

## Invisible Settlements in Jerusalem

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[Published in Palestine-Israel Journal Vol. 17 No. 1, March 2011](#)

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When we talk of Israeli settlement activity in East Jerusalem, we usually mean an activity of one of two types: the large neighborhoods initiated after 1967 by the Israeli government and built on land unilaterally annexed to Jerusalem and expropriated for public needs — i.e, Ramot, Gilo, Pisgat Ze'ev, Har Homa and French Hill. These neighborhoods were set up so that Jewish settlements would encircle East Jerusalem, thus isolating it and separating it from the West Bank, so that East Jerusalem could not serve as the capital of a future Palestinian state. Starting in 1967, successive Israeli governments have undertaken the planning and construction of some 50,000 residential units in these neighborhoods and, today, more than 190,000 Israelis live in them.

The second type of settlement relates to Jewish settlements in the heart of Palestinian neighborhoods in East Jerusalem — anything from a single building to a cluster of buildings inhabited by ideological settlers — in the Muslim Quarter (of the Old City), Silwan and Sheikh Jarrah. Each is located in a closed area and secured by a private security company at the state's expense. These settlements are intended to change the character of the Palestinian neighborhoods in East Jerusalem and to ensure a permanent Jewish presence in them. Their purpose is to ensure that in discussions on the permanent status, Israel would find it difficult to abandon them, thus making it all but impossible to establish a Palestinian capital in East Jerusalem's Arab neighborhoods.

There is however another type of settlement in East Jerusalem: one that is difficult to measure, to define, or even quantify I call it the *invisible* settlement or the touristic settlement. In recent years, the State of Israel has invested much effort and great resources into the creation of facts on the ground that dramatically change the character of East Jerusalem and the attitude of the Israeli public to the Palestinian areas of East Jerusalem. The operation of these intensive tourist and educational projects in Jerusalem poses a real threat to Jerusalem's stability and to any chance of a compromise solution in Jerusalem.

### **Tourism as a Settlement Activity**

At some level, the settlements established in Palestinian neighborhoods are a failure. Settlers associations have in the last two decades invested millions of shekels in purchasing buildings and legal costs to establish a foothold in the Palestinian neighborhoods in the east of the city, primarily around the Old City. The result so far is

approximately 2,000 Jewish people living in closed and secured<sup>1</sup> areas, among a population of tens of thousands of Palestinians. Although these settlements do provide a Jewish presence (as well as constant friction with the Palestinian population<sup>2</sup>), it seems, however, that they do not have the strength to create Jewish dominance or to change the Palestinian neighborhoods into Jewish ones. In this case, when negotiations on the solution for Jerusalem are underway, most Israelis would agree to accept a situation in which these neighborhoods are considered Palestinian and the handful of Jewish settlers living there would be evacuated. The settlers grasp that settling in Palestinian houses will not in itself be sufficient to prevent a compromise in Jerusalem. In order to ensure that Israelis do not agree to give up these Palestinian areas, they recognize the need to create a physical and emotional connection between Israelis and these places. It is for this very purpose that the tourist and education projects are intended — to attract the Israeli public to East Jerusalem.

It is important to stress that these are not artificial projects trying to create Jewish tourist sites out of thin air and to "invent" an affinity between Israelis and the Palestinian areas of Jerusalem. There exists a genuine and deep affinity among the Jewish people for key sites of Jewish historical importance that are today located in the heart of Palestinian neighborhoods.

The authentic project of developing historical sites, as well as their expansion and preparation for visitors, enjoys wide-ranging support from the various authorities, as we shall see. It is very difficult to object to an educational initiative that aims to teach history — to expand scientific knowledge through archaeology and to develop and benefit the city through tourism and attractions. However, such projects, carried out in a conflict situation in which Israel unilaterally annexes East Jerusalem — an annexation that is not recognized by the city's inhabitants or by the countries of the world — would mean a far-reaching change in the most sensitive area of the entire Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It could, in fact, lead to an irreversible situation that could prevent a compromise in Jerusalem.

