

Israel to Destroy another Haifa Neighborhood, evict Palestinian Residents

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by Patrick O. Strickland

Many of the historic homes in Haifa's al-Mahatta neighborhood have already been demolished.

An Israeli municipality plans to demolish al-Mahatta, a historic Palestinian neighborhood in [Haifa](#).

It will be replaced by the expansion of an existing railway, new housing units, nightclubs and restaurants, among other venues designed to bring in increased tourist revenues.



([Baladna](#))

"Since I was five years old, I've been hearing that al-Mahatta is going to be completely destroyed ... but today, I can't imagine that we have more than two or three years left in our homes," George Eskandar, chairman of al-Mahatta's neighborhood committee, told The Electronic Intifada.

Around 160 people from more than 30 families are facing eviction. All of them carry Israeli citizenship.

Eskandar, 34, lives with his wife and four-year-old son in his family's home. He and his wife also work as actors. "This is where I was born and where I've spent my whole life," he said.

The program to demolish al-Mahatta is part of an already approved national plan to develop coastal areas up and down present-day Israel. Haifa's municipality has until the end of 2014 to decide the local details of the plan for al-Mahatta, and another five years to fully implement it.

Only two of the remaining structures — one of which is a local church — will be left standing once Israel's plans for al-Mahatta are carried out.

Until now, the plan has only been implemented in the form of individual [housing demolitions](#) and evictions on a home-to-home basis.

Already destroyed

Since Israel's establishment in 1948, the state has sought ways to gentrify al-Mahatta and the surrounding area. "But the policy has only been implemented in recent years," Eskandar said.

During the period of the British Mandate of Palestine (1920-1948), there were more than 600 families in al-Mahatta. As recently as the early 1990s, around 1,500 persons lived in the neighborhood.

Yet several decades of pressure and systematic neglect from the local municipality and the state forced most of the indigenous Palestinian residents to move elsewhere.

Today, only 33 homes are still standing; the rest have all been demolished. Nearly half of them belong to Amidar, a state-owned housing company. "Every time a family gives up and leaves, the policy is that their home is demolished," Eskandar said.

In the majority of cases, Amidar denies tenants the home repairs that they request until they are able to declare the structure too dangerous to live in and kick out the residents.

Caged

Today, al-Mahatta only has one entrance and is caged by a large fence surrounding the neighboring port, the railway, and Highway 2, which connects [Tel Aviv](#) to the northern coastal region in present-day Israel.

In the case of al-Mahatta, the homes all have recognized building permits. The residents are also subject to local and national taxes.

Yet like in [Wadi al-Siyah](#) and other Palestinian neighborhoods [slated for demolition in Haifa](#), residents have been denied basic municipal services for years. Al-Mahatta has suffered from restrictions on building, development, expansion and land purchasing.

"Other than electricity and water, they do not receive any of the services that the municipality is supposed to provide them," said Jumana Eghbariyya, a lawyer at the Social Development Committee—Haifa, an advocacy group that works for the civil and collective rights of Palestinian residents of the city.

Since 1948, there have been no clinics, schools or street lights provided to the neighborhood. Furthermore, every 15 minutes a train roars past the neighborhood, which doesn't have the same acoustic walls present in Jewish areas next to the railway and are designed to mitigate the immensely loud noise.

"The right to object"



Haifa's historic al-Mahatta neighborhood faces destruction.

([Baladna](#))

“Frankly, this is not about the municipality destroying our neighborhood,” Eskandar lamented. “The neighborhood has already been destroyed.”

Furthermore, Israel plans to install an electrification system on the railway tracks that pass through al-Mahatta — potentially a serious health risk for locals due to radiation, according to Israel’s own Environmental Protection Ministry (“[Israeli train electrification plan may be scrapped due to radiation](#),” *Haaretz*, 12 December 2012).

Despite numerous requests for information and clarity, al-Mahatta’s residents have been given only vague answers regarding the neighborhood’s future. The government has not bothered to inform locals or ask for their input. Eskandar remarked, “Why is the municipality doing this behind our backs? We have the right to object to this plan.”

Haifa’s mayor, [Yona Yahav](#), has refused to work with the neighborhood committee to seek an alternative plan that would allow residents to stay in their homes.

In Jewish Israeli neighborhoods in Haifa, the local municipality encourages public participation before embarking on development projects. Yet in Palestinian neighborhoods there are little or no efforts to accommodate the needs and wants of the residents.

“In Jewish neighborhoods, there are public forums and meetings to discuss the future of the area,” Eghbariyya said. “In Arab neighborhoods, the plans are simply announced without talking to anyone. The Palestinian neighborhoods should be treated just like Jewish areas in the city... unfortunately this is the policy not just in Haifa, but across the state.”

Eghbariyya pointed out that Haifa is often promoted by Israel as a city of coexistence between Palestinian residents and Jewish Israelis. “But before there is this coexistence, we want [Israel] to stop deciding the terms of our existence for us.”

In 2013, Orwa Switat, a local urban planner and activist, established a neighborhood committee along with others. Its goal is to raise awareness about al-Mahatta’s plight. “We are planning to reach out to human rights groups and political parties to spread the word,” Switat said.

“Ethnic gentrification”

“This is ethnic gentrification because it only pushes out poorer Arab citizens ... This is colonialism turning the ruins of the [Nakba](#) into an economic pearl for the state to bring in profit,” Switat added. The Nakba (catastrophe in Arabic) is the forced displacement of Palestinians before and after Israel’s foundation in 1948.

“We want to be part of the decision-making process,” he added. “We are not just a poor neighborhood on the edge of Haifa, we are the origins of the city. Any plans for development should empower us and preserve our Palestinian heritage.”

Nonetheless, he added that there was little hope among residents because “our presence threatens the Zionist narrative of this country’s history.”

Similar gentrification projects are taking place in historically Palestinian cities across present-day Israel.

In [Jaffa](#), indigenous Palestinian residents, generally from the lower rungs of the

socioeconomic ladder, have suffered in recent years as Israeli investors buy and renovate property, causing prices to skyrocket.

In [Acre](#) (Akka), Israel [plans to demolish a historical mosque](#), Khan al-Umdan, and put a luxury hotel in its place.

“Erasing history”

Christian Zionists from the United States and Israel are working closely [to establish an international university campus in Nazareth](#), designed to bring in Jewish Israeli and international students and further fragment Palestinian contiguity in the [Galilee](#) region.

[Palestinians citizens of Israel](#) make up some 1.5 million people, or 20 percent of Israel’s citizenry. Despite their nominal citizenship, this minority faces severe restrictions on their political and cultural rights, and regularly suffers from land theft and housing demolitions.

In occupied [East Jerusalem](#) and the broader [West Bank](#), Israeli policies also aim to expel Palestinians and make space for [Jewish-only settlements](#) or expand existing ones.

“There is a policy of erasing the entire history of the Palestinian people in this state. Unfortunately, our neighborhood is just another example of the policy of expulsion,” said Eskandar.

“We’re here, we’re present on the map. We are doing everything we can to stay in our homes. Our history is here, our roots are here, and our memories are here. I’m from here.”

Patrick O. Strickland is an independent journalist and frequent contributor to The Electronic Intifada. His writing can be found at www.patrickostrickland.com. Follow him on Twitter [@P_Strickland](#).

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