



Israeli Occupation of Palestine's West Bank during the COVID-19 Pandemic

As a lethal pandemic sweeps over the planet, a call goes out to reverse man's inhumanity to man and halt conflict. It entreats everyone to respond through voluntary alliance in the fight against an external foe that does not distinguish between one person and another. Rather it spreads without discrimination and reaps lives without mercy, without identity, and is not deterred by borders.

When Corona Virus 19 (COVID-19) invaded the world, did this purposeful moratorium apply in the territories of the Palestinian National Authority, which are subject to Israeli military occupation, including all the lands of historic Palestine and defying the human-made borders of all the countries in the region?*

Before answering this question, we review the conditions and circumstances that the Palestinian National Authority was going through prior to the pandemic. We can summarize that context in the following points:

- The United States had given green lights and public encouragement to Israel's colonial settlement, roots on Palestinian lands occupied in 1967, including East Jerusalem, despite its violation of treaties and principles of international law. Despite this deviation from international legitimacy and UN resolutions, including enforceable Security Council resolutions, the corresponding breaches involve illegal Israeli activities, including the confiscation and colonial settlement of the occupied lands.
- Israel's escalation of frenzied threats to annex Palestine's entire Jordan Valley, whose area is estimated at 30% of the total area of the West Bank.
- Feverishly escalated pursuit against Palestinian agricultural and/or urban activities by the official agencies of the occupation and the so-called Civil Administration in the West Bank and its Higher Planning Committee through new and updated military orders aimed at accelerating demolition, bulldozing and confiscation without allowing time for those affected to raise legal objection.
- Israeli settlers and their associations mounting hot pursuit of Palestinian farmers and Bedouin by accelerating demolitions, while the notorious "Regevim" colonial-settler association monitors Palestinian Arab construction and clearly expresses this destructive policy.
- The escalation of the Jewish settler attacks on the Palestinian lands and on farmers by all possible means, including destroying and bulldozing crops and irrigation networks, chopping down trees, burning cultivated fields, beating farmers and unleashing fierce dogs on them.
- The expansion of settler colonies and implanting new outposts wherever possible over Palestinian land, especially in Area C.
- Topping that off with the U.S. president's larcenous "Deal of the Century," which seeks to provide cover for all these crimes on the ground, handing over more land to the Israeli occupation than it was able to usurp throughout all the years of the occupation and its various devices.

* For practical and logistical reasons, Land Research Center's scope of work covers only occupied Jerusalem and the West Bank of Palestine. This geographical unit represents only a fragment of Palestine and its indigenous habitants a specific sub-group of the Palestinian people, which Israel's apartheid regime subjects to spatial, physical, social and political fragmentation since the state's inception.

So, what happened to the land, housing, and agriculture in Palestine after the Corona pandemic invaded the region?

