

# How Palestinians Near Bethlehem Are Expelled From Their Land

Monday 27 May 2024, by [HASS Amira](#) (Date first published: 25 May 2024).

**Distance requirements from an Israeli settlement in the West Bank and a network of barriers have prevented Palestinian farmers from tilling their plots to the west of Bethlehem for over seven months**

*Faiq Salah and Rabbi Arik Ascherman with the armed man, earlier this month. The armed man threatened the landowner that he would be arrested next time. Credit: Naama Grynbaum*

He appeared exactly 12 minutes after pruning had started in the vineyard, on a surprisingly rainy morning in May. He was armed with a rifle, wearing an army uniform and a bright-colored cap. He knew who the vineyard's owner, Faiq Salah, was and addressed him directly, telling him to leave immediately.

Faiq, 54, from the village of al-Khader south of Bethlehem, was the only Palestinian among a group of seven people. The others were Israeli activists who had volunteered to prune the vines. "You're not allowed to be here," the man said in broken Arabic, "according to the religion." (In Arabic, *din* means "religion"; in Hebrew, it means "law.") Faiq told him that the vineyard was his and that it was well overdue to be pruned.

The man in uniform, who did not identify himself, repeated his demand that Faiq leave, since this was a security-related matter. He didn't show any written order but said that the vineyard was situated less than 200 meters (yards) from the houses of the settlement of Neve Daniel. He also scolded Rabbi Arik Ascherman [from the Torat Tzedek organization](#), who had initiated the volunteer work. "You are breaking the law," the soldier told the rabbi. "This is the second time you've come with them knowing that they're not allowed to be here. This concerns our security, the security of a community with families and hundreds of people."

The armed man in uniform took Faiq's ID card in order to compel him to leave his plot. Before he mounted his all-terrain vehicle, still holding the ID card, he forbade Ascherman to take the farmer in his car, over the narrow and rocky path that leads to a tattered asphalt road. The road was once part of the historic Route 60, but was replaced by the newer bypass Route 60 that goes around Bethlehem. Faiq thus walked along the vineyards, which settlers, in uniform or not, have forbidden him and other al-Khader residents to work since October 7.

When Faiq reached the road, the uniformed man continued to rebuke and threaten him, telling him that next time, if he dared come work in his plot, he would be arrested. While he was still shaking his finger like an adult talking to a dimwitted child, I asked him what settlement he was from. He could have been from Neve Daniel, Elazar or Sde Boaz, an outpost that was legitimized last year, defined as a northern "neighborhood" of Neve Daniel. But the man in uniform replied: "I am from the army, the army." And then he said: It's not just your camp that has bereaved families; we do

too." To another Israeli woman there he said that if her partner died in Gaza, it would be her fault. He then apologized for saying that.

*Faiq Salah, owner of the vineyard, earlier this month. Israeli authorities haven't let thousands of Palestinian farmers work for seven months. Credit: Naama Grynbaum*

The de facto expulsion of Palestinian farmers and shepherds is one of the means through which the army and the settlers have been preventing Palestinians across the West Bank from cultivating fields and vineyards, or from tending their flocks, more intensively so since October 7. Here, west of Bethlehem, in an area dotted with settlements and outposts in what is known as "Gush Etzion," the expulsion of Palestinians from their lands is also achieved through [an extensive network of locked iron gates](#), as well as 24 rock and earth barriers across agricultural roads. This is in addition to barriers across exits to main roads, meant to reduce the traffic of Palestinian vehicles.

This is how seven months have elapsed, with Israeli authorities forbidding thousands of Palestinian farmers to pick olives or grapes, to plow, prune, weed or grow vegetables and cereals. Even the eyes of non-farmers can discern the sad state of olive trees, vines, pomegranate and almond trees drowning in a sea of tall weeds, thorns and wild oats. The land has not been ploughed or loosened for a long time. Vine branches have grown long and are crawling along the ground, with no one to prune them. Here and there are plots that have not been hemmed in by barriers or locks. They have been cared for wonderfully. The furrows are plowed, the land is fresh and the shining leaves only emphasize the neglected state of the other plots.

Thousands of residents whose modest income depends on tilling the plots they inherited from their parents and grandparents, for whom working or spending time in their vineyards or orchards is an inseparable part of their lifestyle, live at a distance of only a few hundred meters from their forbidden land, their anger and frustration growing daily.

