



## Atarot and the Fate of the Jerusalem Airport

Marian Houk

Apart from a brief flurry of media attention at the end of 2007 when reports surfaced of post-Annapolis plans to build one of the largest Jewish residential settlements in one of the strategic and densely-populated areas of contiguous Palestinian inhabitation in the Jerusalem area, there has been very little public interest focused on present-day Atarot, an area of former Jewish settlement and now the location of an Israeli-operated industrial zone adjacent to Qalandia.

It is the site of two major infrastructure installations – one is a non-operational but still-viable airport originally built by the British during the mandate period, and the other is Jerusalem largest industrial zone, constructed by the Israeli Land Administration after Israel's 1967 conquest. These two installations appear to have become sweeteners in a proposed Israeli interim deal recently tabled in Israeli-Palestinian negotiations.

Satellite Photo Map.  
Source: *The Applied Research Institute-Jerusalem (ARIJ)*.

## Proposed Jewish Settlement of Atarot

The name Atarot, apparently drawn from several Biblical references, was given to an area of land purchased for Zionist settlement in Qalandia village north of Jerusalem in the early 1900s, during the final years of Ottoman rule in Palestine. Jewish activists began to live and work in Atarot in 1914, but they moved away at some point during the First World War, and then returned in 1922, when Palestine was under British administration but prior to the League of Nations' formal establishment of the Palestine Mandate. The British constructed an airport at Qalandia that was opened for regular flights in 1936.

The small Atarot settlement supplied fruit, produce and dairy products to Jerusalem until the Hagana-ordered evacuation of Atarot's some 200 residents during the conflict that surrounded the proclamation of the state of Israel in 1948. Many of Atarot's residents relocated to a new area near Tel Aviv which they named Atara, and there has been no Jewish settlement in Atarot since that time.

But the combination of a possible Biblical antecedent plus the abandonment under duress of pre-state claims makes the spot an attractive if not almost irresistible target for Israeli claims – at least as enunciated by ideologues in Israel's national religious settlement movement.

In late December 2007 – approximately one month after the much-hyped launch of the Annapolis process aimed at the creation of a Palestinian state by the end of 2008 or so – Israel's Housing Minister Ze'ev Boim announced that his ministry “was looking into building a new Jewish neighbourhood with 10,000 apartments in Atarot, located in east Jerusalem, to ease a housing crunch in the city”, according to Israel's YNet website.

A post-Annapolis upsurge in announcements of settlement expansion plans has cast a pall over the on-going direct Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. But, despite regular threats, Palestinian negotiators have not withdrawn over the issue, despite the stepped-up pace and scale of the announcements.

Since the start of the Annapolis process in November 2007, according to the Applied Research Institute of Jerusalem (ARIJ) – *which is actually now located behind The Wall in Bethlehem* – there have been Israeli announcements of plans, including publication of tenders, to build over 50,000 housing units “in and around the city of Jerusalem”. However, by July 2008, according to ARIJ, the plans for some 33,800 of these 50,000+ housing units – including the 11,000 proposed housing units for a Jewish settlement in Atarot – have now been put under “study and review”.

ARIJ noted that these various post-Annapolis announcements conform to a remarkable degree with the “Jerusalem 2000” or “Town Planning Scheme 2000” proposal that was first announced on 13 September 2004 by (West) Jerusalem Mayor Uri Lupolianski, and which proposes “the addition of 65,000 housing units to settlements in Jerusalem city and along the city’s outskirts by the year 2020”.

After the expression of U.S. concerns about post-Annapolis Israeli announcements of tenders for settlement expansion, it was explained that Israeli governments have never agreed to stop building inside what they define as Jerusalem. This policy was enunciated particularly clearly by Israeli Prime Minister Olmert’s spokesman, Mark Regev. The Israeli government *says* it has frozen new settlement construction in the West Bank – though whether it can actually claim to have done so or not is another matter entirely. However, a number of Israeli experts who monitor Israeli settlement activity now appear to be convinced that plans for a Jewish residential settlement in Atarot are, at least for the moment, frozen.

