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# Jerusalem orders Palestinian homes to be razed

Chris McGreal in Jerusalem  
Saturday June 4, 2005

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Jerusalem's city council has ordered one of the largest mass demolitions in the city's recent history, with plans to raze the homes of about 1,000 Palestinians in a neighbourhood claimed by Jewish settlers.

The council says about 90 buildings served with demolition orders were built illegally over the last three decades on a site of religious and archaeological value just outside the Old City walls, and that they are being destroyed to restore the area as a national park.

But Israeli human rights campaigners say the real intent is to forcibly remove Palestinians from an area, Silwan, that is an important link in the government's plan to encircle Arab East Jerusalem with Jewish settlements.

Meir Margalit, a former city councillor leading opposition to the demolitions, said: "It will undermine a solution to the conflict, because the government is trying to make it impossible for East Jerusalem to be the Palestinian capital."

The targeted houses make up the Al Bustan neighbourhood in Silwan, in an area the city council calls King's Valley because it was the

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site of King David's city.

The demolitions were ordered by the city engineer, Uri Shetrit, in a letter last November but were kept under wraps until dozens of demolition orders went out in recent weeks.

"This hill and its surrounding neighbourhood dates from 5,000 years ago," the letter says. "These remains have an international and national value and they give the city its status as one of the most valuable cities in the world."

But the opposition leader on the council, Alalu Jose, said there was almost nothing left of King David's city: "I confronted Shetrit after he sent out the letter ordering the demolitions and said, 'This has nothing to do with archaeology or parks, it's all about politics.'"

A controversial settler organisation, Elad, partially funded by the government, has already taken over more than 40 buildings in the area.

Mr Margalit said: "There is a much bigger plan here, aimed at ensuring Israeli control of all of Jerusalem even after there is a Palestinian state."

He acknowledged that many of the affected houses were built illegally, but says that was because of a council policy not to issue construction permits to Palestinians. The mayor of Jerusalem, Uri Lupolianski, has declined to comment publicly on the demolitions.

Among those served with a demolition order is Mo hammed Badran, who says he was born in 1961 in the house the council now wants to raze.

Mr Badran has papers from the British mandate era in the 20s that appear to show his grandfather owned the land where the house now stands.

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"I have been taxed on this house since the day they introduced it to East Jerusalem in 1973," he said. "If the house was illegal, why did they take the tax?"

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