

Civic War Zone

The Jerusalem mayor, Ehud Olmert, at Har Homa



Jerusalem in the 1967 war was gradually expropriated by the Israeli government. Most of this was privately owned by Arabs. By the end of 1995, almost 40,000 residential units were built on these lands for Jews, but not one for Palestinians. "The strategy is to ease Palestinians out of Jerusalem," says Eitan Felner of B'Tselem. "This is done by building extensive Jewish neighbourhoods, expropriating Arab lands and choking development for Palestinians so that they are forced to live in inhuman conditions or move out of the city."

Israel Kimhi, a city planner at the Jerusalem Centre of Israel Studies, agrees there has been discrimination

A new Jewish colony in East Jerusalem angers Palestinians

THE talks between Israel and the Palestinians are hindered by a new deadlock, this time triggered by Israel's proposed housing programme for Jews in 460 acres of land atop a rolling, pastoral hill in Arab East Jerusalem. The hill forms part of a scenic, biblical landscape that Israelis call Har Homa. To Palestinians, it is Jabal Abu Ghunaim—a link between Jerusalem and the West Bank town of Bethlehem to the south.

Chief Palestinian negotiator Abu Mazen has resigned in protest, and although President Yasser Arafat has managed to keep the lid on violence so far, Palestinians are enraged. "It is a declaration of war against the Palestinian people," warned Faisal Hussein, the Palestinian Authority's representative in Jerusalem.

For his part, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu insists he is not violating the Oslo accords. True, the accords do not prevent Israel from building in Jerusalem since the fate of the city is to be discussed only in the final negotiations. But Israel's decision violates both international law and the 'spirit' of the accords by unilaterally attempting to change the status quo.

Arab countries are therefore pressing for an emergency meeting of the 185-nation UN General Assembly, after the US vetoed an otherwise unanimous resolution of the 15-member Security Council calling on Israel to reverse its decision. Nevertheless, US

President Bill Clinton is reported to have stressed that Israel should not interpret this veto as an approval of its decision.

Palestinians have seen Jewish settlements mushroom all around them after Israel occupied East Jerusalem in the 1967 Six Day War. But the prospect of a Jewish neighbourhood in Jabal Abu Ghunaim is particularly threatening. It is the last open tract of land that connects Jerusalem to the Palestinian West Bank. By building here, Israel will be inserting the final link of a 'ring' of massive Jewish settlements around Jerusalem, pre-empting any future Palestinian effort to claim East Jerusalem as part of the West Bank.

Netanyahu's decision is in line with the policy of successive Israeli governments to strengthen the Jewish presence in East Jerusalem. So, for once, he has the support of most opposition parties. "There's no difference between Labour and Likud about Israel's right to build in Jerusalem," Labour leader Yossi Beilin said. "The question is only whether it is correct to do it now."

Data compiled by B'Tselem, an Israeli human rights group, show that one-third of the 17,500 acres annexed to West

Jerusalem with regard to housing. But he points out that the Palestinians refused to send representatives to the municipality, since in their view that would be a tacit recognition of Israel's sovereignty in East Jerusalem. "So, they don't have any influence in the local decision-making bodies," he says.

It is perhaps true that Jerusalem is more special to Jews than any other group. Most of ancient Jewish history is centred around Jerusalem; Judaism's holiest site, the Wailing Wall, is located in East Jerusalem. But Jerusalem has a complex history, as Palestinian scholar Edward Said writes in *Projecting Jerusalem*: "The continuous Muslim presence and rule in Jerusalem has been longer (than that of the Jews), and there has been a very dense Christian presence as well.... To override all this by saying that only Jews have a right to exclusive sovereignty over the city flies in the face of historical fact."

Netanyahu's decision is something of a concession to coalition partners who feel Israel has given away too much already. But international criticism has forced him to make compensatory gestures. He says he is also committed to building housing for Arabs, albeit not in Har Homa. "All residents are entitled to equal development and rights," he said recently.

To Palestinians, his promises ring hollow in the light of experience. And as the world condemns but does little to change ground realities, Palestinian frustration and fury can only increase. Both sides are now waiting in trepidation for the moment Israeli bulldozers get to work, turning Jabal Abu Ghunaim into Har Homa. ■

Sumana Ramanan in Jerusalem



Arafat has kept a lid on violence, but Palestinians say Israel's act is a "declaration of war".