

The Bil'in model of wall resistance

Iyad Burnat

In the occupied Palestinian West Bank, a 770 km Separation Wall weaves in and out of Palestinian towns and villages separating Palestinians from their homes and land.

The construction of this wall by Israel isolates 29 Palestinian towns (an area of 216,567 dunums or 54141 acres) from the West Bank and leaves them on the Israeli side of the wall.

Within the West Bank remain 138 villages with an area of 554,370 dunums unable to access the towns that are on the other side of the Wall. The construction of this separation wall is set to illegally isolate and fragment 12.6% of the total area of the West Bank, or 5,661 sq. kilometers of Palestinian land.

These Palestinian lands seized by Israel are especially important as they are the most fertile, and often provide an underground source of water. In addition, much of the land seized surrounds Jerusalem.

Confiscation of Palestinian land is further aggravated by the construction of illegal Israeli settlements beyond the Green Line.

Palestinians are forbidden from living in these Jewish-only colonies and using the roads that connect them to one another. Barriers and checkpoints further divide Palestinian land into islands and cantons, thus leaving the facts on the ground incompatible with the possibility of establishing contiguous Palestinian state. These conditions have paved the way for a strong movement of popular resistance, and this is what we have done.

Bil'in, to the west of Ramallah, central West Bank, is a small Palestinian village surrounded by valleys and mountains, and situated in between Jaffa and Jerusalem.

Bil'in has a population of 1,800. Many people there work in agriculture. The people of Bil'in are good, simple people, who embrace freedom and peace and reject any notion of injustice or oppression.

Over the years, Israel's confiscation of land from Bil'in was used for the purpose of building illegal settlements. In 1980's, the settlement Mitat Oz was built on land belonging to the people of Bil'in. In 1990 Israel confiscated more land from Bil'in in order to build another settlement called Kiryat Sefer. Most recently, in 2002, Israel built a new settlement called Mitet yaaho on more land stolen from Bil'in villagers.

In April 2004 the Israeli government announced its intention to build the Separation Wall on even more land from the village of Bil'in. Quickly, the villager formed the Popular Committee Against the Wall and its Settlements (PCAWS).

The PCAWS coordinates with lawyers and legal advisers in order to represent citizens of Bil'in whose land was stolen for the development of illegal settlements or the construction of the Separation Wall. This committee prepares daily and weekly activities, organizing with support by international and Israeli activists.

Construction on the Separation Wall in Bil'in started by Israel's Military bulldozers on February 2 2005. The Separation Wall cuts through 2 kilometers of the villages land and is situated 5 kilometers east of the Green Line. It's bizarre placement is clearly not related to security as Israel regularly claims, but the theft of land and building of settlements.

In order to pave the way for these illegal activities, Israel has uprooted and destroyed nearly 1,000 olive trees owned by local farmers. Those olive trees, located on 2300 dunams of land west of the Separation Wall were considered to be Bil'in's main source of livelihood. Other land seized was used for growing grain, and vegetables, and sometimes used as pasture for livestock.

It is no surprise that the Separation Wall has significantly weakened the economic resources of the village. The land which remains accessible to the Bil'in residents on the eastern side of the Wall is mostly the built-up residential area.

This reality has required villagers to purchase land from neighboring villages, or migrate to Ramallah or Arab or foreign countries (so-called voluntary migration). For the families living in Bil'in, it is a choice either to live in the squalid conditions created by the occupation in the lowest levels of poverty or voluntary migration.

As villagers rejected both of those options, the only thing remained to them was the popular resistance in order to regain access and control over their land no matter what is the obstacles maybe. For Bil'in villagers, they are prepared to work until they see the demolition of this Wall and the illegal settlements from their land.

The struggle

The preparatory phase

I started this journey through the formation of the People's Committee, which is part of the National Committees against the Wall.

We worked closely with international peace activists, especially those with the International Solidarity Movement (ISM), to study the area and explore the possibilities available to us.

In addition to meeting with the lawyers in order to understand the legal status of the Separation Wall in Bil'in, we also coordinated with members of the PNA and explained to them the dangers of the Wall and encouraged them to act

quickly in their political capacity before construction as set to begin and destroy the land.

The start

On 20 February 2005, the bulldozers began the construction of the Separation Wall in Bil'in. The popular demonstrations in Bil'in began quickly in order to counter these illegal activities and saw the participation of all members of society in Bil'in including youth, women, and children.

The women in Bil'in began meeting on a daily basis in the town's senate in order to become more organized in their resistance. Weekly marches were held, one on Friday and the other on another day (often Sunday). Marches have also been carried out during other social and national holidays such as Women's Day and Children's Day.

Creativity

Popular resistance in Bil'in has taken many forms. Our weekly demonstrations in front of the Wall include the use of drums, boxes, re-enacting imprisonment, model coffins, tombstones, adhesive tape, mirrors, a snake, a Wall model, and a large Palestinian flag.

In addition, the residents of Bil'in have portrayed characters from the film *Avatar* and the personalities of Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., and Nelson Mandela.

We chose these various characters in order to draw attention to their important work in human rights, and civil rights. In the case of Mandela, we portrayed him due to his insistence on the rights of the Palestinians and the destruction of their lives after the building of this Wall.

On another occasion the people in Bil'in, who, as previously mentioned are mostly simple farmers, put themselves in sealed barrels in front of the Wall on their stolen land. It was an interesting paradox where the Israeli Occupation Forces used the ugliest, most violent means of suppression to remove the Palestinians from the barrels and the Palestinian farmers peacefully protested the confiscation and theft of their land.

