



MA'AN DEVELOPMENT CENTER

Report Summary

Exploited Palestinian Labor in Israeli Agricultural Settlements in the Jordan Valley

As a continuation of a series documenting critical Israeli violations in the Jordan Valley, the MA'AN Development Center has published a research report entitled "Palestinian Labor in Agricultural Settlements in the Jordan Valley," illuminating the dark side of how political developments impact Palestinians in this region, with the hope of finding alternatives and effecting change. The study involved a random sample of 18% of the 1,800 Palestinians who work in 20 agricultural settlements on confiscated land in the Jordan Valley, where palm trees, grapes, herbs, citrus, flowers, and other items are grown.

This report addresses the reality of Palestinian labor in the agricultural settlements established in the Jordan Valley. Workers' wages and educational attainment were researched, in addition to the Israeli employers' systems and policies. The researchers also studied the effects of Israeli military checkpoints at the entrances to the Jordan Valley on Palestinian agricultural laborers, determining the percentage of workers who cross these checkpoints and the amount of time they spend waiting there on a daily basis. In addition, women and children laborers were included in the study population, and their specific issues were addressed in the report.

The report reveals the unfortunate connection between Palestinian labor and the economy of the Israeli settlements in general – and that of the agricultural settlements built in the Jordan Valley in particular – an affiliation that has existed since the Israeli occupation began in 1967. Agricultural economic activity in these settlements has been powered and sustained by thousands of Palestinian laborers, whose high levels of experience are exploited by settler employers who pay insufficient wages and ignore the workers' rights.

The numbers of Palestinians employed in agricultural settlements fluctuates because they are subject to the ever-changing circumstances of domestic and regional politics, in addition to the more recent trend of importing foreign workers from abroad who take jobs once held by Palestinians. Currently, a total of 9,500 Palestinians work in agriculture in the settlements, 1,800 of whom are employed in the agricultural settlements in the Jordan Valley. (According to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, 92% of these laborers are males and 8% are females.) Although there have been efforts by the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) to dissuade Palestinians from working in illegal Israeli settlements, such jobs are among the few employment options available to Palestinians in this region, which suffers from high unemployment due to the Israeli occupation.

Palestinian employment in Israeli agricultural settlements in the Jordan Valley has been a problem for decades. Unfortunately, it was not adequately addressed when the PNA was established in 1994, and now the situation has grown more complicated and has proven to be increasingly difficult to resolve. It is not sufficient for the PNA to simply tell Palestinian workers not to work in agricultural settlements in the Jordan Valley. Instead, the government must provide alternatives such that these workers could be gainfully employed in jobs that utilize their agricultural experience.

Especially during the First and Second Palestinian Intifadas (uprisings) in 1989 and 2000, respectively, it was believed that depriving the settlements of skilled Palestinian labor could be used as a trump card to exact pressure on the Israeli occupation. However, this tactic backfired when the occupation authorities replaced the Palestinian laborers by importing hundreds of foreign workers, thereby averting any negative economic impact and ultimately enhancing the crisis for the Palestinians.

The changes to Israeli policies after the Second Intifada expose a deeper truth about their strategy for the Jordan Valley. The Israeli authorities tightened their occupation over Palestinians throughout the West Bank and especially in the Jordan Valley, where they no longer allowed Palestinians to enter Israeli settlements without permits and adherence to a strict set of procedures. Among other things, these new policies created more obstacles for Palestinian laborers to reach their workplaces, especially inside settlements. Even more alarming, though, was how these policies reflected Israeli officials' belief that confiscated land in the Jordan Valley was not just under Israeli occupation, but was actually part of Israel.

Palestinians working in settlements in the Jordan Valley are primarily from the three Palestinian governorates of Nablus, Jericho, and Tubas, with the largest proportion (45%) of the workers coming from Nablus. The laborers are paid on an hourly basis, which averages at 10 shekels per hour. Conditions differ from settlement to settlement, so laborers tend to earn between 50-100 shekels per day.

The Israeli occupation has installed military checkpoints at the entrances and exits of the Jordan Valley, which create a burden for approximately 73% of the Palestinian laborers because they need to cross the checkpoints daily in order to work in the settlements. Of these workers who pass through checkpoints, 52% spend between 30 to 60 minutes waiting each day, substantially adding onto the time it takes them to commute into work.

A vast majority of employers in the settlements do not comply with the Israeli health service delivery standards to the Palestinian workers; 85% of the workers in agricultural settlements claimed that their employers fell short of these standards. Also, 80% of the workers claimed that their employers do not comply with payment of wages at the end of a worker's service, according to their personal experience or that of their former colleagues at work. Furthermore, 66% of the workers said that their employers do not comply with Israeli public safety rules.

As for child labor, 5.5% of Palestinians employed in the Jordan Valley settlements are under the age of 18. Many of these children come to work with one or both parents: 4.4% of the adult workers – some of whom are married couples – bring their under-18 children. Statistics in the report demonstrate a link between low level of education and the trend to work in agricultural settlements in the Jordan Valley, in that 94% of the workers never finished high school.

The report recommended that the PNA officially adopt a policy that would outlaw Palestinians from working in Israeli settlements, once the Palestinian government can guarantee these workers job alternatives. Such a law would not only pertain to Palestinians who work on agricultural settlements but also to all Palestinian laborers in general, so that all Palestinians can live in dignity. The report called on NGOs and the private sector to intensify their efforts in the Jordan Valley to contribute to development in this region, helping to create jobs and improve people's lives. Civil society organizations, international NGOs, and United Nations organizations concerned with children's rights in the Palestinian territories were urged to further their efforts to protect children. For example, by communicating with parents of children working in agricultural settlements, these organizations can partner with local communities to reduce the phenomenon of child labor, as well as to prevent children from dropping out of school. Finally, the report recommends that all sectors of Palestinian society must work to provide programs and services to ensure that all workers do not return to work in the settlements.