



Settlement File

A Reality Check for Jerusalem Settlements: The Case of Gilo

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Founded in 1971 soon after the Israeli occupation of East Jerusalem, the settlement of Gilo has prided itself as being a self-sufficient Jerusalem suburb, endowed with all the amenities of modern living including a convenient shopping center and affordable housing. In fact, Gilo has done so well for itself, that in less than thirty years it has expanded to become one of Jerusalem's largest residential areas with

some 30,000 Israelis living in 6,400 living units. At less than \$200,000 for a three bedroom apartment, most of the settlers living there, many of sephardic origin, do so simply as a matter of convenience rather than ideology.

Enter the al-Aqsa Intifada and suddenly the simple living and the seemingly mild contradiction of living so close to the Palestinian town of Beit Jala come into sobering focus. In Gilo, as in many Israeli settlements in Arab East Jerusalem, the idea of living on anything but Israeli soil all but vanished years ago with every newly-paved road and stone-covered apartment building. Gilo residents even felt connected with their fellow settlers in the southern West Bank after the installation of a wide by-pass road built impressively in 1996 with two tunnels going underneath their Beit Jala neighbors. The new Intifada has changed that now, as Gilo finds itself being turned back into a fortress. With reinforced cement shields now ringing their apartment buildings, bullet proof glass framing their scenic views and three Markhav tanks parking conspicuously outside their doors, ignoring contradictions is becoming more difficult.

For Gilo's only Palestinian resident, the latest Palestinian uprising is not so difficult to understand. Living on the edge of the green line, Mohana Arab sees the recent upsurge in violence as a natural consequence of unresolved wrongs. Mohana remembers clearly when the area covered by today's Gilo was still occupied only by 675 acres of olive groves and the famous slayyeb stone used in Beit Jala for masonry. There has had plenty of time to remember the old days, as for the past 17

years Mohana has watched his own 12 acres of land consumed by Gilo's appetite for new residential building.

Now 58 years old, Mohana lives alone in a broken bus surrounded by a mesh of barbed wire, among new neighbors who still don't know his name. In 1984, when Gilo extension called Metzpe Bethlehem was underway, Mohana returned from the Bethlehem market with his father, a tailor named Salman, to find a bulldozer on its way to remove his two story stone house. By that time most of Mohana's land was in the process of being mysteriously expropriated by the Israeli Municipality even while he still maintained ownership by showing his Ottoman and Jordanian land documents in Israeli courts. The Israeli Municipality later apologized for the demolition saying it was a mistake but compensated Mohana only with a broken bus and prohibited him from building anything more than a wooden shed which he currently uses for storage and an outdoor bathroom.

"No man has the right to take my land," says Mohana waving his hand over an aerial photo of a young Gilo just under construction, "I am rooted here and will not leave." Today, Mohana remembers his land as it once was through the pictures stored in the piles of overused photo albums and taped to wall paper inside his bus. After his father passed away and with no neighbors that speak his language or take interest in him, Mohana spends his days taking care of small sewing jobs. He takes short walks with his dog (he rarely leaves his home as he is afraid someone will remove it) and nurses a few trees he planted on his 30 some meter strip of land. Mohana lives fenced in between the settlement's hum-

ming electric grid and a childrens' playground built over the site of his old house. While he thinks his land is still being put to some good use, this playground is a constant reminder of how easy it was for Israel to overpower both himself and his father, just as they did to his neighbors.

The second Palestinian uprising has changed the attitude of the residents of Gilo but, for the moment, not too much. While the settlers can no longer look across the valley at Beit Jala as just some quiet and placid scenery, Mohana's neighbors still pay no attention to him. People in Mohana's neighborhood are more concerned with the disturbing look of the increased security and the falling price of real estate than they are of any personal existential questioning. Although the al-Aqsa Intifada is much more violent than the last, due in large part to the frustraion felt over continued settlement expansion, Gilo still plans to expand across the valley to neighboring el-Wallaje when things are more calm and Beit Jala has returned to its tame scenery.

Personally, Mohana does not think the shooting will produce a satisfactory solution. He, like his fellow Beit Jalans across the valley, who endure almost nightly machine gun fire and frequent bombing raids by Israeli Apache helicopters, want peace to return to their land. Still neither side is near its breaking point. The Palestinians only control one quarter of Beit Jala's pre-1967 land in what is termed Area A and dozens of Beit Jalan homes, like those living in el-Walaje, still find themselves routinely subject to Israeli demolition orders. Likewise, the 30,000 settlers of Gilo, like the 150,000 other Israeli settlers

in Arab East Jerusalem, do not want to abandon their property without a suitable alternative and, while many are taking an extended vacation for the holidays, they will be back.

After seven years of stalled interim agreements, Israel's settlement enterprise has entrenched itself into a maze of residential and commercial blocks, encroaching ever closer to Palestinian towns and villages. The Oslo peace process has produced little more than a new, and unmistakably more painful, impasse. This dangerous state mate will only be overcome by forging a new understanding based on the long standing series of UN resolutions and an implementation schedule that is both monitored and enforced. For Mohana, all will come in due time, the most important thing is that he and his land will not be forgotten.

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