

Evictions in Jerusalem Become Focus of Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

The effort to evict six Arab families from a contested neighborhood has drawn attention to the Israeli effort to remove Palestinians from parts of East Jerusalem and led to protests.

By Patrick Kingsley

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JERUSALEM — In confrontations with Palestinian protesters over the past week in Sheikh Jarrah, a Palestinian neighborhood in East Jerusalem, the Israeli police sprayed so much skunk water, a noxious liquid used to deter demonstrators, that its stench lingered over nearby streets.

The symbolism of the neighborhood extends much further. In the space of a week, Sheikh Jarrah has become the centerpiece of spiking tensions between Israelis and Palestinians in East Jerusalem, and has galvanized Palestinians and their advocates across the world, from the Palestinian leadership in Ramallah and Gaza, to lawmakers and officials in nearby Jordan and faraway Washington.

On Monday, the Israeli Supreme Court is set to decide whether to uphold the eviction of six families from the neighborhood in favor of Jewish settlers. The decades-old legal battle over the fate of a few dozen Palestinians, which Israeli officials dismiss as “a real estate dispute,” has become emblematic of a wider effort to remove thousands of Palestinians from strategic areas in East Jerusalem and a stand-in for the whole decades-long Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

“They don’t want Arabs here, or across East Jerusalem,” said Abdelfatah Skafi, 71, one of the Palestinians facing eviction, during a protest this week. “They want to expel the Arabs, and that way they will be able to surround the Old City,” the contested ancient core of Jerusalem that contains sites sacred to Jews, Muslims and Christians.

Protesters have gathered nightly in Sheikh Jarrah over the past week, clashing with riot police and far-right Israeli groups.

Battles erupted on Friday night inside the iconic Aqsa mosque compound, as thousands of worshipers leaving Friday Prayer threw stones at Israeli police officers, who threw stun grenades and fired rubber-coated bullets, wounding more than 150 people. Video showed stun grenades landing inside prayer rooms.

Images of police violence at the Sheikh Jarrah protests have drawn sharp criticism from sympathetic members of Congress as well as the Jordanian government, which controlled East Jerusalem until 1967.

And they prompted an ominous threat from the military wing of Hamas, the Islamist group that rules the Gaza Strip, which promised that “the enemy would pay a very heavy price” if measures against Sheikh Jarrah residents were not halted.

Jewish settlers and right-wing Israeli activists are also taking a stand there. They say that the Palestinian residents are squatters, and that the district, which is built beside the tomb of a Jewish high priest from antiquity, was Jewish until 1948.

“I would ask you,” said Aryeh King, a settler leader and deputy mayor of Jerusalem, “if you are the owner of the property and somebody is squatting on your property, wouldn’t you have the right to take him out from your property?”

Hundreds of East Jerusalem residents have gathered in Sheikh Jarrah each night for the past week to argue the opposite. Their vigils often begin with outdoor iftar meals, marking the end of the daily Ramadan fast, followed by protests and dancing, culminating in clashes with the police. The police have charged them on horseback, sprayed them with skunk water and thrown stun grenades.

Cars have been burned, guns drawn, scores arrested. Last month, a Jewish member of Parliament from a predominantly Arab party was beaten by the police. On Thursday night, a far-right lawmaker, Itamar Ben Gvir, set up a makeshift office opposite a home listed for eviction, setting off a brawl between protesters and settlers.

The United Nations and the European Union have expressed alarm.

“We’re deeply concerned about the heightened tensions in Jerusalem,” the State Department spokeswoman Jalina Porter said Friday, calling for calm “to de-escalate tensions and avoid violent confrontation.”

The Israeli government has tried to play down the conflict, describing the case as a private matter between the Arab families who moved to the neighborhood in the 1950s, and the settler groups whom Israeli courts have ruled are the legal owners of the families’ homes.

In a statement on Friday, the Israeli Foreign Ministry said the Palestinian Authority and Palestinian terrorists were “presenting a real-estate dispute between private parties as a nationalistic cause in order to incite violence in Jerusalem.”

There have been small weekly protests in Sheikh Jarrah for years but the conflict has exploded over the past week as the Supreme Court neared its decision.

The escalation comes against the backdrop of rising tensions in Jerusalem. In April, the police restricted gatherings at a popular square in East Jerusalem, prompting clashes and demonstrations there. Far-right Israelis later marched through the city center, chanting “Death to Arabs,” amid mob attacks by both Jewish and Arab groups.



Israeli police officers guarding a home in Sheikh Jarrah occupied by Israeli settlers on Wednesday.

The recent postponement of Palestinian elections has added to Arab frustration. And the tension has been compounded by a power vacuum in Israel — which is without a permanent government after inconclusive elections in March — and several gun battles in the West Bank over the past week.