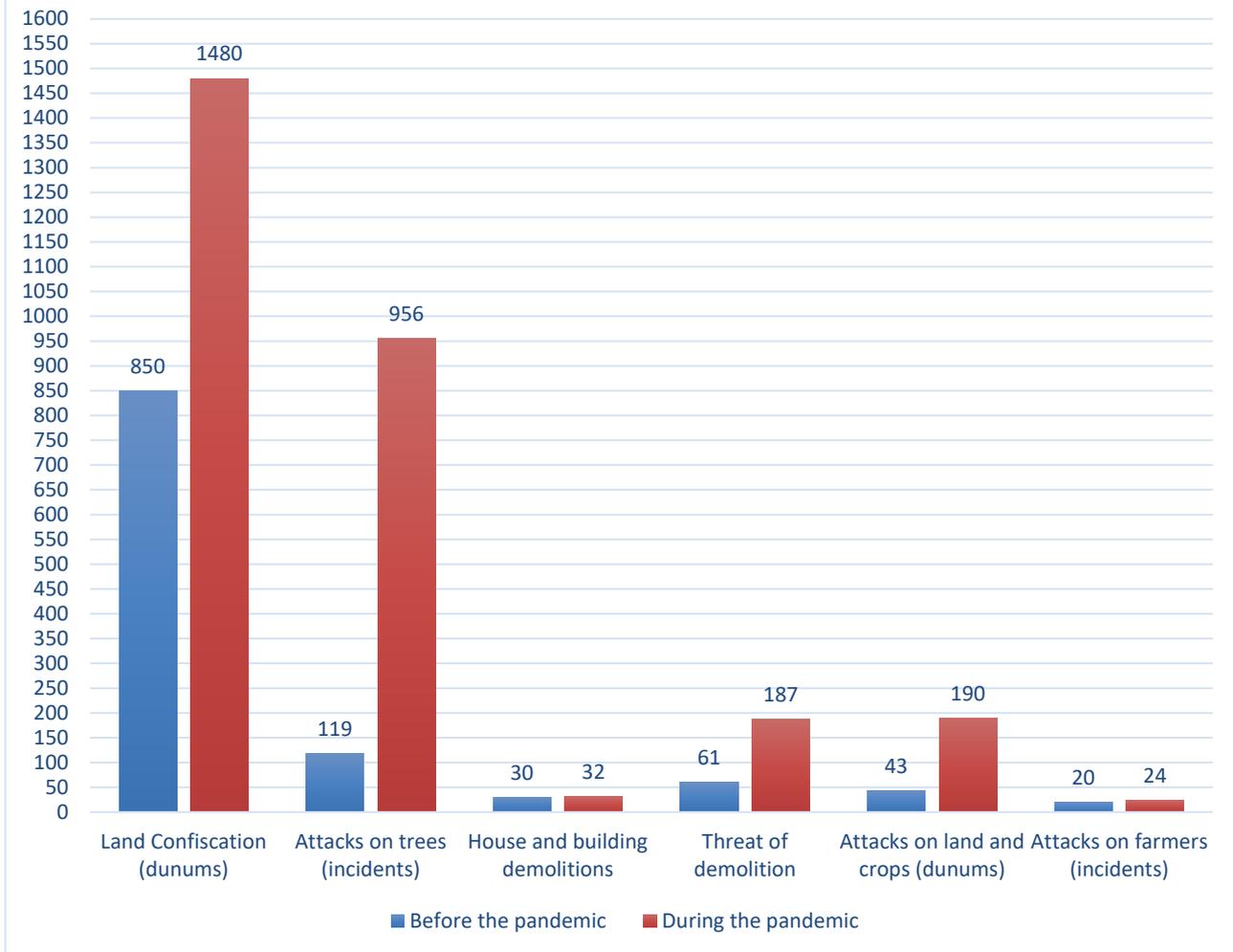
We compare the rates of Israeli violations of Palestinian housing and land rights during the last months before the pandemic against those during this review period (March–May 2020). These violations monitored include confiscation of Palestinian lands, expansion of Zionist colonies, attacks against trees, deforestation, burning, demolition of Palestinian housing and built environment, new demolition orders, land leveling, soil contamination, destruction and grazing of Palestinian crops by colonial herders, and physical assaults on Palestinian farmers. Land Research Center’s field work amid the pandemic has produced the following findings:

1. The rate of land confiscations and settlement expansion during the pre-Corona period reached about 850 dunums (85 hectares) each month. During the closings and curfews that have kept people in their homes to stop the spread of the virus, this rate has jumped to about 1,480 dunums (148 hectares) per month.
2. The number of vandalized trees, whether by the Israeli occupation army or settler colonists, in the pre-Corona stage reached an average of about 119 trees per month. This figure is about 956 trees per month during the current phase of the pandemic.
3. As for residences and establishments, the occupation announced that it would stop demolishing residences and structures due to the circumstance of the pandemic. However, on the ground, during the three months after the onset of the COVID-19, Israeli forces demolished about 96 homes and other structures, including 28 residential houses and structures in use. Total punitive demolitions reached 32 houses and facilities per month, while the rate before the epidemic spread was about 30 per month.
4. New demolition orders amounted to about 97 new military orders to demolish Palestinian homes and facilities during the last three months of the pandemic (March–May 2020). The monthly average number of houses and establishments threatened with demolition after measures to combat the epidemic actually has spiked to 187 houses and other structures, while the rate before the pandemic was 61 per month.
5. Monitoring the Jewish colonists’ attacks on agricultural lands during this period destroyed 562 dunums. Their sheep and bulldozers destroyed Palestinian agriculture at a rate of 190 dunums (19 hectares) per month, while the monthly rate of these assaults affected about 43 dunums (4.3 hectares) before COVID-19.
6. Monitoring efforts have identified some 72 physical assaults, beatings, breaking of bones, and setting trained attack dogs, brutally maiming Palestinian farmers at a rate of about 24 incidents per month. The rate of these attacks before the advent of COVID-19 reached about 20 attacks per month, affecting farmers and their children. That has required their treatment in Palestinian hospitals, which are mainly concerned with combating the Corona pandemic, in addition to the epidemic of the Israeli occupation and colonization.