Israeli attorney Danny Seidemann, the founder and legal advisor to Ir-Amim, an Israeli NGO working “for an equitable and stable Jerusalem with an agreed political future”, said there have been both “deniable and non-deniable schemes” over the past couple of years concerning the construction of a settlement at Atarot. Seidemann said he first heard it mentioned in the Jerusalem Planning Board about one-and-a-half years ago by Deputy Mayor Yehoshua Pollack. “It has come and gone off the radar screen since then”, Seidemann said. “No contracts have been awarded, but there was a roadshow with a power-point presentation to the Jerusalem District Ministry of Construction, and it was being expedited”. Seidemann indicated that the project included a proposal to construct a tunnel to Atarot from the Kokhav Ya’akov (primarily Orthodox Jewish) settlement just outside Ramallah, passing underneath the Qalandia refugee camp – and the major and very congested Qalandia “border crossing” that controls almost all passage in and out of Ramallah.

Khalil Toufakji of the Arab Studies Society had almost identical information, but expressed concern that it would adversely affect the airport at Atarot: “We heard some information from the Israeli side that they want to build a new settlement north of the [Jerusalem Airport] runway – between The Wall and the runway – around 11,000 housing units, and at the same time they want to build a tunnel to make, contiguity between the settlements inside Jerusalem and the settlement outside Jerusalem – Kokhav Ya’akov, which today is in the West Bank. But in my opinion nothing will happen – I hope – because in this area, according to Taba, and according to the Israeli-Palestinian agreement which was approved, it’s forbidden to build any house around the runway”.

Seidemann noted that the new Jewish settlement project in Atarot would, if implemented, completely change the landscape, and disrupt the contiguity of a

Palestinian zone that extends from Ramallah south to Shu'afat. "There are no Jewish residents in the whole zone from Neve Ya'akov to Qafr Aqab" (part of the Jerusalem municipality that is now isolated behind the Qalandia checkpoint on the West Bank), he noted, "Putting 11,000 residential units for Jews in the midst of a major Palestinian strip would lead to a Balkanisation of the area that would make a final status agreement on Jerusalem impossible".

For this reason, Seidemann said, "based on my information, it is true that there was strong American pressure to drop the plans for the construction of a massive Jewish settlement in Atarot".

In its late December 2007 article on Housing Minister Boim's announcement concerning an Atarot settlement, YNet noted drily that the very next day, "Boim said he rejected the idea of building the neighbourhood when it was brought before him – something he didn't say Wednesday when talking to media. 'The subject of a possible exploration (of the plan) was brought before me, but I suggested that we drop it', he told Israel Radio'. Ynet added that a ministry spokesman said that 'the plan to build the neighbourhood in Atarot was one of several options presented to Boim after he asked the government's land authority to identify potential construction sites ... [but] This obviously was ruled out, because of the sensitive nature of the peace talks ... We wouldn't even dream of doing it... We ruled it out categorically'."

YNet also noted, in the same report, that "An Israeli official, speaking on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to discuss the matter with reporters, said Olmert was not aware of the plan before it was reported in the media".

Col. (Res) Shaul Arieli of Israel's Council for Peace and Security was categorical, speaking in an interview in September: "No one is going to build any Jewish neighbourhood there". Arieli explained that "The Mayor of Jerusalem froze this option because of pressure from the Government, who were under pressure from the Americans". Why? "Because of the location – if you build a Jewish neighbourhood, it will be much more difficult to have any contiguity of Palestinian areas. The closest Jewish neighbourhood is Neve Ya'akov, and there is the Palestinian neighbourhood of Beit Hanina in between. Ramat Shlomo is much further away – some 3 to 4 kilometers south."

Meir Margalit, a former member of the (West) Jerusalem City Council and formerly of Peace Now, is a field coordinator for the Israeli Coalition Against House Demolition (ICAHN).

"Indeed, there is a plan to build a large Jewish settlement in Atarot", Margalit said in September, "but I am not sure if it has been approved by the Ministry of the Interior – and my feeling is that they will not approve something like this."

The plan, Margalit said, originated in “some department in the Ministry of Housing – and some in the Jerusalem Municipality are interested in it, especially for Orthodox Jews who put pressure to build this settlement at Atarot. But nobody can do it without a permit from the Prime Minister’s Office”.

