

## **Brief on Oush Grab Situation**

Oush Grab is a new public park built on land owned by the Beit Sahour Municipality. The site is a former Israeli military camp, left by the occupation forces in April, 2006. Before 1967 it was used by the Jordanian army as a military base. The Jordanians bought the land from Palestinian owners; the land within this original border is now under the jurisdiction of the Beit Shaour municipality. When the Israeli army took over the camp, they expanded the borders to include some private land neighboring the camp. This private land has now been returned to the Palestinian landowners and is not reflected in the municipal master plan. The top of the hill, where the old military buildings are still located, is the only part of the area still under Israeli military order. This means the municipality is not allowed to build or develop the space, though it lies within the original Jordanian border and is public land. The Beit Sahour Municipality, the NGO Paidia and other local NGOS, were able to lift the military order on the remainder of the camp. The development as a public garden and recreation area is vital for the social, economic and physical wellbeing of the community. As we know, the Bethlehem area suffers from a lack of open spaces where children can safely play and picnic.

On Thursday May 15<sup>th</sup>, about 40 settlers attempted to take over the site of Oush Grab. According to the many settlers anxious to speak to the press, they are hoping to build a new settlement outpost in the old military buildings at the top of the hill. On Friday morning they returned to mark the buildings with graffiti and to hang flags. According to the settlers' website, they intend to come to Oush Grab frequently this week.

The possibility of a new settlement outpost, or any kind of sustained military presence at Oush Grab poses more than an immediate security threat to the community. It threatens the existence of the new public park as well as the access of private landowners to their farms. It threatens to destroy the safe, open and public space many organizations have worked so diligently to create.

So, what can we do? The goal is to further integrate Oush Grab, specifically the top of the hill, into the local community by holding weekly events and barbeques at the site. In this sense our actions are not simply a reaction against the settlement, but an expression of the different possible uses for the site. Movies, concerts, art projects, hiking and dance parties are all part of the opportunity. By approaching local organizations and the Popular Committees we can build a groundswell of support. We have to do things the settlers and the army will not expect, things that they don't know how to react to. This week is important because of the Investment Summit in Bethlehem. It is an opportunity to invite the visitors and press to Oush Grab to see the positive steps the community has taken in creating the park, juxtaposed with the destructive wishes of the settlers

***As we move forward we have to remember that this proposed settlement/outpost is not only an act of injustice, it is also illegal. And while the settlers don't have much of a sense of humor, they certainly can be dangerous.***