

Resource Guide: Bil'in Case Study

5 BROKEN CAMERAS



Subhiyeh, with her granddaughter Jawaher in her home

AN EYE ON BIL'IN: WHERE POPULAR NON-VIOLENT RESISTANCE LIES AT THE HEART OF THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT

In 2004, the Israeli Government ordered the confiscated of 4,000 dunums* of agricultural land belonging to the Palestinian village of Bil'in in order to build the separation wall. Bil'in is a small agricultural village and many villagers relied on the crops they produced on this land for their livelihoods. The residents of Bil'in responded to this confiscation order by setting up a Popular Resistance Committee which organized and used both nonviolent protests and legal strategies to oppose the building of the wall and settlements on their land.

The popular non-violent resistance in Bil'in has gained support from both international and Israeli activists. Every Friday villagers march peacefully towards the wall in an attempt to reach the land that has been taken from them. They are joined by international and Israeli activists. At nearly every demonstration, international, Israeli, and Palestinians protestors are detained or arrested. Most of the internationals and Israelis detained are released after only a few hours later, but many of the Palestinians arrested remain in prison for periods that range from only a few days to weeks or months.

As a result of the villager's protests and legal challenges, the Israeli High Court of Justice ordered the route of the wall changed in 2007. This resulted in village residents

*A Palestinian, Turkish or Jordanian dunum is equivalent to about 0.25 acres. One acre is equivalent to 4.047 dunum.



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Left: Dr. Rateb Abu Rahmah in his garden. Right: Yusra Yusef posing with two of her granddaughters in her daughter's home.

regaining access to 1,200 dunums of the land which had been confiscated. However, the same court upheld the Israeli government's right to continue building settlements on other village land. Approximately 2,800 dunums of village agricultural land remains inaccessible to village residents.

Since construction of the wall started, many people in the village have lost a great deal, among them is Subhiyeh Abu Rahmah. In April 2009 an Israeli soldier shot and killed her son Basem* while he was participating in a non-violent demonstration against the wall. In December 2011 her daughter Jawaher died of asphyxiation after inhaling tear gas fired at her by an Israeli soldier while she observed, from a distance, nonviolent demonstrations near the village. Ashraf, another of her sons came to the attention of the world when a video of an Israeli soldier shooting him in the leg with a rubber bullet from close range while he was bound and blindfolded was released by the Israeli human rights organization B'tselem. Ashraf is currently in prison after being arrested for participating in the weekly nonviolent protests.

Speaking about Ashraf's arrest, Subhiyeh told AFSC that, "the Israeli forces arrested Ashraf in broad daylight. He is now in Magiddo prison, gets beaten regularly, and we don't know what the verdict in his case will be. I pray every day for his safe return."

As is the case for nearly every family in the village, the Abu Rahmah family lost access to their olive groves and agricultural land. Speaking again, Subhiyeh said, "we have now lost our source of livelihood, and it is very depressing to see the big modern buildings hovering over your land. We no longer have any cattle because we were forced to sell them due to not being able to access our grazing pastures. Today, I only have access to a very small part of our land on which I can continue to plow and grow crops when possible."

Yusra Yusef also lives in Bil'in. Her husband, who passed away four years ago, was the head of the village council when it initiated its legal struggle against the wall. Age 54 and a

mother of nine, one can still see deep sorrow in her eyes when she speaks of her late husband and his struggles. She explains: "The legal case was submitted under my husband's name, and lots of pressure from the Israel side was exerted against him to withdraw the case, to put a halt to the peaceful demonstrations. This is what killed him in the end."

Unlike Subhiyeh, Yusra's family lost all of their land to the Separation Wall and adjacent settlement. She can no longer work in the field and has lost an important source of both food and income.

The popular resistance committee has now been in existence for eight years. Dr. Rateb Abu Rahmah, spokesperson and media coordinator for the committee in Bil'in, explains: "We have managed through our peaceful resistance to shift the process. The High Court has decided to return part of our land, about 1200 dunums, however we need to relentlessly continue our peaceful resistance. Peace requires bridges, not walls. Much harm has been done to the villages and its residents [by the wall]."

The confiscation of land and loss of income have not been the only impacts of the wall on the village. Dr. Rateb told AFSC that academic performance in village schools has also dropped significantly since the wall was built. While village students used to have some of the highest scores in Palestine on the General Certificate Exam that is taken by all students before they graduate from high school, today students' performance is very low. Only one out of 15 passes the exam. He links this to the enormous psychological trauma and fear children and young adults are exposed to day after day as a result of military raids, arrest campaigns, and other actions taken against the village.

Despite the hardships they face, village residents remain committed to continuing their struggle and to sending out a message to the world that peace and justice will only prevail when the rights of all are respected.