Margalit said that the reason he believes permission for the settlement in Atarot will not be forthcoming is because, “according to the negotiations with the Palestinian Authority, this part of the city will pass to the Palestinian Authority (PA). In addition according to maps presented to the PA, all areas to the north of Neve Ya’akov will pass to the PA.”

Margalit added that the proposal is to do this fast.

This would mean that Israel is offering to cede both the Jerusalem Airport (popularly known as Qalandia Airport, and renamed Atarot Airport by the Israelis) and the industrial zone to the PA – a noticeable change from the earlier Israeli negotiating position.

Margalit acknowledged that the current route of The Wall as constructed in this area north of Neve Ya’akov does not conform to this reported new Israeli proposal. But, Margalit said, “this is what the Israeli side, put on the table – and this is why there will not be a settlement built in Atarot”.

Until now, Israeli moves have indicated a general intention to keep both the Atarot industrial zone and airport as part of Israel. Atarot was part of the West Bank area controlled by Jordanian troops from 1948 until the Israeli conquest during the June 1967 war, when it was then unilaterally incorporated into the Israeli-defined Greater Jerusalem municipal area. In maps presented by Israel at the Camp David talks in the summer of 2000, Atarot was included in the *Israeli* built-up area of Jerusalem – and *not* in the areas defined as “*Palestinian East Jerusalem*” [apparently an area designated for transfer to an eventual Palestinian state], according to the website of PASSIA, the Jerusalem-based Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs.

But, Haaretz reported that in December 1999, “Israel was proposing to hand over civilian control to the Palestinian Authority of Palestinian neighbourhoods in north Jerusalem and give joint control to the domestic Atarot airport”. The industrial zone was not mentioned, and apparently not included.

The route of The Wall has carved out a distinct space in Israeli Jerusalem for the Atarot industrial area and airport, plus ample Israeli road access. The division of the two lanes of the former main road between Jerusalem and Ramallah by The Wall in the Al Ram area was aimed precisely at facilitating Israeli-controlled access to and from the Atarot industrial zone.

But, Margalit said, “I don’t believe the Americans will let the government carry out the plan [to build a Jewish settlement at Atarot]. They know about this plan, and they are part of the negotiations, and they know that this is part of East Jerusalem that will pass in the end to the Palestinian Authority. Sooner or later it will happen. It includes an airport (of course the infrastructure is there) and an industrial zone, and the industrial zone will be under Palestinian sovereignty”.

This is the minimum that the Palestinians can accept, Margalit suggested. He noted that the Palestinians claim all of East Jerusalem.

Seidemann believes that it is very unlikely that Palestinian President Abbas can accept so little. He compared the offer to the perhaps-mythical 17th century sale of Manhattan by an unspecified Indian tribe to the Dutch for 60 guilders (according to legend, the rough equivalent of \$24 dollars) – reportedly paid in beads and mirrors.

“For the Palestinians, this too will be glass beads”, Seidemann said, unless it is accompanied by a way to address the status of the Old City, the historic Jordanian Jerusalem (some 6.5 kilometers including Sheikh Jarrah, Wadi Joz, As-Suwaneh, Ras al Amoud, and at-Thuri, known as Abu Tor by the Israelis), and the “historic basin” between the Old City and the Mount of Olives.

The Wall as originally planned, would actually have conformed to what Margalit reported as the most recent reported proposal for a partial territorial division.

The Israeli Army (IDF) Central Command Headquarters – a huge administration center with complicated technical infrastructure – is located on the northwest corner of Neve Ya’akov, and according to the original plan, The Wall would have run from the former main Jerusalem-Ramallah road right up the hill to the outer perimeter of the Central Command complex. But, after a series of legal appeals, court rulings determined that The Wall should be re-routed several hundred meters further north. Now, The Wall passes from the former main Jerusalem-Ramallah road, up Ahmad Orabi street, between houses and related families, all the way up to the back of Neve Ya’akov, leaving on the Jerusalem side a triangle of Dahiet al Barid that contains several Christian institutions, prestigious private schools, the World Bank offices, the now-closed Jerusalem Claridge Hotel, the Norwegian Representative Office, and the forlornly luxurious homes and gardens of some of East Jerusalem’s Salah ed-Din Street’s most successful merchants –as well as the home of Knesset Member Ahmed Tibi.

