

A campaign by Jewish settlers and their supporters in Israel's Housing Ministry to rapidly populate traditionally Arab neighborhoods in East Jerusalem is a metaphor for the difficult road to peace.

# One Nation, Irreconcilable

■ By James Kitfield



**JERUSALEM**—When Jewish settlers evicted an elderly Palestinian couple from the house in East Jerusalem where they had lived for more than 50 years, the evictors came in the middle of the night and were backed by the full force of the Israeli government and security forces. ■ As reported in the Israeli daily newspaper *Haaretz* and verified by witnesses who talked to *National Journal*, about 20 vehicles from the Israel Defense Forces cordoned off the Sheik Jarrah neighborhood in the Arab section of the city at 4:45 a.m. on a Sunday last September.

Seven minibuses dispatched 40 or 50 soldiers and police officers. A handful of peace activists and protesters sleeping nearby were quickly overwhelmed, and Fawzieh al-Kurd and her disabled husband, Mohammed, were awakened by a loud knock on the door.

“My husband went to the door in his walker, but he was having trouble opening it, and when they kicked it down he was knocked to the floor,” Fawzieh al-Kurd said in an interview, speaking inside a tent that she and some neighbors erected

in an empty lot near her former home. Mohammed al-Kurd started having trouble breathing, she said, and the neighbors summoned an ambulance, but there was a lengthy delay before officers allowed it through the police cordon. “When the ambulance was finally gone, I was left out on the streets alone in the middle of the night, surrounded by soldiers. My husband returned a few days later and we began constructing this tent, but he had another heart attack and died. So every day seems to bring a new sorrow.”

■ **A LAND DIVIDED:**  
In East Jerusalem, the security wall (left) cuts off Palestinian residents from their kinsmen in the West Bank; it also raises questions (right) about the nature of their citizenship inside a Jewish state.



The eviction of the al-Kurds from their home of half a century provoked a rare official rebuke of Israel by the United States—not because it was extraordinary but rather because U.S. officials saw it as increasingly typical. The numbers suggest a concerted campaign by Jewish settlers and their supporters in Israel’s Housing Ministry to rapidly populate East Jerusalem as a way to block implementation of the November 2007 Annapolis initiative and its vision of a two-state solution. Every serious peace proposal of recent years—from Camp David in 2000 and Taba in 2001, to the Geneva Initiative in 2003—calls for a divided Jerusalem serving as the capital of both states, in exchange for Palestinians’ waiving the right of refugees to return to Israel.

In the year after the Bush administration’s Annapolis initiative, for instance, the Israeli government gave final approval for the construction of 2,730 housing units for Jewish settlers in overwhelmingly Arab East Jerusalem, a 600 percent increase over the previous year. Initial permits were issued for an additional 1,184 units, representing a 50 percent increase over 2007.

“The official, though little discussed, policy of the Israeli government has long been to approve thousands and thousands of new homes for Jewish settlers in East Jerusalem, while bureaucratically making it nearly impossible for Palestinians to get building permits,” said Hagit Ofra, who runs the Settlement Watch program for the Israeli activist group Peace Now. That policy, she said, leaves the Palestinian residents of Jerusalem with only a few unattractive options: They can either leave for the West Bank, permanently forsaking jobs, families, and access to the city of their birth, or they can cram many generations under the same roof in overcrowded houses.

“The third option is to try and relieve that overcrowding by building illegally, without permits,” Ofra said, “but in that case they will live in fear of the demolition order.” She pointed to the broken remains of a large house surrounded by piles of rubble. Since 2000, the Jerusalem municipality and the Interior Ministry have razed 700 such homes, and there are thousands of pending orders for further destruction. “The demolition order is a very important tool the Israeli government uses to control its Arab population.”

### Existential Questions

Middle East experts often repeat a well-worn adage that if no way is found to break the cycle of terrorism, retribution, and land confiscation at the heart of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Israel’s days as a Jewish democracy are numbered. Before former Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, the “father”



■ Evicted

of the settlement movement, lapsed into a coma in 2006 following a stroke, even he recognized that his dream of a “Greater Israel” in the biblical lands of Judea and Samaria, today’s West Bank, was a dangerous mirage.

Sharon’s decision in 2005 to unilaterally withdraw from the Gaza Strip and leave Israeli society protected behind a new security fence that hews roughly to pre-1967 borders was thus a concession to the inescapable logic of demography. Today, Jews represent only about half of the population in the land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea, which includes Gaza and the West Bank, and that proportion will steadily decline as a result of higher Arab birthrates.