The following table shows the rates of violations in the specific context of the Israeli occupation of Palestine’s West Bank before and after the epidemic. The corresponding graph reflects the redoubling of these measures imposed by the occupation, taking advantage of the harsh circumstance as the world is busy combating the COVID-19 pandemic.

Violation	Violation before the Pandemic	Violation during the Pandemic
Land confiscation – dunums (1,000m ²)	850	1480
Attacks on trees– number of trees	119	956
House and building demolition – structures	30	32
Threat of Demolitions – incidents	61	187
Attacks on land and crops – dunums	43	190
Attacks on farmers – number of cases	20	24

Israeli Violations of Palestinian Land before and during the COVID-19 Pandemic



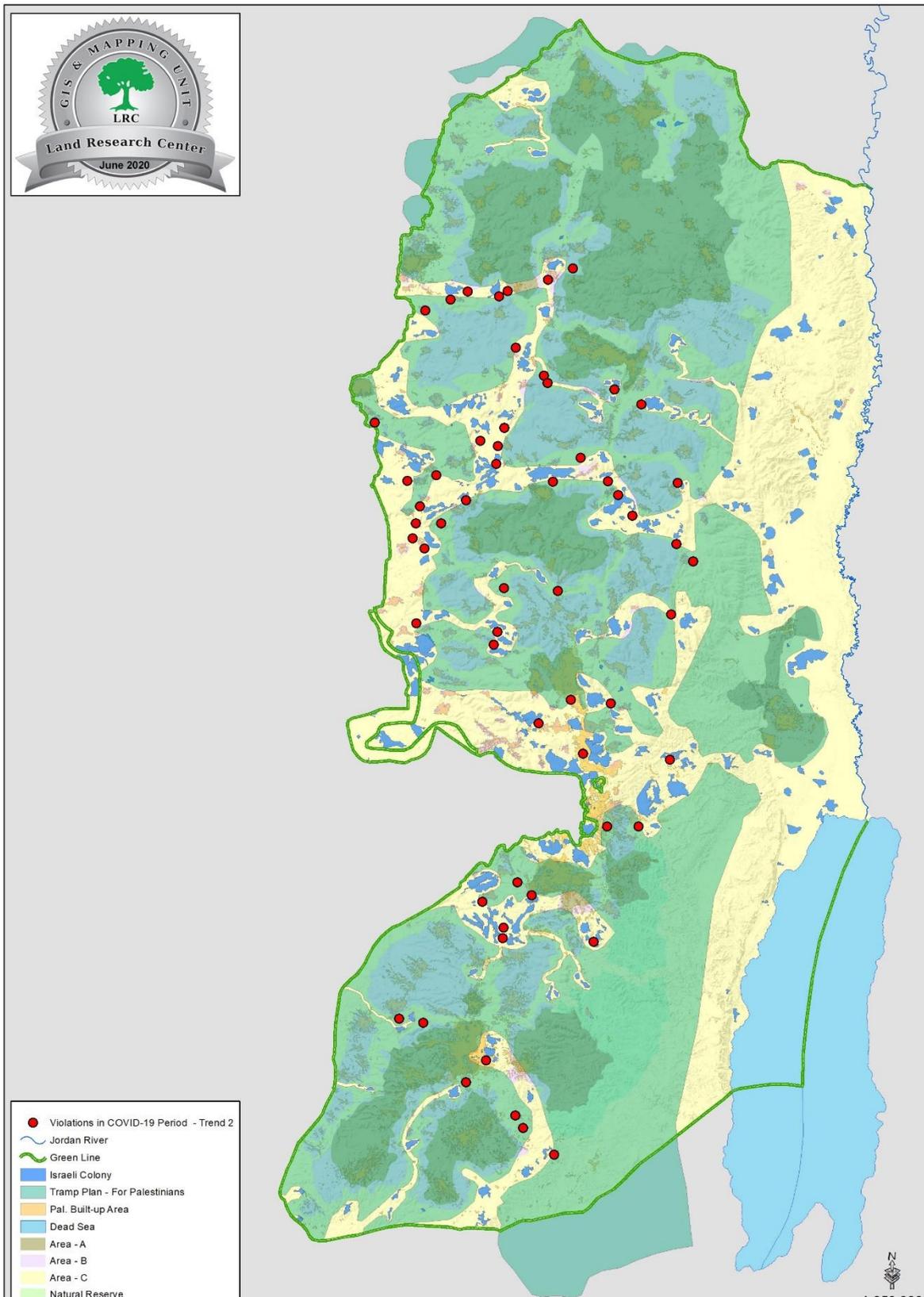
Analyzing what happened during the last three months (March–May2020), we observe three trends, or patterns in the Israeli violations committed on the ground. These involve all occupation gangs, including some of which are official military bodies and some are settlement gangs, working on the ground and often in overlapping and coordinated fashion.

