



The Struggle of Al-Aqaba Neighborhood

Abstract

This report examines the urban, legal, and political trajectory of Al-Aqaba, a small yet emblematic Palestinian neighborhood in Beit Hanina, East Jerusalem. It documents decades of systematic planning exclusion, infrastructural neglect, and legal precarity faced by residents, despite repeated efforts to obtain municipal recognition. The analysis situates Al-Aqaba within broader patterns of discriminatory urban governance in East Jerusalem, while critically assessing recent planning interventions—most notably Local Outline Plan No. 101-1136035 and the proposed Jerusalem Light Rail Brown Line. Together, these developments reveal a complex dynamic in which long-denied formalization is introduced alongside intensified spatial control. The report argues that Al-Aqaba's case reflects a wider municipal approach that links infrastructure-led development to planning enforcement, raising fundamental questions about equity, rights, and the future of Palestinian urban space in Jerusalem.

Al-Aqaba: Location, History, and Planning Status

Al-Aqaba is a small neighborhood situated in the northwestern region of the Beit Hanina Village in East Jerusalem (as shown in Figure 1), encompassing an area of 80 dunams within land registration Block no' 30607 (temporary registration). Bounded by Jisr Al-Nasif Street, Gibran Khalil Gibran Street, Al-Sadaqa Street, portions of Al-Aqaba Street, Al-Zeitouna Street, parts of Al-Jawza Street, and the main Ramallah Road, Al-Aqaba is home to approximately 500 residents. The neighborhood comprises around 50 buildings, serving as residential, commercial, and public facilities.



Figure 1: Al Aqaba Neighborhood Boundaries Map.

Construction in Al-Aqaba commenced between 1993 and 1995 in an ad hoc and informal manner. In 2003, residents sought to secure formal recognition for the neighborhood from the Jerusalem Municipality; however, this status remains elusive to date. Initially named and documented by the Jordanians prior to 1967, Al-Aqaba is presently absent from official records maintained by the Jerusalem Municipality and other institutions. Designated as green land where construction is prohibited, the neighborhood suffers from a dearth of fundamental services essential for its inhabitants. Despite the overall socioeconomic designation of Beit Hanina as the second best neighborhood in East Jerusalem, Al-Aqaba remains relatively impoverished.

Revealing the infrastructural hurdles faced by residents, the Arab Center for Alternative Planning (ACAP) surveyed the neighborhood on April 3rd, 2024. Abu Musa Al Rajabi, the "Representative of the Land Settlement Project," highlighted a myriad of challenges on the ground facing Al-Aqaba. These challenges encompass inadequate sewage drainage, a water



distribution network, an absence of street lighting, and improper asphalt layers. Notably, Al Rajabi spotlighted approximately 45 houses with looming demolition orders due to the stagnant progression of the land settlement project with the Municipality of Jerusalem.

Al Rajabi elucidated the intricacies hindering the resolution of these issues, citing significant financial strain on residents, including payments of about 300,000 shekels to engineers for devising an infrastructure blueprint and monthly fines of 5,000 shekels imposed by the municipality on a few residents. Furthermore, protracted administrative processes and bureaucratic inefficiencies have stymied efforts to procure legal documentation since 2003, with no substantive breakthrough made with the municipality.

ACAP wishes to highlight the grave implications of land settlement in East Jerusalem, which impinges upon residents' rights to fundamental utilities such as water and electricity. Despite residents' requests from the municipality, progress remains slow, with bureaucratic hurdles impeding advancements and exacerbating the predicament over time. The onerous bureaucratic processes render the issue increasingly complicated and seemingly insurmountable through paperwork alone.

The visual representations accompanying this narrative report offer glimpses of the different facets of the challenges confronting the residents of Al-Aqaba. The juxtaposition of the neighborhood's physical realities with the bureaucratic hurdles underscores the urgent need for substantive interventions to ameliorate the plight of residents striving for basic amenities. In conclusion, addressing the multifaceted challenges plaguing Al-Aqaba necessitates concerted actions from both the Jerusalem Municipality and involved civil society organizations to ensure the realization of residents' rights and dignified living conditions in this overlooked neighborhood.



The Political Marginalization of Al-Aqaba: A Microcosm of Discrimination and Negligence in Jerusalem.

The plight of Al-Aqaba, a marginalized neighborhood in East Jerusalem, offers an example of the discriminatory and neglectful practices of the Jerusalem Municipality towards its Palestinian residents. The lack of planning status and official recognition of Al-Aqaba by the municipality, serve as a stark testament to the systemic discrimination against the neighborhood and its inhabitants. This deliberate disregard for Al-Aqaba reflects a larger pattern of discrimination towards Palestinian neighborhoods throughout the city.

The unequal treatment of Palestinian neighborhoods by the Jerusalem Municipality is not an isolated incident but rather a pervasive practice that denies basic rights and services to Palestinian residents. Despite the municipality's claims of treating all citizens, both Israelis and Palestinians, equally, the case of Al-Aqaba starkly contradicts these assertions. The municipality's actions, or lack thereof, in Al-Aqaba directly contradict its professed goal of integrating all segments of the population into a cohesive citizenry.

