An Israeli Vision for the Future of Jerusalem

Documents on the Jerusalem Master Plan of 2020

For years, Israeli authorities have been quietly fitting together the pieces of a metropolitan Jerusalem, designed with expansive borders and then planned with immense new neighborhoods for new Jewish residents. These neighborhoods ring the Old City and essentially swallow Palestinian neighborhoods relegated to back roads and culs-de-sacs.

Recently, two major pieces of the Greater Jerusalem design entered the news. First, plans to expand the city’s boundaries to the west into wooded hills came up for a vote in the city council (on which Palestinians are not represented). After a public campaign by Israeli environmental groups, the planning scheme was canceled by Mayor Uri Lupolianski in late November.

The plan, while seemingly unconnected to Palestinian development in the city, is in fact integral to Israeli Jewish visions of Jerusalem. Right wing Construction and Housing Minister Isaac Herzog opposes the Safdie scheme and its destruction of the environment—but says that is why more
construction is needed on Har Homa, the major Jewish settlement (also once a wooded hill) that is ending possibilities for Palestinian development in the region between East Jerusalem and Bethlehem, south of the city.

Indeed, the Jerusalem Post suggested that the mayor’s surprise decision on western expansion will come at great cost for Palestinians. One of the conditions for annulling the planning scheme was that environmental groups support him in studying reserve areas for building in the city, and aid him in their development.

Moshe Safdie also designed the plans for the “City of David,” a small but key settlement in the Palestinian area of Silwan, which is currently being implemented hand-in-hand with the settler group El’ad. The following two documents, which we reprint here, appeared recently in Maariv and in a Peace Now bulletin, describe the impact of these recent planning programs. (JQ)

Committing a Wrong in the Name of Demographics

Efrat Cohen, an architect with the organization Bimkom, Planners for Planning Rights published in Maariv on 12 November, 2006, translated by Jerusalem Quarterly

The plan to expand Jerusalem westward (commonly known as the “Safdie Plan”), which proposes building more than 15,000 housing units to the west of Jerusalem, while annexing tens of thousands of dunams of land, recently made its way into the public agenda mainly as a result of the large-scale opposition it elicited.

The promoters of the plan and its creators adopted the vision of growing population and fear of the demographic balance as central planning principles. Other considerations such as quality of life in the city, the needs and goals for its development, that usually characterize professionalism of planners and their work, seem to have disappeared, and the demographic threat is driving the entire vision.

Western expanded Jerusalem is the fiction of the great Jewish city. The rise in the Jewish and Palestinian population living in Jerusalem and its environs in 2020 will not change with the plotting of a city line in so-called Jerusalem snaking between East and West Jerusalem. In addition, the plan to wide Jerusalem westwards will have negative effects on today’s city. The proposed city line will detract from the unity of the metropolis, actually creating three cities: in the west, there will be a wealthy Jewish suburb, in the center a crowded and impoverished ultra-orthodox city, and in the east an even more poor and more crowded Arab city.

The presentation of the demographic threat in the writing of the basic plan is not new in Jerusalem planning discussions. Also in the program of Jerusalem 2000, which established a municipal plan for the city’s environs (also claiming professionalism and
seriousness) made use of the prospect of growing population and the menacing sword of the Arab demographic threat in the city (greater than Jewish [growth]), lagging official involvement in planning for the betterment of the Jewish population, and the need to discriminate against the population of the Arab east of the city.

This discriminatory plan fails to meet the changing needs of the Arab population. In the field of housing, for example, the plans allows for added isolation of this population only by crowding the existing neighborhoods, without allotting land for new housing, and allowing high construction. Restrictions on building and the protection, allegedly, of the ‘village character’ of the Arab neighborhoods, accelerate inequalities in the apportioning of rights to build between Jewish and Arab neighborhoods, which is for example restricted in most Arab neighborhoods to the building of structures of four stories and in the nearby adjacent Jewish neighborhoods to six or more stories (examples are Jabal Mukabber and East Talpiot, Sur Baher and Har Homa).

The essence of Jerusalem as a city cannot be set by appeasing the majority that is given to supporting the Safadzi plan, mostly because it restricts possibilities for the city to incorporate all of the population groups living in the area, for allowing them expansion of life, equal possibilities and advancement. A city of this nature should have educational institutions that allow every resident to study and develop, support diverse places of commerce that allow the residents to earn a living and live respectably, and provide wide and diverse services.

