

Spatial Development of Bethlehem and East Jerusalem: A bleak future?





ethlehem, like Jerusalem, is considered a sacred city for the three monotheistic religions: Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. Until 1967 – before the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territory that included the occupation of East Jerusalem – Bethlehem was developing and spatially growing, maintaining an organic connection with Jerusalem city. Since the occupation, Bethlehem city, along with its twin cities of Beit Jala and Beit Sahour (henceforth the Bethlehem City-area) has witnessed an ever-changing flexible frontier with Jerusalem and thus, the long established socio-cultural,



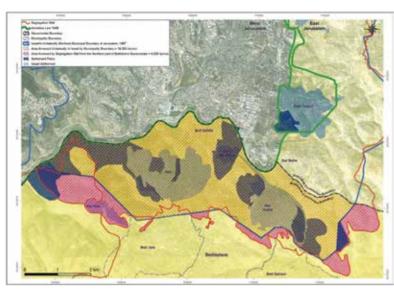
economic, and above all spiritual lifeline between the Bethlehem City-area and Jerusalem has been undermined by the Israeli matrix of control manifested by settlements, outposts, by-pass roads, and the Separation Wall that infiltrates the city and dissects the urban fabric of the Bethlehem City-area from Jerusalem city.

Bethlehem City-area was considered an inclusive neighborhood of Jerusalem until it was extracted from the milieu of its territorial realm, which ultimately directed the urban growth away from

Jerusalem, and thus away from the center of life for Palestinians. A probing look at the urban morphology of the Bethlehem City-area today reveals that it is characterized by a sprawl of fabric. The directional and rotational trajectory of growth for the urban fabric of the Bethlehem City-area has radically changed since the Israeli occupation of the West Bank territory. The resulting

Palestinians.





Map Bethlehem-Jerusalem - Applied Research Institute-Jerusalem (ARIJ) (2015).

facts on the ground have affected every aspect of life for Palestinians, including the right to freedom of movement along with the associated rights such as the right to worship and the right to education, amongst others.

Due to the geo-political conditions. at present more than ninety-six percent of Bethlehem's population live in less than fourteen percent of the total area of the city-region that falls under the Palestinian planning jurisdiction (classified as Areas A and B), whereas the remaining area (eighty-six percent. classified as Area C) is entirely controlled by the Israeli authorities. As immediate and subsequent effects of the last four decades under Israeli occupation, the Palestinian sovereignty over land in the Bethlehem City-area has drastically decreased. This goes along with the opposing trend of an increasing urbanization that can be coined as 'human warehousing' and has resulted in the over-crowdedness of large parts of Palestinian cities, especially in East Jerusalem and in the Bethlehem City-area.

Taking the gross population density (population/gross area) as a quantitative indicator, crowdedness in the Bethlehem

City-area has increased by a factor of seven during 1967-2007, from 555 capita/km2 to 3,383 capita/km2. The current gross population density of the Bethlehem City-area at 3,383 capita/ km2 is considered relatively high when compared to other Palestinian cities; it is also high compared to the population densities of the West Bank and of the entire Palestinian territory (including Gaza), which in 2008 reached 422 capita/km2 and 635 capita/km2 respectively; but it remains less than the gross population density of East Jerusalem that calculates currently at 4,491 capita/km². Furthermore, it is anticipated that the gross population density will increase, as the Palestinian population growth rate is high and access to open land is limited in and around Jerusalem. If one assumes that Israeli activities will remain as they are today (with land confiscation and the construction of the Separation Wall continuing unrestrained), the gross population density in the Bethlehem City-area will continue to increase. For comparison: the gross population density in the West Bank territory has increased by approximately fifty percent over the early five years of the construction of the Separation Wall (2002-2007), as this structure has severely reduced the area available for spatial development, while the population has continued to increase.

The age-old link between Jerusalem and Bethlehem has been almost completely severed as a result of the physical obstructions on the ground. Without a political resolution that ends the Israeli occupation - and with it removes the host of physical obstructions that include the Separation Wall, as well as the illegal Israeli settlements and their infrastructure - the future for Bethlehem, separated from Jerusalem. looks bleak. Likewise, and at the risk of sounding tautological, restricting access to the religious and holy sites in both Jerusalem and Bethlehem increases the risk of aggravating religious divisions in an area that has historical and religious importance for believers in the Muslim, Christian, and Jewish faiths, alike. Nevertheless and most unfortunately, the prevailing alternative option for Bethlehem to spatially develop apart from Jerusalem remains a reality on the ground. Should Palestinians dejectedly submit to this stipulation as the only available alternative? Empathetically, no! This article argues that the question is not whether Bethlehem should grow as an indispensable part of Jerusalem or not, rather the question is how to end the Israeli occupation that renders the sustainable spatial development of the Bethlehem City-area as such a fairytale.

The repercussions of the prolonged Israeli occupation have resulted in a complex model of colonialism. From one perspective, it has undermined the historical and socio-cultural relations between the Palestinian capital city of Jerusalem and the neighboring areas. In the case of Bethlehem the occupation has rendered the possibility

for Bethlehem to grow as part of Jerusalem almost impossible due to the total physical severance. From another perspective and as time passes, it is indeed a dim possibility to envision a sustainable spatial development for Bethlehem, even alone and apart from Jerusalem.

To conclude, we must candidly admit that the current trend of spatial development will lead to unsustainable outcomes and that the carrying capacity of Bethlehem will be stretched to the limit with the limited land that is available for future spatial development. It is a glaring result - after almost two decades of fruitless peace negotiations with the Israelis - that any concrete positive development for Palestinians, manifested on the ground, is restricted to a trickle, in fact moving backwards. Nevertheless, there is nothing preventing Palestinians to develop a vision and to devise strategies for development of the areas inaccessible due to the current Israeli geo-political constructs, such as in the Israelioccupied areas of East Jerusalem and Area C of the West Bank. Unequivocally expressed, while Palestinians cannot perceive 'autonomy' as tantamount to 'sovereignty,' they should nevertheless plan in a comprehensive way if the Palestinian flagship project of "ending the occupation and building the state" is to become a reality and a Palestinian fact on the ground.

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