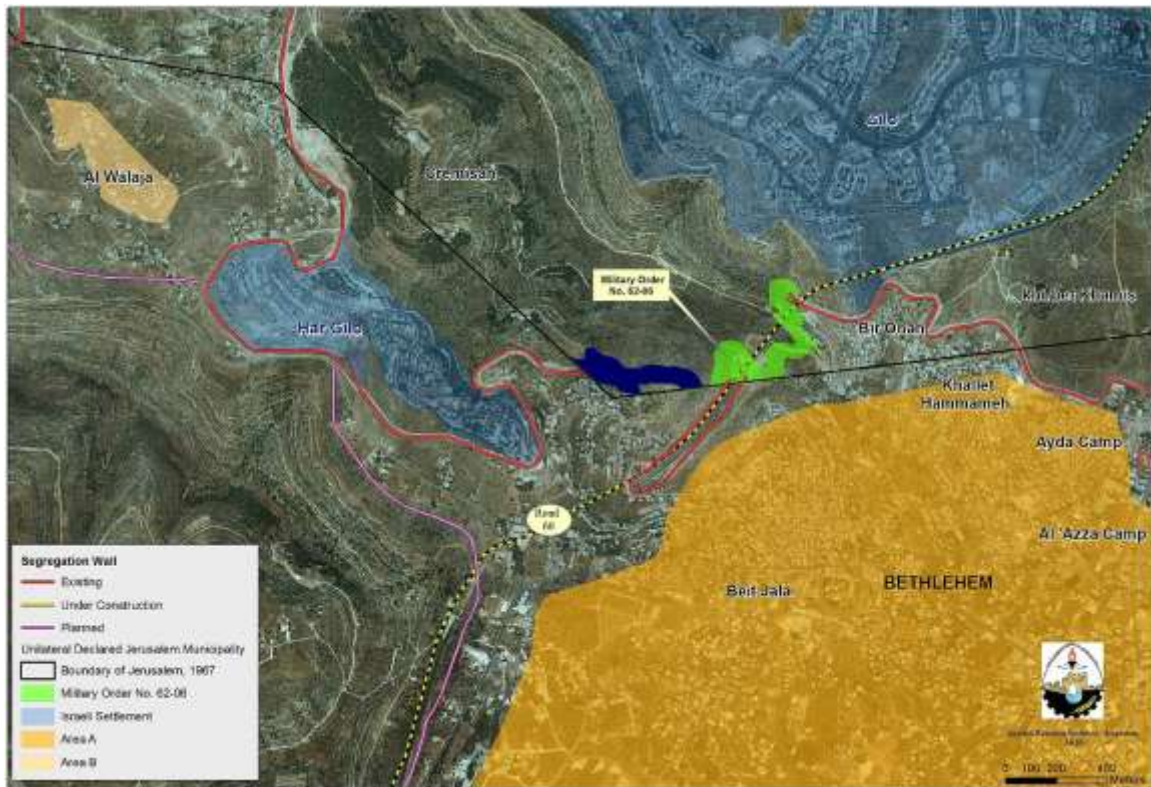
Israel's plan for Bir Onah neighborhood

Israel was able to re-draw the boundaries of Jerusalem Municipality, for the second time, through the construction of the Segregation Wall, which is being built in the occupied West Bank. The path of the Segregation Wall around Jerusalem shows the Israeli intentions and plans to control vast areas of uninhabited Palestinian land and to include Israeli settlements within its new boundaries through the infamous Israeli scheme of 'Greater Jerusalem,' which seeks to annex the three major Israeli settlement blocs that surround the city of Jerusalem while excluding 12 densely populated Palestinian communities nearby (pop +150,000) from the city's municipal boundaries, to become on the eastern side of the wall, outside the new borders Israel is unilaterally drawing around the city of Jerusalem.

The latest Israeli revised route of the Segregation Wall route published on the so-called "Israeli Ministry of Defense" website in April 2007 showed that the wall will extend a length of 0.9 km on lands of Bir 'Owna neighborhood and will pass less than 100 meters from the Palestinians houses in the neighborhood. Additionally, the wall will isolate vast areas of agricultural lands, to become on the Israeli side of the wall.

The construction of the wall on lands of Bir 'Owna neighborhood, where the majority of Palestinians hold Jerusalem ID cards, sets the neighborhood outside the boundaries of Jerusalem municipality to become on the eastern side of the wall, under the jurisdiction of the Palestinian National Authority despite its location inside the Jerusalem municipal area; thus stripping Palestinian Jerusalemites off their right to acquire city services in return for what they pay of Arnona and other taxes, because they no longer are living within the city boundaries. This clearly shows that the Israeli Government is changing demographic balance in favor of Judaizing the city of Jerusalem by emptying the city from the high dense Palestinian communities to ensure the "Israelization of the city".

The wall has also added Bir Onah neighborhood to the list of Palestinian communities in occupied East Jerusalem that were excluded from Jerusalem city’s municipal boundaries due to the construction of the wall, including Ar Ram, Al Bared outskirts, Az Zayyem, Hizma, Anata, Shu’fat Camp, As Sawahrah Ash Sharqiya, Ash Sheikh Saed, Al Ezariyah, Qalandyia camp, Kafr Aqab, Mikmas and Abu Dis. Map (2)



Map 2: The Segregation Wall plan on lands of Bier ‘Owna

Israel manipulates with the demographic balance

The Jerusalem Municipality is manipulating with the demographic balance in the city of Jerusalem in favor of Judaizing it, by emptying it from the highly dense Palestinian communities that has become on the eastern side of the wall. This was revealed back in October 2017, when the Israeli daily newspaper, Haaretz, published an article on the 29th of October 2017, revealing the Israeli Affairs Minister’s proposal, Zeev Elkin (that time), for the municipal division of Jerusalem, which would see several Palestinian neighborhoods on the eastern side of the wall (due to wall construction) be separated from the Jerusalem municipality boundary and placed under the jurisdiction of one or more new council administrations (could be the Israeli Civil Administration). The proposal hasn’t been approved yet, (requires the approval of Prime Minister and the completion of various legislative amendments, whose first reading was already passed by the Knesset in July 2017), however, this proposal, if approved, will establish an extraordinary Israeli local council whose inhabitants are not Israeli settlers, but rather

Palestinians with the status of permanent residents only (Palestinians holding Jerusalem ID cards), (Haaretz. 2017). Haaretz also noted that following the construction of the wall in and around Jerusalem, the Jerusalem Municipality, police and other Israeli agencies stopped providing services to Palestinian communities that has been sit outside the wall area (excluded from the city's municipal boundary due to the construction of the wall). This proposal, if approved, will also be applied to Bir 'Owna neighborhood since it has been set outside the city's Municipal boundary due to the construction of the wall.