In the ruthless market mechanism that has created havoc as a result of the construction of The Wall, some of these residents have now given up hope and are putting their properties up for reduced sale, while unregulated speculative construction runs rampant, and profiteers expect an influx of demand from Palestinians willing to pay a premium for easier proximity to Jerusalem and possible residency rights, in this new area of uncertain status created by the route of The Wall.

An extremely unpleasant checkpoint still remains at exactly the spot that would be the boundary between the Palestinian Authority and Israel – if the proposal Margalit mentioned were to be implemented.

Known as the “Al Ram checkpoint”, it was originally intended to allow only the passage of the residents of the corner of Dahiet al Barid now on the Jerusalem side of The Wall, during the construction phase. For this reason, even Machsom Watch—an Israeli group that monitors army behaviour at checkpoint crossings—has abandoned this site.

The Wall is now complete and closed in Dahiet al Barid area, but a metal gate across the former main Jerusalem-Ramallah road has now been opened – continuing to allow heavy traffic into and out of what is now de facto the West Bank. [There are rumors this metal gate across the road will be closed on Sunday 27 September.]

In the meantime, the “Al Ram checkpoint” (which, was supposed to move back to the metal gate, but has not) has actually been expanded from one to three lanes, with hundreds if not thousands of cars passing through every hour, including large trucks coming in and also now exiting in the opposite direction, towards downtown Jerusalem.

The nervous nature of the negotiations, such as they are, on Jerusalem, is illustrated by a mini-flap that arose in mid-September following the publishing by the Palestinian newspaper al Ayyam of an interview with the U.S. Consul in Jerusalem, Jacob Walles – a man who is known for his reluctance to talk to the press, but who has been present in almost all of the relevant meetings.

What really caused an uproar was Walles’ statement that U.S. Secretary of State Condoleeza Rice believed that the post-Annapolis direct negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority should be conducted on the basis of 1967 borders, with some minor territorial adjustments – and that the U.S. wanted Jerusalem dealt with now.

After publication of the interview, according to The Jerusalem Post: “Israel conveyed its displeasure to Washington on Thursday over remarks reportedly made by US Consul General Jacob Walles that it had agreed to start negotiations with the Palestinians over Jerusalem. The comments prompted a bitter row among Kadima’s would-be leaders.”

The heat was so great that on 11<sup>th</sup> September the U.S. State Department issued a potentially misleading statement, entitled “U.S Position on Borders of a Future Palestinian State”, which said: “The U.S. government has not taken a position on borders. While the discussions between the parties are confidential, we can state that

the parties have not in any way prejudiced long held views on borders. A senior U.S. official who participated in the discussions denies that the Israeli side, led by chief negotiator Foreign Minister Livni, has been willing to negotiate concerning Jerusalem. The Secretary participated in the negotiations in a way that respected the Israeli position”.

Then, on 16 September, the *Jerusalem Post* reported that: “The future of Jerusalem, according to Channel 2, was being negotiated between Olmert and Abbas, and *not by the team led by Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni.*”

In another report on the same day, the *Jerusalem Post* added that “Prime Minister Ehud Olmert told a Kadima Party meeting at Kfar Hamaccabiah in Ramat Gan on Thursday night that his government was sticking by its position that Jerusalem should be left until the end of the talks. ‘We have achieved significant progress, but we haven’t started the negotiations on Jerusalem yet’, Olmert told a crowd of several hundred party activists and supporters. ‘We said this issue would be handled last, and that is what we’ll do’.”

Meanwhile, the Prime Minister Olmert may have been hoping to quiet the situation and to create an illusion of progress with a proposal for an interim agreement – including Atarot.

## **Atarot Industrial Zone**

As things stand at the moment, The Wall carves out the Atarot industrial zone – and most of its access roads – as part of Israeli Jerusalem, and keeps Qalandia refugee camp and the areas around it – even parts of Jerusalem such as Qafr Aqab and Semiramis – within the Palestinian (West Bank) side.

