

# A “Silicon” Disaster Threatening Wadi al-Jawz

Abd al-Raouf al-Arnaout

## Abstract

The Israeli municipality in Jerusalem plans to turn the only small industrial zone in East Jerusalem into a “high-tech zone,” causing the removal of dozens of small shops and auto repair garages that were established before the 1967 occupation. The author reports on the impact of the plans on Palestinians in Wadi al-Jawz, who fear imminent eviction from their shops, and loss of the only source of their livelihood. They disclaim the intentions of the Israeli municipality to create a “Wadi Silicon,” modeled on Silicon Valley in the United States, as a pretext. Palestinian officials and experts argue that the project comes in the context of Israeli plans to erase the Palestinian Arab face of Jerusalem.

## Keywords

Jerusalem; East Jerusalem; Palestinians; Israeli occupation; Silicon; Wadi al-Jawz.

Jerusalemites became deeply concerned in late 2020 about the Israeli Jerusalem municipality’s approval of a master plan for the occupied neighborhood of Wadi al-Jawz,<sup>1</sup> which they warn will have catastrophic consequences for the occupied city.

The Israeli municipality’s announcement of an approved “Silicon Wadi” plan in Wadi al-Jawz, which apparently includes other neighborhoods as well, raises concerns among Palestinians in Jerusalem and elsewhere for several reasons: The project is to be built on Palestinian-owned land, in a sensitive landscape, and in an area

adjacent to the Old City. The plan allows for the construction of large sixteen-story buildings, which means obliterating the Arab face of the city, and altering its Arab, Islamic, and Christian character. In addition to threatening the city's deep-rooted architectural heritage, the plan raises alarm among business owners in Wadi al-Jawz. The popular neighborhood is the only industrial area in East Jerusalem, which means that hundreds of families will lose their livelihoods and their private property that has been passed on from one generation to another over hundreds of years.

The master plan designates the area as an "advanced high-tech zone" that extends over 250,000 square meters. The municipality labeled the project "Silicon Wadi" in an attempt to cover up its actual intentions, and instead promote it as a development project similar to Silicon Valley in the United States.

Palestinians in the city, however, agree that the master plan ultimately aligns with the Israeli plan to transform the historical landmarks and Israelize the city's landscape – beginning with al-Musrara neighborhood, passing through the streets of Sultan Sulayman, Salah al-Din, and al-Zahra neighborhoods, and ending with the industrial area in Wadi al-Jawz. Some even describe it as a settlement project, asking: "If the project is so profitable, why are they not implementing it in West Jerusalem? Did the Israeli municipality suddenly become concerned about the welfare of Palestinians in East Jerusalem?"

## **What Does the Municipality Say?**

On 1 November 2020, the Israeli municipality released a statement titled: "Approval of the Silicon Wadi Masterplan," that was, contrary to the usual procedure, released solely in Hebrew. According to the statement,

The local planning and construction committee approved last week the masterplan for Wadi al-Jawz, which was developed by the municipality of Jerusalem through the Jerusalem Development Authority and is co-funded by the Ministry of Jerusalem and Heritage .... The plan aims to enable local developers and landowners in the area to develop the area to benefit residents of East Jerusalem .... The project aims to turn Wadi al-Jawz Street itself into an advanced high-employment center, "Silicon Wadi," a hub for trade and development. Building rights will be given for an area of 200,000 square meters that will be used for trade and employment. The municipality noted that it is seeking to "designate the area as an advanced high-tech center .... For that purpose the car repair shops will be moved to employment areas in al-'Isawiyya and Umm Tuba according to recent approvals .... Given the central accessible location, the plan allows for building 900 hotel rooms .... Jerusalem Development Authority actually started working on a detailed plan along Wadi al-Jawz Street to speed up the process, and facilitate the issuance of permits to complete the construction of high-tech offices and hotels as fast as possible.

The Israeli municipality noted in the same statement that the plan goes beyond Wadi al-Jawz:

The masterplan includes a Kidron park, a huge first-class park east of the city. The actual development of the area will start within three months and is expected to take up to two years . . . ‘Uthman Ibn Affan Street north of the eastern neighborhood connects it to Road No. 1 to the west. The plan suggests that the street will turn into a lively axis, a kind of “Train Track Park” for the eastern part of the city. In order to do this, the program recommends building two areas for urban renewal. The plan suggests building alternative residential buildings that accommodate trade, employment, and touristic purposes, while evacuating part of the area for public use – a pedestrian area along Kidron river, etc. . . . The plan also provides new roads that would relieve traffic congestion and connect to nearby main roads. Furthermore, the master transportation plan explores the possibility of laying out light rail transport in the area . . . most of the plan is located in a sensitive natural landscape adjacent to the Old City, and hence the height of housing units will be limited to four floors, but the employment centers can go higher, and new levels can be added gradually up to sixteen floors.

