

Palestine: Who will stop the settlers? Noise but no action from US over family's eviction

By [Jonathan Cook](#)

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The middle-of-the-night eviction last week of an elderly Palestinian couple from their home in East Jerusalem to make way for Jewish settlers is a demonstration of Israeli intent towards a future peace deal with the Palestinians.

Mohammed and Fawziya Khurd are now on the street, living in a tent, after Israeli police enforced a court order issued in July to expel them.

The couple have been living in the same property in the Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood since the mid-1950s, when East Jerusalem was under Jordanian control. The United Nations allotted them the land after they were expelled from their homes in territory that was seized by Israel during the 1948 war.

Since East Jerusalem's occupation by Israel in 1967, however, Jewish settler groups have been waging a relentless battle for the Khurds' home, claiming that the land originally belonged to Jews.

In 1999, the settlers occupied a wing of the house belonging to the couple's son, Raed, though the courts subsequently ruled in favour of the family. The eviction order against the settlers, unlike that against the Khurds, was never enforced.

The takeover of the Khurds' house is far from an isolated incident. Settlers are quietly grabbing homes from Palestinians in key neighbourhoods around the Old City of Jerusalem in an attempt to pre-empt any future peace deal with the Palestinians.

What makes the case of the Khurd family exceptional is that it has attracted the attention of western consulates, particularly those of Israel's important allies, that is, the United States and Britain. They have appealed without success to the Israeli government to intercede.

In particular, the diplomats are concerned that the takeover of the Khurds' home will set a dangerous precedent, freeing settler groups to wrest control of most of Sheikh Jarrah. The settlers plan to oust more than 500 Palestinians from the neighbourhood and build 200 apartments for Jewish families.

If the settlers can take control of other areas, such as Silwan, Ras al-Amud and the Mount of Olives, the Old City and its holy sites would be as good as sealed off not only to Palestinians in the West Bank - as is the case already - but also to nearly 250,000 Palestinians in the outlying suburbs of East Jerusalem.

Because the Palestinians expect East Jerusalem and its holy places to be the core of their state, the Sheikh Jarrah judgment effectively offers the settlers a blocking veto on any future negotiations.

That may be one reason why the Israeli government has shown little inclination to intervene in cases like that of the Khurds. In Israeli law, all of Jerusalem, including the eastern half of the city, is the “indivisible” capital of the Jewish state.

The eviction order also worries western diplomats because it opens up a Pandora’s box of competing land claims that will make it impossible for Palestinian negotiators to sign up to a deal on the division of Jerusalem.

The Palestinian Authority has already pointed out to the consulates that nearly two-thirds of West Jerusalem’s land was owned by Palestinians before the creation of Israel. Fawziya Khurd, for example, lived in Talbieh, in what is now the city’s western half, before 1948.

If the settlers can make property claims in East Jerusalem based on title deeds that pre-exist 1948, why cannot Palestinians make similar claims in West Jerusalem?

The US involvement in the Khurd case demonstrates its desire to mark its red lines in East Jerusalem. The concern is that Israeli actions on the ground are seeking to unravel the outlines of an agreement being promoted by Washington to create some kind of circumscribed Palestinian state.

In the US view, the basis of such a deal is an exchange of letters between George W Bush and Ariel Sharon, the Israeli prime minister at the time, in spring 2004 in which the US president affirmed that Israel would not be expected to return to the armistice lines of 1949. Instead, he declared that Israel would be able to hold on to its “population centres” in the West Bank – code for the established settlement blocs.

As a result, the current US administration has turned a blind eye to continuing construction in the main settlements, home to most of the West Bank’s 250,000 settlers. The unstated agreement between Tel Aviv and Washington is that these areas will be annexed to Israel in a future peace deal.

In an indication of Israel’s confidence about the West Bank settlements, the Israeli media reported at the weekend that Ehud Barak, the defence minister and the leader of the Labor Party, had personally approved hundreds of new apartments for the settlers in the past few months.

The separation wall is being crafted to include these blocs, eating into one tenth of the West Bank and leaving only a few tens of thousands of settlers on the “wrong side”.

For the time being, the US is showing indecision only about two settlement-cities, Ariel and Ma’ale Adumim. If the wall encompasses them, it will effectively sever the West Bank into three parts.

In relation to East Jerusalem, the White House has so far appeared to favour maintaining the status quo. That would entail the eastern half of the city being carved up into a series of

complex zones, or “bubbles” as they have been described in the Israeli media.

Another 250,000 Jewish settlers live in East Jerusalem, though almost all of them reside in their own discreet colonies implanted between Palestinian neighbourhoods. These settlements are considered so established by Israelis that most of their inhabitants do not regard themselves as settlers.

However, the more ideological settlers of the kind taking over homes in Sheikh Jarrah refuse to accept partition of the city on any terms. They are trying to erode the Palestinians’ chances of ever controlling their own neighbourhoods in the eastern half of the city.

Backed by powerful allies in the courts, government and municipality, the settlers look set to continue expanding in East Jerusalem.

Nir Barkat, the millionaire businessman who was elected mayor of Jerusalem last week, forged close ties with some of the most extreme figures in the city’s settlement movement during his campaign.

Like his chief rival for the mayoralty, he has promised to build a new Jewish neighbourhood, called Eastern Gate, that will be home to at least 10,000 settlers on land next to the Palestinian neighbourhood of Anata.

The move, much like the eviction of the Khurds, has been greeted with silence from the government. Both developments are a sign of Washington’s powerlessness to force even the limited concessions it expects from Israel in East Jerusalem.

Jonathan Cook is a writer and journalist based in Nazareth, Israel. His new book is “Disappearing Palestine: Israel’s Experiments in Human Despair” (Zed Books). His website is www.jkcook.net.

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