Pattern No. 1: Perpetrators of the first approach ostensibly seek to accelerate the implementation of parts of the “Deal of the Century” conspiracy proffered by U.S. President Trump and the Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu. Despite the publication of the general map annexed to the plan, they announced that it still needed to be drawn with greater detail and accuracy. This refinement is to incorporate the views of the occupation leadership and the settlers, pursuant to posing more opportunities to further plunder the land, seize more of it, and displace more Palestinians.

The current trends demonstrate how they now exploit the opportunity of restricting Palestinians’ movement because of the pandemic and to attack, demolish, destroy and expel the Palestinian from her/his land and farm. This was clearly indicated also by the sites targeted for demolition and destruction to pressure the Palestinians to migrate from the lands in which they are located. Implementing the Deal’s map by way of these violations is considered a means to impose a *fait accompli* on the ground to facilitate its implementation.

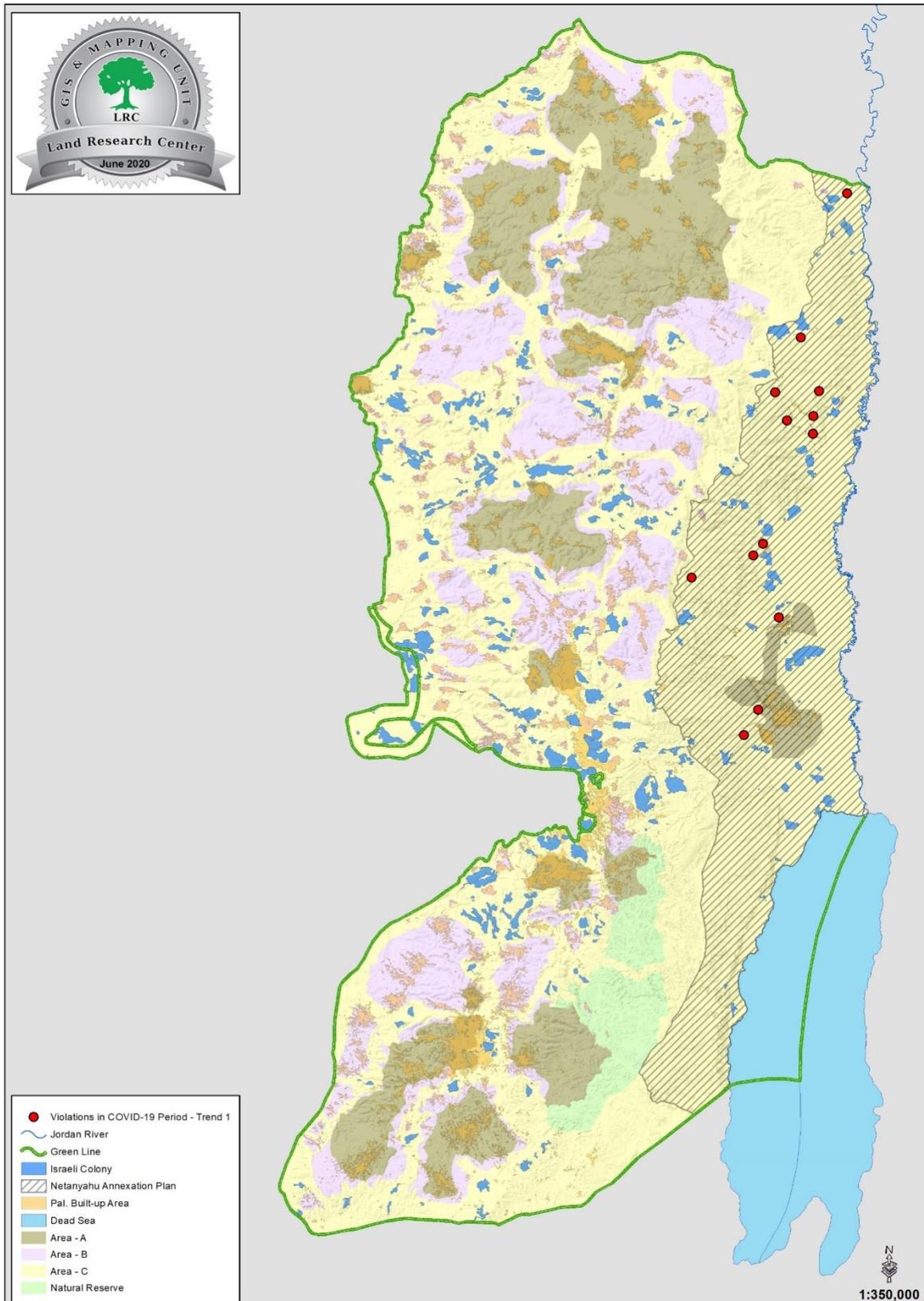
This is evident by the concentration of many of these violations in this relatively short period in corridors connecting the colonies and outposts with each other and with the lands of Palestine that Israel occupied and acquired by force in 1948 AD, cutting through large areas of Palestinian lands already inhabited or cultivated for agriculture.

Previously, the Israeli occupation administration was unable to find sufficient excuses to seize these territories, which posed an expected obstacle to the aforementioned Deal. This strategy is consistent with serial devices to displace the Palestinians from their land and empty it through settler expansion on the Palestinian people's land and, ultimately, liquidation of the Palestinian national cause.