That demographic trend poses two existential questions: Is a two-state divorce that peacefully splits the two peoples still possible? (See “United They Fall, Divided They Stand,” *NJ*, 3/28/09, p. 30.) And if it isn’t, what kind of country is Israel destined to become—more Jewish or more democratic? As it turns out, the answers to those questions can be found in this ancient city that lies at the center of the conflict.

Unlike the West Bank and Gaza, East Jerusalem was never considered to be occupied territory or have a temporary status by the Israeli government. Shortly after Israel captured the Old City and eastern neighborhoods from Jordan in the 1967 Six-Day War, it annexed East Jerusalem, along with its 70,000 Arab inhabitants, into Israel proper. Although neither the international community nor the United States recognized the annexation, Palestinian residents of the city, who now number more than 254,000, have been residents of “Jerusalem, the undivided capital of Israel,” for more than 40 years. Their story is a useful

### ■ In Summary

■ After the 1967 Six-Day War, **Israel annexed East Jerusalem** and its 70,000 Arab residents into Israel proper.

■ Israel imposed measures aimed at **keeping the Palestinian portion** of the population at 1967 levels.

■ But the **Arab population is growing** and will make up 40 percent of the city’s populace by 2020.



**Fawzieh al-Kurd stands outside a tent after Jewish settlers evicted her family from their home, visible in the background, of more than half a century.**

parable, therefore, for how Israel might look if it permanently incorporated all of its approximately 2.4 million Arab inhabitants into its borders.

### **A Contested House**

For the al-Kurds, the trouble began in 1999 when they applied for a permit to build a second entrance to their home so that they could share it with their son's young family. Although permission was predictably denied, they built the entrance anyway. Soon after, a well-informed "city official" came to their home, noted the new entrance, and asked to see the family's identity card listing all the occupants of the house.

When they were summoned to court, the al-Kurds discovered that the city official was really a member of a Jewish settler organization called Shimon's Estate, which had been given a bill of sale to the house dating back to the pre-World War I Ottoman era. After the al-Kurds and the settler group both produced ownership documents dated before Israel's founding in 1948, the court ruled for Shimon's Estate; the al-Kurds' son and his family were evicted, and an Israeli settler family moved into part of the al-Kurds' house.

Nearly a decade of court cases followed, pitting the settlers and their wealthy backers against the al-Kurd family and their dwindling finances. Whenever a court seemed poised to rule on behalf of the Palestinians, Fawzieh al-Kurd said, a new settler family would move in and the process would begin all over again. The young children of the settler families were taught to taunt the aging couple, she added. Members of the Israeli Knesset who were closely allied with the settler movement periodically appeared on their doorstep with groups of "donors" offering to buy the house and the surrounding dwellings, and threatening to evict the al-Kurds if they didn't leave voluntarily.

"I told them my dignity and my homeland were not for sale," said Fawzieh al-Kurd, sitting in the makeshift tent that police have dismantled multiple times as illegal, levying a fine on the widow each time. On the hillside above her tent, the cluster of houses in

her former courtyard is guarded by armed security personnel and a guard tower paid for by Israeli taxpayers, and each doorway sports the six-pointed star of the Israeli flag. "So I was kicked out of my home in 1948, and now I've been kicked out of my home again," she said. "How long will we Palestinians be kicked out of our homes? All we want is to remain in our homeland."

Although members of Peace Now who have followed her case in the courts generally back al-Kurd's account, few Israelis see it as exceptional. The successful challenge of Arab residents' obscure property deeds by well-backed Jewish settler groups with insider information and equally vague papers; the compliance of local police forces; the support from Knesset members—all are

regular features in local press coverage, although not many incidents merit big headlines. "An article about Jews evacuating Arabs has long since become as uninteresting as a 'dog bites man' story," wrote columnist Akiva Eldar in *Haaretz*.

### **Second-Class Citizens**

The incident with the al-Kurds brings up the larger question of how the official system in Jerusalem can seem so skewed against its longtime Palestinian residents. Hillel Cohen, a professor at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and the author of *The Market Square Is Empty: The Rise and Fall of Arab Jerusalem 1967-2007*, says that the answer is easy: Despite residing in Jerusalem as "permanent residents" for more than four decades, Palestinians in the city are not Israeli citizens and are barred from voting in national elections. Unlike Jewish settler groups, they are part of no governing coalition that can dispense top-level jobs in the Housing Ministry and other key bureaucracies. Palestinians are not represented in the police forces, in the military, or as judges in the courts.

"Palestinians in Jerusalem have a split and confused sense of identity," Cohen said in an interview. "They can travel freely in Israel, go to hotels and beaches, start a business, and gain access to national health care, even have some Jewish friends. But they cannot vote in national elections, they cannot serve in uniform, and they cannot build a house."

