

Annexation Wall Ensures Bleak Future for Aboud's Christian and Muslim Residents

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The new Israeli government of Ehud Olmert is the beneficiary of the many helpful distractions deflecting world attention from its occupation of Palestine. International diplomacy focuses on Hamas' alleged "intransigence" and "rejectionism," and the subsequent need for a cut-off of aid to the Palestinian Authority—and, collaterally, to jobless, hungry Palestinians. On a regional level, meanwhile, attention is fixed on Iraq and the growing tension with Iran.

Making the most of these diversions, Israel continues to consolidate Jewish-only settlement blocs and construct its annexation wall in the West Bank. The wall's path has added a hundred more stories of Palestinian land loss to the occupation's sorry history, and thrust a number of villages into the spotlight. One such village is Aboud, in the Ramallah district, the site not only of aggressive Israeli colonization, but also of organized civil resistance.

With a population of around 2,500, Aboud is sustained by the cultivation of olive trees (to which almost half the village land is devoted), as well as other assorted fruits and nuts, including grapes, figs and almonds. About a fifth of the village's work force makes its living in the agricultural sector—a proportion that has increased since the beginning of the intifada, when Palestinian construction workers lost their jobs inside Israel.

While in these ways Aboud is no different from the majority of Palestinian villages, the village is distinguished by its ancient religious heritage and contemporary coexistence of Muslims and Christians. The Orthodox Church in Aboud traces its origins back to the 4th century, and the village is home to a number of sites of archaeological interest. In 2002 the Israeli army destroyed the sixth century Santa Barbara shrine, but the remains of numerous other ancient churches dot the village land.

Aboud's rich Christian heritage gave way to a peaceful coexistence between Christian and Muslim Palestinians, and now the village has a roughly 60–40 Muslim majority. This is unusual in a land where an ever-shrinking Christian minority (now estimated to be around 2 percent) is concentrated in traditional areas such as Jerusalem, Ramallah and the Bethlehem district. Christian Palestinians have found themselves the unwitting pawns in a larger political game, portrayed as the victims of "jihadist" aggression by Zionist propagandists, but also suffering as a minority in a society where colonization and a disintegration of law and order has resulted in isolated instances of sectarianism or opportunistic crime.

In the early 1980s, Aboud got new neighbors: the Israeli colonies of Beit Arye and, later, Ofarim. In all, around 1,500 dunums of land—some belonging to the villages of Rantis

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and Al-Lubban—were confiscated in order to construct the two settlements. But not until the annexation wall arrived did the full cost of the settlements become clear. Based on the principle of “more land, fewer Arabs,” the wall loops around strategic colonies, ensnaring Palestinian villages in coils of razor wire and concrete.

With the construction of the wall, it is estimated that the villagers of Aboud are set to lose around 26 percent of their land. That swath, however, includes almost 40 percent of their agricultural land. According to Firas Aridah, a priest in Aboud, the maps presented to the village by Israeli occupation forces indicate that most of the olive trees under threat are owned by Christians. Along with a loss of land that will affect around one-third of the villagers, the wall will also deny access to vital water aquifers and block routes to nearby Palestinian villages.

The existential threat to Aboud posed by the wall has galvanized the village to embark on a program of civil resistance similar to that adopted in places like Bil’in and Beit Sira. Weekly demonstrations began in Aboud in November 2005, as soon as the Israeli military began bulldozing land in preparation for construction of the wall. The protests usually are conducted under the auspices of local anti-occupation and anti-wall groups, sometimes in association with political parties and groups such as the International Solidarity Movement (ISM).

While such actions empower and unite villagers in creative resistance, the limitations are apparent even to Aboud’s residents. Commenting on an Aboud-solidarity Web site, Daniel Sumrain son of the local Orthodox priest, noted that while “a peaceful demonstration is a far more powerful statement,” the “demonstrations alone cannot stop construction of the wall. We need the world to act.”

Aboud’s situation undermines a number of myths of the Zionist movement and its advocates in the West. Firstly, and most obviously, that the wall is related to security, rather than land confiscation and the annexation of key settlements. Secondly, however, the Christian Zionist movement’s portrayal of a persecuted Christian minority in Palestinian society simply does not stand up in Aboud, where Muslim and Christian villagers march side by side against the colonization of their land. Syndicated conservative columnist Robert Novak drew the Zionist lobby’s wrath for his piece describing the plight of Aboud and the Palestinians. In the article he noted that he could find only one “Catholic layman or prelate who complained of anti-Christian bias by Muslims,” and made the more general point that “Christians share the harsh fate of Palestinian Muslims in the wake of the disastrous second intifada.”

In an article written at Christmastime, Father Firas emphasized Aboud’s interreligious unity, describing how at times “the Israelis give special treatment to the Christians in our village...to try to separate us, but, in reality, we Muslims and Christians are brothers.” Firas went on to quote the church organist, who noted that “Some foreigners believe that Islam is the greatest danger for Palestinian Christians rather than Israel’s occupation. This is Israeli propaganda. Israel wants to tell the world that it protects us from the Muslims, but it is not true.”

At demonstrations, the villagers of Aboud declare that “before Muslims and Christians, we are Palestinians.”

On March 4, the Israeli High Court ordered that construction of the wall in Aboud be halted for two weeks. Given the priorities of the Israeli government, however—along with the fact that Israeli bulldozers continued hard at work the morning of the decision—it surely is only a matter of time before the land seizure is completed. The future for Aboud, and for other West Bank villages, is bleak. Already more people from Aboud live in the diaspora than in the village itself, and emigration will only increase.

In a telephone interview Naseem Anfous, Aboud resident and employee of the Palestinian Ministry of Civil Affairs, was frank in his assessment. “The Israelis have told the Europeans and Americans that they hope the Christian people stay in Palestine,” he said, “but on the ground they are trying to transfer the Christian people. If they lose olive trees and their land, what are they going to do in Aboud? They will have nothing.”