

Witness in Palestine The Wall, Munira's House, & Other Families in the Seam

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The author and Munira's son in front of the Wall that separates Munira and her family from their village and land

Friday, November 21, 2003

Today I visited a warm and soft-spoken woman named Munira who lives with her husband Hani and their six small children on the outskirts of Mas'ha village. Hani and his family came to Mas'ha as refugees from the War of 1948, known to Palestinians as the *Nakba* or "Catastrophe," because it marked the exodus of three quarters of Palestine's native population, who have never been allowed to return.⁹ Hani's father was killed in the war. Left without a breadwinner, the young Hani and his family were homeless for 10 years.¹⁰

When Hani grew up, he built a home for himself and his family in Mas'ha. He and Munira built nurseries and greenhouses, and lived off their trees, land, and animals. Even when the nearby Elkana settlement was founded in 1978 and grew to within 20 feet of their bedroom window, the family did not move. Then, last year, another *nakba* of Palestinian recent history began: the building of Israel's "Separation Barrier," the *Wall*.

If you were to build a Wall to prevent two groups from hurting one another, where would you build it? Most people would build on the border between the two peoples. In fact, that is where most supporters of Israel's Wall believe it to be: between Israel and the West Bank. But any map of the planned and partially completed path of the Wall—a map that you're unlikely to find in any mainstream US newspaper, even though Americans are the ones paying for it—reveals a different reality. According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the Western half of the Wall is expected to annex approximately 14.5% of West Bank land to Israel, a percentage OCHA estimates will at least double after completion of the projected extensions and closures on the eastern side. The barrier winds deeply into the West Bank, passing close by Palestinian built-up areas and annexing the surrounding land and water sources to Israel, along with

⁹ For a story from the *Nakba*, see pp. 332-338.

¹⁰ Anna Weekes, "The One-Family Bantustan in Mas'ha," *Green Left Weekly* (March 10, 2004).

ISRAEL'S WALL IN THE PALESTINIAN WEST BANK

== The Wall

■ Areas limited or forbidden
to West Bank Palestinians





The Wall passes close by built-up Palestinian areas, annexing all the surrounding land to Israel.

existing settlements. Although Israeli settlements have only built up about 3% of the West Bank, with the surrounding land and water sources they control about 40%.¹¹

Situated on the outskirts of Mas’ha, Munira and Hani’s house posed a problem for the Israeli army, who implored the family to move so that the Wall could annex the house and neighboring area to Elkana. Munira and Hani refused. They also refused financial compensation, insisting that all they wanted was to remain in their home, to live and work on their land in peace.

The army responded by building a 25-foot concrete wall in front of **Munira’s house**, separating the family from their land, village, and community. The Wall continues in both directions, leaving Munira’s family on the Israeli side of the fence, even though they are on internationally recognized Palestinian territory, well east of the Green Line.

In Munira’s backyard is another fence keeping the family out of neighboring Elkana which, like all settlements, is reserved for Jews only. There are fences on the remaining two sides of Munira’s house. Surrounded on all four sides, Munira and her family live in a cage—an open-air prison.

*Munira’s house:
An army road and the concrete
Wall stand where the family’s
olive groves and greenhouses
once stood. Wire fence continues
on the other three sides of the
house, forming a complete cage.*



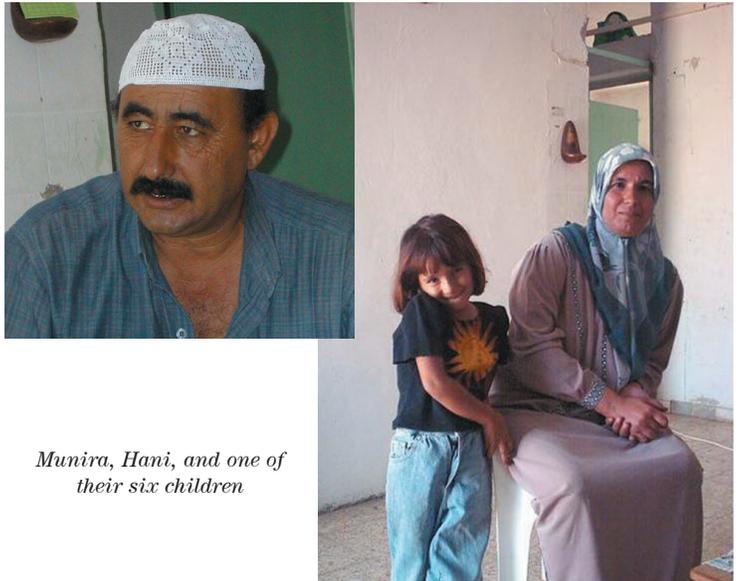
¹¹ PASSIA 2007, p. 313.

