

Jerusalem Diary

January - May 2006

The **stunning win of Hamas in Jerusalem in January 25, 2006 parliamentary elections marked a sea-change in Jerusalem's political scene**, which was once dominated by Faisal Hussein, head of Fatah in the West Bank and Palestinian Authority Minister Without Portfolio. The death of Hussein in May 2001 and the closure of the Orient House and its satellite institutions five months later by Israeli authorities caused a receding of political activity in Jerusalem. This gap has been filled in recent years by the Islamic Movement in Israel, which organizes near-daily tour buses to Jerusalem markets and religious sites. As the elected representatives of Palestinians in the city, Hamas now faces the job of bringing residents' agenda to the fore.

Already, however, the three Hamas parliamentary representatives, Mahmud Abu Tir, Ahmad 'Atur, and Muhammad Totah, face a direct Israeli challenge to their representation. **On May 30, the members were sent letters from Interior Minister Roni Bar-On saying that they had 30 days to resign from the Hamas movement or they would have to turn over to Israel the Jerusalem identity cards that allow them to move in the city.** The notice was made one month after the Israeli cabinet announced it had decided to rescind the Hamas representatives' residency in response to their refusal to denounce a suicide bombing claimed by Islamic Jihad.

"East Jerusalem is an integral part of the Occupied Territories," writes the Israeli human rights organization B'Tselem, "so its Palestinian residents are protected by the Fourth Geneva Convention, which prohibits the occupying power from forcibly transferring civilians from their homes. Israel's proposed action would flagrantly violate Israel's obligations under the Convention." **Three Arab members of the Israeli Knesset met in solidarity with the parliamentarians on April 19**, causing a political uproar in Israel.

The elections themselves were marred by restrictions on campaigning. On January 18, **seven activists from the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine were arrested** at al-Dar Hotel as they prepared to hold a press conference. They were held by Israeli police for seven hours and then released after paying a 2,000 NIS fine.

Third Way candidate Hanan Ashrawi told *bitterlemons.org* on January 16, 2006 that her party's kick-off event in the city was met by border police and harassment. "There is also another dimension," she related, "which is the rumor campaign, a campaign of intimidation and fear, whereby people are told that [if they vote] they will lose their residency rights, their identity cards and their social rights—and hence we will lose Jerusalem. We have to break multiple sieges. There is a territorial siege with the settlements, a security siege at the checkpoints, a physical siege from the wall, a current political siege with elections, and a psychological siege, in the form of this fear and intimidation. We have to break through all of these in order to energize and re-invigorate the Palestinians of Jerusalem."

Using the voter lists from previous elections, 6,300 Palestinians were allowed to vote at three stations in post offices within the city. Another 125,000 Jerusalemite Palestinians (48 percent of the population) were allowed to vote in 14 stations in the Jerusalem area. Voting was monitored by international observers, and ballot boxes then brought to ar-Ram for counting.

A survey by the Jerusalem Institute for Israel Studies found that **63 percent of Israelis agree that concessions be made in Jerusalem in the context of a real peace with the Palestinians**, reported Peace Now's 27 March, 2006 *Middle East Peace Report*. According to the poll, 54 percent of Israelis are prepared to give up Arab neighborhoods of East Jerusalem, but not the Old City, the Jewish Quarter, or the Western Wall. Another 35 percent of Israelis do not agree to any concessions regarding Jerusalem. The Institute reported this as a substantial softening of Israeli attitudes since the 2003 elections.

Israel's construction of a series of walls, patrol roads, barbed wire fences and guard towers through the heart of East Jerusalem has been challenged by Israelis on two fronts. On the one hand, the security establishment is frustrated by hold-ups to construction caused by Palestinian appeals to the High Court. Their case suffered a blow when **the Israeli High Court ruled against the state on 4 July against allowing the barrier to remain in place, annexing the settlement of Tzofin to Israel along with much of the land of the village of Azzun** in the northern West Bank. The court said that the state had lied, hiding political considerations under security rational.

On the other hand, the route of the 'Jerusalem Envelope' is being met by considerable challenges from retired security officials. The planned route will expand Jerusalem's metropolitan borders from 126.4 square kilometers to 233.8 square kilometers, incorporated 152,000 "extra" Palestinians within its route. **The Council of Peace and Security has objected to the expanded route, saying that "a fence with Palestinians living on both sides of it is not a security fence"** and arguing that the barrier should be constructed along a route that is shorter, cheaper and quicker to build, reported *Ha'aretz* on June 6. One week later, Defense Minister Amir Peretz was reported to be reviewing the route of the barrier in order to keep as few Palestinians as possible from its western or "Israeli" side.

But even as the barrier threatens to sever Palestinian access to Jerusalem, Israel records a decline in Jewish population. **The number of Jews in the city is greater than the number of Arabs, noted the Israel Bureau of Statistics, but there has been a consistent decrease in the proportion of Jewish residents.** In 1967, Jews constituted 74 percent of the population, while by 2004 that number had dropped to 66 percent. At the end of 2004, some 414,300 (59 percent) of Jerusalem's residents lived in the city's Jewish settlements, 44 percent of them Jews. **In 2005, a 48 percent increase in the number of tourists (from both Israel and abroad) staying in Jerusalem hotels was recorded** - 2,930,100 tourists in 2005 compared to 1,981,200 in 2004. Hotel profits also rose by 32 percent.

A group of **36 international aid agencies working in the Palestinian**

territories held a Jerusalem press conference on May 4 to warn against the deteriorating humanitarian situation in Gaza six months after the Israeli redeployment. Jan Coffey, Save the Children UK Programme Manager, reported that “the situation in Gaza is very bleak with 78 percent of the population living under the poverty line of less than US\$ 2.1 per person per day, and 10 percent of children under the age of five suffering from chronic malnutrition.” The organizations emphasized that they do not have the capacity to replace the institutions of the Palestinian Authority, in the event that ongoing Israeli and international sanctions against the Hamas-led

government were to cause the collapse of public services.

A movie about the Palestinian soccer team, “Goal Dreams”, premiered in early June on the barrier in Abu Dis outside Jerusalem. The film describes the newly-formed Palestinian team’s ordeal as it tries to practice for a qualifying match against Uzbekistan. The team is comprised of players from the West Bank and Gaza Strip, as well as the Diaspora. Co-director Jeffery Saunders said, “We wanted a venue where as many people could see the film as possible. And besides, what’s the biggest flat surface that you can find?”