Faiq's uncle, who is 77, used to come to the roadside and sell bunches of grapes he had just picked, selling the produce of his land. In October and November last year, he was prohibited from doing so, and he is worried that this year, there will be no grapes to pick. Faiq's mother, Aisha, used to sell vine leaves. They now are unsuitable for eating or selling, she said disappointedly on that day in early May, when her son brought her the branches that the Israeli activists had pruned so that she could pluck their leaves off. "They're dry," she determined. The weeds that hadn't been cut on time and the branches that had run wild were sucking all the water from the ground. That's why this year's grapes will lack juiciness, explained Faiq's uncle, Mohamed.

*Work on Route 60, earlier this month. Palestinians' access to their land plots in the area is being denied after settlements severed them from the rest of the Palestinian space in the southern West Bank. Credit: Naama Grynbaum*

The inhabitants of al-Khader and [thousands of other farmers in the West Bank](#) feel totally alone in this struggle. Palestinian Authority institutions are too weak, and have apparently lost interest or belief in their ability to defend their citizens from the Israeli authorities. The Israeli coordination administration, which is theoretically supposed to protect the Palestinian farmers' possessions and right to work in areas under Israeli control, is under the jurisdiction of cabinet member Bezalel Smotrich. Attorney Quamar Mishraqui As'ad submitted a petition back in December against the blocking of access to Palestinian land since October 7 (which focused on the southern West Bank but in fact applies to the entire area), but Israeli courts take their time.

The gesture made by Ascherman and the Israeli activists move the vineyard owners. But the small number of activists cannot reach all the plots. Furthermore, as Faiq and his uncle Mohammed say:

they miss seeing their plots with their own eyes and working there themselves.

Dror Etkes from the Kerem Navot human rights organization who has been researching the policy of land robbery in the West Bank, has for years been following the denial of access to Palestinians to their lands in the area west of Bethlehem as well. He is the one who found and counted all the barriers on Palestinian land in the area, encompassing almost 20,000 acres.

This has become a segregated area after 11 settlements, 12 outposts and a network of roads connecting them have cut this land off from the rest of the Palestinian space in the southern West Bank (the severance from East Jerusalem and the northern West Bank has also been an ongoing process since the early 90s). The borders of this segregated area are the settlement of Efrat and Highway 60 which bypasses Bethlehem on its east; the 1949 border in the west, the lands of the village of Walajeh which were annexed to Jerusalem in 1967 on the north, and village of Jab'a and Highway 375 on the south.

Etkes found that a third of the 60 gates and roadblocks in this area were positioned since October 7. One iron gate was placed on a farm road near the Sde Boaz outpost, and 20 earth and stone berms were placed on other farm roads. Seven gates, of which four are at the entrance to trapped land in Efrat were intermittently opened to the Palestinian landowners are now always closed.

The [village of al-Khader](#) is one of the main victims. The fate of its land is a parable for a typical process throughout the West Bank, which began in the 1970s. The village has 20,000 dunams (5,000 acres) of which 900 dunams (225 acres) are built up. The rest of the land lies west of the new Route 60, and Israel prohibits any Palestinian construction on it (except for 180 dunams (45 acres)). Over the years and military and bureaucratic tricks, Israel has allotted about 3,100 dunams (775 acres) to the settlements of Efrat, Elazar and Neve Daniel. Currently, five unauthorized outposts have also taken over the village's land, the latest of them, Eden Farm, was established in 2021.

*Volunteers working on Salah's land, earlier this month. Vineyard owners are touched by the volunteers' gesture, but there are few of them and they can't get everywhere. Credit: Naama Grynbaum*

Etkes has now found that 12 (including an iron gate) of the 21 new roadblocks in the area block access to al-Khader's land. He estimates that about 3,000 dunams (750 acres) of additional land, mostly belonging to al-Khader, is easy prey for the expansion of the outposts' land. The loss of land and building ban on most of the area have caused real estate prices in the village to skyrocket. "A million dollars per dunam," says Mohammad, "which no one can pay."

Theoretically, every roadblock requires some kind of land expropriation order. Etkes is unaware of any such order, and in truth, there are no supporting orders for the old roadblocks either. For a long time, it's been hard to distinguish between local initiatives by settlers (military or civilian) to block access to Palestinians and temporary orders of the army. The boundaries are completely blurred, says Etkes in a new investigation by Kerem Navot on the Israeli takeover of the regions west of Bethlehem.

