

FACTS & FIGURES

Economic and Social Ramifications of the Israeli Zoning Plan for East Jerusalem City Center

Policy Briefing Note

Palestine Economic Policy
Research Institute (MAS)

Editor's Note:

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Introduction

As part of the institutionalized spatial planning designed to cement Jerusalem, in both its eastern and western areas, as the “undivided and united” capital of the State of Israel, Jerusalem District Planning Committee recently proposed a new structural plan for the so-called “city centre” of East Jerusalem – spanning the areas of Bab Al Amoud (Damascus Gate), Salah El Deen, Nablus Road, Zahra Road, up to borders with the Shaik Jarrah and Wadi Al Joz neighborhoods of East Jerusalem. This plan builds on a legacy of Israel’s history of colonial planning policy that aims to divide and control Palestinian communities through implanting Israeli settlements in occupied areas of the City, while also limiting their potential for economic development and social cohesion.

The planning process, like all other Israeli municipal and state measures in East Jerusalem, are unilateral measures which exclude the (approximately 320,000) Palestinian citizens of the city from strategic decisions affecting their daily lives and livelihoods. Needless to say, with 70 years of such planning experience, Israel cloaks its colonial proposals in a “legal”, “professional”, “modernizing” and “culturally sensitive” narrative. Exclusion of Palestinians in this regard takes two forms:

- planning objectives which by definition and design neglect their legitimate social, economic and cultural aspirations and favors those of the Israeli population;
- political, civil and planning processes which treat Palestinian

Jerusalemites as individual “residents” rather than a population with collective, national interests.

This overview of the implications of the “city center” plan focuses on four main channels of impacts on economic and social development: infrastructure and movement, building policy, the cultural heritage and history of the area and the East Jerusalem social fabric, and the status of Jerusalem as the capital of Palestine. The attached socio-economic profile of the concerned areas of the city (prepared by MAS in 2016) provides some additional background information on their particular population and local economic features.

1- Infrastructure: divide and rule

The proposed plan creates a new flow for traffic in the area by establishing a “ring road” that circumvents the Salah El-Deen neighborhood while simultaneously changing some of the main roads in the area to one-way streets and pedestrian zones. While the justification for these changes may be argued for easing traffic flow, it will entail transforming the area so as to no longer serve as the pivotal transport hub for Jerusalemites. The implications for the local community and small commerce can be far-reaching. Historically, Salah El-Deen street has been the main access point to Damascus Gate and the Old City for Palestinians coming from the north and the east. This allowed Salah El-Deen to become a busy hub for business, tourism, professional services and public transport making it one of the most important economic centers in East Jerusalem.

However, the new infrastructure plans artificially disconnect the area from Bab Al Amoud: by rechanneling and choking the flow of nearby vehicular traffic, and monitoring the flow of people through this main entry from the north-east into the Old City. Furthermore, this would increase the position of Bab Al Khalil (Jaffa Gate) as the main entrance to the Old City by redirecting the flow of tourists through the adjacent Israeli Mamilla shopping area.

2- Building and housing: ethnic cleansing

The plan also sets out new building policies that limit the construction of new buildings and additional floors to very few plots of land, including both residential housing and other tourist and commercial constructions, and at most an additional 20-25% of current space. As East Jerusalem faces a major housing crisis, this would not only increase the stress on the housing market and the possibility for developing mixed commercial/residential space (as this area has always been), but it would also severely limit the potential for economic development and limit the function of this area which has a residential, commercial, and touristic nature.

For an area that heavily depends on tourism for income, the lack of potential for growing existing hotels, building new ones, or creating new centers that would attract more tourists is a formula to abort local economic development. It is also important to note that such a planning strategy and the ensuing restrictions are not consistent in authorities’ treatment of east and west Jerusalem, adding a new

layer to the discriminatory policies against the growth and prosperity of Palestinian quarters of Jerusalem, pushing the population to exit the city center and the old city, by making these areas uninhabitable.

3- Erasing culture, society and history

It appears that the Israeli planners did not care to learn more about the historical origins of these Palestinian quarters, which were actually among the areas surrounding the Old City to the north and west that became the natural extensions of the old city population as the Palestinian middle class began to emerge in the early 1900s. However, "Zionist zoning" in Jerusalem has rarely exhibited sensitivity to the significance of Arab or Islamic cultural heritage, as witnessed by:

- the destruction of the ancient Mamilla Islamic cemetery, which was a natural contiguity of the Old City and its walls, and the building on a so-called "Museum of Tolerance" in its place; or,
- the bulldozing in 1967 of the Mughrabi quarter of the Old City and the enforcement of extremely strict and discriminatory zoning pushing the Palestinian residents, especially their offspring, to move outside the city in areas that are now inside the wall.
- Separating the areas of Suwwaneh, Wadi Joz, Al-Tur, and the holy basin are east of the old city and transforming it into a "Biblical Park".

