

Barkat's Disengagement Plan

Yudith Oppenheimer

The mayor of Jerusalem gets up one fine morning and decides that 70,000 residents – native Jerusalemites – shall no longer be part of the city. Does the mayor have the authority to make such a decision? No. But Jerusalem is unlike any other city. And why is it that Nir Barkat is fed up with almost one tenth of the residents of his city? Have they stopped paying taxes? Have they undermined the city's institutions or its leadership? They have done nothing of the sort.

Barkat's declaration to remove 70,000 residents from municipal jurisdiction applies to the residents of eight neighborhoods in East Jerusalem, in the areas of Qalandia in the north and the Shu'fat refugee camp in the northeast, all within the jurisdiction Israel declared in 1967 when it annexed them to the "united" city. For nearly forty-five years these neighborhoods have been a recognized part of Jerusalem's urban space. Their residents work in Jerusalem, feel they belong to the city, and receive from it the scant services and resources the city's leaders through the decades have deigned to provide them.

The separation barrier built in the middle of the last decade left these neighborhoods in no man's land. After the barrier was built municipal services gradually diminished until they almost completely disappeared. At the same time, the absence of municipal authority drew residents of other neighborhoods, who could no longer withstand the impossible obstacles the municipality imposes on construction in Palestinian neighborhoods inside the barrier. It would seem to be a paradise of uncontrolled building; in fact, it is a state of urban chaos in which residents yearn for the presence of the authorities, without which their lives have descended into anarchy and their infrastructures have collapsed.

Since the separation barrier was built, the residents have lived in constant fear that Israel will carry out its hidden intention of completely disconnecting these neighborhoods from the city and turning them into abandoned enclaves. That fear turns out not to have been unfounded.

The Jerusalem neighborhoods outside the separation barrier are not an isolated case. To the contrary, they are a faithful reflection of Israel's policy in all of East Jerusalem. Israel annexed East Jerusalem and applied Israeli law to it, granting its population the status of permanent residents of Israel while continuing to view them as conditional subjects. Even the rights granted to Palestinian residents by law are distributed sparingly and partially. Now the anomaly of the "united" city has been fully exposed. Who could imagine the mayors of Tel Aviv or Haifa suddenly disengaging from parts of their cities? In what other city do residents wake up in the morning and discover they are no longer part of the city where they were born, raised, work and live? A neighborhood is not an entity unto itself; it is an organic part of the city and its residents derive their identity and lifestyle from the urban and political space in which they live. The concept of residency status was always problematic because it denied the civil status and political rights of the Palestinians in Jerusalem; the discriminatory application of the policy rendered meaningless whatever rights were granted. Barkat's statement reveals the aspiration of that policy: imposing Israeli sovereignty on East Jerusalem while voiding it of its residents.

The disengagement from the neighborhoods outside of the separation barrier will not produce the results Barkat hopes for. To the contrary, it will lead to a new wave of immigration to the city, just as residents who lived outside of the municipal area of Jerusalem returned to it in droves when the barrier was first built. If this happens, it is doubtful Barkat would be prepared to absorb the tens of thousands of residents who will return to the broken and neglected infrastructures that await them in Palestinian neighborhoods within the barrier. Instead of turning his back on them, Barkat should work to improve the living conditions of all the residents of the city, both inside and outside the barrier.

The repeated attempts to unilaterally redraw the boundaries of Jerusalem indicate that the concept of the united city was, at best, provisional and limited. These attempts will not succeed and will only increase the tension and suffering of the city's residents. Jerusalem is the city of two peoples and no demographic or territorial acrobatics can change that basic fact and obviate the need for an agreed political settlement in Jerusalem.

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