Reports demonstrate Israel's efforts to alter demography of East Jerusalem

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Two recent reports point to the Israeli government's determined efforts to drive Palestinians and Israeli Arabs out of their homes in East Jerusalem.

The HaMoked Center for the Defense of the Individual, an Israeli human rights organization, released a statement showing that the Interior Ministry revoked the residency of 4,577 East Jerusalem Arab residents in 2008. HaMoked acquired the statistics, under a Freedom of Information Act request, for all of the years between 1967 and 2008, apart from 2002 for which no figures were available. The figures show that 8,269 Palestinians had their Jerusalem residence revoked between 1967 and 2007, with a previous high in 2006 when 1,363 Arabs lost their residency status. The number of cases of revocation of residency in 2008 is equal to approximately one half of the total number of cases over the previous 40 years.

Dalia Kerstein, executive director of HaMoked, stated, "The interior ministry campaign in 2008 is only part of a general policy whose aim is to limit the Palestinian population and preserve a Jewish majority in Jerusalem." The Palestinians in East Jerusalem are the majority, with about 250,000, but this is being challenged by 190,000 Jewish settlers. The Palestinian residents of Jerusalem, unlike the Arabs inside Israel, did not become Israeli citizens after the creation of Israel in 1948, and though they have some of the rights of Israelis, their permission to live in the city can be revoked for a variety of reasons.

According to the Interior Ministry, the sharp increase in revoking residency follows its decision to investigate the legal status of thousands of East Jerusalem residents in March and April 2008. This new tactic is reportedly the brainchild of former Interior Minister Meir Sheetrit (Kadima) and Yaakov Ganot, ex-head of the ministry's Population Administration. Ominously, Sheetrit claims, "What we discovered is just the tip of the iceberg."

The ministry said it carried out a "comprehensive check" to determine how many people listed as residents still lived in Jerusalem. It stripped the rights of those living abroad and of 38 individuals who had simply moved from Jerusalem to Palestinian areas of the West Bank.

HaMoked said that if these residents live abroad for seven years, or gain citizenship or residency elsewhere, they lose their Israeli residency. If one were to follow this principle, then those on family visits, or students studying abroad, or workers moving between Palestinian territories could be affected. Once residency is lost, even returning for a family visit can be impossible.

"People who are studying or working outside, they are in a very dangerous circumstance," said Adnan Husseini, of the Palestinian Authority (PA). "It means we don't have any nationality. Zero."

Israel does not treat native East Jerusalem Arabs, who found themselves under illegal Israeli rule in 1967, any differently from residents of the other Palestinian territories who have been granted permanent residency in Israel. They have the same legal status as people who immigrated to Israel legally, but are not entitled to citizenship under the Law of Return. "They are treated as if they were immigrants to Israel, despite the fact that it is Israel that came to them in 1967," explained Attorney Yotam Ben-Hillel of HaMoked.

A confidential European Union report, updated annually by EU representatives in Jerusalem and Ramallah and never published due to Israeli pressure, was leaked to the press, according to Israeli daily *Haaretz*. The 14-page report, dated November 23, accuses the Israeli government and the Jerusalem municipal authority of deliberate measures to alter the city's demography in favour of Jewish residents and to "sever East Jerusalem from the West Bank." They did this by helping right-wing organisations buy homes in Palestinian neighbourhoods and further "attempts to implant further Jewish settlements into the heart of the Muslim Quarter."

"Developments in East Jerusalem in 2009 were marked by the continued expansion of Israeli settlements and a considerable number of Palestinian house demolitions and eviction orders," says the report. "Israel is, by practical means, actively pursuing its illegal annexation of East Jerusalem by weakening the Palestinian community in the

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city, impeding Palestinian urban developments and ultimately separating East Jerusalem from the rest of the West Bank."

Over 600 Palestinian-owned structures have been demolished since the year 2000, the report says, and many of the new Jewish settlements have been built on the periphery of East Jerusalem in an effort to cut off the Arab quarter from the surrounding West Bank, making it easier to argue that the city is a cohesive Jewish unit. The report also says that while 35 percent of Jerusalem's residents are Arab, only 5 to 10 percent of the city's budget goes to Arab neighbourhoods.

"The continued settlement expansion plan around the Old City effectively encircles and contains the historic basin and separates the Muslim holy places from the rest of East Jerusalem," the report said, adding that the municipality places severe restrictions on issuing building permits for Palestinian houses in East Jerusalem, forcing them to construct without permits. Palestinians have received fewer than 200 building permits per year for the past several years, while they require some 1,500 housing units annually. The government's policies are "an integral part of a broader Israeli strategy" and "are undermining prospects for a Palestinian capital in East Jerusalem and incrementally render a sustainable two-state solution unfeasible."

Archaeology has also become an ideological tool, after excavation rights were granted to bodies with ties to "extreme pro-settler organisations." Palestinians have claimed that Israel uses distorted archaeological findings to bolster their claim for undisputed ownership of Jerusalem.

Under pressure from the Obama administration, which is trying to keep Arab regimes onside for its impending confrontation with Iran, Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu announced a 10-month freeze on building new illegal homes, but not on 3,000 homes already under construction in the West Bank, nor at all in East Jerusalem. Extreme right-wing settlers groups have promised stiff resistance. Netanyahu is in fact in full agreement with the settlers, and any freeze, however temporary, is anathema to his far-right coalition partners.

Israeli radio stations have reported unrest in at least four settlements where inspectors tried to enforce the government order. The government told the High Court of Justice that the freeze would force it to postpone the evacuation of several illegal outposts and the demolition of thousands of illegal buildings against which demolition orders had already been issued since the people needed for these evacuations and demolitions were busy enforcing the freeze.

Tensions in the Palestinian Authority are already explosive, with Israel's settlement projects accompanied by the demolition of numerous Palestinian homes. There were protests, riots and violent confrontations between Palestinian youth and Israeli police in the compound surrounding the al-Aqsa Mosque over the autumn as Israelis have taken over houses in the mostly Arab area following court orders.

The Obama administration has abandoned the demand for an end to settlement construction as a precondition for negotiations between Israel and the PA, despite this being contained in the "Road Map" drawn up by the US, the EU, Russia and the United Nations in 2002. All settlements are illegal under international law. Netanyahu is well aware that the US relies on Israel as a regional enforcer, and that its professions of even-handedness are for public consumption only. Obama has made clear that all that is on offer is a demilitarised and bifurcated state comprising Gaza and the West Bank, which would consist of several non-contiguous blocks, penned in by an eight-metre-high concrete wall and controlled by Israel.

Washington recently tried to get Egypt to modify the Arab peace plan of 2002, but Egypt was unable to move the Arab League on this. The plan calls for a Palestinian state on the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem, Israel's withdrawal to its 1967 borders; and acceptance of the Palestinians' right of return to their homes in Israel, or compensation, in return for normalising relations with the Arab world.

Israel is vehemently opposed to the return of Palestinians who were driven from their homes or fled in 1948 and 1967, and the handing back of East Jerusalem to the PA. It is in fact opposed to any form of Palestinian state, even a truncated one. The West Bank settlements effectively divide it in two. Already close to 500,000 Israelis live in more than 100 settlements built since the occupation that followed the 1967 war.

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