It would be good for the municipality of Jerusalem to invest maximum efforts in real attempts to support the populations that live there today and form a quality city that comprises a meaningful center connected also to a strong population. Real and fair planning is a vital tool for reaching this target.

The Battle for Jerusalem’s Old City and Holy Basin

The following piece, released by Peace Now, appear in the format of Q and A, followed by comments from Israeli land expert Danny Seidman.

In recent months, Israel has begun allowing the most extremist Jewish settlers to take control of some of the most highly contested areas of Jerusalem. In some specific cases, government authorities are clearly abetting the settlers’ efforts.

Perhaps the most egregious example of this is the case of the large national park that surrounds the Old City on its south and east. Israel recently handed de facto control of this national park—and the many religious and historic sites it contains—to the extremist settler organization El’ad (which for years has led efforts to establish a Jewish presence in the neighborhood of Silwan, also known as the City of David.). As reported recently in Ha’aretz newspaper, visitors to the sites buy admission tickets
from El’ad employees, admission fees go into El’ad coffers, and tour guides and staff at the site preach El Ad’s own brand of extremist, exclusionist history. The Jerusalem Municipality website’s page on the City of David refers visitors to a link to the El’ad website; the link no longer works, since El’ad is in the process of launching a new, sophisticated and evidently well-financed site, which thus far lacks any English-language content.

Another national park northeast of the Old City, to be placed under the control of Jewish extremists, is in the planning stages. In addition, in recent months the Jerusalem settlers have once again begun taking over Palestinian properties and intensifying activities in the heart of the Muslim Quarter, in Silwan, and in the areas around and overlooking the Old City (sometimes referred to as its “visual basin” or “the Holy Basin”).

Is this activity new?

No. It is a resurgence of a controversial and blatantly illegal campaign to take over homes and property in Palestinian neighborhoods of East Jerusalem that peaked in the 1980s. As noted in Settlements in Focus, Vol. 1, Issue 4:

“The most significant Israeli government support for such activities took place from the mid-1980s until 1992. During this period there was a covert Israeli government policy of targeting properties in Palestinian neighborhoods and turning them over to settler organizations like El’ad (whose activities focus exclusively on Silwan) and Ateret Cohanim (whose focus is the Old City). As revealed in an Israeli government-commissioned report, the tactics included declaring Palestinian property to be absentee property (i.e., property whose owners were in “enemy” territory at the end of the 1967 War, and whose assets thus reverted, under Israeli law, to the State of Israel) and turning it over to settlers; and using government pressure to convince Palestinian owners to sell to settlers. The primary player orchestrating this policy was Ariel Sharon, who was Minister of Infrastructure during much of the period in question and who in 1987 acquired the lease on an apartment deep inside the Muslim Quarter of the Old City, opening the way for the settler organization Ateret Cohanim to begin aggressively targeting properties in the same area.
“The situation changed in 1992, when then-Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin commissioned the Klugman Committee report—an interdepartmental report on settlement activity in East Jerusalem issued by a committee headed by Haim Klugman, then-Director General of the Ministry of Justice. The report revealed the extensive covert and largely illegal government activities to expedite settlement inside East Jerusalem neighborhoods, bankrolled by the Israeli taxpayers without their knowledge. As a result of the Klugman Report and ensuing scandal, government support for settlement activities in Palestinian neighborhoods of East Jerusalem ceased abruptly in late 1992, and while support resumed several years later when Binyamin Netanyahu took over as Prime Minister, it was at a much diminished level.”

Who is supporting these activities today?

Thus far it is not clear how and with whose support the settlers have re-launched their efforts in East Jerusalem. From the scope of the efforts, the covert manner in which they are being undertaken, and the involvement of properties that are controlled by the state of Israel, it does appear clear that this new campaign involves the consent and active support of some elements within the Israeli government. The Antiquities Authority, the National Parks Authority, the Ministry of Construction, the Ministry of infrastructures, for example, are clearly complicit, in varying degrees. Given former Prime Minister Sharon’s strong past support for and direct involvement in such efforts in the past (as documented in the referenced editions of Settlements in Focus) some observers believe it is not a coincidence that this resurgence of activity arose during his tenure as prime minister. However, until there is greater investigation—and possibly a new commission of inquiry—it is likely that the full extent of the government’s role will remain murky.

Nonetheless, there is clear evidence of active Israeli government support for the settlers. For example, in 2005 the Knesset approved NIS 60 million (around $13.5 million) per year for seven years to fund restoration of the Old City and its environs—funds that some experts argue are tantamount to a slush fund for settler activities in the area. In addition, the decision to give settlers control over various public areas, like the national park discussed earlier, and an historic quarry, discussed below—indicate clear support from at least some elements in the Israeli government (since the decisions and authorization had to have come from within the government).

