The Prime Minister’s decision to move forward with the “Kedem Compound” plan in Silwan and the “Mount Scopus Slopes” National Park

Last Wednesday morning we learned the Prime Minister and the Minister of Interior had decided to publish the “Kedem Compound” plan in Silwan (City of David) for comments and to move forward on the “Mount Scopus Slopes” National Park. This is the first time the Prime Minister has linked the archaeological excavations and national parks in East Jerusalem with the political controversy over the city’s future.

The Kedem Compound plan will give Israel a significant foothold in Silwan, opposite the Al-Aqsa mosque. Kedem Compound, along with existing tourist sites, will strengthen Israel’s presence in Silwan and westward toward the Kidron Valley, Ras-al-Amud and the Mount of Olives.

The Mount Scopus Slopes national park will prevent construction by Palestinians and create a corridor of national parks under Israeli control from the Old City toward Area E1.

1. Kedem Compound

Kedem Compound will be the main tourist area to be established at the spot known as the “Giv’ati Parking Lot.” The Antiquities Authority has been undertaking archaeological excavations there since 2007 in preparation for construction at the site. The excavations in the “Givati Parking Lot” compound, located just a few meters southeast of the Dung Gate, at the edge of the Village of Silwan and very close to the Temple Mount, have been proceeding continuously for some seven years. According to the plans of Elad (an Israeli non-profit that supports Jewish settlement in the Village of Silwan and strengthening of Israeli possession of East Jerusalem), which funds the excavations, a tourism building by the name of the Kedem Compound is slated for construction at the site.

This compound will constitute a main axis in the plans devised by Elad and the Government of Israel. It will span some 5,000 square meters and will rise to a height of four stories. At its eastern and southern sides, the Givati Parking Lot borders homes of Palestinian residents, located just a few meters from it. The residents view the excavations as a political initiative, one that burrows beneath their homes and threatens their future. The proposed excavations and construction plans raise many questions regarding how conservation in the Old City and the landscape surrounding the Temple Mount / Al-Haram a-Sharif is carried out.

---

Development Plan for the “Givati Parking Lot”
In the past, the parking lot was one of the open areas used by residents of the village. Weddings and parties were held there, and peddlers set up carts to sell souvenirs to tourists. To our understanding, the excavation is intended to reinforce the site’s connection with the City of David antiquities site, emphasizing its Jewish-Israeli character while obscuring its present identity as part of a Palestinian village. This compound is expected to serve as an alternative to the tourism hub currently located at the Jaffa Gate, which constitutes the beginning of the main tourist route in the Old City. The main activity of the Kedem Compound will be based on tours and the connection with archaeological sites in Silwan, the Mt. Of Olives, the Kidron Valley and the Old City. Some of the routes will exist in underground spaces and tunnels excavated by the Antiquities Authority in recent years (See Emek Shaveh’s publication, Jerusalem Underground).

The Kedem Compound is one of the main buildings that will have an effect, according to plan, on the landscape between the Old City and Silwan, and on the manner in which this area is perceived in consciousness as belonging to the State of Israel. Meanwhile, within the Ophel excavation area, south of the Temple Mount / Haram A-Sharif, conservation and development projects are underway; these, too, will lead to the creation of tourist routes that terminate at the Kedem Compound.
Construction of such a dominant compound atop antiquities and very close to the walls of the Old City and the Temple Mount, at the entrance to the Village of Silwan, poses political, ethical and planning problems: political, because the compound is intended to serve settlers and their partisan ideologies, ethical because it is being imposed on the neighbors and detracts from their quality of life, and planning because it buries antiquities beneath it and introduces many foreign elements to the heart of the historical basin, including vehicular traffic and tunnels, which distort the context of the landscape and its context.

2. Mount Scopus Slopes National Park
At the beginning of October Amir Peretz, the Minister of Environmental Protection, whose remit includes the National Parks Authority, announced he would not support the plan for the Mount Scopus Slopes national park. The Prime Minister’s decision Tuesday ignores the Minister’s authority and opposes implementation of the Minister’s policies.

We understand that, in order to advance the plan in the Planning and Building Committee, the Minister of Interior, the Minister of Environmental Protection and the Prime Minister must arrive at a compromise acceptable to all parties. As an alternative, the Prime Minister can act through the Ministry of Interior, without the agreement of the Minister of Environmental Quality, to have the Planning and Building Committee approve the plan, which would lead to the peculiar situation in which the National Parks Authority would be able to operate in an area defined as a national park despite the opposition of the minister in charge.

3. Summary and political implications
The Prime Minister’s decision to advance the Mount Scopus Slopes national park project and the Kedem Compound in Silwan indicates that the plans for developing tourism, the archaeological excavations and the national parks are part of an organized political program in order to strengthen Israeli settlements and its hold on East Jerusalem. Though Emek Shaveh has for years argued as much, this is the first time the Prime Minister has linked such activities with the political struggle over the city’s future.

The planned national park will extend the national parks corridor that begins at the Old City to the eastern edge of Jerusalem’s municipal boundary (cf. attached map). The distance from there to E1 area is very short.

The Kedem Compound plan will have a significant effect on the village of Silwan, on the area near the Al-Aqsa mosque. One of its goals is to strength Israel’s claim to historic rights in Jerusalem. It is one of the antiquities sites being developed in the historic basin, and particularly in Silwan. Its size, location and purpose make it one the most serious political and planning issues of all the preliminary plans being developed for ancient Jerusalem.

Emek Shaveh
© November 2013