

# Jerusalem Diary

June - September 2006

Jerusalem, like the rest of the West Bank, is feeling the sobering economic realities of the Israeli and international embargo enforced after the Islamic movement Hamas won January 25 Palestinian parliamentary elections.

**“People are seriously depressed,” said Mervat Naber, head of Caritas Jerusalem’s Social department in an early September press release.**

**“They are going into their sixth month without government wages.**

What would any of us do under these circumstances? The mood in Palestine is simply awful and morose.”

The school year, scheduled to start on September 2, was the impetus behind the most recent crisis. Government workers declared a strike until they are paid back wages. The protest, entering its third week at this writing, is being used by both Hamas and Fateh supporters to promote their agendas.

But the start of the school year mostly meant new expenses: for books, travel and tuition. While Jerusalem is less impacted by the broader economic crisis, many of its residents rely on Palestinian Authority health insurance and other services. **Private Jerusalem schools report having to make up the difference for dozens of pupils unable to pay.**

After Israeli sweeps detained nearly 70 Palestinian parliamentarians and ministers in the Hamas-led government, **an Israeli military court in August extended the remand of minister for Jerusalem affairs Khalid Abu Arafah for the seventh time since late June. One day after his arrest, Abu Arafah and Hamas parliamentarians Muhammad Abu Tir, Muhammad Totah, and Ahmed al-Toun were stripped of their Jerusalem identity cards and the right to live in the city.**

Some of the government representatives report being tortured, says the *Christian Science Monitor*. **Released Labour Minister Muhammed Barghouthi and Deputy Prime Minister Nasser al-Din al-Shaer and Abu Arafah report being put for days at a time in *shabah*,** a name for an uncomfortable position that was banned by the Israeli supreme court in 1999, except in cases where the detainee is considered a ‘ticking bomb’.

Weeks of war between Israel and Lebanon’s Hizbullah this summer put on hold Israeli plans for a unilateral disengagement from the West Bank. But Jerusalem settlement expansion continued apace, as part of the government’s strategy to shore up its control in areas it has no intention of evacuating.

**On September 3, Israel authorized bids for 690 homes to be built in the Jerusalem-area settlements of Maale Adumim and Betar Illit.**

Another large settlement encroaching upon Jabal Mukaber lay down foundations this summer. **Nof Zion's 395 units are slated to open to buyers in 2007.** According to *The New Standard*, blueprints include a daycare, a shopping center, a school, parks, a country club and a hotel.

"Many of our buyers appreciate the added security that is offered by the closed-gated community," a realtor tells the journalist. But Jabal Mukaber residents worry that the access road that they now share with the settlement will be closed to them, leaving them stranded between Nof Zion and an eight-meter-high concrete section of the barrier Israel has constructed nearby.

"The idea is not to live; the idea is for us to leave," Palestinian landowner Osama Zahaikah says.

The Foundation for Middle East Peace reported, in a special summer edition mapping Jerusalem settlements, on the activities of the right-wing settlement group Elad.

**This summer Elad took over some 15 apartments in three different buildings, and another four houses, in Silwan and al-Tur.** In al-Tur, the settlers clashed with the Palestinian residents, and a Palestinian suspected of collaborating with the group was killed.

Elad has been working steadily, using Israeli radio and television, to rally public support for what it calls "ancient Jerusalem." What this means, writer Meron Rappaport decodes, is that the group is trying to normalize the national park of the "City of David" and the Shiloah Tunnel. These assets are operated by Elad, their tour guides are from Elad, and the price of admission goes to Elad coffers—all with the agreement of the Israel Nature and National Parks Protection Authority.

The Israeli Committee against House Demolitions issued its bi-annual report on Israeli demolitions of Palestinian homes in Jerusalem and its environs.

**"During the first half of the year 2006, 47 structures were demolished in East Jerusalem by the Municipality of Jerusalem and/or the Ministry of Interior," ICAHD reported.** "There were 16 pirate gas stations included in that statistic therefore a net total of 31 residential structures was demolished."

This tally represents a decline from previous years, the group says. They believe that the decline results from bureaucratic competition within the municipality, and from heightened efforts to block the building of illegal structures.

Plans by the Israeli gay community to hold the second international World Pride parade in Jerusalem, in an attempt to challenge the city's growing conservative atmosphere, quickly were attacked from many quarters. The event, planned for August 6, was subject early on to boycott calls from those opposed to Israel's occupation.

In the end, **many demonstrators used the venue to protest Israel's attacks on Lebanon.** Organizers also held a demonstration next to the barrier in Jerusalem to reach out to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Palestinians, reported pinknews.co.uk.

**Israel's air raids on Lebanon were a major impetus in the removal of the last two foreign embassies from Jerusalem.** Costa Rica led the way, to be followed by El Salvador's decision on August 25. In a foreign ministry statement, El Salvador said it "recognizes and guarantees the right of the state of Israel to live in peace within secure and internationally recognized borders."

The statement added, however, "equally, the government of El Salvador repeats its recognition of the right of a Palestinian state to exist."

In other news, after years of serving as Jerusalem's mufti at the behest of former Palestinian president Yasser Arafat, controversial **religious leader Ekrima Sabri was removed from his position in early July** after angering President Mahmoud Abbas. Aides to the president told the *Jerusalem Post* that the mufti, who serves at the behest of the president, had spoken out publicly on several occasions against Abbas' political initiatives towards Israel and Hamas. Sabri was replaced by al-Aqsa mosque director Muhammad Hussein.

On July 28, **Israeli police used stun grenades to break up demonstrations outside the al-Aqsa Mosque after the authorities banned men and women under the age of 45** from entering the grounds for Friday prayers.

Former US ambassador to Israel Martin Indyk told a group of Israel's supporters visiting Jerusalem for an economic conference that he had given up on trying to adopt a just solution for the city's holy sites.

"In the Middle East and in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in particular some problems do not have solutions," Indyk said. "You should leave well enough alone." His attitude seems to reflect the position of the current US administration, which is ostensibly on the other side of the American political spectrum.