Separation fence threatens to destroy farming, ecosystem around Jerusalem

According to the Nature and Parks Authority, establishment of the wall will change not only the landscape, but also the special pace of life of traditional farmers.

By Zafrir Rinat | Oct.18, 2012 | 4:01 AM | 1

Soon bulldozers will begin to break ground close to the Palestinian village of Batir in order to build a new section of the separation fence between Israel and the West Bank. They will bring to a sad end one of the loveliest and most fascinating stories of local landscape preservation by generations of Jewish and Arab farmers. After the wall bisects it, the face of this landscape will be changed forever.

Batir is one of only a few villages where traditional hill farming methods have been preserved since the Second Temple period. To this day, the Palestinian farmers make use of the terraced land, watering it via the aqueduct that descends the hill to the Refaim stream bed. Many places have abandoned this kind of agriculture, making Batir and other adjacent villages so special that both the Israel Nature and Parks Authority and the Palestinian Authority (separately, of course) came to the conclusion that UNESCO should declare...
the area a world heritage site for landscape culture. There are also historic sites in the area, among them the ruins of the city of Betar, the last bastion of the Bar Kochba rebellion against the Romans.

In all, 640 dunams of land will be confiscated from residents of Batir. A fence dividing the village from the tracks of the Tel Aviv-Jerusalem railroad will soon be cut into the landscape. At one point it will hug the walls of a school, and later on it will separate Batir villagers from the fields and groves they work in the Refaim stream bed. Work on the wall has already begun on the slope of the neighboring village of Walaja, where traditional farming methods are also practiced. After the wall is completed in Batir, another section is to be built to its west and will pass down the slopes over the Mayanot stream, another special element in the landscape.

The Israeli security apparatus says that work on the wall in the Batir area has been calculated to cause the least damage possible to the landscape; it says that the wall is of a minimal width and that its route has been changed and moved to the bottom of the slopes in order to minimize damage to the agricultural landscape, even taking into account the security risk, since placement of the wall at the top of a hill allows for better control of an area. The only areas to suffer damage, Israel says, are the bottom terraces, but water will continue to flow to the farmed sections.

Batir farmers will continue to work the slopes, and those who farm slopes remaining on the Israeli side will be allowed to pass through special underground gates. At this point in time, they must cross the railroad tracks at risk to their lives. After transfer points are established, they will be able to reach their land safely.

Justifications for the erection of the wall in this sensitive area include, among other things, the heavy traffic of Palestinians looking for work who then remain in Israel without permission, and the suspicion that some of them may be terrorists. The Israeli security apparatus has rejected all other suggested solutions. It claims that manned lookout posts or electronic tracking devices are insufficient. Only a physical obstacle will protect, it says, the area around Jerusalem.

Paradoxically, an Israeli government body has recently been enlisted to defend Batir residents: the Nature and Parks Authority. It has said in the past that it cannot oppose government decisions on the placement of the wall, and it can only act in order to reduce damages; however, in the case of Batir it deviated from its own line and surprised the security establishment with a sharply written criticism warning of the damage the wall will cause in the area. The paper, prepared by the authority's professionals in this field, calls for the consideration of alternatives to the erection of the wall.

"Minimization of the damage caused by the barrier focuses on reducing physical damage and blending the wall into [the cosmetics of] the landscape," the authority's paper states. "But the greatest damage is the very existence of a barrier on a line dividing different areas. Due to its very, this damage cannot be ameliorated."

According to the Nature and Parks Authority, establishment of the wall will change not only the landscape, but also the special pace of life of traditional farmers. For example, young people who used to help their families will not be able to run with their hoes down to the stream bed. The farmers who
regularly work their land will have to pass through gates bearing special permits. This means, according to the paper, dealing a death blow to traditional farming in the area, when instead everything possible should be done to allow it to continue.

All this is happening in a village whose land rights were preserved until the 1967 War. In the wake of a rare agreement between Defense Minister Moshe Dayan and the Jordanians, Batir residents were allowed to work their land occupied by Israel, and they did so intensively over the years, avoiding any damage to the trains that passed through the area. The Nature and Parks Authority document underscores the fact that in order to upgrade the tracks, olive trees belonging to Batir residents were uprooted and that this was done with their cooperation. In contrast, the army says that several village residents were convicted of efforts to sabotage the tracks a few years ago.

Another certain victim of the wall will be the wild animals that require continuous and open land to thrive. The area around the Jerusalem hills is defined as an ecologically vital corridor between the plain and the hills, enabling the movement of animals and the diffusion of wild plants. This corridor will be nearly completely blocked by the separation wall in different parts of the Jerusalem hills. If it is also erected in Batir and the surrounding area, it will leave rare animals like gazelles and fallow deer trapped within a small space. In the long run, without a suitable natural breeding ground, their chances of survival are small. The area's diverse natural heritage will be lost along with a cultural heritage of long standing.