The Israeli government policy of restricting the ability of Palestinians to build or expand homes, Cohen said, was originally meant to keep their proportion of the city's population at the 1967 level of approximately one Palestinian to every three Jewish Israelis. That and other policies designed to restrict the growth of the Palestinian population failed, however, and Arabs will make up 40 percent of the city's population by 2020. Jerusalem is thus an apt metaphor for the rapidly deteriorating majority status of Jews in an Israel that permanently retains the occupied territories.

"The Israeli government's essential vision for Palestinian residents of Jerusalem is the same as the Jewish settlers have for

## ■ Rightward Shift



In recent elections, ultraorthodox and religious nationalist factions gained power, representing a rightward shift in Israeli politics.

‘Greater Israel’: The Arabs can have individual rights, but they cannot have political rights,” Cohen said. “And as long as they accept the sovereignty of a Jewish Israel and their lack of political rights in an apartheid-like system, they can stay as residents in Jerusalem and Greater Israel without any problem.”

Marei al-Radeideh, a 26-year-old Palestinian from Jerusalem who commandeered a construction vehicle on March 5 and used it to slam a police car into a bus before being shot dead, was just the latest sign of the problems and sense of rage that such a system engenders. It was the third such bulldozer attack in Jerusalem in the past year. In each case, a young Palestinian man with no obvious ties to terrorist groups woke up one day and lashed out in a senseless and suicidal act. A little-known Palestinian militant group several days later claimed that al-Radeideh was a member, but his family has denied it.

The growing radicalism inspired by such a system is hardly one-sided. On the streets of Jerusalem, huge political billboards carry the picture of Avigdor Lieberman, an ultranationalist populist who rode a wave of anti-Arab anger during the Gaza war to a big win in Israeli elections. Lieberman is slated to become Israel’s foreign minister.

Reportedly a former member of Rabbi Meir Kahane’s racist Kach movement, which is outlawed as a terrorist group in the United States and Israel, Lieberman ran on a platform to force Arab Israelis to sign a “loyalty oath.” Lieberman has advocated the ethnic cleansing of Israel’s Arabs (“All of them with no exception! They have no place here. Let them take their bags and go to hell!”). He has called for the execution of Arab Knesset members who dared meet with Hamas leaders, and he likened Israeli peace activists to “capos, like those who served the Nazis at the concentration camps.” In the February elections, those views won Lieberman’s far-right party, Yisrael Beiteinu (Israel Our Home), 11 seats in Israel’s 120-member Knesset, making him a potential kingmaker in Israel’s coalition system.

Roby Nathanson is an activist with the Macro Center, a non-profit think tank in Israel. “Nobody seriously thinks Israel will

implement loyalty oaths, but the very fact that someone like Lieberman could gain so much political power by stoking anti-Arab fears and running an almost fascist campaign is a dangerous phenomenon and points to trends in society that we can’t ignore,” he said. Even though the vast majority of Israeli Jews reject Lieberman’s views, just as most Israeli Arabs reject the radicalism of Hamas, Nathanson believes that the campaign is just one more sign of rising stresses between Jews and non-Jews inside of Israel.

“That’s why America and the Obama administration have a huge role to play in pressuring us finally to achieve some peace settlement with the Palestinians and our neighbors,” he said, echoing a “Save us from ourselves” sentiment often heard among peace activists in Israel. “Because a resolution is the only thing that will change the really shaky mood here for the better.”

### Whose Holy Basin?

The balancing act that the Obama administration will have to master in playing the dual roles of “staunch friend of Israel” and “honest broker” to the Arabs was on clear display during Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton’s early-March trip to Jerusalem. Clinton criticized the Israeli government for its plans to raze 88 homes and evict 1,500 Palestinians from East Jerusalem’s Silwan neighborhood, calling the plan “unhelpful” and a violation of international obligations. Her message exposed the ancient fault line that could determine whether Jerusalem becomes the biggest impediment to a peaceful resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

“To ask the Jewish people to divide Jerusalem ... is indecent and would call into question the moral justification for establishing the land of Israel.”

—Yakir Segev,  
Jerusalem City Council member

Located at the foot of the old city and the Temple Mount, the holiest site in Judaism, Silwan hardly looks like the epicenter of a fiercely contested land. Like most East Jerusalem neighborhoods, it is poor and unkempt. Houses and apartments cling to hill-sides in haphazard blocks. Each building is topped by a water tank because the municipal government never extended adequate water service to Palestinian neighborhoods.