Map indicating examples of Pattern No. 1 housing and land rights violations carried out by Israel in Palestine's West Bank.

Pattern No. 2: Perpetrators of the second trend are those who seek to implement the plan by annexing the lands of the Palestinian Jordan Valley as a pre-emptive introduction to the Trump/Netanyahu Deal and impose the outcomes of reckless breaches of international law. They oppose the idea of a viable Palestinian



Map indicating examples of Pattern No. 2 housing and land rights violations carried out by Israel in Palestine's West Bank.

state with sovereignty and international borders, and call for the Palestinians to self-rule fragmented cities and villages within their usurped entity. This scenario leaves Palestinians with less land and natural resources as that proposed in the days of the notorious Village Leagues (1981–83).

This was made evident by the violations concentrated in the northern Jordan Valley in the villages of Wadi al-Maleh, Umm al-Quba, al-Dair, `Ayn al-Bayda, al-Hadidiya and Furush Bait Dajan, then down to the central Jordan Valley in al-Jiftlik, Fasayil and al-Auja. This trend has plundered and usurped the lands remaining under Palestinian tenure by sabotaging crops and cutting irrigation networks, confiscating and demolishing water wells and the destroying the farmers' trellises, barracks, tents and simple houses there. It was clear that the Israeli military and settlers operating there were in harmony with the annexation plan adopted by the Prime Minister of the Occupying Power, Netanyahu, and with a green light from him.