Moreover, the neglect of Al-Aqaba by the municipality undermines the efforts to develop East Jerusalem into a well-organized city that could potentially serve as the capital of Palestine in a two-state solution framework. By failing to address the needs of Al-Aqaba and other marginalized Palestinian neighborhoods, the municipality hinders progress towards a peaceful resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the establishment of a viable two-state solution.

Recent Planning Developments in Al-Aqaba (2025): A Step Towards Formalization or Controlled Containment?

On the 3rd of February 2025, the Municipality of Jerusalem submitted, and the Jerusalem District Planning Committee advanced, Local Outline Plan No. 101-1136035, titled “Change of Land Use in Al-Aqaba – Beit Hanina, Jerusalem”. This plan, covering approximately 107.2 dunams, represents the most significant planning intervention ever proposed for the neighborhood. While it ostensibly aims to regularize and upgrade an area long deprived of



official planning recognition, it also raises critical questions about equity, control, and the future of Palestinian urban space in East Jerusalem.

The plan redefines Al-Aqaba's land use, converting vast portions of land previously classified as "open landscape" — where construction was prohibited — into designated residential areas, public institutions, open green spaces, and new road systems. The planning documentation further acknowledges the existence of unlicensed structures, proposing the demolition of some and the retroactive legalization of others. It allows for building rights up to 160%, including the addition of two floors above existing structures, while mandating underground parking, and the integration of rainwater infiltration and tree preservation systems.

Approximately 40% of the total plan area is now allocated to public infrastructure, green spaces, and community facilities, a long-standing demand by residents and planning advocates. However, the history of municipal underinvestment in similar neighborhoods raises valid concerns. The attached "Figure 2" provides a visual representation of these changes, showing a clear move from unregulated to codified urban space — a transformation that could either empower the community through legal recognition or, conversely, institutionalize spatial restrictions under a rigid planning regime.

