

Excavated Palestinian lives in Silwan
Events of 5 November 2008

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A small group of us arrived after it was all over. Six members of the EAPPI had heard the news that homes were being demolished in al-Bustan, an area of Silwan, just outside the old city of Jerusalem and a stones throw from the Al Aqsa Mosque, but we were too far away to get there before it ended. On arrival, we stopped the taxi at the top of Wadi Hilwe Street, walking the rest of the way to the bottom of the valley. Near the bottom, just before the south east bank stretches upwards, the dust was settling over a home recently demolished. On the way down, jeeps and foot soldiers flanked us on both sides of the road as they withdrew from the area. At the bottom of the road, on the sharp curve and deep in the valley the shouting of the police was drowned out by their huge horses trotting away. When they had left there was a strange silence in the valley. The media was packing up and the residents were going back into their homes and the internationals followed the police up the hill. Our small group went down to the site of the demolished home.



Most of the dust had already settled and the neighbourhood kids were climbing on the rubble, grabbing onto the exposed steel and slipping on the loose concrete and stone. I raised my camera and some quick 'La, la', a stern 'No' were shouted. The whole house had been demolished. On both sides of the site there towered the living quarters of fellow residents, some of them peeking through their windows. To the left, up the hill, a guard in a Jewish, settler outpost, some 50 metres away looked on. The belongings of the house were lying outside and the child photographs were still taped to the refrigerator. The three children who had lived there



and their mother were not to be found. Their home was destroyed but the house did not belong to them but rather the Siyam family, who had rented out the premises. A second home was up for demolition that day too but the bulldozers couldn't get there and the soldiers and police proceeded with hammers and picks. The owner, Samer, resisted but was beaten and is now under house arrest for an unknown period. The neighbourhood residents resisted strongly, eventually forcing the army and police to withdraw, so this home still stands with some structural damage. It is unclear when or if they will be back. I wish I could say that it is just another day in Silwan but it's not, it's getting worse.

For a video of the resistance of Samer and surrounding events, please have a look on YouTube: <http://uk.youtube.com/watch?v=3k46nTA4Uxc>

Setting the tone

Since 1992, the policy of stepping up demolitions in the Silwan area has accelerated. Steadily increasing year by year as the political situation in Jerusalem becomes more precarious. In a push to keep the demographics of the city at a 70 percent Jewish and 30 percent Palestinian ratio, a policy kept since it was first laid down in 1973 in light of growing Palestinian population, the need to increase active pressure on East Jerusalem residents is picking up.

Following Israel's annexation of East Jerusalem in 1967, Israeli government planning authorities devised new town plans for the area surrounding the old city of Jerusalem. These plans aimed to consolidate Israeli interests in the historic basin that includes central Palestinian neighbourhoods

such as Silwan, A-Tor, and Sheikh Jarrakh. A key element of these plans was to designate the area on all sides of the old city walls as park land. The consideration that these areas were deemed important archaeological and religious areas meant that a virtual stop was put on the issuing of building permits for residents here. However, due to tremendous population pressures – the population has increased over three times what it was in 1967 to about 250,000 today – homes had to be built and many of these were built without the proper permit.

Until 1994, Israeli authorities took almost no action against the Palestinian homeowners who had built without a permit but since then, legal action has been initiated against a number of homes. Today, the current number of homes under threat of demolition in Silwan alone is approximately 88. Make that 86 considering the events of 5 November. Seeing the affect that these demolitions have on the community and taking into consideration the already incessant squeezing of the Palestinian population one needs to investigate a little deeper whether these are indeed uncomplicated legal proceedings or a kind of political movement dancing on the fringes of legality. One doesn't need to look too hard before suspicions are raised.

The players

The main protagonist in the displacement and push for house demolitions is the right wing organisation Elad – the Hebrew acronym for the city of David. Elad has never made a secret of the goals of its organisation: to control the sensitive site of Al-bustan and replace Silwan's Palestinian residents with Jewish settlers. Although those goals have often been thwarted by the Israeli authorities for various reasons over the years, their influence eventually reached the right people in Israeli administration and they have gained permission to operate on the ground. The most obvious display of Elad's work is the excavation of the Givati parking lot across the road from the City of David archaeological park. The organisation gathered much attention earlier in 2008 when the Haaretz newspaper reported that they removed the remains of some 100 skeletons dating from the 8-9th century CE, some 200 years after the Muslim conquest of Jerusalem, from the site without going through the proper procedures and certainly not considering the historical wealth of the find. In short, there has been no legal action into the matter even though many employees of Elad have disagreed with the actions of the organisation.