Pattern No. 3: Perpetrators of the third method of violation are the extreme of the extremist settlers who reject the Deal of the Century because, at some stage, they may have to accept a Palestinian state, even if it is a failed, without powers, and torn apart, as the Bantustans of South Africa's "grand apartheid." Those fanatics also reject the idea of annexing the Jordan Valley, because they consider all the lands of the West Bank acquired by force and occupied in 1967 to be theirs, not just the Jordan Valley. In their view, these Palestinian lands were promised, occupied and returned to them, and there is no way to leave parts of it to the Palestinians if the annexation process would mean ceding of other lands to the Palestinians.

These people reject the presence of any Palestinian entity west of the Jordan River as a threat to the future of their racist colonial presence in the land of Palestine. Thus, they demand the annexation of all Palestinian lands occupied in 1967, considering that the state of the Palestinians is the Kingdom of Jordan east of the River and that they will have to leave historic Palestine one day.

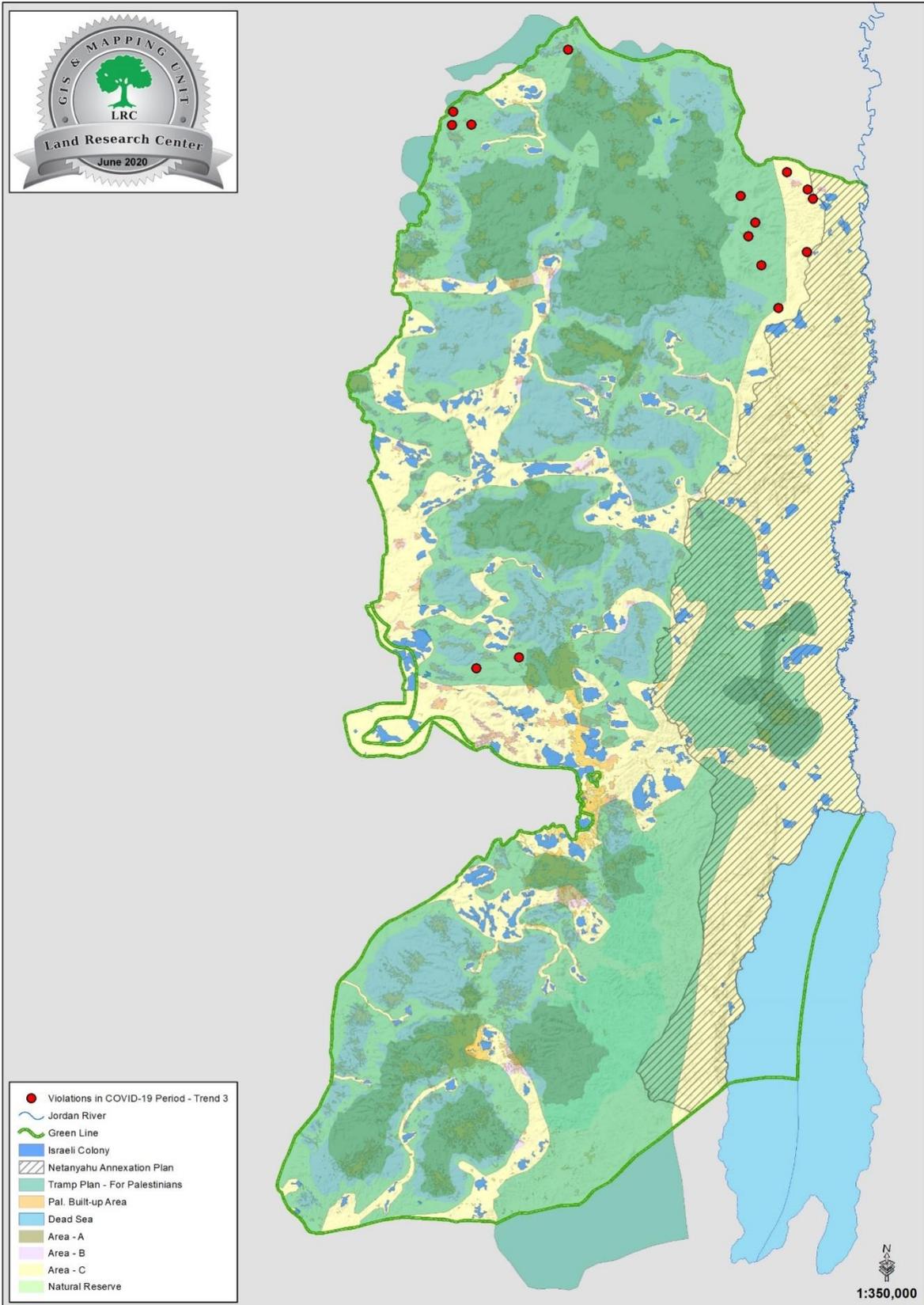
This trend is brought into view by violations and preparations for the establishment of outposts that were concentrated in the lands of the Palestinian villages of Abiziq, Kardala, and Warza, northeast of the town of Tubas, parallel to the northern Jordan Valley. These lie outside the annexation map of the Jordan Valley, and their Jewish-settler claimants aim to embarrass Netanyahu if these lands are not annexed.[†]