## **Private Property, Waqf-administered Lands, and No Expropriation Orders**

Khalil al-Tufakji, head of the Maps Department at the Arab Studies Society, interviewed for *al-Ayyam*,<sup>2</sup> cast doubts about the project:

The land on which they announced the masterplan is Palestinian-owned land, but it was not announced that this land will be expropriated . . . . We’ve been hearing about this project for years, but the truth is that the municipality has no plans for this project although they are talking about approving the masterplan . . . . What the municipality is talking about is a huge project that extends from Musrara through the streets of Sultan Sulayman, Salah al-Din, and al-Zahra to the industrial area in Wadi al-Jawz.

An expert on the area, who prefers to be anonymous, agrees with al-Tufakji and said in an interview with *al-Ayyam*: “Turning the masterplan into an actual project on the ground will take many years. If the project was so profitable, why they are not implementing it in West Jerusalem? Are they really invested in the welfare of East Jerusalem’s Palestinians?”<sup>3</sup>

In his interview with *al-Ayyam*, Kamal Obaydat, head of the Chamber of Commerce in Jerusalem, called the plan a “shady project”:



A street view in Wadi al-Jawz, 2020.

The Chamber of Commerce in East Jerusalem has been closed by orders from the Israeli occupation since 2001, which limits its ability to act. We are trying constantly to follow up with owners of lands, shops and workshops in the area. We fear that the Israeli municipality will evict the owners of the shops and workshops in the area, forcing them to lose their livelihoods, and forcibly remove them from the area where they have worked for decades. This project is part of a bigger plan to change the face of East Jerusalem. The size of the project and the way it is being organized is suspicious.

The Israeli municipality sent eviction notices to forty business owners in June 2020, giving them until the end of the year to evacuate. This number represents an estimated one third of the business owners in the industrial area. The municipality informed business owners and merchants that they will be moved to two areas in Umm Tuba and al-'Isawiyya. But what the Israeli municipality calls "employment centers" in these neighborhoods are nothing but ink on paper, and the residents are not agreeing to the establishment of Israeli projects on their lands. The Wadi al-Jawz land on which the industrial area now stands is owned by Palestinian families, and most of

them are family waqf. Most of the business owners in the area are tenants.

Yunis Dwayk, a business owner in the industrial area, believes that this project involves the Judaization of the area, ongoing for more than forty years, and that the municipality is trying to implement it despite opposition from business owners who have rejected the alternatives offered by the municipality.

Dwayk told *al-Ayyam*: “Six or seven months ago dozens of business owners received eviction notices from the municipality ordering them to evict by the end of the year. The notices were sent to a third of the business owners in the area. We believe that the municipality wants to evacuate business owners in three phases to avoid provoking the public and international opinion.”

Dwayk, who has a small shop to fix car suspensions, in operation since 1953, recalled: “The idea was proposed years ago, and the municipality offered at first to move the industrial area to [settlements] ‘Atarot’ and then to ‘Mishor Adumim’ and now they are talking about Umm Tuba and al-‘Isawiyya.” He added: “Everyone knows that this is the only industrial area in the city. It has been here since before the Israeli occupation and people are used to coming here to fix their cars. Business owners have gone through very hard times, beginning with the Israeli siege on the city in 1993 and ending with the pandemic-related restrictions this year. Now they fear removal, and they are wondering, what will come next?”

Dwayk notes that most of the tenants have been in the area for decades; they have old rent-controlled leases and they are wondering what their fate will be if they are evicted.

Al-Khatib and many others are wondering if there is any truth to what the Israeli deputy mayor, Fleur Hassan-Nahoum, said about discussing the project with Emirati businessmen during her visit to the United Arab Emirates last month. The Israeli official did not confirm that Emirati businessmen agreed to invest in this project, and the UAE from its side did not comment on her statement.

Mohammad Abu Salb, owner of a metal workshop in the industrial area, believes that with this plan the Israeli municipality will be throwing dozens of business owners, hundreds of workers, and thousands of families to the unknown. Abu Salb said: “The municipality posted advertisements a few months ago about the ‘Silicon Wadi,’ and naturally all merchants and business owners were taken by surprise, as they have been hearing about plans for this area for years. But nobody knows what is the nature of the project. Will it be an industrial area or a trade complex? But to our surprise, what is being planned does not have anything to do with an industrial area and we, as business owners, will be kicked out of here.” He added: “We still do not know what will happen or what our fate will be as business owners. Some of us went to the municipality to inquire, but they refused to give any details, although they confirmed that there is a masterplan for the area. We don’t know what will happen to our workshops and livelihoods, and if we were to be moved elsewhere, then where?”