Today, Elad effectively controls Silwan despite the Israeli justice system decreeing that Elad's acquisition of many Palestinian homes in Silwan involved unlawful actions. In the long run, the courts have proved ineffectual against the settlers and the Palestinian neighbourhood is now dotted with a dozen settler outposts, clearly visible with their watchtowers, flags, and armed

guards. By now, Elad also has the full backing of the Jerusalem Municipality, Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA), Israel Nature and National Park Protection Authority (INNPPA) and the Jerusalem Police. Elad runs all the excavations in Silwan. It decides where and when to dig and hires the IAA to do the work. The IAA itself issues the required digging permits that allow Elad to turn archaeology into its most effective instrument of dispossession of the local Palestinians. With such a private organisation working so hard and with the support of the relevant government bodies to expand the archaeological park in the Al-Bustan neighbourhood, the picture becomes a little clearer and the reasons better understood for the recent increase in the home demolitions in this part of East Jerusalem.

So where is it going from here?

The residents of the demolished homes stay with families or spend more money to rent from the neighbourhood. But the question is, if they were not meant to build in the first place, then can the demolitions be considered to be their own fault? When we spoke to the neighbour of the Siyam family house that was demolished on this day he said the owner had never received a demolition order. Although it is highly unlikely this is the case, it is possible that the owner did in fact not know he had received one.

What is interesting is that these demolitions are issued against the building and not against a person. Although that is obvious enough, what is problematic is that the municipal inspector has no need to deliver the order to the homeowner but rather is simply required to attach the order to the building where it can be overlooked, fall off, or simply be destroyed by the weather. There is no designated place where such an order needs to be placed and there is no required confirmation of receipt. While in most cases the home owner will indeed know that such an inspector has visited the home, there is room for error and misunderstanding.

Starting 24 hours after delivery, the bulldozer may arrive at any time. Once the court has approved the demolition order, the bulldozer can turn up next day or at any other moment. The strain experienced by the inhabitants in this waiting period is tremendous, causing health problems, domestic violence and anxiety. An official at the Civil Administration told the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions (ICAHD) that fear and intimidation are important components in the enforcement policy since they deter Palestinians from building.

Of the households of the other some 86 homes awaiting demolition – how do they continue with their lives? Jawwad, who has erected a tent down the road from the Givati parking lot excavation

in order to educate people about the developments here, says, “We see the third intifada starting here”. The settlers and this Elad organisation have destroyed the economical life here. The house of my grandmother is under threat, he says, pointing across the road to a double story home with a lovely garden on the balcony. They came one day with fake papers to try and take the house, he continues. Although there have been some court victories for Jawwad’s family, how long can these 80-odd homes avoid demolition with such a strong organisation pushing for their removal?

Building homes, not just houses

Each side has a case, as so many people say, but when you are confronted with a situation in which a family who has been evicted from their home with no forwarding notice and then left to their own devices to organise their possessions, find a new home, and salvage what they can from what was left in the wreckage, you can’t help but think such a system could work better. The livelihood of Palestinians are being squeezed all the more so in East Jerusalem and when you start pushing people out who have no where else left to go you can only listen a little more carefully to what Jawwad has to say about the beginning of the 3rd intifada. When the legitimate Israeli government finds it possible to deal with organisations such as Elad who operate in grey legal waters, and turn a blind eye to human right violations of their own people, it gives reason to pause. If the demolitions are indeed a matter of destroying the building and not the lives of the people living in them; if the purpose is to follow the law and not clear the land in a kind of pseudo ethnic cleansing then the process would be different, support would be offered by the same government and associated organisations doing the demolitions. This kind of support is clearly not available and the Palestinians need to fend for themselves against a system that blocks their reasons for living at almost every turn. As long as a government considers the 4000 year old inhabitants of the valley here more important than those currently living here, we can expect more demolitions.