As it turns out, Silwan probably includes the oldest parts of Jerusalem. In recent years, after archaeological excavations in the neighborhood revealed artifacts dating back to the time of King David, about 1,000 B.C., residents say that the street names of what is known as the City of David began to change. A settler group called the Elad Association for Resettling Jews in the Old City moved into the neighborhood, managing an archaeological site and contesting the Palestinian ownership of numerous houses.

Jawad Siyam, a spokesman for the Palestinian “Neighbors of Silwan” group, said he took the Elad settlers to court when they claimed

ownership of his grandmother's house. He won an injunction, but nine years later, he says, they are still in the house, because authorities refuse to evict them.

"I called the police to protest about the settlers, and I was told to come down to the police station and file a complaint. When I got there I was arrested and charged with 'attacking the settlers,'" Siyam said, smoking a cigarette and sipping hot tea in the kitchen of his own ramshackle house. "When that didn't hold up, I was charged with inciting 'anti-Jewish behavior' for organizing a protest against the settlers. It's gotten to the point where I don't even know how to behave anymore, because first the police tell me to do one thing and then they tell me the opposite. We made a video of the settlers tearing down olive trees in our backyards, but no one in the village is willing to complain anymore for fear of being arrested."

Recently, Israel's High Court of Justice ordered the government to explain unauthorized construction and earthworks being erected as part of the archaeological excavation in the Silwan area and near the Temple Mount. Lawyers for Peace Now fear that if the digging continues and the 88 Palestinian houses are razed as planned, perhaps the single most imposing obstacle to a two-state solution—determining sovereignty over and administration of the Temple Mount and some of the most sacred sites in the Muslim, Jewish, and Christians faiths, an area collectively referred to as the Holy Basin—will have grown insurmountable.

"If the Holy Basin and the issues surrounding it are extended into Palestinian neighborhoods in East Jerusalem and the City of David, then this conflict transforms from one based on nationalism to one centered on religion, and then there will never be a resolution," said Ofra of Peace Now. "Believe me, there are religious fundamentalists and extremists on both sides who would like to see that happen."

City officials acknowledge that the 1,500 Palestinians in the Silwan neighborhood facing eviction built unauthorized homes because the government denied them permits as a matter of policy, but that doesn't make the houses any less illegal, they argue. Officials don't deny that the Elad settler group has a political agenda in confiscating property and pushing for further excavations in the City of David, but they insist that that doesn't negate the historical significance of the archaeological sites. If anything, in city leaders' view, the historical discoveries help make the argument that Jerusalem must never be divided.

"To ask the Jewish people to divide Jerusalem and relinquish areas that we hold sacred and which were the fulfillment of religious and nationalist dreams that can be traced back to King David is indecent and would call into question the moral justification for establishing sovereignty over the land of Israel in the first place," said Yakir Segev, the City Council member with authority over East Jerusalem.

Like presumptive Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Se-

## ■ City of David



**Archaeological digs in Palestinian neighborhoods near the Temple Mount threaten to turn a conflict based on nationalism into one centered on religion.**

gev would address the obvious imbalances in Israeli society and discrimination against Arabs by incrementally working to make the lives of Palestinians in East Jerusalem better, if not politically empowered. His stance could be a harbinger of Israel's undemocratic future.

"I personally believe Israel should prove itself worthy of control over Jerusalem by striving to make the quality of life for Arabs in East Jerusalem the same as for Jews living in the West side, and, for many good and bad reasons that include discrimination, that clearly is not the case today," Segev said in an interview. "Unfortunately, however, the greater nationalist conflict between Israelis and Palestinians has become a zero-sum game between two stubborn and irrational peoples. So to expect a peace treaty or piece of paper to clarify and rearrange this common space we share is a very Western and postmodern idea. It just won't work here."

At sunset on a recent Friday in Jerusalem's Old City, young students gathered in a circle in the Jewish Quarter to dance and sing in full-throated celebration of Shabbat, before descending steps arm-in-arm in laughing groups to pray at the foot of the Western Wall and the Temple Mount. Above their heads, Arab worshippers could be seen flocking from the Muslim Quarter to Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock as the mournful call to prayer of the Islamic faithful wafted over the rooftops. In the nearby Christian Quarter, groups of young seminarians were filing out of classrooms and into the narrow streets near the Church of the Holy Sepulcher.

An Armenian merchant stopped an American and noted the quiet joy written on every face, and the shared reverence as each tribe went about the rituals of its faith. "Here we all live together in peace," the merchant said. "There's no reason to fight."

There was nothing Western or particularly postmodern about the scene. Indeed, if you listened long enough to the faint sounds of singing, laughter, and incantation echoing down the streets, you might almost swear that the ancient ghosts of Old Jerusalem were whispering a message.

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