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Jerusalem Arab residents contest highway route

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A new Israeli highway project is threatening to add to tensions in Jerusalem by cutting through a quiet, middleclass Arab neighborhood to link a large bloc of Jewish settlements to the city.

The project comes during a flurry of Israeli building in east Jerusalem, the section of the city claimed by the Palestinians as their future capital.

City officials say the road is meant to serve everyone. Critics counter that the road is part of a grand scheme, including construction of thousands of apartments, to solidify Israel's control over the area and sever the connection between the holy city and any future Palestinian state.

"It changes the geography and demography in ways that will make a two-state solution very, very difficult," said Aviv Tatarsky of Ir Amim, an organization that lobbies for equitable treatment of Jews and Arabs in Jerusalem.

The highway project is just four kilometers (2.5 miles) long and will complete a north-south route across the city. It will link two of Israel's most contentious roads, allowing Israeli Jews living in the southern West Bank to zip into Jerusalem and to the coastal city of Tel Aviv with barely a stop.

Israeli work crews have already moved into the Arab neighborhood of Beit Safafa in southeast Jerusalem, and begun construction on the 1.5-kilometer (1-mile) section through the neighborhood.

City officials say the extension will improve transport for Jerusalem's Arabs and Jews. They said they couldn't hold up infrastructure development while waiting for a resolution to the

decades-old Mideast conflict.

Even if Jerusalem is divided to serve as the future capitals of Israel and Palestine, the road networks would likely be shared, said deputy mayor Naomi Tsur.

"Whatever the future status of Jerusalem, people have to have access from one end of the city to the other," Tsur said. "They still have to get to work, clinics, schools and universities ... even if half the city is Palestine, they will have to have access."

Beit Safafa residents say the project is destroying their community by separating thousands of residents from the neighborhood's center, where the schools and medical clinics are. In an area where olive and almond trees still peek out among buildings, they also warn that the construction will remove what little remains of their rural past.

"Children will be cut off from school, the elderly from mosques," said resident Alaa Salman. "When somebody dies in our village we carry them with our hands to our cemetery. How will we do that after the road is built? All that will change," he said.

Residents have built a protest tent on part of the highway's route, and others have scrawled angry red and yellow signs near where bulldozers churned up land on a recent day. They are meeting municipal officials, organizing protests and petitioning Israel's Supreme Court to move the highway underground.

Tsur said the city is trying to minimize disruption to Beit Safafa's residents.

The city is planning to bury 180 meters (600 feet) of the Beit Safafa route and build parks on top. Tsur said concrete walls and acoustic barriers will conceal exposed highway sections. Planners promised to soundproof windows of nearby homes and build vehicle and pedestrian bridges to link the neighborhood.

Yair Singer, chief project engineer, said the new road will ease traffic from two settlements on Jerusalem's southern outskirts, Gilo and Har Gilo, and bypass congested urban roads. More than 60,000 people live there now, making the need for a new road more pressing, Singer said.

The underlying issue is Israel's control over the West Bank and east Jerusalem, territories it captured in the 1967 Mideast war. After the war, Israel annexed east Jerusalem and surrounding West Bank territory to the city's municipal boundaries, claiming the entire city as its capital. Most of the international community does not recognize that move.

Palestinians seek these areas for their future state, with annexed parts of Jerusalem as their capital. The competing claims to east Jerusalem, which is home to sensitive Jewish, Christian and Muslim holy sites, has been the most explosive issue in past Israeli-Palestinian peace talks and has led to periodic bouts of violence.

Complicating the equation is some half-million Israelis who live in Jewish settlements in those areas. Nearly half of them live in east Jerusalem, where settlements are integrated as regular neighborhoods.

According to Peace Now, an anti-settlement watchdog group, Israel approved tenders to build 2,386 homes in east Jerusalem, a nearly eight-fold increase over the previous year and the highest level of construction in more than a decade. In all, some 9,000 housing units are

believed to be in various stages of planning.

The international community has repeatedly condemned Israeli settlement construction and supported efforts to create a Palestinian state, including a vote last November at the U.N. to recognize a future Palestine in the West Bank, Gaza Strip and east Jerusalem.

Netanyahu opposes any withdrawal from east Jerusalem. He has given grudging agreement to the need to establish a Palestinian state, but peace efforts remain stalled, in large part because of Palestinian objections to continued settlement construction.

The road project appears to be part of a larger Israeli plan for Jerusalem. The final stretch of the Begin highway, named after the late Prime Minister Menachem Begin, is crucial for consolidating Israeli control.

The decades-old project will link Route 60, a thoroughfare for West Bank settlements southeast of Jerusalem, to Route 443, a highway that links Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. Route 443 has drawn criticism because part of it runs through the West Bank.

Along with the road, several thousand new apartments are in various stages of planning in the east Jerusalem area.

Much of the new construction is slated for settlements that surround Beit Safafa. In addition, Netanyahu has promised to push development of an area that links east Jerusalem to the nearby settlement of Maaleh Adumim.

As Netanyahu prepares to form a new coalition government this week, there are no signs the construction will slow.

Netanyahu is expected to put the pro-settler "Jewish Home" Party in charge of the Housing Ministry, giving it vast budgets to promote more settlement construction.

"The third Netanyahu government has one clear goal: enlarging the settlements and achieving the vision of 'a million Jews living in Judea and Samaria.' This magic number will thwart the division of the land and prevent once and for all the establishment of a Palestinian state," wrote Aluf Benn, editor in chief of the Haaretz daily, using the biblical term for the West Bank.

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