Palestine: High Price Tag for Settlers' Eviction

By [Jonathan Cook](#)

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Jerusalem's mayor threatened last week to demolish 200 homes in Palestinian neighbourhoods of the city in an act even he conceded would probably bring long-simmering tensions over housing in East Jerusalem to a boil.

His uncompromising stance is the latest stage in a protracted legal battle over a single building towering above the jumble of modest homes of Silwan, a deprived and overcrowded Palestinian community lying just outside the Old City walls, in the shadow of the silver-topped al Aqsa mosque.

Beit Yehonatan, or Jonathan's House, is distinctive not only for its height — at seven storeys, it is at least three floors taller than its neighbours — but also for the Israeli flag draped from the roof to the street.

The settlement outpost, named for Jonathan Pollard, serving a life sentence in the US for spying on Israel's behalf in the 1980s, has been home to eight Jewish families since 2004, when it was built without a licence by an extremist settler organisation known as Ateret Cohanim.

Beit Yehonatan is one of dozens of settler-occupied homes springing up in Palestinian areas of East Jerusalem, most of them takeovers of Palestinian homes.

Critics say the intent of these "outposts", together with the large settlements of East Jerusalem built by the state and home to nearly 200,000 Jews, is to foil any peace agreement that might one day offer the Palestinians a meaningful state with Jerusalem as its capital.

But exceptionally for the settlers, who are used to a mix of overt and covert assistance from officials, the inhabitants of Beit Yehonatan are at risk of being evicted from their home, two years after an "urgent" enforcement order was issued by the Israeli Supreme Court.

Last week Nir Barkat, Jerusalem's mayor, finally agreed "under protest" to seal Beit Yehonatan amid mounting pressure from an array of legal officials. Mr Barkat had been fighting strenuously against implementing the court order, aided by senior members of the parliament, the police, and even Benjamin Netanyahu, the Israeli prime minister, who opposed his own attorney general's advice by declaring Beit Yehonatan's future "a purely municipal matter".

But the mayor has not simply capitulated. He warned that Beit Yehonatan would be evacuated only on condition that more than 200 demolition orders on Palestinian homes, most of them in Silwan, were carried out at the same time. He argued that he had to avoid any impression that the law was being enforced in a "discriminatory" manner against Jews.

Jeff Halper, head of the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions, said Mr Barkat's idea of fairness was "ridiculous".

"In the past 15 years there have been more than a thousand Palestinian homes demolished in East Jerusalem versus absolutely no settler homes," he said. "In fact, no settlers have ever lost their home in East Jerusalem."

In making his announcement, Mr Barkat admitted that the 200 demolitions would trigger "a strong possibility for conflict". Palestinians in East Jerusalem are already seething over decades of planning restrictions that have forced many of them to build or extend homes illegally because it is all but impossible to get permits from the Israeli authorities.

Mr Halper said the municipality had classified 22,000 Palestinian homes in East Jerusalem as illegal, even as it also assessed a shortage of 25,000 homes for the city's 250,000-strong Palestinian population.

The homes targeted for demolition include Palestinian houses around Beit Yehonatan that violate planning restrictions that allow families to build only two floors; despite the restriction, many houses have four storeys and owners pay fines.

In addition, the city council wants to demolish 88 homes in a small area called Bustan that the municipality claims is in danger of flooding.

Zeinab Jaber lives next to Beit Yehonatan in the home she was born in 61 years ago. The building was declared illegal 20 years ago, after it was extended to four storeys to accommodate her growing family. Today she and her six grown-up sons pay monthly fines of more than $1,000 (Dh 3,672) in the hope of warding off destruction.

Her son Amjad, 32, married with two young sons, said he did not dare miss a payment. "It's simple: if you don't pay, you'll end up in prison."

"What is there for the settlers here?" Mrs Jaber asked. "They are only here because they want to take this place from us. They won't be happy till we leave."

On the opposite slope across the valley from Beit Yehonatan, Mohammed Jalajil, 48, said he did not doubt that the municipality would demolish the 200 homes. He, his wife and five children have been crammed into a room in a relative's apartment since their own house was demolished seven years ago.

Mr Jalajil, 48, said: "It was only months after they took our house from us that I saw the settlers building theirs nearby. My lawyer tells me that, even though my house is gone, I won't have paid off my fines for another 10 years."

If Mr Barkat follows through with his threat, the demolitions will prompt a rebuke from the international community. Last month, France and the United States joined the UN in denouncing more than 100 demolitions in East Jerusalem over the past three months.

The mayor's decision, warned Meir Margalit, a Jerusalem city councillor, was comparable to the "price tag" policy of the settlers in the West Bank, who have attacked Palestinian villages in retaliation against official attempts to dismantle a few of the settlement outposts dotting Palestinian territory.

"But the difference here is that the price tag is being levied not by the settlers themselves but by the municipality and the government on their behalf," he said.

Yesterday the municipality was due to issue a seven-day evacuation notice to the inhabitants of Beit Yehonatan, but the operation was cancelled at the last minute when police refused to co-operate.

Frictions have been growing in Silwan for several years over the activities of another settler organisation, Elad, which, with official backing, has been building an archaeological park known as the City of David in the midst of the Palestinian neighbourhood. As Palestinians have been pushed out, at least 80 Jewish families have moved into homes nearby.

As Elad entrenches itself in Silwan, Beit Yehonatan has proved more difficult to secure. "Usually the settlers present a façade of legality to what they do," Mr Halper said. "The problem here is that they built in an overtly illegal manner, without a permit and way over the building height restrictions."

Mr Barkat's resistance to evicting Beit Yehonatan's inhabitants was highlighted last month when he tried to stave off legal pressure by proposing a new planning policy to legalise unlicensed buildings in Silwan. The mayor proposed that the rules limiting homes to two storeys be revised to four.

The reform would have applied to Beit Yehonatan first, sealing its top three storeys but allowing the Jewish families to inhabit the rest of the building.

Although Mr Barkat promised that illegal Palestinian buildings would also be saved, Ir Amim, an Israeli human rights groups, dismissed the mayor's claim.

The overwhelming majority of Palestinian homes would fail to qualify because land registry documents are missing for the area and a range of requirements on car parking, access roads and sewerage connections are "impossible" to meet, Orly Noy, a spokeswoman, wrote in the Haaretz newspaper last month.

She added that Palestinian areas of East Jerusalem lacked 70km of sewage pipes and that not a single new road had been paved in their neighbourhoods since Israel's occupation in 1967.

A planning map of East Jerusalem drawn up recently by the Jerusalem municipality came to light last month, as Mr Barkat was promising to legalise buildings, showing that more than 300 homes — most of them in Silwan — were facing imminent demolition.

Jonathan Cook is a writer and journalist based in Nazareth, Israel. His latest books are "Israel and the Clash of Civilisations: Iraq, Iran and the Plan to Remake the Middle East" (Pluto Press) and "Disappearing Palestine: Israel's Experiments in Human Despair" (Zed Books). His website is www.jkcook.net.

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