These areas and other violation sites are also located within the area designated for the Palestinians, according to the initial map of the Deal. This pattern emerges also from the violations committed on the lands of Rummana, located east of Jenin, as well as Duyuk al-Tahta and Dayr al-Qalt, within the territories of Jericho, and Qawawis, south of the city of al-Khalil/Hebron. These territories are all within the map of the Deal, and the perpetrators of this third pattern are, thus, seeking to thwart the Trump/Netanyahu scheme so that the Palestinians have no presence whatsoever on their lands. (See map on following page.)

Political Context

There is no doubt that policymakers in the occupying state know the details of all these activities and their perpetrators. The Israeli government leaves wide girth for each group to do whatever it pleases, because Israeli leaders have never sought real peace. Rather, they thrive on this opposition as a pretext for postponement, procrastination and retreat from any agreement or commitment. Therefore, the presence of these three parties and authors of these patterns of violation constitute a political gain that deals out more playing cards. While these Israeli factions seem contradictory and incoherent, in the end they are moving in the same direction, which is to keep the Israeli occupation in a constant state of rage with the Palestinians, which may lead some of them to voluntary migration under pressure of human need and not being able to tolerate all of this injustice, oppression and hunger.

[†] For an authoritative iteration of the annexation plans of the Trump/Netanyahu "Deal of the Century," see the map by Jan de Jong, "Israeli Annexation in the West Bank (According to The Trump Vision Plan-2020)," in Stop the Wall Campaign, "Trump's Map of Israeli Apartheid," at: <http://www.hic-mena.org/news.php?id=p3FpbA==>.



Map indicating examples of Pattern No. 3 housing and land rights violations carried out by Israel in Palestine's West Bank.

Meanwhile, Israeli investors reach out and normalize transactional relations with some Arabs to infuse more division and discord between and among them, and within their societies. This rending of the social and political fabric of the region retains Palestine as a nation subject to pillage by imperialist forces and their colonists just as we have witnessed from the start of the national cause in Palestine until today.

This has contributed to the bold decision of the Palestinian leadership to disengage from agreements with the occupying state and its principal patron, the United States, which seek only to escalate the complexity in Palestine. In turn, the reality of Palestinian land, housing and agriculture has deteriorated further and become more dangerous, as the occupation punishes the Palestinians for their leadership's position. Additionally, the Palestinian National Authority, now more than ever, lacks sufficient capability to take effective proactive steps that protect farmers and preserve crops and housing in this unequal confrontation.

However, the Palestinian National Authority and the competent Palestinian institutions have mounted campaigns to support Jordan Valley farmers and accelerated the pace of advocacy before the international community to apply international law and the International Criminal Court to uphold the Palestinian's right on their soil, accountability and prosecution of perpetrators of their occupation crimes. These are usually slow, monotonous methods, and we may see modest results after a long time, when the issues may have been lost and disappeared under layers of cumulative atrocities.

In light of this complicated circumstance, what are the obstacles that await the Palestinians?

