

Jerusalem Diary

April - July 2008

A new wave of violence has hit Jerusalem, as Israeli settlement policies intensify in the holy city.

On 22 July, a Palestinian driving a bulldozer in a West Jerusalem street struck and wounded at least 16 people before being shot dead by a passerby. Ghassan Abu Tair from Umm Tuba was a Jerusalemite related to Palestinian Legislative Council member Muhammed Abu Tair, who has been detained by Israel for over two years. Ghassan was apparently mimicking another attack on 2 July, in which three people were killed and the Palestinian bulldozer driver was also shot. Israeli settlers have also carried out several stabbing attacks and rampages against Palestinians in Jerusalem in recent months.

The most recent violence came one day before US presidential hopeful Obama Barack was to make a close-up foray into the Middle East conflict. Barack is expected to visit Israeli and Palestinian officials in Jerusalem and Ramallah, as he tours the region and showcases his foreign policy before the November elections.

Obama told the American-Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) that Jerusalem “Jerusalem will remain the capital of Israel, and it must remain undivided” thus appearing to come down

more hawkishly than other US leaders on the issue.

In 1947, the UN designated Jerusalem as a corpus separatum under international authority, and has rejected Israel’s occupation of the city in multiple resolutions. Palestinians seek to establish a capital in the eastern side of Jerusalem occupied since 1967.

Obama’s aides subsequently sought to reframe his remarks. “He has repeatedly said that Jerusalem is a final status issue to be negotiated by the parties,” one aide told the press. “Jerusalem would remain Israel’s capital. It should not be divided with barbed wire and checkpoints as it was between 1948 and 1967.”

Saqer Al Tamimi, a 42-year-old merchant from Ramallah, told the AP that he used to support Obama. “We used to expect he would be better because he’s black, and black people were subject to discrimination, and so they may do us, the Palestinians, justice,” Al Tamimi said. “Unfortunately, when they reach a certain level, the policy is already formulated for them.”

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas was meeting Tuesday at the time of the bulldozer attack with Israeli President Shimon Peres at his Jerusalem residence, in a series of summits commenced in

Annapolis Maryland in November last year. The two sides are being encouraged to try to come to a final status agreement before the end of 2008, when the Palestinian and American administrations reach the end of their terms. Elections are also widely expected in Israel due to corruption allegations centered on Prime Minister Ehud Olmert.

The talks appear to have little traction, however, and analysts believe it will be difficult for the parties to implement any agreement, which would include a pact on Jerusalem, due to their weak domestic positions.

Engineer Mustafa Abu Zahra, Head of Committee caring for the Islamic cemeteries in Jerusalem, told al-Quds newspaper on July 18 that Israeli police had removed a sign marking Bab al-Rahmah Cemetery near an area where Israeli parties had dumped topsoil in preparation for turning the area into a public park. The cemetery is 1,400 years old, and the committee says it will try to remove the soil itself in order to prevent the area's transformation.

In addition, the al-Kurd family in Sheikh Jarrah received notice from the Israeli High Court that they must vacate the home where they have lived since 1956. The court accepts Israeli claims that the property was owned by Jews previously and therefore, that the al-Kurd family is only renters.

The area where the home is located is near the Tomb of Simon the Just, which has been a recent focus of Israeli

settlement activities. Observers say the goal is to create a 'line of Israeli control' from the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood near Damascus Gate, to the City of David settlement near Bab il-Mugharibeh on the other side of the Old City. Settlement efforts have also intensified near Jaffa Gate, transforming the appearance and character of Jerusalem's walled town.

"The Israeli intention is to expel 500 citizens from 28 families from the neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah, in addition to expelling 1,500 Jerusalem residents 88 houses in the Silwan neighborhood," Ahmed Ruweidi of the Jerusalem Affairs ministry told PNN. "There have been decisions to demolish 32 housing units in 'Issawiya village. Fifty-five Palestinian families have been threatened with the demolition of their houses in the neighborhood of Al Ashquariyya in Beit Hanina, and there are 250 houses in the Mount of Olives that have also been threatened with demolition."

Palestinians also protested the opening of a European Union Tempus office intended to serve Israel in the city of Jerusalem, alongside the opening of a Tempus office for higher education support in Ramallah to serve Palestinians. Palestinians said the move recognized Israel's control of the city, despite international resolutions.