



# The Northern Entrance of Bethlehem: The devastated area near Rachel's tomb

By Issam Juha



For Bethlehemites, the Monastery and Church of St. Elias have traditionally linked the two cities of Jerusalem and Bethlehem. The monastery is one of the two points where people from Bethlehem receive the patriarchs that come to town each year mainly to celebrate Christmas: on 7 January the Greek Orthodox Patriarch, and on 18 January the Armenian Orthodox Patriarch. Several buildings spread along the way that connects the Monastery and Church of St. Elias with the Sansour Building, locally



Wall graffiti in Bethlehem.



The construction of the Segregation Wall has significantly affected the northern entrance of Bethlehem: 3,000 *dunums* were confiscated, which dramatically changed the lives of people who live in that area and are struggling to retain the historical, economic, cultural, and social value of the area but will always remember that Bethlehem is and will always be connected to its sister town Jerusalem.



known as the tobacco factory, among them the Ecumenical Tantur Institute of Jerusalem and Rachel's Tomb, or Masjed Bilal Ben Rabbah, where on 25 December the people of Bethlehem receive the Latin Patriarch.

Rachels Tomb, locally also known as 'Qubbat Rahail' (Cupola of Rachel) is a structure that dates back to the Ottoman period; its western room, built in 1620, contains a tomb that is believed to be Rachel's, and its eastern two rooms, built in 1841 by Moses Montefiore, house a mosque. The site is venerated by Muslims, Christians, and Jews; and women seeking fertility would visit it. The area around the Tomb is used as a cemetery by the Muslims of Bethlehem. After 1967, the Israeli occupation started to close the site and considered it as a place of worship for Jews only. Since 1995, it has been turned into a fortress that is solely accessible to Israeli Jews and tourists. The construction of the Separation Wall during the second Intifada aimed to ensure access to the site for these two target groups and to provide parking lots for them.

The Wall, constructed along the northern entrance to Bethlehem in order to cut it off from Jerusalem, did not only create a barrier between the two cities, it also fragmented the landscape

along the road that has historically been the entrance of the town. Eighteen *dunums* were confiscated to ensure services to the site, and more than 3,000 *dumuns* of Bethlehem's lands are located behind the Wall. This has a devastating effect on the city since the only potential for future expansion of the town's municipal borders lies in these 3,000 dununms. Moreover, the areas adjacent to the Wall were classified as Area C, which means that according to the Oslo Agreements the municipality is prevented from developing it, even though it is inhabited by nearly 600 Palestinians and contains an industrial complex, more than fifty commercial shops, three souvenir shops, four restaurants, and two gas stations.



Separation Wall suffocating Bethlehem.

Today, the checkpoint at the northern entrance of Bethlehem (Checkpoint 300) is operated by the Israeli occupation authorities and serves as an access to Jerusalem. There is an access for vehicles that can be used by tourists and another one that it is separate and quite removed and where access is allowed only by foot. The pedestrian access receives Palestinians with special permits and tourists and visitors who do not have a vehicle. Since it is removed from general transportation, the area in front of the pedestrian entrance of the checkpoint has turned into a drop-off area without regulations and traffic guidance, and thus what was planned and developed as a residential area has become an uncontrolled haphazard space.

In order to face the damages that resulted from the construction of

the Wall - and despite the fact that the Municipality of Bethlehem does realize that the Wall is an illegal construction that shall fall one day - the municipality took the decision to work on various projects that shall contribute to easing the lives of the inhabitants who are forced to use the checkpoint to reach their work or medical treatment facilities, as well as for pilgrimage, family visits, or any other humanitarian reason. Projects like the rehabilitation of Caritas Street, the upgrading of the sewage network, and the rehabilitation of a roundabout at the checkpoint entrance are all projects that are foreseen to enhance the situation in the area, once accomplished. Moreover, the municipality decided to install a kiosk that shall serve as an information office for tourists and visitors. However, all of these

interventions remain vulnerable and may not be implementable as they require the approval of the Israeli government, which means that they may be demolished if the municipality proceeds without obtaining the necessary licenses, as these are seldom granted.

Various segments of the Wall contain watchtowers that are used by the Israeli occupying forces and have become points of confrontation between the military armed forces and Palestinian civilians. This is true especially for the tower near Rachel's Tomb and the Sansour building where, for the past two months, confrontations have been taking place almost daily between Palestinian protestors and Israeli soldiers who do not hesitate to hurdle hundreds of tear gas bombs as a first

step and continue their escalation by shooting at the protestors with not only rubber, but also live bullets. Several youth and children were murdered at this site over the last weeks.

Resistance through art is another way of confronting the Israeli occupation in Palestine. The Wall in Bethlehem, as is the situation in other places in Palestine, has been used as a tool to display people's rejection of the Wall and their calls for peace. Poems, slogans, paintings, and graffiti have been used as visual tools to achieve this goal, and perhaps the graffiti created by the street artist Banksy has contributed to turning the Wall into a tourist attraction.

Each Christmas, Bethlehemites gather near Rachel's Tomb to follow their long-time tradition of receiving the Patriarchs at the northern entrance of Bethlehem. Participants in this welcoming event are taken aback by the ugliness of the Segregation Wall. This abomination has destroyed the northern area of Bethlehem which used to be the most prestigious area for both residence and enterprises. Since the construction of the Wall, the value of properties has dramatically decreased due to the current situation of isolation. Bethlehem shall celebrate Christmas again this year and sends its call for peace again to all humanity. Again, the Patriarchs shall enter the town through the iron gate near Rachel's tomb; a gate that is only open to receive official visitors of the town. But Bethlehemites still hope that the Pope's prayer near this gate and the prayers of Palestinians all over the world shall bring peace to the City of Peace.

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