



UNRWA

Case Study

Reports on the West Bank
Wall/Barrier

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Jaafar Omar- School Student and Part-Time Farmer

AZUN ATME - *The one-dunum¹ greenhouse is well tended and the tomatoes have started to redden. For weeks, the plants have been carefully watered, sprayed, trained and protected against the winter winds. Soon there will be more to do. The ripe tomatoes will have to be picked, packed and sent to the vegetable market in the village of Beita, southeast of Nablus.*

These are not easy chores for a 15 year-old schoolboy who would rather be doing his homework than looking after his family's land, 15 kilometres south of Qalqilya. As Jaafar brings his calloused hands together, he meticulously enumerates the tasks involved in greenhouse farming. He has had to learn fast and well. His 11-member family's only source of livelihood rests on his thin shoulders.

Although resident in the village of Beit Amin, Jaafar's family has owned land in neighbouring Azun Atme for 15 years. The father, Ahmad Omar (Abu Bashir), invested all his money in a greenhouse and two adjacent plots of land. He spent more than NIS 75,000 in land rehabilitation alone. Rocks were removed by bulldozers, the land levelled and tons of soil and manure spread over his land. Every day for 15 years he drove his tractor from Beit Amin to Azun Atme to work on his land. As the greenhouse became profitable, Abu Bashir opened a small poultry farm, planted the rest of his land with lemon trees, cauliflower and cabbage; and dreamt of a better future for his four sons and five daughters.



Everything came to a sudden halt on 30 October 2003, when Azun Atme was declared a 'closed military zone' by the Israeli authorities and became one of the West Bank's northern enclaves west of the 'security wall'. The barrier isolated the village behind a gate open only to Azun Atme residents, students and permit holders, thus preventing access to hundreds of landowners, farmers, traders and visitors from nearby villages. Azun Atme was instantly

¹ 1,000 square metres

cut off from the outside world, especially from the villages of Beit Amin and Saniriya with which it has strong social, economic and other ties.

Before the *intifada*, most of Azun Atme's agricultural produce was 'exported' to the rest of West Bank and to the most lucrative market, Israel. Trucks loaded with citrus fruit and vegetables used to shuttle back and forth from the village daily. With the gate in place, Azun Atme now only sends produce to the main vegetable market in Beita, on the few trucks that have been issued Israeli permits to enter the enclave. The truck owners charge two shekels per box of vegetables, and the Beita market levies a 12 percent commission on the total sale. In addition, farmers are not able to determine their selling prices, as they depend on the truck drivers to market their produce. When the trucks are late in reaching the market, or the produce has wilted because of the waits at checkpoints on rainy or very hot days, vegetable prices decrease further, reducing the farmers' profit to almost zero.

The gate and the permit system affected not only the enclave. Azun Atme, Beit Amin and Saniriya are interdependent in more ways than one, as 60 percent of Azun Atme's land is owned by people from the other two villages. Hundreds of families now find themselves cut off from their only source of income. Azun Atme's 700 dunums of greenhouses and 4,000 dunums of arable land have become accessible to only 40 percent of their owners. In addition, should an additional inner fence be constructed around Azun Atme, encircling it from all sides, the village would lose one of its five water wells and two of them would be partially damaged.

The Israeli authorities encouraged landowners who reside outside Azun Atme to apply for the new 'long term residents' permits. The Palestinian Authority opposed this, arguing that this would mean a *de facto* recognition of the barrier and make the natural right of every Palestinian farmer to work on his land dependent on the Israeli-granted permits. To date, 460 farmers have requested and obtained permits, driven by economic deprivation and the sight of their greenhouses deteriorating. Of these, some permits have been issued to the least able members of the family, such as elderly women or young children. However, in excess of 130 families have applied for but not obtained permits or have refused to apply on principle.

The sight of these farmers at the gate, under the shadow of the newly installed watchtower, trying to convince a soldier to wave them through, or simply sitting on their tractors staring at the barrier, has become part of the landscape. Often they wait for hours, and do not leave until dispersed by the soldiers. Sometimes fights ensue. Abu Bashir says that he was recently beaten by a soldier when he insisted that he wanted to go to *Al Ard*, 'the land.'

Nevertheless, he adamantly refuses to apply for a permit. A clause in the Israeli-issued permit specifies that the permit holder is entitled to enter the enclave and work on agricultural land, but has no property rights over his land. 'How can I have no property rights over my own land?' Abu Bashir demands. He and many other farmers fear that this clause could be used by the Israeli authorities to confiscate their land at any time. They maintain they

are unwilling to relinquish their property rights in exchange for 'permission' to farm their own land; even at the expense of 'not planting anything at all and letting everything die,' one farmer says.

Occasionally farmers are allowed to cross without permits, depending on the goodwill of certain soldiers. On such days, they try to get as much work done as they can. But working on the land once in a while is not enough; plants die without regular water and care.

