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Planning cooperation

[IN JERUSALEM Edition]

Jerusalem Post - Jerusalem

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Is Issawiya a blueprint for cooperation between Arab neighborhoods and the Jerusalem municipality

The village of Issawiya sets along the steep eastern slopes of Mount Scopus, dramatically overlooking the Judaeen desert. Strategically located, Issawiya, with a population of about 12,000 residents, borders the Hebrew University to the south, French Hill and Hadassah Hospital to the West, the Tzammeret HaBira neighborhood to the north, and the Jerusalem-Ma'aleh Adumim road to the east.

The village has been here for hundreds of years, and was incorporated into the municipality of Jerusalem after 1967. By most counts, with this setting and location, Issawiya should be thriving. It's not.

Security forces have blocked off the pathway between the road leading to the University and into Jerusalem. Although most of the residents of the village hold Israeli identity cards, unemployment is high and the villagers are poor. Violence, drugs, and petty crime are on the rise.

Issawiya has grown haphazardly and dangerously. The construction is dense, and most of the buildings are far higher than the legally- permitted two or three floors. Some of the houses extend onto the sidewalk, creating a hazard for pedestrians, most of them children. Construction of some roads was started years ago, but never completed. There are almost no green spaces. Although municipal spokesmen claim that Issawiya receives the same sanitation services as any other neighborhood, trash bags line the sidewalks.

In 1991, the Jerusalem municipality approved Master Plan number 2316 for the development of Issawiya. But the plan, which failed to take into account the birth rates, population growth, and expansion of the neighborhood, quickly became outmoded and irrelevant.

Even without the master plan, Issawiya, thanks to an active and cohesive leadership of family elders and representatives, has been able to get some of its needs addressed. In 1990, a committee of leaders pressured

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the municipality to provide a sewage system, since the antiquated cesspit system was in danger of collapsing and residents were forced to empty buckets of sewage onto the main road. In 1995, the villagers met with then-Mayor Ehud Olmert to discuss their difficulties and the need to redraw the overall master plan for Issawiya.

Olmert promised to act, but since then, the municipality has stalled. Although no plan has been developed, the municipality has appropriated nearly 80% of the village's 12,000 dunams, leaving the village with 2,400 dunams, only 1,100 of which are within the municipal borders of Jerusalem.

Much of the Mount Scopus Hebrew University campus and the expanded Hadassah Hospital were built on what was once village- owned property. Most recently, the University's new Institute for Contemporary Judaism was built on land that was specifically re- zoned for that purpose. However, the adjacent village land has not been re-zoned.

Under the original 1991 plan, which utilizes only 666 dunams of the 2,400 available to the Issawiya community, it is almost impossible to receive building permits. Planning committee member Mahmoud Abu Humus explains that illegal construction is a necessity.

"Families grow and there's nowhere to build. It's not like with the Jews who are more mobile and can move from one city to another. In Arab society people live near their families. Where else can we go? Nearby Pisgat Ze'ev is not exactly inviting Arab families to come live there." Says Darwish Darwishi, head of the local planning committee, "They [municipal officials] are not really interested in building but in destroying. Last year, 12 houses were destroyed in a single day. The cost of the house demolitions could have easily taken care of the roads and the sanitation," he adds.

Municipal officials deny that they have demolished any homes in Issawiya over the past few months.

Hoping to resolve their difficulties by extending and updating the master plan for their village, in 2002, village leaders turned to Bimkom, a non-governmental organization devoted to human rights in spatial planning established in 1999.

Bimkom professionals believe that planners must consult with residents, not only since it is the residents who will benefit or suffer from the plan, but also since residents have "knowledge of place." Residents are the ones conversant in the life-habits, local agendas and traffic flows and their knowledge can effectively complement the professional knowledge of formally trained engineers and planners.

The Bimkom activists took upon themselves to mediate between the village residents and the municipal authorities, to create a plan that would benefit all sides.

Viewing the planning process as an issue of civil rights, Bimkom initially began the process by educating village residents regarding the workings of the establishment. Bimkom convened town meetings, in which villagers were encouraged to define the parameters and preferences of a new master plan, and organized workshops to teach villagers about their rights and the professional and political jargon of a field that impacts heavily on their daily lives.

A survey of the villagers' preferences indicated that the villagers wanted more social activities. However, since most of the land is private, they couldn't agree on a mechanism to appropriate land for these services. The villagers have also expressed a desire for more shopping areas, and park, garden, and "green" spaces.

Together, the professionals and the residents drafted a map showing land ownership and current construction. Meetings were held with the municipality, Israel Land Authority, interior ministry and other public officials to appraise them of the villagers' needs and preferences.

At present, the 12,000 residents live in 1,800 homes. By 2020, Bimkom expects the population to reach 20,800 residents. If illegal construction is taken into account, more than 800 dunams are already serving as residential space. Bimkom is therefore seeking the re-zoning of an additional 720 dunams, including 350 for homes, 200 for public spaces, 20 for industry and trade, and 150 for roads.

In cooperation with Haifa-based architect Eran Mebel, Bimkom, in the name of the villagers, has submitted two alternative plans for municipal approval. One plan projects expansion northward across the Jerusalem-Ma'aleh Adumim road, and the other expands southward, toward the Mount Scopus underpass.

The municipality does acknowledge that the 1991 plan is inadequate, and a more recent "Jerusalem 2000" plan, published six months ago, replaces this older version and points to the future eastward and westward development of Jerusalem. Furthermore, since these plans are usually updated every 10 years, Issawiya's plan is long overdue and should now be up for revision anyway.

City officials have requested planning costs so far underwritten by Bimkom's donors to be budgeted in 2005, and the relevant municipality departments have been alerted that costs for the plan's implementation should be budgeted in the very near future.

The municipality, however, disagrees with Bimkom's numbers, and the negotiations are now focusing on how much additional land is needed.

The municipality, according to Bimkom project manager Efrat Cohen-Bar, "is prepared to merely legalize the space already commandeered for illegal construction and to approve an additional scrap of land that's not

nearly enough.

"Before they approve additional land, they want us first to prove that what exists is not enough. It's like proving you don't have a sister," Cohen-Bar complains.

But the municipality is adamant.

Osnat Post, Deputy City Engineer at the Jerusalem Municipality, insists that these demands are not capricious or discriminatory, and notes the the various "green" and pro-environment organizations make similar demands of all planning proposals.

"We've come to realize that expansion outside Jerusalem comes on account of developing the inner city," she says. "The same is true for Issawiya. Before we grant additional land, we need to make sure that the areas already populated are properly utilized."

Yet, despite this disagreement, the process is moving forward, and the Bimkom professions believe that their intervention may be the start of a unique form of cooperation between Arab villages within Jerusalem and municipal officials.

"We have never actually written a plan like this," Bimkom spokeswoman Shuli Hartman says. "This is usually the responsibility of the establishment. This project may serve as a model, and hopefully, the municipality will continue in the positive manner they began."

Municipal officials are pleased, too. "Although this is not the first time we are cooperating with residents of an Arab village in drafting master plans, this is the first time Bimkom is part of the package," Post told In Jerusalem.

Working with a outside organization makes the municipality's life easier, Post says, since, given the current political atmosphere, the villagers might be suspicious of the municipality's motives for rejecting or approving a specific plan or proposal. "Since Bimkom also seeks to maintain a level of professional demands, it doesn't seem [to the villagers] as if the establishment is simply trying to raise obstacles," she says.

Credit: Eran Mebel

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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