There is no doubt that the next stage will constitute a wider and more difficult clash between the colonial settlers and the Palestinian farmers. The farmer's life will be in graver danger and his crops exposed to destruction and loss, as the usurpation of his land will be repeated more and more. It is expected that the Palestinian National Authority will be handcuffed and its ability to work to play the primary role in protecting the land and the human being for the duration.

Conclusions and Recommendations

So, as a specialized Palestinian civil society institution what can Land Research Center offer to reduce losses and enhance resilience at this extremely dangerous stage? The Center's vision is based on general principles to optimize current strengths, namely:

- The Palestinian person loves the land of Palestine and is extremely attached to it as the pillar of steadfastness.
- The Palestinian Bedouins are to be credited with preserving many of the lands targeted by the occupation, and their presence has thwarted many settler-colony plans.
- The people of the Palestinian refugee camps have enormous human energy, and their energies, but are not invested consistent with their potential.
- The Palestinian people owns a numerous national non-governmental institutions (private, national institutions, universities, research centers, professional, research, cultural, sports, charitable and cooperative societies, and professional, labor and student unions in all sectors and specializations) that can protect the Palestinian social fabric and constitute the most important tools of resilience at all stages.
- All of the lands of Palestine are regulated by a large number of land laws, occupation military orders, and overlapping and sometimes contradictory, with always complex regulations and regulations. While this is a problem, it may constitute an opportunity for revolutionary decisions that motivate individuals and groups.
- Despite the small area of Palestine and the loss of most of it due to the occupation, and despite the drought and desertification of the region and the scarcity of water in it, Palestine still possesses a great

biological diversity, both in the classification of lands and soils, the diversity of the climate and the diversity of animal life and agricultural products suitable as means of subsistence.

- The system of municipalities, village councils, and local committees that the Palestinian National Authority helped to develop is able to contribute to achieving some balance to protect the Palestinian social and economic fabric, if it cooperates meaningfully with Palestinian civil society institutions.

Based on these findings, we suggest developing a permanent methodology to enhance the steadfastness of the indigenous Palestinians on their land, which is the guarantee to resist and thwart the plans of the occupation. This requires an in-depth collective effort, and on this path, we suggest the following:

- Promoting the municipal committees and village councils established by the Land Research Center, and still creating more of them, until each municipality affectively addresses the issues of its land and its citizens as a kind of distribution of responsibilities and burden sharing to facilitate tasks.
- Distributing unexploited public, communal and endowment lands to (non-owner) farmers and Bedouins on condition of reclaiming, living on and protecting them. This is not to exclude outright ownership of land plots, or parts of them, so that they could better defend them, since these lands are always targeted by the occupation for usurpation under the pretext that they have not proprietor.
- Investing in the energy of the Palestinian camp youth who have no place to reside in the camp and have no way to buy lands outside. These youth could be eligible for tenure on state treasury lands and endowment lands distributed to them at affordable rents, or without fees and taxes, in order to protect Palestinian inhabitants' tenure on them. Such an arrangement would be grounded on formal criteria and binding conditions that would protect the land from settler-colony expansion.
- Renewing the prohibition of the sale of lands. Palestinian land is not for sale.
- Reducing the anachronistic phenomena of landlords and feudal land holdings, as these never proved to protect the land.
- Focusing on small-scale and family agricultural and industrial projects that enhance resilience and resistance to pressure from the occupation.
- Reducing mega-projects that limit opportunities for small producers and their economic viability and force them to cooperate with the occupation to avoid economic collapse, thus breaking any solid national position in the face of the occupation.
- Focusing on general agriculture and home farming techniques (vegetable, poultry or other animal) that produce food needed for local Palestinian consumption and not for export. This would increase the capacity to bear the burdens of national situations such as civil disobedience, curfew, or closures that may occur at any moment.
- Strengthening Palestinian collective action programs through cohesion between the official, public and civil institutions, and developing real cooperative work that is not organizationally politicized.

And yet, no doubt the indigenous people of Palestine are living a complex pandemic of occupation that challenges the nation and its cause. People on the land face these challenges bare chested on behalf of the entire nation, and they risk liquidation with no alternative but to uphold their right to tenure on the land of Palestine. This demands struggle in various ways to preserve this historical right that will return one day when the nation awakens to realize its transcendent destiny.

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