### **The Model: Wadi Hilweh and Silwan**

It would seem that the most successful model of a tourist settlement in Jerusalem is in the Wadi Hilweh neighborhood in Silwan.<sup>3</sup> Wadi Hilweh lies immediately outside the walls of the Old City, mere meters from al-Haram al-Sharif (the Temple Mount). Ancient Jerusalem began in this spot as early as the Canaanite Period. In biblical times, the heart of Jerusalem was in Wadi Hilweh and archaeological remnants found there shed light on those years. As a result, there are those who call the area "The City of David" in the name of King David who ruled Jerusalem in the period when it was located on the slopes of Wadi Hilweh. This location served as a tourist attraction and a focal point for hundreds of

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<sup>1</sup> The State of Israel bears the cost of constant guarding for settlers in East Jerusalem via the budget of the Ministry of Housing. In 2010, 54 million shekels is allocated for this purpose. Ironically, this budget is funded by the Israeli tax payers which include the Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem themselves.

<sup>2</sup> The Association for Civil Rights in Israel recently published an important report on the effect of the settlers' presence in the Palestinian neighbourhoods: [www.acri.org.il/eng/story.aspx?id=763](http://www.acri.org.il/eng/story.aspx?id=763)

<sup>3</sup> For more information, see [www.silwanic.net](http://www.silwanic.net)

years, attracting many scientists who carried out archaeological digs that revealed parts of its historical and diverse cultural story.

The settlers' foundation, Elad (a Hebrew acronym which means "To the City of David"), which started settling in houses in the neighborhood in the early 1990s, knew how to tap into the historical importance of the site and established a visitors' center there. Elad invested money and effort into archaeological and tourist development of the site and there has been an impressive rise in the number of visitors in recent years. According to the head of the Israel Nature and Parks Authority,<sup>4</sup> 10,000 people visited the site a decade ago; whereas, in 2008, there were 400,000 visitors. It is worth mentioning that this is carried out through cooperation and with the close assistance of various authorities. Originally, the Jerusalem City Council allowed the Elad association to operate a visitors' center, while today it is the Israel Nature and Parks Authority which gives the foundation the right to operate the site and works with it on its development.

One can describe what is happening at Wadi Hilweh today as the creation of two separate sites at the same location. One site is the living, bustling Palestinian neighborhood, with thousands of Palestinian children and adults who live their lives in it. The other site is what is known as "The City of David" — the archaeological tourist site, part of which is to be found in underground tunnels, in which the reality is fundamentally different to the reality of the living, breathing Palestinian neighborhood. Hundreds of thousands of visitors have visited the latter place, the historical one, without even noticing the present, living reality. While it is true to say that anyone looking around will see houses, cars and people, Palestinian people, but the tour visits the historic and not the present-day sites. When I took a tourist guides course we were taught that people see what you tell them they see. If you don't show them what they see, they will not notice and will not remember it, although it was in front of their eyes. This perhaps explains the dual success of the tourist project: not only do hundreds of thousands of Israelis visit it and get to know it, but when they do go there, all they see is Jewish history and the national importance of the place to Israel; they do not see the present or the place's importance to other peoples.

The driving principle of a permanent status agreement in Jerusalem is that Palestinian neighborhoods be under Palestinian sovereignty and Israeli neighborhoods under Israeli sovereignty. The Palestinians can not agree to accept a situation under which Palestinian residents will be dispossessed of their homes or have to become Israeli citizens. From their perspective, this would be a second *Nakba*, a second Palestinian catastrophe such as in 1948. In other words, the Palestinian neighborhood Wadi Hilweh must be part of the Palestinian state. But the thousands of Israelis who have visited the place see it as a very important historical and archaeological site that they will find very difficult to give up.

## Archeology<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Avitar Cohen, head of the Jerusalem District of The Nature and Parks Authority. See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=But-I81pFAI>.

<sup>5</sup> For more information on archaeology in Jerusalem and its role in the conflict, see: [www.alt-arch.org](http://www.alt-arch.org)

The archaeological digs play a central role in the touristic settlements. The archeological finding often serves as "proof" of the existence of the Jewish people in Jerusalem in ancient times. Exposing these artifacts to visitors serves as an educational tool to emotionally tie the audience to the place. As some of the digs in the Old City and its environs are carried out in underground tunnels, the diggers gain double benefit. On the one hand, they expose ancient artifacts, which are important and moving and, on the other hand, a kind of horizontal division is formed between the site of the Palestinian neighborhood in the present, which is above ground, and a separate but cut-off world, in which the past is re-created, below ground level. Visitors to the underground tunnels will not see a single Palestinian or the present fabric of life.