In addition, past experience suggests that the extremist settler groups are receiving substantial assistance from groups and individuals outside Israel, including from sources in the United States (where such assistance is tax-exempt).

What areas exactly are the settlers targeting?

Settlers are targeting sites in key areas of the Old City and the Holy Basin, including some areas that the settlers have never in the past succeeded in penetrating:
The Old City:

- Muslim Quarter: The Government of Israel is preparing to move ahead with a plan to build a new settlement inside Herod’s Gate, in the heart of the Muslim Quarter (discussed in detail in *Settlements in Focus, Vol. 1, Issue 8*).

- Muslim Quarter: The Government of Israel recently handed over to the Ateret Cohanim settler organization a new project to “restore” a 3,000 year-old quarry running under the Old City, from Herod’s Gate 280 meters toward the Temple Mount/Haram al Sharif. The project is being funded by, among others, the Ministry of Infrastructure, from monies budgeted for the rehabilitation of quarries (funds ostensibly meant to deal with the blight on the land left by modern quarries, not the transformation of a 3,000 year-old underground quarry into a tourist site run by far right-wing settlers).

- Jaffa Gate: In 2005, settlers claimed to have acquired—under questionable circumstances that are now the subject of legal proceedings—two Palestinian hotels located at Jaffa Gate (for details see: *Settlements in Focus Vol. 1, Issue 4*). This is the entrance to the Old City that will under the best of circumstances (like those envisioned by the Geneva Initiative) require the most delicate and complicated arrangements, since it represents a key point of control, with access to all four Quarters of the Old City.

The Holy Basin:

[...]

- North of the Old City: A national park is being planned for this area, and will reportedly be turned over to the settlers to run.

- A-Tur (Mount of Olives): In April 2006 settlers took over—under dubious circumstances—two large buildings in the neighborhood of A-Tur on the Mount of Olives, overlooking the Old City. This is the first time since 1967 the settlers have succeeded in acquiring property in this densely-populated Palestinian neighborhood. Details of this case are included in this *Ha’aretz* article. The circumstances of these takeovers are of highly questionable legality, and the subject of legal proceedings.

- Ras al-Amud (Mount of Olives): The recent commencement of construction of the new Israeli police station in El will soon be turned over to the settlers. Reportedly the settlers are funding the construction of the new police station in order to facilitate the handover of the property in Ras al-Amud, where the settlers plan to construct a large new settlement complex. (For more details see the *Haaretz* article)
• Kidmat Zion (Abu Dis): There is a government-sponsored plan, approved by the Jerusalem Municipality, for the construction of several hundred housing units in this area, located in the heart of the Palestinian neighborhood of Abu-Dis—an area isolated from any other Israeli presence. Two new houses (one built illegally) have already been turned over to settlers.

• Silwan (south of the Old City): In March 2006 settlers took over a Palestinian home in Silwan. Earlier attempts to evict the family living in this home in the late 1990s were abandoned after they drew critical media coverage. The media at that time reported in detail on the history of the family living in the home—a family that had been celebrated for intervening during Arab riots in 1929 to save Jewish lives.

• Silwan (south of the Old City): As mentioned earlier, the Government of Israel has handed control of the major elements in the national park adjacent to the Old City to the settlers.

• Abu Tor (south of the Old City): Settlers recently took over a Palestinian property in this neighborhood. The site they took over was being used to serve the mentally disabled.

From these activities, what can we infer about the settlers’ goals?

The patterns of settlement activity in Jerusalem reveal three “rings” of settlements; two of these reflect religious/messianic ideology, and the other reflects a political/strategic plan for the city. Clearly, there is a “thermal map” of Jerusalem—not all areas resonate equally for the settlers (and other Israelis). The settlers concentrate their energies on those areas that resonate the most strongly.

Ring 1—the Old City: Plotting the settlement activities inside and immediately around the Old City, it appears clear that the settlers are focusing their activities on a band of settlements extending from Herod’s Gate, through the Old City, to Silwan. By establishing a presence in these areas, the settlers appear to want to “ring” the Temple Mount (where messianic settlers aspire to rebuild the Jewish temple) and cut it off from the Palestinian population.

