



# Pastoral Communities of the Jordan Valley

## SNAPSHOT

The Jordan Valley covers almost a third of the West Bank, extending from the Green Line in the north to the Dead Sea in the south, and from the Jordan River in the east to the hills in the west.

Today, nearly 60,000 Palestinians live in the Jordan Valley. While most are concentrated in the district of Jericho, many semi-nomadic communities are scattered across the rest of the Valley. These communities, generally speaking, live and try to maintain their pastoral way of life.<sup>1</sup> About 87 percent of the land they have traditionally used for grazing and small-scale agriculture, however, now falls under full Israeli control (Area C).<sup>2</sup> An additional 7% of the land is part of Area B but is unavailable for development as it was designated a nature reserve under the 1998 Wye River Memorandum.<sup>3</sup> These restrictions have hampered the Palestinian agricultural sector.<sup>4</sup>

A host of restrictive Israeli policies have prevented development of these Palestinian communities and put them at constant risk of forced displacement due to demolitions, forced evictions from closed military zones and the inability to meet basic needs because of imposed restrictions.<sup>5</sup> This is in contravention of international law.<sup>6</sup>

## BACKGROUND

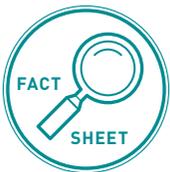
The Jordan Valley, with its fertile lands and plentiful water sources, has for centuries been home to semi-nomadic pastoral communities. After the 1948 War, when Israel established a state and hundreds of thousands of Palestinians were expelled from their homes, many refugees fled to the Jordan Valley.<sup>7</sup>

However, when Israel occupied the West Bank in 1967, hundreds of families fled the Jordan Valley. The Israeli military confiscated thousands of dunums of land, deeming the Palestinian owners who had been pushed out “absentees.”<sup>8</sup> Since then, Israel has taken a number of measures to make it difficult if not impossible for these refugees to return to their lands in the Jordan Valley. Israel immediately began the construction of settlements in this area; today, 9,500 Israelis live in 40 illegal<sup>9</sup> settlements scattered across the Jordan Valley.<sup>10</sup>

The implementation of the Oslo Accords in the 1990s divided the West Bank into administrative areas A, B, and C, with the vast majority of the Jordan Valley – nearly all but the urban district of Jericho – falling within Area C. This gave Israel full military and civil control over the Jordan Valley, including its planning

PALESTINE  
REFRAMED





and zoning. Most of the land of this valley has been allocated to settlements or labeled “closed military zone,” “state land”, “nature reserve”, or “buffer zone”, leaving only about 6% open for Palestinian access.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, Israel began installing checkpoints and roadblocks, making it much more difficult for Palestinians to enter and leave the Valley.<sup>12</sup>

Today, as a result of Israel’s severe restrictions on land, water, infrastructure, and movement, and the illegal<sup>13</sup> destruction of property and repeated demolitions of villages, Palestinian families in the Jordan Valley have the highest poverty rates in the West Bank and a hard time meeting basic needs to maintain livelihood.<sup>14</sup>

## CURRENT ISSUES

### Control of Land, Evictions, & Demolitions

The Israeli Civil Administration (ICA) has full control over zoning and planning in Area C, and is the sole issuer of building permits.<sup>15</sup> In practice, the ICA has given permits to Palestinians on less than 1% of the land of the Jordan Valley.<sup>16</sup> The near impossibility of receiving permission to do basic construction – such as a home roof repair, infrastructure for running water, or the expansion of a school – causes Palestinians to resort to building without seeking such permits, resulting in these activities being deemed “illegal” by the Israeli state. Doing so puts their communities at risk for eviction and demolition.<sup>17</sup> The constant threat of such punitive measures pressures families residing in the Jordan Valley to move to other areas, effectively forcing them to forfeit their traditional lands and way of life.

### Restriction of Movement

Checkpoints and roadblocks impede Palestinian travel to, from, and within the Jordan Valley. This not only undermines ties to friends and family in the rest of the West Bank, but also makes access to schools and hospitals difficult and time-consuming.

Even Palestinian ambulances are banned from entering the area.<sup>19</sup> These barriers have been estimated to cost about GBP 1.5 million in terms of potential annual revenue for Palestinian farmers trying to get their produce on the market.<sup>20</sup> Additionally, shepherds who let their animals graze in areas that are deemed by Israel to be “off limits” – which are often unclearly marked and inconsistently enforced – face arrest, fines, or the confiscation of their flocks and equipment.<sup>21</sup>

### Water Access

The large water aquifer beneath the Jordan Valley is under full Israeli control, as is the Jordan River and its nearby springs.<sup>22</sup> Water is distributed by Mekorot, an Israeli water company that offers discounted rates to settlers who illegally reside in the Jordan Valley. Settlers in the valley consume more water per capita than settlers in any other area within the West Bank, and over six times more than Palestinians in the Valley.<sup>23</sup> Meanwhile, only 37% of Palestinians in the Jordan Valley have access to running water, and are allocated so little that often a significant portion of a family’s income is spent buying and transporting water by tanker.<sup>24</sup> The pastoral communities consume as little as 20 liters per capita per day, less than one fifth of the World Health Organization’s recommended minimum of 100 liters.