The repeated claims by settlers and soldiers in recent months that Palestinians are forbidden to work their land if it is less than 200 meters from a settlement's houses (how is that distance surveyed? By the last house? From the middle of the parcel?) has no reference. Answers by army spokesmen and the Coordinator of Activity in the Territories have ignored Haaretz's specific question whether there is a signed order or verbal instruction about the 200-meter survey: they would not confirm or deny or show proof of any such order.

Faiq Salah is not the only one to reject the prohibition to keep a distance as an edict from heaven. His relatives said how, in the past seven months, they were able to go four times to their land in the area called Ein Al-Qasis. The new roadblocks and climbing by foot between the terraces – an hour and a half each way – haven't deterred the couple, Hiam and Raid Salah, both about 60. But each time settlers and soldiers evicted them from their land. "We were sometimes evicted even before the war," said Hiam, "But not like now."

The extended family has about 40 dunams (10 acres) in the area now trapped between the Elazar and Neve Daniel settlements. Hiam and her husband, who speaks Hebrew, once went to harvest sage that she planted there, and two masked settlers in army uniforms evicted them, threatening to shoot them the next time. She says that they once seized a hoe and destroyed a vine arbor. She discovered that of the mature vine plants from the seedlings she had planted a year before most had disappeared, "Maybe five remained."

On May 7, they went to the parcel a fourth time, this time after coordinating with the Israeli Coordination and Liaison Administration officer, in order to bring a tractor to plow the land. "We were five, together with my son, the tractor driver, and R., who helped him clear the weeds," says Hiam. "Suddenly masked settlers dressed like soldiers appeared. They beat my son, forbade him to talk on the phone. Regular army came after them, one man and two women soldiers from the Civil Administration. They sat us down on the ground. They did not let us talk with officer S. with whom we had coordinated to bring the tractor. They did not let us drink, and then they arrested R. The woman soldier said that he would be detained for a short time and released (at least two days passed before he was released from detention). We sat there for about five hours, until they let us return."

*A vineyard in the settlement of Efrat, earlier this month. A visit revealed quite a few parcels of farmland between and beside the settlers' houses. Credit: Naama Grynbaum*

Nasra Khader, 60, who has land in the area, explains the logic. "They bother us and cause all kinds of problems so that we will give up, and then they completely take over the land. Like my cousin's land inside Efrat, for example, a parcel we call Sarfendi." This is the Givat Hadagan outpost, says Etkes. It has been whitewashed over the years (the land on which it was built was declared state land) and turned into a neighborhood of Efrat. Inside is an enclave or two of farmland that the authorities have been unable to expropriate, but it is inside the settlement fence and its owners are not allowed to enter.

Etkes has found that more farmland is trapped in Efrat and its edges, with a total area of about 860 dunams (215 acres). Before the war, Aisha Salah, 72, was allowed to enter the family parcel, trapped in the southern part of the settlement, and work it with no time limit. Since the war, she hasn't gone there. "My relative, S., was not allowed to enter his land, which is at the edge of the settlement, outside the built-up area, so I realized that there was no chance they would let me," she said.

A tour of Efrat found quite a few parcels of farmland between and beside the settlers' houses, and it seems that their owners cannot go to work them. Etkes calculates that, before the war, most of the parcels – about 600 dunams (150 acres) of the 860 dunams (215 acres) was regularly worked. Officials at the settlement council refused to respond to Haaretz's questions about entry by the landowners.

The IDF Spokesperson's Office and the Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories spokesman responded, "The movement of Palestinians in Judea and Samaria is permitted everywhere where no military closure orders has been issued by the authorized army commander, who is also subject to the legal restrictions ... Since the outbreak of the war, a series of orders restricting movement in the area have been issued in order to maintain security. In cases in which

orders have been imposed on private land, the security forces act to allow entry of the landowners to the areas, with an escort, in accordance with the security considerations.” (Author’s note: Experience in the field contradicts this determination.)

“In some cases, residents of the communities (settlements) blocked the entry of the landowners to them, and the subject is being handled by the authorized parties,” they continued. “The placement of roadblocks is under the sole authority of the military commanders. The region’s authorities seek to remove roadblocks not placed by the IDF.”

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**P.S.**

• Haaretz. May 25, 2024:

<https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/palestinians/2024-05-25/ty-article/.premium/distance-requirements-and-barriers-how-palestinians-are-being-expelled-from-their-land/0000018f-acf8-df13-a3af-bcfea1270000>