The underground tunnels also raise Muslim fears and anxiety, often encouraged and exaggerated by extremist Muslim organizations, that Israel will take control of the Haram al-Sharif (Temple Mount) from underground. This fear, which would not hold water for most Israelis, is very prevalent among many Palestinians, who are of the opinion that Israel's intention is to take control of the Haram from below, through the tunnels. Thus, for example, in September 1996, Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's decision to create an opening from the Western Wall tunnel led to the outbreak of riots throughout the West Bank, which cost 15 Israeli soldiers and some 70 Palestinians their lives.

Today, dozens of extensive digs are taking place in the area of the Old City, many of which are financed by right-wing organizations, with the objective of exposing the past and disseminating knowledge about Jerusalem in its earliest times. The Israel Antiquities Authority itself carries out many of them as rescue digs, and not as scientific digs by a scientific, university body. The Israel Antiquities Authority is one of the most active organizations in the arena of touristic settlement in East Jerusalem. It provides the scientific and legal authorization to create and expand touristic and ideological plans.

## **Education**

In addition to the visit and the tour itself, the touristic settlements also include educational content designed to emotionally tie visitors to these places as national values. Thus, for example, the State of Israel invests millions in the Western Wall tunnel site via its Western Wall Heritage Foundation. This Foundation recently opened an impressive and costly center, the Generations Center, near the Western Wall. This center houses a permanent exhibition designed to create an experience for visitors that explains how they personally are part of generations of Jewish people for whom the common denominator is the longing and yearning for Jerusalem and the Western Wall.

Plans to expand the site and its educational experience are ongoing and include *inter alia* the building of a museum on the concourse to the Western Wall itself to enable expansion of educational activities at the Wall. These educational messages, legitimate though they may be, are not the only potential messages at a site such as the Western Wall. It is after all entirely possible to put such messages across in a museum that is not attached to the Western Wall and the Temple Mount.

In October 2009, Israel's education minister announced a project called "Going up to Jerusalem", the purpose of which was to bring every student in Israel on a field trip to Jerusalem at least three times during their primary and secondary education.<sup>6</sup> The Israeli government invests 15 million shekels a year in this enterprise so that the transport and other costs of the trips are at the state's expense. The Israel Defense Force (IDF) also implements projects that bring IDF soldiers to Jerusalem on an educational trip.<sup>7</sup> On these trips, soldiers and students visit historical sites in Jerusalem in order to create a connection between them and the Jewish heritage associated with these places. For me, the connection of Jewish people and the Jewish heritage to Jerusalem is undisputable and important to me as a Jew, however the context of the present must not be ignored, and the political conclusions of what this connection should mean practically today are under deep dispute.

One of the inherent dangers of these educational programs, which reach hundreds of thousands of young Israeli adults and youth, is the strengthening of the religious element of the conflict. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a national and political one, which can be resolved through political arrangements and is controllable to some extent. The emphasis on the religious component in the conflict brings into the arena emotions and beliefs that will be far more difficult to control and that cannot be resolved. Emphasizing the religious element could take the conflict out of its local, national context and change it into a religious conflict between Jews and the entire Muslim world.

### **The Secret Government Plan**

Almost all the Israeli authorities are involved in the touristic and educational projects in Jerusalem. The Ministry of Tourism, the Education Ministry, The Nature and Parks Authority, the Jerusalem City Council, The Jerusalem Development Authority, the Antiquities Authority, the Ministry of Housing, the Ministry of Transportation and many other organizations are involved, directly and indirectly, each in their area of expertise, in the touristic settlement in Jerusalem. The most visible and extreme example of touristic settlement recently in the headlines is that of Jerusalem Mayor Nir Barkat's plan to demolish Palestinian homes in the neighborhood of al-Bustan in Silwan in favor of a biblical park replicating the garden of King Solomon.<sup>8</sup>