Palestinians are often fined and their equipment confiscated if caught restoring existing wells or harvesting rainwater in cisterns without permits which are elusive, if not impossible, to come by. Meanwhile, Israel continues to develop its water infrastructure for the exclusive benefit of the Jewish inhabitants of the illegal settlements within the valley. This further reduces the yield from the few springs and wells that Palestinians have access to.<sup>25</sup>

### Exploitation of Palestinian Labor

The agricultural plots of the Jewish settlements in the valley have plentiful water and are subsidized, protected, and thriving. Often, Palestinians in the Jordan Valley have few opportunities but to

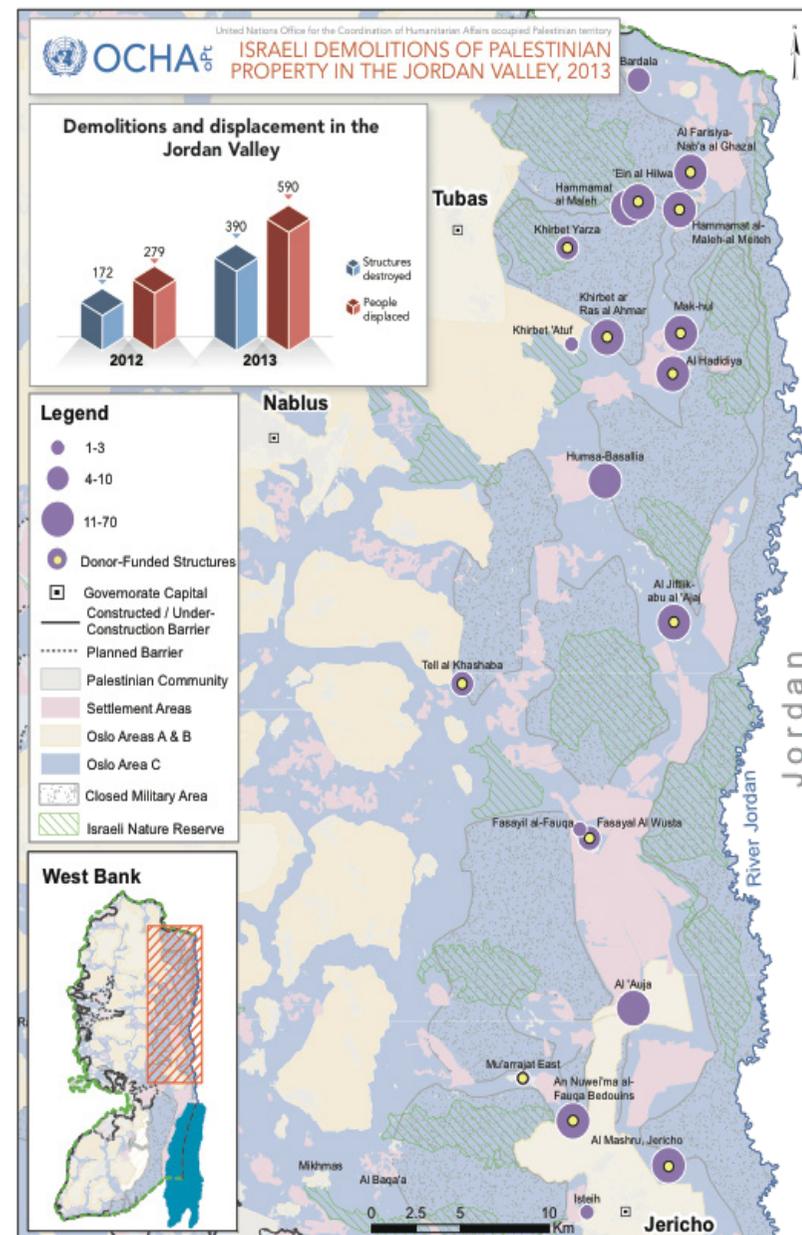




work on these farms. Jewish settlers readily employ Palestinian laborers because they can pay well under the Israeli minimum wage, knowing that Palestinians have limited employment options or recourse to labor rights within Israel, the body controlling these areas. The Israeli Supreme Court has ruled consistently that Israeli labor law protections, including the right to Israeli minimum wage, extend to Palestinian workers in settlements. However, in practice, authorities do not enforce these laws.<sup>26</sup> Additionally, because settlers use Palestinian middlemen to find laborers, there is no paper trail linking employer and laborer, making it nearly impossible for Palestinians to demand rights under Israeli labor law.<sup>27</sup>

### **Child Labor & Access to Education**

Only two schools operate within Area C of the Jordan Valley, due to the inability of the Palestinian community to expand or construct new buildings. The hassle of long daily commutes and unpredictable checkpoints, combined with widespread financial hardship, cause families to take their children out of school and place them to work in the Jewish settlements in order to secure minimum livelihood. Jewish settlements employ Palestinian children as young as ten years old as agricultural laborers.<sup>29</sup> They work under dangerous conditions, handling pesticides and operating heavy machinery, often in extreme temperatures.<sup>30</sup> This is in contravention of both Israeli and Palestinian law, as well as International law, which set the minimum age of employment at 15, and prohibit such hazardous work for anyone under 18.<sup>31</sup> Israel has been condemned by both the Convention on the Rights of the Child<sup>32</sup> and the International Labor Organization<sup>33</sup> for breaking their obligation to protect children in the territory they occupy from economic exploitation, hazardous work, and employment that interferes with schooling.





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