Munira and Hani are determined to stay in their home as long as they can, but the obstacles increase every day. Because of the Wall, Hani can no longer easily reach his work in nearby Azzun Atma, and Munira can hardly leave her house for fear of it being destroyed. To reach their remaining land, Munira and Hani have to wait hours for soldiers to unlock the gate of the cage. Hani says the army initially wasn't going to build a gate, but they agreed to after the Red Cross, United Nations Relief and Works Agency, and various Israeli human rights groups interfered. Munira and Hani say they feel like foreigners on their own land. Their youngest children, on the other hand, have grown accustomed to their cage, having forgotten what life was like before the Wall. The parents worry about the children's isolation from other children, and the long-term social, economic, educational, and psychological effects that the two nakbas will have on future generations.



A soldier guards the gate to Munira's house.

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Munira, Hani, and one of their six children

Friends, family, IWPS, and delegations try to visit Munira often, but we're dependent on soldiers' schedules and whims. During Ramadan the gate to Munira's cage has been open just once a day, from four to five in the afternoon. It is well-known that this hour is reserved for cooking and the breaking of the fast, and is not a time when people can visit, particularly not women. IWPS inquired about the reasoning behind this schedule, but the army did not respond. The intention, however, seems clear: to render life so difficult that the family surrenders and leaves, "voluntarily."

Munira is just one of more than 31,000 West Bank Palestinians who have been completely encircled by the Wall.¹² Hundreds of thousands have been separated from their jobs, schools, and hospitals. In fact, 80% of the Wall doesn't even touch the internationally recognized border, leaving approximately 375,000 Palestinians stranded in the "Seam," the area between the Wall and the Green Line.¹³ Like all Palestinians in the Occupied Territories, residents of the Seam don't have the rights afforded to Israeli citizens, but they are required to pay taxes to Israel. Furthermore, families in the Seam are required to obtain permits to continue living in their own homes on their own land. Jewish Israelis, on the other hand, are free to move into the Seam without permits. In fact, I could move there next month if I wanted to, because I'm Jewish.

Munira's is not the only family that is resisting. In an act of civil disobedience, many families in Jubara village near Tulkarem have been refusing to carry Israeli permits, which are difficult to acquire and expire after 3 months. The families are worried that if they accept the premise that Palestinians should need Israeli permits to continue living on their own land in the Seam, the government will eventually revoke them as a means of forcing the families out. As punishment for refusing to obtain permits, the people of Jubara have been kept under Israeli military curfew, during which residents are forbidden to leave their homes for any reason at any time except a few hours a week to get food. The curfew has prevented any residents from leaving their village for the past month.

One week ago we went to Jubara to visit Asmi, a man whose house has been separated from his village by the Wall. Every day, military jeeps drive through his backyard on their patrol of the Wall, and the army has informed him that his house is under demolition order. Instead of leaving, Asmi and his family have found their own unique method of resistance: they are building a new house right next to the old one, so that when their first house is destroyed they can move into the second, buying themselves more time (assuming the military waits for a second demolition order).

On the way to Asmi's house, we met another family separated from their village by the Wall. The son smiled at us as we walked by and eventually the whole family came out and invited us in for tea. The son was studying at a university in Nablus but had not been able to go to school recently because of Jubara's checkpoint and curfew. His commute, which used to be half an hour, is now 2 hours each way. His younger sister and brother came out and we asked if they were in school too. They said they were, but that their school was on the other side of the Wall, so sometimes when the gates are closed they don't make it. The gates are usually opened three times a day for an hour at a time. If they are closed, it's a 2.5-mile walk to the next gate, and another 2.5 miles to get back down to the village school.

The father of the children looked at his land and olive groves with a mixture of pride and sadness. The mother motioned towards the Wall with disgust. "Our village, our family is on the other side of that Wall!" she exclaimed. "My mother is sick but I cannot go to her when she needs me. This is what they call peace? Every day they take more. And when we fight back they take even more. But stolen territory will never bring Israel security, as they suggest. Security will come from peace, and peace will never come from a wall."



¹² PASSIA 2007.

¹³ Jimmy Carter, *Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), p. 192.