Just after the start of the second Intifada, the industrial zone nearly turned into a ghost town. Israelis felt it was too dangerous to come to the 425-acre complex. Palestinians coming from the West Bank or East Jerusalem sometimes faced hours of travel time, mainly waiting at checkpoints.

Ir Amim’s Danny Seidemann said that there have been great fluctuations in the fortunes of the Atarot industrial zone. “At the beginning of the second Intifada, occupancy rates were way down, there were a lot of vacancies, and the whole thing was going downhill. But, there is very little small industrial space in Jerusalem, so there are now lots of sublets to Palestinian businesses”, Seidemann noted. He added that he has heard there has been something of a recovery, now that the Atarot industrial zone has been placed on the Jerusalem side of The Wall. “In fact, the whole question

of industrial zones in fluctuating Israeli-Palestinian relations is very interesting”, Seidemann noted.

The “Jerusalem 2000” master plan – an Israeli scheme which focuses on the issue of demographic balance in Jerusalem (70% Jewish is the perceived ideal with a maximum 30% Arab population mix) – recommends Atarot as the main area for traditional industries in East Jerusalem, and calls for the transfer of traditional industries from Jerusalem to Atarot (Maale Adumim and the outskirts of Beit Shemesh are the Jewish industrial zone areas, and contain more than traditional industries). The Jerusalem 2000 Master plan calls for the transfer of garages, car repair and body shop businesses from the “Trade and Services Center” in Wadi Joz to Atarot.

Hagit Ofran of Peace Now said that there is currently an expansion and upgrading of the industrial infrastructure in Atarot with money from the Israeli government Reshut Leputuach Yerushalayim, the Jerusalem Development Authority.

Margalit also noted that now, from time to time, the Peres Peace Center brings out plans to convert the Atarot industrial area into a Joint Israeli-Palestinian economic zone, and they have money to do it, he says. Margalit believes that the Palestinians would also be interested in the development of a Joint Industrial Zone.

Khalil Toufakji said that, “most of the industrial area is Palestinian now. Most of the Palestinians who have a big project, or big company, they rent most of the building that were built for Israel, but the Israelis rent it for the Arabs. Now, if you go there, most of the industrial land is rented to the Palestinians. From Jerusalem to the industrial area there is no checkpoint. So, from the airport to the Jordan valley, to Jerusalem, to Israel, they have no problem. But maybe for the West Bank... we have a problem. Every few centimeters we have a checkpoint. If you finish one checkpoint, there is another checkpoint. This is the problem in the West Bank.”

## **What is the Fate of Jerusalem Airport—Can it Still be Used?**

There is also the fate of Jerusalem Airport to consider.

Regular flights operated out of Qalandia Airport, as it was popularly known, under British control in 1936, and continued under Jordanian administration and then under Israeli rule. The flights stopped because of the second Intifada.

According to a report in Haaretz in July 2001, “The Airport Authority and the Defense Ministry recently signed an agreement on the army’s use of the Atarot [Qalandia] airport in Jerusalem. The Israeli Defense Forces effectively took over the airport for

its own use after it was shut down for civilian air traffic shortly after the start of the Intifada last October, and it is serving as a forward post against Palestinian forces in the area.”

IDF spokesperson Peter Lerner said in September that the Jerusalem airport is “not operational”, but said he did not know more about whether or not the military was using the Airport.

Khalil Toufakji of the Arab Studies Society, said that in his view “nothing will happen – I hope – because in this area, according to Taba, and according to the Israeli-Palestinian agreement which was approved, it’s forbidden to build any house around the runway.”

Peter Milic is a former producer for Israel Television who gained aviation experience partly through several humanitarian operations, including an airlift of emergency assistance to Mozambique, that he ran with funding he raised from the Israeli public. In an interview in September, he said that he thought that any settlement could be built “only on the west side. I mean, the east side has Qalandia, it’s the refugee camp. On the south of the airport, you have Atarot industrial zone, and in the north you can’t do any settlement, because I think it almost reaches Ramallah.”

