

Demolition orders reach Convent homes inside the Old City

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Today the Jerusalem Inter-Church Centre has learned of new house demolition orders against at least four Christian families living inside the old city of Jerusalem where local Churches accommodate more than 500 homes for Palestinian families. The Greek Orthodox Patriarchate and the Catholic Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land own most of these homes. Churches are already facing difficulty in attaining renovation permits and expansion is almost impossible. One of the Church lawyers confirms that even the Churches already have court cases with the municipality of Jerusalem on similar issues. One of the Church leaders bitterly criticize the different treatment given to Jewish settlers inside the city wall where they are granted permits for expanding and renovating the properties under their control.

In these four cases in particular, the families were addressed individually by the Israeli municipal authorities and court cases are underway. One of the defendants, Sami Wakileh, recalls the Judge telling him, "It is a waste of your precious time. Do not dream of receiving any permit..." This means that the existing home will be demolished sooner or later. Sami's house is actually an old building that he leased from the Church and spent over a hundred thousand dollars to fix and renovate. In another case, Bassam Ayyash, who rents a 50 square meter apartment from the Greek Orthodox Church inside the Patriarchate's convent has also received a demolition order claiming that this 50 square meter apartment is an expansion to his home! Bassam is puzzled with the persistence of the authorities in not agreeing to come and investigate the matter when he confirms, "My only home is the 50 square meter apartment."

Last month, ten Christian families in Beit Hanina, a suburb area of North East Jerusalem, received demolition orders for their six year old apartments in the Al-Sunbula building. Half of the building was licensed originally while permits to formulate the rest were not given. Now all the inhabitants face the same fate if the municipality carries out its threats.

Housing inside Jerusalem has been a burden for all Palestinian families. With an extremely difficult process and impossible permit system coupled with the high cost of living in Jerusalem, building or having one's own

apartment is becoming a dream. The Christian community struggles with the family re-unification system and residency rights restrictions imposed by the Israeli Authorities. When one Jerusalemite cannot live together with his or her spouse who is a West Banker under one roof inside Jerusalem, the ultimate effect is that less and less couples decide to get married. Father Ibrahim Faltas, the Roman Catholic Parish priest of Jerusalem, declared last week that the number of Catholic marriages this year is almost half of what they experienced during the previous years. New Jerusalem Christian families are more and more forced to leave their home city either to the neighboring West Bank or emigrate if they have the chance.

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