On Friday, Israeli officials said troops had killed two armed Palestinian militants, and wounded a third, who had attempted to enter Israel from the West Bank and fired on Israeli soldiers.

Analysts fear these tensions could boil over on Monday, when the Supreme Court is expected to rule on the Sheikh Jarrah case. The hearing coincides with Jerusalem Day — the annual Israeli celebration of the capture of the eastern half of the city in 1967, which pro-settler groups typically mark with a provocative march through Arab areas.

The dispute in Sheikh Jarrah originates in the 19th century, when historic Palestine was under Ottoman rule. Two Jewish trusts bought a section of the neighborhood from Arab landowners in 1876.

Jordan captured the area, along with the rest of East Jerusalem, in the Arab-Israeli war of 1948, and built dozens of homes there to house some of the hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees who had fled from what became Israel.

Israel captured the territory in 1967 and annexed East Jerusalem, later returning ownership of the Sheikh Jarrah homes to the Jewish trusts. They sold it to a right-wing settler group, which has tried to evict the residents ever since.

In 1982, the Palestinian residents signed an agreement accepting Jewish ownership of the land and allowing them to live there as protected tenants. But they have since rejected the agreement, saying they were tricked into signing it.

Some now dispute the Jewish ownership of the property. They have produced their own Ottoman-era land titles that they say undermine claims of historic Jewish ownership on at least part of the land.



Israeli police officers detain a Palestinian protester during demonstrations in Sheikh Jarrah on Wednesday.

But the settlers say that there is no question the property was bought by Jews in the 19th century. And they say that Jewish presence here in antiquity gives them the right to the city in perpetuity.

“I want Jerusalem to be Jewish,” said Yonatan Yosef, a Jewish settler in Sheikh Jarrah, and a former spokesman for the area’s settlements. “This land belonged to the Jewish nation, to the Jewish people.”

Several families on the street have already been replaced by settlers, while another has shared its home with settlers since they took over half of it in 2009.

Peace Now, an activist group that campaigns for a two-state solution to the conflict, estimates that about 200 homes housing more than 3,000 Palestinians in strategic areas near the Old City are under threat of eviction, while 20,000 Palestinian homes across the city are under threat of demolition.

Palestinians and rights advocates say the evictions are part of a wider strategy of reinforcing Jewish control over East Jerusalem, the area that Palestinians hope will be the capital of a future Palestinian state.

An urban master plan published by the Jerusalem authorities in 2004 explicitly set a goal of keeping the Arab proportion of the city population at 30 percent. In reality, the ratio has risen to closer to 40 percent.

Today's city leaders disagree about whether the evictions amount to a strategy of demographic change.

But Mr. King, the deputy mayor, said "of course" they are part of a wider strategy of installing "layers of Jews" throughout East Jerusalem.



A car belonging to Jewish settlers in Sheikh Jarrah was set on fire on Thursday.

That policy, Mr. King said, "is the way to secure the future of Jerusalem as a Jewish capital for the Jewish people."

"If we will not be in big numbers and if we will not be at the right places in strategic areas in East Jerusalem," he added, then future peace negotiators "will try to divide Jerusalem and to give part of Jerusalem to our enemy."

Palestinians and their advocates consider the evictions — coupled with restrictions on building permits, which force Palestinian residents of Jerusalem to either leave the city, or to build illegal housing vulnerable to demolition orders — as a kind of ethnic cleansing.

“It’s a land grab,” said Sami Abu Dayyeh, owner of the Ambassador Hotel in Sheikh Jarrah, some of whose land has been confiscated by the Israeli state in a separate case. “They are stealing land left and right.”

A spokesman for the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Rupert Colville, said Friday that the evictions “would violate Israel’s obligations under international law” prohibiting the forced transfer of residents from occupied territory.

If the court rules in favor of the landlords, the question remains of what happens to the Palestinian residents, who could be evicted as soon as next week. Israeli law allows Jews to reclaim ownership of land they vacated in 1948, but denies Palestinians the right to reclaim the properties they fled from in the same war.

Mr. Skafi, the Sheikh Jarrah resident, said his family lived in West Jerusalem before 1948, but has no legal recourse to reclaim the property.

“It’s the height of racism,” he said, shortly before the police fired another barrage of skunk water nearby. “Jews can get back their properties, but not the Arabs.”

But Fleur Hassan-Nahoum, a deputy mayor of Jerusalem, said the discrepancy was necessary to preserve Israel’s Jewish character.

“This is a Jewish country,” she said. “There’s only one. And of course there are laws that some people may consider as favoring Jews — it’s a Jewish state. It is here to protect the Jewish people.”