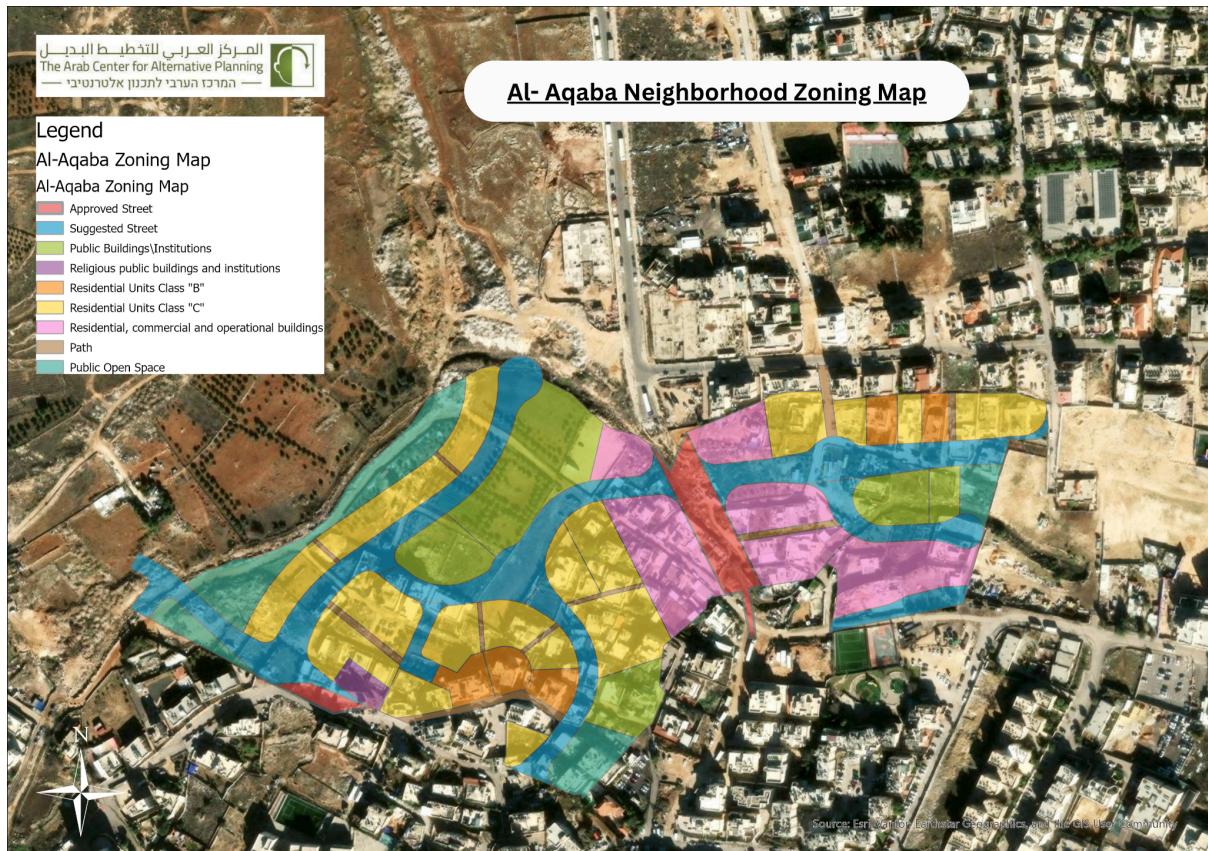


Figure 2: Al Aqaba Neighborhood Zoning Map

For Al-Aqaba's residents, this plan offers cautious hope: the possibility of obtaining building permits and securing tenure after decades of precarity. Yet, after decades of neglect, the Municipality's renewed attention to Al-Aqaba seems to be driven less by a commitment to social equity and more by broader urban redevelopment interests connected to regional infrastructure projects. As of October 25th 2025, this local outline plan remains under review and has not yet received final statutory approval by the Jerusalem District Planning Committee. Its implementation, therefore, remains uncertain and subject to further procedural deliberation.



The Brown Line (Jerusalem Light Rail): Infrastructural Integration or Fragmentation of Palestinian Space?

Simultaneously, the Jerusalem Light Rail – Brown Line (Route 08) constitutes another major project shaping the future of Al-Aqaba and northern Beit Hanina. According to the Jerusalem Mass Transit System Project – Brown Line Preliminary Design (2023–2024), the line will pass directly through the Al-Aqaba neighborhood, cutting across its newly proposed urban grid (as shown in Figure 3). This infrastructure initiative is presented as part of a city-wide effort to improve connectivity between northern and southern Jerusalem.



Figure 3: The Light Rail location to Al -Aqaba Neighborhood.

While the extension of the Brown Line could, in principle, improve mobility for Palestinian residents and enhance access to economic centers, its trajectory through Al-Aqaba raises significant concerns. Historically, large-scale transportation projects in East Jerusalem have served not only to connect neighborhoods but also to consolidate Israeli municipal control



and redefine spatial boundaries. The introduction of the light rail through Al-Aqaba, as depicted in the attached “Figure 3 and Figure 4”, exemplifies this dynamic.



Figure 4: The Light Rail Line Crossing Al Aqaba Neighborhood.

By physically linking Beit Hanina and surrounding areas to the wider urban fabric of West Jerusalem, the project risks reinforcing asymmetric urban integration — where infrastructure investment benefits the city as a whole while local Palestinian communities remain politically and economically marginalized. For residents of Al-Aqaba, improved access may come at the cost of increased surveillance, stricter construction enforcement, and potential displacement resulting from the formalization process accompanying the rail expansion.

As of October 25th 2025, the Brown Line project also remains unapproved and under technical review. No final decision or implementation order has yet been issued by the relevant authorities.



Interrelation Between the Rezoning Plan and the Light Rail Project

The simultaneity of the Local Outline Plan No. 101-1136035 and the Brown Line extension is not coincidental. Both initiatives are spatially and politically intertwined, reflecting a coordinated municipal strategy that uses infrastructure as a catalyst for planning enforcement. For decades, the Municipality of Jerusalem neglected Al-Aqaba, classifying it as an unplanned area and denying its residents access to basic services. The recent reemergence of municipal interest aligns directly with the route of the forthcoming light rail — indicating that the rezoning plan is being advanced primarily to facilitate and legitimize the light rail's passage through the neighborhood.

This connection underscores a recurring pattern in East Jerusalem: planning intervention occurs only when Palestinian areas become strategically valuable to broader Israeli urban schemes. The rezoning plan, under the banner of “urban regularization,” effectively prepares the land for the light rail by standardizing property boundaries, designating demolition areas, and establishing road alignments consistent with the transport project’s requirements. In doing so, it paves the way for infrastructure-led urban restructuring that prioritizes municipal and political objectives over local community needs.

The overlap of the two projects highlights a paradox. On one hand, Al-Aqaba’s residents may finally gain a legal planning framework and potential access to municipal infrastructure. On the other hand, this process may reinforce patterns of spatial control and demographic engineering, deepening inequality rather than rectifying it.

Conclusion

Al-Aqaba’s experience encapsulates the structural contradictions of planning in East Jerusalem: prolonged neglect followed by selective intervention driven by strategic municipal interests rather than residents’ needs. While the advancement of Local Outline Plan No. 101-1136035 marks a potential turning point by offering a formal planning framework, its timing and alignment with the Brown Line light rail project suggest that regularization is being pursued primarily to facilitate large-scale infrastructure rather than to remedy decades of injustice. Without robust safeguards, genuine community participation, and guarantees



against displacement, formalization risks becoming another mechanism of control rather than empowerment. Addressing Al-Aqaba's challenges therefore requires more than statutory plans; it demands a rights-based planning approach that prioritizes security of tenure, equitable service provision, and meaningful inclusion of residents in decision-making. The future of Al-Aqaba-and similar neighborhoods-will ultimately depend on whether planning is used as a tool for justice and dignity, or as an instrument to entrench existing inequalities.

The following pictures showing different spaces in the neighborhood:

(The photos were taken on the 3rd of April 2024)









