

## **Israel seizes Arab land near Jerusalem**

Khaleej Times  
(AFP)

9 October 2007

JERUSALEM - Israel has ordered the confiscation of Arab land outside east Jerusalem, officials said on Tuesday, reviving fears that the occupied West Bank could be split in two and challenging peace overtures.

The appropriation orders come with Israelis and Palestinians preparing for a major US-sponsored international peace summit widely expected in Maryland next month, and were immediately criticised by Arab authorities.

Hassan Abed Rabbo at the Palestinian local government ministry said the late September order covers 110 hectares (272 acres) in four Palestinian villages between east Jerusalem and the Jewish settlement of Maale Adumim.

The land could create a bloc of settlements incorporating Maale Adumim and nearby Mishor Adumim and Kedar, he said, and "prevent Palestinian territorial continuity" between the West Bank and Jordan Valley.

"They have usurped dozens of hectares of West Bank land for their greater Jerusalem settlement project that takes in Maale Adumim," Abed Rabbo said.

The army orders given to landowners, a copy of which was seen by AFP, sought to justify the expropriation on "military grounds" and for "measures designed to stop terrorist acts".

The army confirmed Israel was constructing a 15.5 kilometre (10 mile) road connecting east Jerusalem with the West Bank town of Jericho on 144 hectares of state-owned land and 23 hectares of private land "which was appropriated."

The road was being built "in order to improve the quality of life for Palestinians," it said.

But Israel's Haaretz newspaper said the appropriated land would also allow for the development of Jewish settlements on a key strip of the occupied West Bank east of Jerusalem.

"That in turn would 'free up' the E-1 area between Jerusalem and Maale Adumim, through which the current Jerusalem-Jericho road runs, for a long-planned Jewish development consisting of 3,500 apartments and an industrial park," Haaretz wrote.

In 2005, Israel -- under US pressure -- froze plans to connect Maale Adumim to east Jerusalem, which the Palestinians want to make the capital of their promised state and which Israel has occupied since 1967.

The Palestinians heavily criticised the project because it would effectively split the West Bank and separate the territory from east Jerusalem.

Israelis and Palestinians are trying to draw up a joint document which would serve as a basis for final-status negotiations ahead of the scheduled international meeting on the Middle East scheduled for next month.

Jewish settlement activity has been one of several stumbling blocks that have precluded an agreement in past Israeli-Palestinian negotiations.

"We condemn this Israeli decision to confiscate Palestinian land at a time in which we are trying to revive the peace process," chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erakat told AFP.

"Settlement expansion, especially in the Jerusalem area, will undermine and destroy these efforts. We call upon the Israeli government to revoke this decision and give peace a chance," he added.

Egypt also strongly criticised what foreign ministry spokesman Hossam Zaki said proves "Israel is planning to go ahead with its scheme to separate the northern parts of the West Bank from its southern ones.

"Going ahead with this project is in total contradiction with efforts by all parties to resume serious political negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians," he added.

A US diplomat refused to comment on this specific case, but said "we discourage any of the sides from taking actions that will prejudice the final status issues that should be settled in bilateral negotiations."

According to an opinion poll published in Israel's Yediot Aharonot newspaper on Tuesday, most Israelis -- 63 percent -- oppose sharing Jerusalem with the Palestinians as part of a final peace deal.