

Life in Sheikh Jarrah has become a 'big prison' under Israeli siege

Via [Middle East Eye](#)

In the closed-off Karm al-Jaouni area in the Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood, Palestinian residents describe life under a perpetual threat of forced expulsion as akin to being imprisoned in their own homes under constant Israeli scrutiny and restriction of movement.

Cement blocks meet visitors as they approach the neighbourhood, with Israeli police forces denying entry to non-residents. The only option left for those who wish to enter the area is to navigate their way around rooftops and reach the heart of Karm al-Jaouni, where families are threatened with removal from their homes to make way for Israeli settlers.

The settlers who have occupied the house of the Ghawi family since 2009 stand, on alert, in front of the outpost at all times. Meanwhile, Palestinian residents try to get some much-needed rest during the day in anticipation of new rounds of attacks by settlers around sunset.

Behind the gate of Saleh Diab's house, fragments of glass and stones of different sizes thrown by settlers in daily attacks are strewn around the yard. Israeli forces also regularly target the house, under the pretext that visiting solidarity activists attack the settler outpost opposite, leaving behind remnants of stun grenades and tear gas canisters.

"I am 51 years old, but it feels like I've lived 1,000 years of worry," Diab tells Middle East Eye. Palestinian children feel 'abandoned by the world' after Israel demolished their

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“I have suffered every day from Israeli occupation measures since I turned 17. I’ve been detained around 20 times since, and expelled from Sheikh Jarrah five times.”

Exhaustion is etched on Diab’s face, whose home is surrounded by three settler outposts. The first, facing his house, used to belong to the Ghawi family before it was forcibly taken by settlers under the protection of Israeli forces. The second one, located to the right, is the Kurd’s family home, which has been partially occupied by settlers. However, it’s the third outpost that is the most problematic for the family. Situated right behind their house is the sacred shrine of Shimeon al-Siddiq (founder of the Israelite tribe of Simeon), which many Jews visit to perform Talmudic rites.

Diab says that a week after the Ghawi family was forcibly removed from their home in 2009, eight other families in Sheikh Jarrah received eviction orders for the benefit of settlers.

“Since that day, we have been living in tragic conditions devoid of security and stability,” Diab says.

“The most difficult thing I have faced since is my children’s repeated questions about our fate after eviction, their academic future, and other answers that I cannot find the answers to.”

On 16 May, after a suspected car-ramming incident, the Israeli police placed cement blocks at three locations around the neighbourhood, with military police forces manning the posts at all times. Since then, Diab has been forced to keep his personal ID on him when out, in case he needs to go to the grocery store at the entrance to the neighbourhood.

“The permanent security posts have turned our lives into hell,” he says.

“We have become prisoners in our own home as they prevent non-residents from entering the neighbourhood, forcing us to present our IDs and asking us questions, just like an interrogation, whenever we need to leave or enter.”

Diab stays up guarding his house until sunrise, before his brother takes over the watch in fear of a sudden attack by settlers.

“I fear the recurrence of what happened to the [Dawabsheh family](#) when settlers burned their house in the village of Duma while they were sleeping,” he says, in reference to the 2015 attack that killed a Palestinian couple, their 18-month-old son, and left four-year Ahmed Dawabsheh badly burned.

Every now and then, Diab goes to the iron gate, on a leg fractured by Israeli forces during attacks in May, to inspect the situation on the street and talk to neighbours before returning home.

“In this house, there are 23 members of the Diab family, including 11 children, living a harsh present and their future is bleak.”

‘This is my house’

In the house of the Ghousheh family, Maysoun and her two daughters sit with three men who had managed to sneak into the neighbourhood to offer solidarity.

Maysoun, who has been living in Sheikh Jarrah since 1990, tells MEE that after her neighbour Um Kamel al-Kurd was evicted from her home in 2008, all of the residents have been living the nightmare of forcible displacement.

“Every day I start my morning waiting for the worst to happen,” she says, her voice cracking with anguish.

“The occupation authorities have prevented my family from

visiting me, and the one time I tried to visit them, Israeli female soldiers guarding one of the security posts violently attacked us inside our car.”

The military post inches closer to Maysoun’s house day after day.

Two Israeli soldiers stationed themselves at the gate while MEE’s team was inside the house and even asked to see Maysoun’s ID, which she refused to show, saying in Hebrew: “This my house, and I don’t have to show you any proof.”

Maysoun says the situation has been particularly difficult on her youngest daughter, Mayar, who refused to go to school for two weeks out of fear that she would not be allowed to get back to her house.

Maysoun tells MEE that the 11-year-old was recently referred to the school’s social worker as she suffers psychological distress, including insomnia, due to the developments in the neighbourhood.

Mayar looks at her mother, turns around, opens the main gate, casts a quick look around and dives back inside the house.

After Israeli forces closed off Sheikh Jarrah, Mayar says she has taken to buying sweets and cold drinks to sell to the neighbourhood’s residents.

“The siege pushed me to open a small grocery store in our house,” she says.

Aspiring journalists

Outside the Ghousheh home, 14-year-old Nufuth Hammad roams the streets with a notepad and a pen, gathering the testimonies of Sheikh Jarrah’s elders about their past and present lives in the neighbourhood.

Despite being detained last month, Hammad walks confidently

and without fear of armed settlers and Israeli forces, who patrol the streets around the clock.

“I am fully aware that I could be arrested at any moment because our movements are restricted, even within the neighbourhood itself,” she tells MEE.

Hammad was detained after a settler filed a complaint against her for drawing the Palestinian flags on children’s faces and listening to a song about Jerusalem with her friends, saying that such songs are sound pollution and that she should not be allowed to glorify the Palestinian flag while living on Israeli land.

The Israeli police interrogated Hammad for several hours before releasing her.

The Hammad family was forcibly displaced from the city of Haifa during the Nakba, or Catastrophe, in 1948. The family moved to Karm al-Jaouni in 1956 as part of an initiative by Jordan and the UN agency for Palestinian refugees to settle 28 families in Jerusalem in return for their UNRWA documents.

The selected families were provided with housing units, built by the Jordanian government, for three years, after which the ownership of the property was transferred to them.

Hammad’s grandfather, Aref, a member of the Sheikh Jarrah Refugees Housing Units Committee, says that 160 residents have received eviction orders in recent months, including 46 children coming from 12 different families.

According to Aref, there are 28 extended refugee families, composed of 500 members in total, living in an area of 18 dunums in Karm al-Jaouni.

Back at the home of the Ghousheh family, 11-year-old Mayar reflects on recent events and the terrible impact they have had on her, physically and emotionally.

“My life has completely turned around in the last few months. I’ve been wounded several times in the daily attacks by police forces and settlers, and stun and tear gas grenades have destroyed our windows,” she says.

“I’ve endured many things that I’m not supposed to go through as a child.”