

‘Where Can I Go?’ The Threat of Annexation of Palestinian Lands in the Jordan Valley

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As the sheep ventured out in search of food, the sun rose over the hills behind them. Their climb was made significantly easier than previous weeks, as the sweltering heat of the day didn't arrive until after 8.30am. The sheep and their shepherd Burhan lead the way, accompanied by the sound of the flock rustling in the dry bushes; the bell on the donkey chiming with each wave of its neck.

This morning the sound of gunfire accompanied the donkey's bell. The land here has been used to establish an Israeli military training camp; mounds of dirt form earthen alleys where soldiers take firing practice. The land where Burhan lives and shepherds his flock is surrounded by the training camp, a training base, and a smaller military site on the hill above his home. This leaves him and his family encircled, with little space for his sheep to find precious food and water – scarce now, as we wait for winter and the rain.



Gunfire and explosions can be heard from the hill where sheep graze across the road from the military training camp

It is this way in much of the occupied West Bank – shepherds and farmers find themselves surrounded by military firing zones, suddenly-closed ‘military areas’, and land occupied illegally by Israeli citizens living in militarised gated communities (settlements) on land that is, almost always, taken illegally from its owner.

It is particularly true in the Jordan Valley, which comprises almost one-third of the land in the West Bank. The Jordan Valley used to be an agricultural oasis, lush with farmland fed by natural springs and the water table from the Jordan River. It was famous for bananas and citrus, and grew an abundance of vegetables and grains. This is no longer true – much of it is now declared for use by the military, and there is a ‘buffer zone’ running the length of the border with Jordan, fenced off and inaccessible to the Palestinians who used to farm and graze their flocks in the area.

Human rights organisation [Al Haq](#) highlights the potential long-term impact of military zones:

‘The declaration of closed military areas is often a prelude to other categories of appropriation, and land initially closed for military purposes is often subsequently allocated to existing Israeli settlements or to establish new ones.’

As Israeli NGO [Yesh Din](#) puts it, land appropriation like this has led to a ‘creeping annexation’ of the West Bank.



Palestinian homes beyond an area where the sign declares, ‘Danger: Firing area. Entrance forbidden.’

Ahead of the elections on the 17th of September, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced that he would annex the Jordan Valley to Israel if his party won the elections. The

leader of the opposition party accused Netanyahu of stealing his party's idea. Almost one month after the elections, leaders are still negotiating in attempts to form a government.

Regardless of the politics, and whatever outcome the of last month's elections, annexation of territory by war or force violates international law ([UN Office of the High Commission for Human Rights](#)).

The same week that Netanyahu promised to annex the Jordan Valley, he also visited the settlement outpost of Mevo'ot Yeriho. This visit included a cabinet meeting and an announcement that Netanyahu planned to formally recognise Mevo'ot Yeriho under Israeli law. Mevo'ot Yeriho is one of around 100 'outposts' in the West Bank. An outpost is an Israeli settlement established by Israeli civilians on Palestinian land. They are set up without official authorisation by the government. While outposts like Mevo'ot Yeriho are illegal under both international and Israeli law, they receive the funding and assistance of various government bodies and the Israeli government has retroactively authorised or is [in the process of authorising almost one third of 100 outposts](#).



The date trees of illegal outpost, Mevo'ot Yeriho can be seen here between the Palestinian community (foreground) and the homes of settlers from Mevo'ot Yeriho (background).

The Palestinian communities around Mevo'ot Yeriho are worried that Netanyahu's statement will provoke increased hostility from the settlements. Already, one family in the area has seen heightened harassment from settlers:

'It used to be that they would drive their cars behind us and our sheep to scare and scatter the flock. Since the announcement [about Mevo'ot Yeriho], the settlers have, for the first time, left their cars and thrown stones at us and the sheep.'

The family believes the settlers feel emboldened and protected by the promise to legalise their outpost. 'Some of the sheep are pregnant, and a shock like this could cause problems.'

For shepherds with sheep as their only income, losing one lamb is significant. And as [B'Tselem](#) points out, 'the long-term outcome of settler violence is the dispossession of Palestinians from more and more areas in the West Bank, facilitating Israel's seizure of land and resources.'

On the hills surrounded by military camps and bases, Burhan and his neighbour reflect on the politicians' promise to annex the Jordan Valley. 'Where can I go?' says his neighbour. 'I've been here for 53 years. When I go to sleep, I am dreaming about our problems. I wake up thinking about these problems.'

Take Action

108 British MPs have [signed a letter](#) urging the UK Government to 'act robustly' in response to the promise of annexation. If you are in the UK, please [write to your MP](#) and ask them to add their name to this letter.

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