Abu Salb’s grandfather opened the metal shop almost fifty years ago: “Afterwards my father took over and now I am running the shop. For over fifty years, we have been building relationships with customers and now they want us to leave, although

moving customers to a new area is very difficult. Everyone in the city and surrounding neighborhoods goes to the industrial area to fix their cars, it would be very difficult to direct them elsewhere, especially if the new location is farther away.”

## **A Theoretical Project and Pressure**

Lawyer Muhannad Jabara, an expert in zoning and construction in Jerusalem, said in an interview with *al-Ayyam*, “The plan announced by the Israeli municipality in Jerusalem for the industrial area in Wadi al-Jawz, known as ‘Silicon Wadi,’ is a general plan that reflects the municipality’s vision for the future use of the area, and does not constitute a detailed plan that can be presented to the district committee in the Israeli Ministry of Interior.” He did not dismiss the idea that the municipality will pressure dozens of business owners and merchants at the end of the year and the beginning of next year to evacuate from Wadi al-Jawz.

Jabara continued: “In the middle of 2020 the municipality’s legal advisor issued eviction notices to some merchants and business owners in the industrial area informing them that the municipality is in the process of approving a project in the area, and that their presence is inconsistent with the area’s designation since it is not designated as an area for car repair shops, and hence they have to evacuate by the end of the year.”

Jabara explained that the municipality is seeking to propose a general project along these lines to the district committee in the Ministry of Interior to designate the area for commercial, hospitality, and high-tech use under the name “Silicon Valley.” Jabara said that the district committee considered the project to be a theoretical one, and impractical since the land is privately owned by Palestinians and is heavily populated by car repair shops and workshops, and that the landowners did not apply for any new projects in the area. He said that, in light of that, the district committee gave the municipality a chance to prove that this project is practical and not theoretical. He summed up: “Sending eviction notices to the merchants and business owners in the industrial area under the pretense that their existence is illegal and demanding they evacuate aims to convince the district committee that the project is practical and to encourage land-owners to apply for projects that correspond with the municipality’s plan to turn it into what it calls ‘Silicon Wadi’.”

Ziyad al-Hammuri, Director of the Jerusalem Center for Social and Economic Rights, finds that the project is part of a bigger Israeli plan to change the face of Jerusalem. Hammuri stated that the project does not consider the needs of Palestinians in occupied East Jerusalem and is an attempt to change its Arab Islamic and Christian character.

*Abd al-Raouf al-Arnaout, a Palestinian journalist based in East Jerusalem, has been covering issues related to the city since 1992, and since 1995 for al-Ayyam daily newspaper.*



## Endnotes

- 1 See Aseel Jundi, “‘Silicon Wadi’: Israel’s Latest Plans to Impose Control over Jerusalem’s Old City,” *Middle East Eye*, 24 June 2020, online at [www.middleeasteye.net/news/israel-palestine-silicon-wadi-annexation-jerusalem-old-city](http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/israel-palestine-silicon-wadi-annexation-jerusalem-old-city) (accessed 1 March 2021). See Israeli press reports, Tzvi Joffer, “200 East Jerusalem Businesses to Be Demolished for ‘Silicon Wadi,’” *Jerusalem Post*, 2 June 2020, online at [www.jpost.com/middle-east/200-palestinian-industrial-buildings-to-be-destroyed-in-east-jerusalem-629926](http://www.jpost.com/middle-east/200-palestinian-industrial-buildings-to-be-destroyed-in-east-jerusalem-629926) (accessed 1 March 2021); and Tzvi Joffer, “‘Silicon Wadi’ hi-tech park approved in east Jerusalem,” *Jerusalem Post*, 2 November 2020, online at [www.jpost.com/israel-news/silicon-wadi-hi-tech-park-approved-in-east-jerusalem-647655](http://www.jpost.com/israel-news/silicon-wadi-hi-tech-park-approved-in-east-jerusalem-647655) (accessed 1 March 2021). See also Israeli human rights report, “Recent Israeli Planning for Wadi al-Joz, East Jerusalem: Eastern Business District & Silicon Wadi,” Bimkom, online at [fmep.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/Silicon-Wadi-Wadi-Joz.pdf](http://fmep.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/Silicon-Wadi-Wadi-Joz.pdf) (accessed 1 March 2021).
- 2 Abd al-Raouf al-Arnaout, “Al-Quds: kaarithat ‘al-silikon’ tuhadded mintaqet wad el-jawz,” [The ‘Silicon disaster’ threatens the Wadi al-Jawz region], *al-Ayyam*, 24 November 2020, online at [www.al-ayyam.ps/ar\\_page.php?id=144a1007y340398087Y144a1007](http://www.al-ayyam.ps/ar_page.php?id=144a1007y340398087Y144a1007) (accessed 28 February 2021).
- 3 Al-Arnaout, “Al-Quds.”