

Silwan under threat

Max Watson reports on the creeping transfer of Palestinian East Jerusalem

The Israeli government is aiming to ethnically cleanse Jerusalem of its Palestinian population, ordering the demolition of 88 houses in the Al-Bustan neighbourhood of Silwan.

The Jerusalem Municipality has come under heavy pressure against their plans for demolitions — from media, activist organisations such as the Israeli Committee against House Demolitions (ICAHN), Rabbis for Human Rights, the Palestinian Authority and Knesset Members.

Despite this pressure, which led to the Municipality claiming they won't see through *all* the demolitions — when 64 families have *already* received demolition orders — Israeli engineer Uri Shitreet, responsible for the plan, said: "If we can't destroy their homes, we will find ways to evict them" (*Ha'aretz*, 31 May 2005).

Jeff Halper, of ICAHD, explains that one settler organisation, El Ad, with funding from the government, is devoted to "Judaizing" Silwan. El Ad has taken over more than 50 houses in Silwan in the last decade — often under the cover of night.

The latest plans stem from a letter sent in November 2004 by Uri Shitreet to Jerusalem's Department of Building Permits, stating the Al-Bustan neighbourhood is an important cultural and historical site.

The following March, the first demolition orders were delivered. Since then, the Municipality claimed they met with residents to discuss alternative relocation plans, which the residents deny.

The Palestinian Authority issued a statement in June, stating these demolition orders violate the Fourth Geneva Convention; Phase 1 of the Road Map, which requires Israel to end "actions undermining trust, including confiscation/demolition of Palestinian homes/property"; and George Bush's 26 May 2005 statement that "Israel should not undertake any activity that ...



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Part of the area of East Jerusalem under threat

prejudices final status negotiations with regard to... Jerusalem."

The timing of these demolition orders is not coincidental, says Halper. The State of Israel is placating settler-organisations in the run-up to the so-called disengagement plan, by offering them a Jewish neighbourhood on a "prime site" next to the Old City.

"International law prohibits Israel, as an Occupying Power, from imposing its own laws and regulations," says Halper. Despite this, Shitreet has vowed to continue his plans "no matter what pressures are brought upon me."

"This is all part of a national program to make the life of Palestinians so hard they will leave Jerusalem. It is that simple."

Ruhama Avraham, the Deputy Minister of Interior, claimed that many of the families are illegal residents — from Hebron — and even said "there is a fear that terrorists have infiltrated them", in a clear attempt to incite Israeli public opinion (*Ha'aretz*, 6 February 2005).

Farhi Abu-Diab, a leading campaigner against the demolitions, called Avraham's statements lies: "If there are people staying here illegally, let them send in the police." (*Ha'aretz*, 6 February 2005).

Rabbis for Human Rights, in a June

statement, said: "When I think of 'You shall not covet your neighbour's house', I cannot ignore the 88 houses in Silwan facing demolition, and all the rest of the houses in Jerusalem and the Occupied Territories. In fact, the Al-Bustan plan is but a particularly glaring example of the policies being carried out every day in all the Palestinian neighbourhoods of Jerusalem."

Meir Margalit, a former Jerusalem City Councillor and member of ICAHD, says these plans are part of an explicit process of "Judaizing" Jerusalem: "Look at the larger picture. Put the settlement actions in Silwan together with the ongoing demolition of Arab houses in East Jerusalem. Put it together with the building of the wall through Abu Dis. All these features together paint a very dramatic picture where the Israeli government, together with the settlers, are part of a national program to make the life of Palestinians so hard they will leave Jerusalem. It is that simple."

Human rights groups are calling on the Government and Municipality to stop demolitions in Jerusalem altogether. ICAHD further calls on "the international community to express its opposition to the plans of the Israeli government and the Jerusalem Municipality to demolish an entire Palestinian neighbourhood in East Jerusalem."