
Al-Walaja: Unpermitted Checkpoint Construction Final Development in Sealing off a Village between Jerusalem and Gush Etzion

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Last Wednesday, February 14, the Jerusalem Municipality initiated construction of a new checkpoint on the edge of Al-Walaja – the final step in blocking the village’s access to a national park built on land confiscated from its residents. Jerusalem Mayor Nir Barkat and Minister of Jerusalem Affairs Ze’ev Elkin inaugurated the Emek Refaim National Park several weeks ago, opening the gates to another national park plan that will serve the dual purpose of normalizing the confiscation of Palestinian land under the guise of parks and recreation while further insulating the Palestinian village, sandwiched between the city and the Gush Etzion settlement bloc south of Jerusalem.

The new checkpoint will replace the one now in operation between Al-Walaja and Gilo, bringing it directly to the edge of the village ([red star on map](#)) in order to block resident’s access to 1,200 dunams of national park land between the village and the Green Line. The park will deepen the isolation of the village, already encircled by the Separation Barrier on its East Jerusalem side (half of the village lies beyond the municipal border, in the West Bank). Completion of the checkpoint is the final step before launch of operations at the national park visitor center at Ein Haniya – a large spring central to the community life of Al-Walaja and no longer available to its residents.

On February 12, the District Committee approved a permit for construction, rejecting separate objections from residents of Al-Walaja and the Har Gilo settlement. Despite the committee granting a week for the attorney for the residents of Al-Walaja to submit an appeal, the Municipality – which initiated and is funding the multi-million shekel project – launched construction two days later. The director general of the Municipality, Amnon Merhav, personally supervised the illegal construction, refusing to halt the equipment when confronted by the residents’ attorney and Ir Amim field researcher, Aviv Tatarsky. Tatarsky was arrested and jailed on his way to work the following morning for disrupting the peace.

Developments in al-Walaja - [more than half of which is under threat of demolition, on its annexed side](#) - must be seen in the context of a much larger campaign to consolidate the southern perimeter of East Jerusalem and fatally disrupt contiguity with the West Bank. Over the last several years, Israel has steadily promoted plans toward this end, including ongoing expansion of Har Homa and Gilo; approval of plans in Givat Hamatos, which would supplant Har Homa as the newest settlement in East Jerusalem; and construction of the six lane highway through residential Beit Safafa, which serves to further disrupt

contiguity between East Jerusalem and the Bethlehem area while reinforcing the connection between settlements in the West Bank and Jerusalem.

All of these actions are punctuated by the national park plan, which will add a final layer of isolation around al-Walaja and strengthen the connection between Jerusalem and the Gush Etzion settlement bloc - one of the three major blocs, including Ma'ale Adumim/E-1 and Givat Ze'ev - that comprise Israel's vision of a "Greater Jerusalem". That vision - the de facto annexation of these blocs to the city - has now been concretized in a bill of the same name. While that bill was taken off the agenda of the Ministerial Committee on Legislation in late 2017; in January, the Knesset passed Amendment 2 to the Basic Law: Jerusalem, Capital of Israel, complicating division of the city under any future political resolution and easing open the door to [legislation to redraw the borders of the city](#) and transfer some 120,000 Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem.

Please direct all inquiries to:

Betty Herschman

Director of International Relations & Advocacy

Ir Amim (City of Nations/City of Peoples)

Jerusalem

betty@ir-amim.org.il

054-308-5096

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