

Israel Is Expanding Settlements in East Jerusalem at Unparalleled Rate

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Israeli military excavators demolish the house of the Palestinian Shuqairat family, which was reportedly built without a construction permit, in the Jabal Mukaber neighbourhood of Israeli-annexed east Jerusalem on January 3, 2024.

By Sharon Zhang* / TRUTHOUT

As Israeli forces have been carrying out their genocide of Gaza over the past six months, Israeli officials have been expanding construction of illegal settlements in East Jerusalem at a speed not previously seen

in modern times, new reporting finds.

In a report published Wednesday, The Guardian revealed that the Israeli government has approved or advanced the building of thousands of housing units, spread over 20 different projects.

The construction is being undertaken in areas of East Jerusalem that were formally annexed by Israeli officials in 1980, following Israel's occupation of the territory after the 1967 war.. The new housing will be available for Jewish settlers to move onto Palestinian land. Different government agencies, sometimes in collaboration with violent right-wing nationalist groups, are behind the projects, with the ultimate goal of expelling Palestinians from their homes and forcibly wresting control over all of Palestine.

At the same time, human rights advocates say that planning and construction of housing for Palestinians has been totally halted. Human rights experts in Israel say that the rate of projects being approved and moved forward just in the past six months is "unprecedented."

"The fast-tracking of these plans has been unparalleled in the last six months," Sari Kronish, a staffer at Israeli human rights group Bimkom – Planners for Planning Rights, told The Guardian. "While many government bodies were shuttered or had limited operation following 7 October, the planning authorities continued to plough forward, advancing these plans at unprecedented speed."

These plans appear to be timed strategically with the genocide, while Palestinians and foreign governments are likely to be paying more attention to Israel's indiscriminate slaughter in Gaza.

One of the settlements, for instance, was approved just 48 hours after the October 7 Hamas attack. The project, called Kidmat Zion, is located in the middle of a Palestinian neighborhood in the eastern part of East Jerusalem known as Ras al-Amud.

Another project, known as Givat Shaked, was originally proposed in the mid-1990s, but received planning approval in January of this year after decades of controversy over and international pressure against the plan. The plan encompasses high rises with hundreds of units to be built in the majority Muslim community of Beit Safafa, situated on the Green Line that demarcates the pre-1967 border between Israel and Palestine that Israeli occupiers have worked to blur.

"Many of the settlement plans are strategically designated for areas along the southern perimeter of East Jerusalem," Amy Cohen, a staffer for Israeli human rights group Ir Amim told The Guardian. "If constructed, they would further fracture the Palestinian space ... and create a 'sealing-off' effect of East Jerusalem from Bethlehem and the southern West Bank. Such moves directly undermine conditions necessary for a viable independent Palestinian state with a contiguous capital in East Jerusalem."

Israel has also been intensifying its settling of the occupied West Bank amid its genocide. A UN report last month found that settlements are expanding extremely rapidly as the Israeli government increases its collaboration with the violent settler movement to an "unprecedented" level.

Settlers have been attacking Palestinians in the West Bank at an increasing rate: stealing their belongings, setting their homes on fire and forcing them to leave their neighborhoods under threat with help from the Israeli military. Palestinians say that they have experienced some of the worst settler violence in living memory since Israel's genocide began.

This violence is fueling a record death toll in the West Bank. Last year, 507 Palestinians, including 124 children, were killed in the West Bank and East Jerusalem in the deadliest year for Palestinians since the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) began recording deaths in 2005. The death toll in the West Bank was more than triple the previous record high, which was recorded in 2022.

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