In addition to the new building policies that are to be implemented, the plan also categorizes any building constructed prior to 1967 as a cultural heritage site thus banning any construction other than conservation. While this will likely protect many of the actual cultural and historical sites in the area, it also bans the development of many buildings built prior to 1967 especially during the Jordanian administration, that do not necessarily have any historical, architectural or cultural significance. On the other hand, the (continuing) Jordanian role since 1948 as custodian of the Islamic Holy Places in Jerusalem, is an important factor shaping the social, political and even architectural fabric of the city today. Hence, there is a need for a planning policy that is more sensitive to, and better preserves the legacy of the era of Jordanian rule, and safeguards the role and interests of Jordanian institutions today in the affairs of the holy city.

It must be emphasized that Israel has generally restricted new construction or by Palestinians in this or other sensitive areas of East Jerusalem, rendering it architecturally reminiscent of the early and mid-20th century (with little renewal since). Overall, the new building policies and the categorization of cultural heritage sites makes the development of the neighborhood virtually impossible. In essence, it is a set of laws and policies that are aimed at maintaining the somewhat dilapidated status quo of the Salah El-Deen area with no room for natural urban growth and development and increasingly less a magnet for people and commerce.

The plan is also lacking an essential aspect of any structural master plan which would take into consideration the natural growth of the area and the needs and economic practices of the population that lives in it. As it currently stands, the

designs show no plan for what to do with the growing population, where to create new housing centers, how to ensure public transport and what to do with displaced persons and businesses (especially in Wadi Al Joz area). This risks inflicting permanent damage to the socio-cultural status and role of this area. Palestinian collective aspirations and the relation of Jerusalemites to the increasingly constrained space left to them by colonial processes, have always been and will continue to be disregarded systematically by Israel.

4- Preventing East Jerusalem as the capital of Palestine and detaching it from the Palestinian national economy

Lastly, it is important to consider how the spatial implications of the plan impact political and legal status of East Jerusalem as the capital of the future State of Palestine. In particular, the plan reconfigures and cuts the Bab al Amoud/Sultan Suleiman area with a ring road (or public transport network) connecting to west Jerusalem and eventually to Israeli colonized areas to the north-east of Silwan and the Holy Basin). In doing so the plan will entail further isolation of the “Old City and its Walls” (a World Heritage site) from its natural adjacent quarters such as this (and similarly, the areas to the east of the Old City currently experiencing intensive Israelization). Alarming, it risks a move towards “Disneyfication” of the Old City, turning it to another commercialized site on the Israeli tourism circuit, and intensification of the ongoing erasure of its rich Islamic and Christian Arab/Palestinian cultural heritage.

On the other hand, the increasing isolation and “enclavisation” of the once wholly Arab populated, owned and administered East Jerusalem has grave consequences for its pivotal role in the Palestinian national economy, contributing 12% of its GDP thirty years ago, dropping lately to 7%. The arteries of Palestinian trade and movement of people that once passed north and south, east and west through Jerusalem are today cut. Long-entrenched geo-economic dynamics have been distorted to the detriment of the Palestinian population struggling to exist and maintain a distinct identity “within the Wall”, while maintaining historic economic relations with the rest of the West Bank in particular.

Notwithstanding recent US recognition of Israel’s illegal sovereignty over both East and West Jerusalem further complicating the issue, this need not preclude (and for Palestinians of course in no way precludes) planning for East Jerusalem as the capital city of Palestine. Such a plan that has not included any of the local Palestinian communities and/or authorities in its purpose or design is a continuation of Israel’s policies in East Jerusalem that aim to not only divide and control the Palestinian communities but to also undermine East Jerusalem as the future capital of Palestine.

5- Policy Messages

- For the socio-economic, cultural and political reasons outlined above, this plan should be vigorously challenged as an unacceptable game-changer as regards the still unresolved status of Jerusalem, by international par-

ties and in international forums concerned with the situation and human rights of the Palestinian people living there under prolonged Israeli occupation, to safeguard the unity of the occupied Palestinian territory.

- This could take the form both of individual representations and expressions of concern about the Plan by individual countries to the Israeli authorities, as well as pursuing the issue in the concerned United Nations Humans Rights Council (including Special Rapporteurs) and General Assembly levels, on the basis of it constituting a violation of international laws that jeopardizes the possibility to reach to internationally legitimate political solution.
- Furthermore, Palestinian stakeholders on the ground, both those challenging the plan and those impacted by it, should be supported through donor programs for East Jerusalem, and refer to the “Jerusalem Development Cluster Plan” adopted by the Palestinian government as the guiding framework for the programs supporting the Jerusalem economy and community.
- Indeed, the separate and special status of the “City of Jerusalem” as envisaged in international legitimacy since the 1947 Partition Resolution designated Jerusalem as “Corpus Separatum”, should serve as a beacon for future planning for the city and for international support for its besieged Palestinian population.
- Additionally, the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan is distinctly responsible and related given its role not only in protecting the holy city’s sites and public endowments (Awqaf properties), but also because of its historical economic and social relationship with East Jerusalem.