Abu Bashir has requested a change of residency, an alternative that many farmers are considering. By changing his place of residence from Beit Amin to Azun Atme, Abu Bashir would not need a permit to go through the gate to Azun Atme to access his land. The process, though, is time consuming and has no guarantee of success. The request has to be passed from the village council to the Palestinian Ministry of the Interior, which then forwards the request to Beit El, the Israeli Civil Administration headquarters for the West Bank. One of Abu Bashir's sons, Tarek, has already obtained a change of residency, because he applied early on, in anticipation of access difficulties as the construction of the barrier progressed towards Azun Atme. Reportedly, the Israeli authorities are not granting changes of residency anymore, aware that this is being done by Palestinians residing outside the enclaves for the sole purpose of accessing agricultural land and businesses.

Unable to find another solution, Abu Bashir reluctantly asked his son Jaafar to work the family land and after school hours. As a student in one of Azun Atme's two schools, Jaafar does not need to apply for a permit or for a change of residency to access Azun Atme daily, along with 96 students and 36 teachers who come from the surrounding villages. However, restrictions still apply: he can only cross through the gate on school days, and not after school hours. Like his school friends and their teachers who reside outside the enclave, attending school is the only reason that he is allowed to enter the enclave.

Since November, he has worked in the greenhouse every day after school, from early afternoon until dusk. He has a carefully planned routine; time is short and there is a lot to do. Disappearing behind the tall and leafy tomato plants, Jaafar quickly moves from one stalk to the other, checking the leaves with an expert eye, examining the ripeness of tomatoes and opening the water hoses.

He is proud of his newly acquired expertise in mixing chemicals. 'There is a product for each disease, and using the wrong one could kill the plant. My family cannot afford that,' he says.

Tarek, Jaafar's brother, is a student at Najah University in Nablus. He returns to his home village every two weeks for the weekend, arriving home by mid-afternoon after long waits at checkpoints and several changes of buses. He tries to help his brother, driving the tractor and picking fruit, but twice a month is not enough and he does not want to quit university. 'Besides,' he adds, 'I do not like farming very much and Jaafar is much better at it than I ever was.' Although Tarek is the only member of the family who succeeded in changing

his residency status to Azun Atme, this does not help Jaafar, who still bears sole responsibility for keeping the family farm going.

Jaafar says he does not dislike farming, but would prefer 'studying for exams, like my brother, because it takes a lot of reading to prepare adequately'. What does he dislike the most? 'Crossing the gate after dark,' he answers without



hesitation. 'I get scared because I know that the soldiers are scared too'.

He also misses having lunch at home with his parents and brothers and sisters. On several occasions he went home and then tried to return to Azun Atme, but was turned back because crossing after school hours is forbidden. After several

such unsuccessful attempts, Jaafar gave up and now brings his own lunch to eat alone in the greenhouse.

Jaafar's head teacher says that at least 20 schoolboys face the same predicament. When the parents are not allowed through the gate, they call the school to inform their children that they must go to the greenhouses after school. The head teacher regrets that this is having a detrimental impact on the children's academic performance; a one-dunum greenhouse is too much for a teenager working alone. 'No wonder they do not do their homework, forget their books at home and look absent-minded. Who would blame them? When they get home after a day's schooling and work in the greenhouses all they do is eat and collapse into bed,' the head teacher says. After a long pause, he adds: 'It is more difficult for the parents, how do you think they feel?'

Abu Bashir's answer comes quickly, in an emotional voice. 'Farming is a lot of physical work, but I have no other option. I was happy to do all the work myself, because then my sons and daughters would have the time to study and become educated. Now all my plans have failed. I depend on my son to work the land'.

Like other farmers, Abu Bashir considered the option of constructing a shed close to the greenhouse to sleep overnight on the rare occasions when he is allowed to cross the gate. But other farmers who have done that have warned him that the Border Police have threatened to demolish any unauthorised construction. Because Azun Atme is a 'C' area (i.e. under full Israeli civil and security control) all new construction requires the authorisation of the Israeli authorities. Over the years, residents have constructed houses in Area 'C' without permits: twenty-four homes have now been served with demolition

orders. The Boys' School's bathrooms which have also been built without permits have also been served with demolition orders

Soldiers at the gate have also been keeping track of farmers who cross the gate once a week or so and have refused to let them in again, arguing that they have been sleeping in the enclave without a proper permit and must be punished for 'breaking the law'.

Farmers in Azun Atme are having a hard time surviving economically, even with their sons' help. During a recent storm, Abu Bashir's greenhouse was damaged; the plastic covers were torn, exposing the tomatoes to the wind and cold. Fixing the plastic is an impossible task for a lone teenager, and because Abu Bashir was not allowed to enter Azun Atme for several days, many of his tomato plants were struck by disease.

The poultry farm, which used to earn a daily income of NIS 200 in eggs, was forced to close. Not having been allowed through the gate for several days, Abu Bashir was unable to feed the chickens; they fell ill and many died. He gave away the rest of his 4,500 chickens. Resigned, he says that 'It was too much to do for Jaafar anyway... This would have ended up happening in any case'.

However imperfect an arrangement, Abu Bashir has no alternative but to have Jaafar tend to the greenhouse to feed the family. Despite the disruption to his young life, Abu Bashir hopes that his son understands. 'I would do anything to spare him this work. It is the Israelis' doing, not mine.'