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Givat Hamatos to be first Jewish neighborhood in East Jerusalem to be built since Har Homa was established during Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's first term, in the late 1990s.

By Akiva Eldar Tags : Jerusalem

For the first time since Har Homa was established, during Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's first term, in the late 1990s, a new Jewish neighborhood in East Jerusalem is slated for building.

On Tuesday a reparcelization plan was published for Givat Hamatos, in south Jerusalem. The plan calls for building 2,610 residential units, one third of them as part of an expansion of the Palestinian village of Beit Safafa, on the southern border of the capital.

The land included in the construction plans is owned by the state, which holds ultimate authority over the project. Objections or reservations to the plan must be submitted within 60 days of the plan's publication. A report about the intention to establish the neighborhood reached Washington and European capitals on the eve of the Sukkot holiday, sparking criticism from U.S. and European officials.

While the Jerusalem District Planning Council vetted development plans for other Jewish neighborhoods in East Jerusalem, it is the Jerusalem Municipality that must make the decisions about Givat Hamatos. Given the right-wing composition of its planning and building committee, swift approval is expected. Even if Netanyahu were to give in to international pressure he would have a hard time halting the project. Yet the fact that the Israel Lands Administration has released the plan means the political leadership has the authority to freeze it at any stage, even if the Jerusalem city council approves it.

Right-wing activists are likely to object to the idea of using public land to build more housing for a Palestinian neighborhood. Beit Safafa suffers for severe overcrowding, and very few building permits have been issued for the neighborhood.

The plan to build 1,700 homes for Jews in Givat Hamatos is more ambitious than the 1,100 new residences planned for Gilo, which earned a sharp rebuke to Netanyahu from German Chancellor Angela Merkel as well as criticism in Washington.

Building the new neighborhood in Givat Hamatos would impede an agreement with the Palestinians based on the framework proposed by President Bill Clinton and frustrate attempts to create territorial contiguity between Palestinian neighborhoods in the Jerusalem area.

The scope and location of the plans conform to the Housing Ministry's E1 plan, designed to connect Jerusalem with Ma'aleh Adumim. For years Israel has not taken action to implement this plan owing to stiff opposition articulated by the United States. The Givat Hamatos plan also accords with other initiatives to expand Israeli power and control in East Jerusalem beyond the 1967 Green Line while creating a settlement belt including the expansion of Gilo and Har Homa in the south and Pisgat Ze'ev and Ramat Shlomo in the north.

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