Jerusalem: the right to reside

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A crucial place for peace

The city of Jerusalem is at the heart of conflicts in the Middle East, due to its shared historical and religious significance for the three Abrahamic faiths.

The current situation in Jerusalem is cause for intense concern. Israel systematically discriminates against Palestinians in the city through home demolitions, unfair planning practices and residency restrictions.

Such policies not only cause suffering, but have severe political implications. Efforts for peace can only succeed if there is an equitable, negotiated deal on sharing the Holy City.
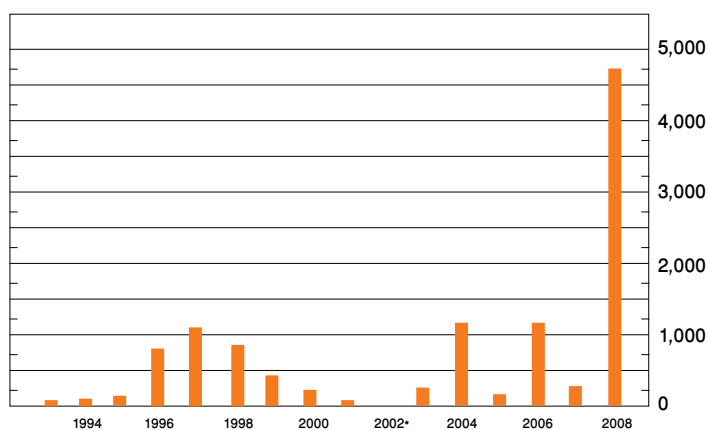
Legal realities and illegal policies

Jerusalem is the primary national symbol for both Palestinians and Israelis. But since Israel occupied Gaza and the West Bank (including East Jerusalem) in the Six Day War of 1967, it has established its dominance over the whole city, "uniting" Jerusalem to prevent the establishment of a Palestinian capital there.

In 1980, Israel formally annexed Jerusalem and declared the city its "united, eternal and indivisible capital," in defiance of International Law. The rest of the international community still views the east of the city as illegally occupied territory, but Israel is stepping up efforts to ensure a Jewish majority, at the expense of Palestinian residents.

In 2009, Israeli authorities announced they would intensify Israeli settlement in the east of the city, pre-empting negotiations. Israel has also withdrawn the right of thousands of local Palestinians to reside in their home city (see below). These measures is seriously undermine International Law and the possibility of a two-state solution to the Israeli-Arab conflict.

(Sources: Ir Amim, Al Maqdese, PASSIA, UNOCHA).

Israel's separation barrier and other restrictions against Palestinian movement severely disrupt the religious life of Palestinian Christians. *(Photo: EAPPI)*

Prevented from worshipping

Israeli restrictions during Holy Week blocked thousands of Palestinian Christians from reaching their Jerusalem holy sites for 2010 Easter celebrations.

Israeli soldiers and police disrupted traditional processions, blocked access to the Old City for two days of Holy Week, and preventing thousands of Palestinian Christians from worshipping in Jerusalem churches.

In one case, Israeli police physically attacked worshippers trying to reach the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. They also closed the main road from nearby Bethlehem into Jerusalem, in what locals say was collective punishment for a peaceful protest on Good Friday.

Many thousands of Palestinians were unable to reach Jerusalem at all as Israel refused to grant them entry permits.

"Almost no West Bank or Gazan Christians were seen at the Holy Saturday celebrations due to very bad past experience of struggling in vain to be inside the Old City," said Yusef Daher, director of a local World Council of Churches project.

Israel justifies its movement restrictions against Palestinians on the grounds of security.

But Palestinian Christians say they are "severe violations of freedom of worship."

By withdrawing their Jerusalem residency permits, Israel has taken away the right of thousands of Palestinians to live in Jerusalem - and the pace of this is increasing. The above chart shows the number of permits withdrawn annually since the Oslo Accords of 1993.
*(Source: B'tselem. Includes latest available data as of July 2010). *2002 figures not available.*

By any means?

How settler groups lay claim to Palestinian homes

A Palestinian family on the edge of Jerusalem have been forced to sleep in their animal sheds after being evicted from their home in May to make way for Israeli settlers. Thirty-three members of the Salah family, including 21 children and an elderly couple, were forced out after a court decision in favour of an American settler.

Yitzchak Herskovitz, a former carpenter, moved into the Salah family home on 2nd May after winning a 17-year court battle over ownership of the land. The Salah family say they bought the land in 1966, when it was under Jordanian control.

"We have been living here since before 1967," said Ismael Salah, whose 103-year-old father Ali Ibrahim Salah bought the land from a local Armenian.

"Now we are living in sheds built for our sheep and chickens."

The decrepit sheds lie on a flat piece of land next to the Salah family's house, which was built by Ismael's father. Settlers have taken the home and erected an Israeli flag on the roof.

Zionist settler groups and the state of Israel frequently exploit the unofficial nature of pre-occupation land deals to take over Palestinian-owned properties in East Jerusalem and the West Bank. Ali confirmed his purchase of the land in the traditional way - with a handshake.

> "We have been living here since before 1967. Now we are living in sheds built for our sheep and chickens."

One of the Salah children outside the goat shed where the family now lives. (Photo: EAPPI)

The family's lack of documents, along with what Ismael termed the "incompetance" of their lawyers, meant they were unable to defend themselves from Herskovitz's claim that he owned the land.

Now, 35 members of the family have been evicted and they owe 108,000 shekels (over $28,000) in fines, on top of the tens of thousands they have already paid in legal costs. The settlers have added insult to injury: they call the family "Arab squatters."

This is strange logic. Palestinians have lived here for centuries and their rights are being trampled by the demands of settler groups and the state.

For Ismael, Israeli policies throughout Jerusalem all add up to one thing:

"They want to get rid of all the Arabs from here."

Photo: EAPPI

Further reading...

Ir Amim

An Israeli organization working for an equitable and stable Jerusalem with an agreed political future. The name is Hebrew for "City of Nations." Website: www.ir-amim.org.il/eng/

Jerusalem: The cost of failure (Chatham House, Feb. 2010)

A political briefing by two experts on conflict in cities.
www.chathamhouse.org.uk/publications/papers/view/-/id/835/