Alongside the involvement of all the authorities in all the projects being carried out on the ground, there is also a major government initiative for tourist development in East Jerusalem, which has not attracted the public attention it deserves. On August 9, 2005, when public eyes were turned towards the evacuation of settlements in Gaza, the Sharon government passed Resolution 4090 to "bolster the city of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel".<sup>9</sup> This resolution provides for the allocation of 60 million shekels per year for the years 2006-2013 to develop the Old City and the Mount of Olives, totaling 480 million

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/news/1.289535>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.aka.idf.il/chinuch/klali/default.asp?catId=42817&docId=46667> (Hebrew language site)

<sup>8</sup> <http://settlementwatcheastjerusalem.wordpress.com/2010/06/20/yet-another-provocation-in-jerusalem-tomorrow/>

<sup>9</sup> You can find the full decision in Hebrew at:

<http://www.pmo.gov.il/PMO/Archive/Decisions/2005/08/des4090.htm>

shekels from the state's budget. This enormous sum is managed as a closed financial entity by a government body called The Jerusalem Development Authority and through the services of sub-contractors.

The plan, which plainly states its objective of "strengthening Jerusalem's status as the capital of Israel," covers three main focal points: the open areas around the Old City, the Jewish Cemetery on the Mount of Olives and the Old City itself. The "open areas" project, which goes through the Palestinian neighborhoods of Silwan, Ras al-Amud, Wadi Joz, al-Suwana, Sheikh Jarrah, A-Tur and other neighborhoods, is intended to turn all the open areas around the Old City into an ideological tourist park which focuses only on Jewish sites and Jewish tourism. The Mount of Olives project focuses on the renovation, maintenance and security of the Jewish cemetery, the setting up of an information center, and the promotion of tourism to the area. The Old City project deals with overall planning for the Old City, including the repair of infrastructure, the improvement of its appearance and the promotion of tourism.<sup>10</sup>

On the surface, the plan appears to be innocuous and reasonable, including many good and positive elements relating to tourist development and restoration. However, when you combine all the elements of the plan into a single picture, and add to this the processes already taking place on the ground in recent years, a very dangerous image emerges. If the plan is fully carried out, it could lead to an end to any hope for a permanent agreement between Israel and the Palestinians. It could also seriously jeopardize Israel's relationship with many countries worldwide and even put it in danger of a renewed outbreak of the conflict. The touristic-ideological park that is currently in various stages of development will determine Jewish dominance in the area and will create a geographical partition that will prevent territorial continuity between the Palestinian neighborhoods of the city.

## **Conclusion**

Jerusalem is in many ways the heart of the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. Jerusalem is a religious, national and historical symbol for both peoples, both of whom see it as the capital of their country and their homeland. However, Jerusalem is also the key to solving the conflict. The reality in Jerusalem is such that it is still possible to allow both peoples to establish their capital there: the Jewish neighborhoods to Israel, the Palestinian neighborhoods to Palestine and a special arrangement regarding the holy places.

During the most recent electoral campaign, Prime Minister Netanyahu and his Likud faction carried out a much-publicized visit to the Mount of Olives and the City of David, where he declared: "For 3,000 years this place was the Jewish capital and for 2,000 years we have been struggling to return and re-establish our sovereignty." It is indeed unfortunate that touristic, archaeological sites are being used as a tool by the right to torpedo the chance for a solution in Jerusalem. The increased presence of Israelis as tourists in the Palestinian areas of Jerusalem — while ignoring the complexity and the importance of these same sites to other cultures and other nations — is the type of

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<sup>10</sup> For more information on the 2005 decision and this plan in English, see: <http://peacenow.org.il/site/en/peace.asp?pi=61&fld=620&docid=3644>

settlement with far-reaching implications for daily life in the east of the city and for the future of the conflict.

We must not permit the historical and religious sites to serve as the pretext and the focal point for the continuation of the conflict. Within the framework of a permanent agreement, it is possible to safeguard the national interests of both peoples at these sites through special management and access arrangements, even if sovereignty is divided according to the fabric of life in the present. Anyone concerned about the fate of Jerusalem and stability in the Middle East must pay attention to developments regarding touristic settlements in Jerusalem.