In addition, Milic said, there was an idea he discussed over a decade ago with the late Faisal Husseini, which involved opening a gate on the north side of Jerusalem airport, to provide access for Palestinians coming in from Ramallah, while Israeli passengers could transit through the Atarot industrial zone to the south. “The Palestinians had a dream, or you know, a thought, that they could split the airport with the Israelis. That means that they would have access to the airport from Ramallah, and the Israelis would have access from the industrial zone of Atarot. That means they would have two main gates to Atarot, [but] there was only one runway, so they, both sides would use the runway. The terminal could have been split, into two, and that’s because of security. They could have done it in such a way that the ground floor, which was big, by the way, could serve passengers leaving on a Palestinian flight, and then passengers would leave on an Israeli flight. Now, don’t forget that the Palestinians were thinking about having what they call a Palestinian national carrier, at that time, and they even had people designated to work in it, and run it.”

The prerequisite, Milic said, was the creation of a Palestinian civil Aviation authority – which has since been done – which would also have to be recognized by other countries and accepted by the United Nations.

Building a settlement to the north would cut off Palestinian access to the airport, Milic said, while building a settlement to the west would, he said, “kill the runway... Potentially, there’s an airport, the runway works. Why would they put settlements

there? I mean, it doesn't make sense, but of course nothing makes sense here. But I don't think they will do this. The other thing is, if they plan one day to use the airport, how will they put settlements there, because the runway would touch the buildings or the houses of the settlement. It doesn't make any sense, unless you want to shut completely the airport, which I don't think anybody wants to do."

The type of planes that could land at Jerusalem airport, Milic said, could include "a Boeing 757, that's the biggest. There are stories that a Boeing 767 landed one day, but I'm not sure ... But a Boeing 757 could barely make it –The other thing is that Atarot is very close to populated areas, to the Qalandia refugee camp, it's not far from Ramallah. It's not easy to operate a full-scale airport there. Even if the runway is very strange, and there's a big hole [where the runway dips down] in the middle, you land and then you go down and up ... But, it functions."

Milic said that in his discussions, with Faisal Husseini, the Palestinians did not make specific demands over Jerusalem Airport. "They didn't demand to control neither the traffic control, nor the security, nor the tower. Everything would be controlled by the Israelis. The only thing would be there that the planes would be Palestinian and the passengers would be Palestinians, and they would fly to certain places that would be a hub, and from there on, the Palestinians would go wherever they want to go. Because today, Palestinians, if they haven't got a special permit, can't take off from Ben Gurion airport, they have to go either to Amman, or to El Arish, or to Cairo, wherever ... they cannot take off from Ben Gurion airport. I'm talking about passengers, Palestinian passengers, unless they have a special authority to go through, or permit. Atarot was different. It could work."

Milic's claim that the Palestinians did not make specific demands for 'air traffic control' at Qalandia, may be a specific reference to his talks with Husseini. It is well known however that the Palestinian position in the Arab-Israeli negotiations (in Washington, Camp David, and in Taba) that Israeli withdrawal would be from all East Jerusalem areas, including Qalandia airport, which would then be restored to its earlier operative status.

Khalil Toufaji added, "I remember that before 1967, I was about 16 or 17 – and I know that the Jordanians used a jet airplane at the Jerusalem airport. But nowadays there are airbuses, something jumbo – and for those types of planes, the runway would have to be expanded, made longer. At the same time, you need a building, for an international airport, and there is no place. But for a small or interior or regional airport, it's ok. For an international airport, you need a bigger place."

This is still possible, he said, given enough money: "it's possible to build. I remember that before 1967, the Jordanians started to expand the runway, but [now] because of The Wall, everything is frozen. To the east, there are quarries, with very big excavated

holes. If you want to go to the west, I think you have a problem with Israel, because the airplanes would enter Israeli airspace, and you need to coordinate with Israel. But in this time it is not impossible, if you want to start it, and if there is trust between the two peoples, and if there is a good agreement, maybe we can coordinate with Israel ... I remember when I was in Taba, in 2001, we negotiated about the airport, and some researchers wanted to start to build the airport, a new one. One of them was a project to expand the airport, which today is closed. Some of them want to build another airport in Jericho. Some of them have a project in Jenin. ... [But currently] most of the research is only for the Jerusalem airport.”

*Marian Houk is a journalist currently based in Jerusalem.*