Ring 2—the Holy Basin: Plotting the settlement activities in the areas beyond the Old City but still within Jerusalem’s municipal borders, the settlements clearly delineate the larger area of greatest importance to religious and messianic Jews—the Old City and its visual basin (i.e., the surrounding areas and those areas looking out onto the Old City from the Mount of Olives). These are the areas which resonate with Jewish history (and also with Christian and Muslim traditions).

Ring 3—Greater Jerusalem: Plotting settlement activities further from the Old City, on the periphery of the municipal borders, reveals a third ring of settlements—one which defines the shape and scope of former Prime Minister Sharon’s concept of Greater Jerusalem.
Jerusalem—consistent with his long-held view that blocking geographic contiguity between the West Bank and East Jerusalem is necessary to ensure that there is no political contiguity between the two (for more details about settlements in Greater Jerusalem, please see Settlements in Focus, Vol. 2, Issue 7). In the past there has generally been a clear distinction between these largely government-planned and -supported settlement activities throughout East Jerusalem and on its periphery, and the activities of the messianic settlers in and around the Old City. However, these two parallel lines of settlement appear now to be converging, with the increased (or renewed) government support for the activities of the extremist settlers in and around the Old City (discussed above), and with the extremist settlers becoming active in the drive for the large settlements in other areas as well, in particular with respect to new massive governmental settlements planned on Jerusalem’s southern flank.

**Given the Hamas victory and the unlikelihood of any peace agreement in the near future, why should Israel worry about settler activities in the Old City and Holy Basin?**
There is a very delicate balance in the densely populated Old City and Holy Basin. This geographically tiny area is home to Muslims, Christians, and Jews, and within it are located countless religious and historical sites of deep significance to Jews, Christians, and Muslims (see map).

Most observers would agree that past negotiations over Jerusalem were a failure; some Jerusalem experts (like Ir Amim’s Daniel Seidemann) argue that they failed because the negotiators treated this area like regular “real estate”—measurable in square meters, and divisible horizontally, vertically, or on an angle. As Mr. Seidemann recently told audiences in Washington, DC:

“Negotiations failed precisely because this not regular real estate and it resists being treated as such. It is sacred space—an arena of sacred narratives, wherein reside two overlapping and conflicting national narratives, and three overlapping and conflicting religious narratives.”

Mr. Seidemann went on to explain the dangers of disrupting the peaceful coexistence of these narratives:

“The conflict is being reduced to its volcanic core—the Old City and the surrounding areas—at precisely the same time that Jerusalem is being hermetically sealed along its borders by settlements and the security barrier. A time when the only Muslim men who can come to pray at Islam’s third holiest site, the al-Aqsa Mosque, are Israeli-Arabs and Palestinian men over the age of 45. It is happening precisely when Hamas and its own deadly brand of fundamentalism is ascendant, and when there is a deepening rift between Islam and the West. It is happening at a time when Christian pilgrims cannot travel between the physical embodiments of the two existential poles of Christianity—Nativity, at the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, to Crucifixion, at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem - without first standing in line and being searched by Israeli soldiers. It is happening at a time when extremist evangelical Christians in the United States are supporting and bankrolling radical settlers in Jerusalem, in the hopes of hastening the onset of the Apocalypse.

“And most troublingly, it is happening at a time when the government of Israel has decided to allow, and even abet, the efforts of the most extremist, messianic Israelis to take physical control of this sacred space. These are Israelis who want to transform the situation from one in which mutually incompatible narratives coexist peacefully, if uneasily, in the same space, to one where a single narrative—the Jewish one—establishes physical dominance over the area, to the exclusion of the other narratives. These activities of these Israelis are the seed that could transform the Israeli-Palestinian conflict from a nasty but manageable and ultimately soluble territorial conflict into a nasty, zero-sum religious conflict with the potential to spill over into the region and around the world.”
Isn’t this a little overdramatic?

Looking back through history, it should be recalled that most of the major periods of violence in Jerusalem in the past century were detonated by events in the Old City. These included the 1929 Palestinian riots, caused by a dispute over prayer arrangements at the Western Wall; the 1969 riots, after an Australian tourist set fire to the al-Aqsa Mosque; the violence on the Temple Mount in 1990, after messianic settlers laid a “cornerstone” for the Temple; the riots in 1996 following the opening of the Hasmonean tunnel; and the riots in 2000, following Sharon’s visit to the Temple Mount.

In the words of Mr. Seidemann:

“Jerusalem has the reputation of being nitroglycerin—undeservedly. It is not every random bump in the road that sets it off. Jerusalem is more like an atomic device—it needs critical mass and a detonator. Current developments are building that critical mass, and the settlers seem intent on providing the detonator.”