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Al Walaja: the Palestinian village being slowly squeezed off the map

As the 70th anniversary of Nakba approaches - when 700,000 Palestinians lost their homes in the wake of the creation of Israel - farming families on the West Bank recount their struggle to survive

Oliver Holmes *in Jerusalem*

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In the middle part of the last century the inhabitants of the village of Al Walaja, not far from Jerusalem, considered themselves very lucky.

Fertile hills, terraced for growing vegetables and fruit, led down to a valley where an Ottoman-era railway line connected Jerusalem with the Mediterranean port of Jaffa. Close to a station, Al Walaja's farmers always had buyers for their lentils, peppers, and cucumbers. Mohammed Salim, who estimates he is approaching 80 as he was born "sometime in the 40s", remembers vast fields owned by Al Walaja families. "There was nothing else here."

Today, Salim lives in what has fast become an enclave. In 2018, Al Walaja sits on a tiny cusp of the land it commanded when he was a child. During his lifetime, two wars have displaced all of the village's residents and swallowed most of its land. More was

later confiscated for Jewish settlements. And in the past two decades a towering concrete wall and barbed wire have divided what remains of the community as Israel claims more territory.

Every year on 15 May, Palestinians mark the anniversary of the Nakba, or “catastrophe”, when hundreds of thousands were forced out of their homes or fled amid the fighting that accompanied the creation in 1948 of the state of Israel after the end of the British Mandate. For the residents of Al Walaja, the Nakba was the beginning of a seven-decade struggle to survive.



The barbed wire fence, several metres high, separating the residents of Al Walaja from their agricultural lands.
Photograph: Anne Paq/Activestills.org

Salim and his cousin, Umm-Mohammed, remember it was dusk when the fighting flared in 1948. A civil war between Jewish forces and Arab militia raged as the British sought to withdraw, with surrounding states joining the fight. Residents had heard rumours of a massacre of hundreds of Arab villagers in Deir Yassin at the hands of Zionist paramilitaries. Determined not to suffer the same fate, they fled in October when they heard gunfire.

“As a child, the shells looked to me like watermelons flying through the sky,” said Umm-Mohammed. Her father, she recalls, held her in one arm and her brother in the other as they headed across the train tracks and up the hill on the other side.

“We built wooden houses there,” said Umm-Mohammed, who can see the crumbled homes of the village from her balcony. “We thought we would return after the fighting stopped.”

According to the UNRWA, the United Nations body responsible for Palestinian refugees, about 70% of Al Walaja’s land was lost after Israel and Arab states drew demarcation lines in 1949. Of the original 1,600 people from Al Walaja, most fled to neighbouring countries. About 100, like Umm-Mohammed, settled.

After the six-day war in 1967, when the young Israeli state captured the West Bank from Jordan, Al Walaja found itself occupied. Salim remembers a message that filtered through the village, purportedly from an Israeli commander. “He said, ‘Be aware, and don’t resist.’”

Israel later annexed east Jerusalem, expanding the city's boundary and essentially cutting the village in two. Israeli laws, including strict building restrictions, were imposed, although a few people in Al Walaja were given residency rights.



The entrance to the Jewish settlement Har Gilo, built on Al Walaja's land. Photograph: Anne Paq/Activestills.org

At the top of the new village was an Ottoman base, subsequently taken over by the British, Jordanians and eventually the Israeli military. During the 1970s the site was transformed into a Jewish settlement named Har Gilo, considered illegal under international law, which with another settlement blocks Al Walaja on two sides. Israeli flags flutter from the balconies.

Salim says the communities rarely talk. "So far, they are nice people," he said, looking up at the fortified wall that surrounds the settlement.

In the early 2000s, Israel began construction of a barrier in response to violence across the country, including suicide bombings. Al Walaja was squeezed again, finding itself further isolated by the concrete wall. The original route of the barrier would have split the existing village in two, but Israel's high court granted it a stay. The wall now surrounds Al Walaja on three sides and isolates about 30% of its remaining land.

"It has become a siege around the village," said Khader Al Araj, 47, president of the village council. He scrambled in a metal filing cabinet full of annotated maps. "All our land has been taken."

Now comprising 2,600 people, Al Walaja still exists but its future is, to say the least, precarious. In the past decade, Israeli police have placed a checkpoint in the valley that most residents cannot pass. Isolated fields remain uncultivated, while the Jerusalem municipality has bulldozed dozens of homes. Many more have pending demolition orders. Once famous for its springs, Al Walaja is losing them, too. A wire fence surrounds the largest one at the bottom of the hill. Farmers' goats can no longer drink there.



On Land Day 2018, a villager from Al Walaja looks out over the countryside. Photograph: Anne Paq/Activestills.org

The latest threat is ostensibly benign - an Israeli national park in the valley. The EU says national parks in the occupied territories are used to prevent Palestinians from building. The parks authority says it supports agricultural work but will not allow “illegal construction”. Over the past year, the barrier has been added to, with a four-metre high fence covered in barbed wire. A police checkpoint will be erected further into Al Walaja’s territory, cutting residents off from the rest of their land. Legal challenges have stalled Israeli plans, but ultimately most have gone through.

Yet Al Walaja looks like one of the Holy Land’s most charming villages. Apricot trees and flowers line its winding roads, planted out of pride, residents say, for the small spot of land they still have. A symbol of the destruction of Palestinian life, Al Walaja has attracted funding from foreign states sympathetic to what it represents. Its streets are covered in plaques, thanking various governments for freshly paved walkways and new roads.

Al Araj looks exhausted but believes that self-respect is part of the battle: “We try very hard to keep the village beautiful.”

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