Despite regular oppression, these creative methods of protest have played an important role in increasing the persistence and presence of international solidarity activists and strengthening their relation with the local community in Bil'in. The Israeli and international activists have also helped in getting more media coverage to the struggle in Bil'in.

The struggle on the other side of the wall

Israeli solidarity activists had played an important role in exposing the illegal forgery cases groups like the municipal council of the illegal settlement (Modi'in

Illit), construction companies (Green Park) and (Heftsiba) and some staff in the civil administration of the military.

Those people began building the illegal settlement of Matityahu East in 2002-2003 as their government was invading all West Bank cities, they started construction without obtaining a license from their government, and the fact that Palestinian farmers were afraid to reach the construction site also helped them.

The community in Bil'in responded by setting up mobile homes close to their confiscated land and near the newly built illegal settlements. Interestingly the Palestinian owners of the land are not allowed to live on their land and must watch as it is used to build settlements for Jews only.

One of the major struggles has been for the farmers to continue to work on their land after the building of the Wall. The Popular Committee urged the citizens to be present on their land and work to the best of their ability.

There are some significant obstacles to this. The Wall was completed in April 2006. Since then, the only access to it has been through a military gate manned by Israeli forces. Passage through this military gate has required the Palestinian owners of land to comply with military issued curfews, apply for permits issued by Israel in order to access the land and face arbitrary denials when trying to cross.

Results of the Bil'in resistance

1. On 4th \ 9 \ 2007, the Israeli Supreme Court ruled that the placement of the Wall was illegal as it did not meet the justification provided by the Israeli army (that it was built for "security purposes").

The court recommended that the Israeli Army demolish the wall and push it back a length of 500 meters or approximately 1000 dunums in order to decrease the negative effect it was having on the indigenous population. In reality, the Wall was moved less than half of the recommended length. This achievement, although not a final victory, keeps us hopeful that our efforts are continuing to bring us closer to a just decision to this land confiscation.

2. The military gate to remain open during day and increase those hours as needed.

3. Demolition of some houses in the settlement and to bring some pieces of land inside the settlement and its surroundings to its Palestinian owners.

4. Bil'in has become a symbol of popular resistance to the Wall and settlements, on the nationally and internationally level. The village also has become the focus of international solidarity.

5. The resistance of Bil'in village have unified the community against the Israeli occupation overcoming many problems between different Palestinian political rival groups.

6. Bil'in has become a touristic site national and internationally.
7. The Popular Committee Against the Wall won four local/international awards:
 1. Palestine Prize for Excellence and Creativity Award discretionary nominal
 2. Yasser Arafat Award for achievement and worth \$25,000 in 2007
 3. Carl von Ossietzky Award from Germany, in 2008
 4. Award for innovation from the Arab Thought Foundation in Kuwait and worth 50,000 in 2009.
8. Work, lectures, workshops and international conferences to resist the occupation and the wall and settlements were held in order to spread the experience of Bil'in.
9. On May 26 2008 Ashraf Ibrahim Abu-Rahma temporarily stopped the expansion of a settlement by obstructing the use of a crane used to expand the settlement.

Elements that contributed to the success of the experiment

- 1 – An enlightened young leadership, keen to preserve national unity
- 2 - Israeli and international solidarity activists
- 3 – Consistency and continuity
- 4 - Creativity and innovation in ideas for resistance
- 5 – The Bil'in website and up to date information for the world

Israeli military response

Throughout our protests, we have been met with bulldozers working on the wall, the army using sticks to beat up demonstrators, the usage of tear gas, stun grenades and rubber bullets on civilian protesters.

The Israeli army has experimented with new weapons such as salt and electrical weapons, Alvsolip sponges and hoses. Hundreds of participants have been injured, some on many occasions.

The Israeli army has used collective punishment on the villagers by setting up barricades in the town to prevent workers from leaving to work on the other side of the wall and preventing citizens from obtaining permits to cross into Israel. Curfews are regularly imposed, especially on Fridays, to prevent international peace activists and press from reaching the area.

The Israeli Army may declare all of Bil'in a "closed military zone" and order the residents to stay in their homes on Fridays or face arrest for their participation in the popular resistance. In addition, the Army tried to deploy undercover

units, among the protesters in order to gain any information that may justify their excessive use of force on the people of Bil'in.

The village is the target of night raids where the Israeli forces instill fear and panic in the people by using stun grenades, barging into homes, beating and arresting people including children under the age of 16, all for their participation in the weekly demonstrations.

The price paid by the village of Bil'in

1 – Israeli military fire killed Bassem Abu Rahma on April 17 2009. Abu Rahma was a local organizer of the weekly protests against the wall in Bil'in. He died after a tear gas bomb fired by an Israeli soldier hit him in the chest.

2 – In the course of the six years long struggle against the wall in Bil'in at least 1200 people have been injured by the army fire; 10 of whom seriously injured.

3 - 85 people from the village have been arrested by the military, including members of the People's Committee and their children.

4 - Breaking into homes and night raids by the Israeli forces has caused many psychological problems for children in the village.

About the author

Iyad Burnat is head of the Bil'in Popular committee and co-founder of Friends of Freedom and Justice - Bil'in <<http://www.bilin-ffj.org/>>. He can be contacted at ibel3in AT yahoo.com.