



## Senior Palestinian figures, including clerics, call for boycotting the municipal elections in Jerusalem

September 20, 2018

### Overview

On October 30, 2018, the municipal elections in Jerusalem are to take place. There are about 200,000 residents in the city having the right to vote for the municipality, who since 1967 have boycotted the local elections. **Senior Palestinian figures, including clerics, are trying to prevent the residents' participation in the elections: Sheikh Muhammad Hussein, the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem and the Palestinian Authority, has issued a fatwa (religious ruling) banning the participation in the municipal elections or running for mayor. Sheikh Ikrima Sabri, the Al-Aqsa Mosque preacher, announced that it is forbidden to take part in the elections because Jerusalem is an "occupied city" and the participation of East Jerusalem residents in the elections would mean "recognizing the legitimacy of the occupation." Saeb Erekat, chief of the PLO's Executive Committee, announced that the Executive Committee is opposed to giving legitimacy to the Israeli government's policy towards the Arab residents and therefore the elections must be boycotted.**



**Grand Mufti of Jerusalem and the Palestinian Authority Sheikh Muhammad Hussein, who has issued a fatwa banning participation in the municipal elections (photo: Al-Ghad, July 14, 2017)**

### Background

► On October 30, 2018, municipal elections will take place in Israel, including for the Jerusalem municipality. **In East Jerusalem, there are 360,000 inhabitants with the legal**

**status of permanent residents,<sup>1</sup> comprising about 40% of the city's residents. About 200,000 of them have the right to vote** (the Statistical Yearbook of the Jerusalem Institute for Policy Research; Israeli daily Haaretz, August 23, 2018). Although Palestinians in Jerusalem have had the right to vote for the municipality since 1967, **they have boycotted the elections so far**. Thus, for instance, in the previous municipal elections (2013), **only 1.6% of the residents of Jerusalem with voting rights did participate**.

► A public opinion poll conducted by the Hebrew University of Jerusalem among residents of East Jerusalem in February 2018 reveals that about 60% of them think that the Palestinians should take part in the municipal elections, vs. 13% against (Haaretz, February 14, 2018). This increase stems from the increased awareness among the Palestinian public that in order to improve the conditions of residents of East Jerusalem, they should be part of the municipal institutions responsible for that. **This year, for the first time, there were several Palestinian lists in the municipal elections and a number of East Jerusalem residents running for city council**. Residents of East Jerusalem are called upon not to boycott the elections and come to vote, making the ideological distinction between the municipal level and the ability to improve the conditions of the population in East Jerusalem on the one hand, and the Palestinian national goals on the other.

However, against these voices, **in East Jerusalem there are still stronger voices of national and Islamic elements calling on the residents not to take part in the elections**. Some of them **threatened local committees, activists and nominees for the city council**. It seems that in the current elections, the national and Islamist elements attribute **especially major importance to boycotting the elections**. This is because there were Palestinian nominees running (see below) and because of the political developments over the past year, mainly the relocation of the US Embassy to Jerusalem. These elements **are supported by senior officials in the Palestinian Authority, including senior clerics, who try to dissuade the residents and the nominees from participating in the elections**.

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<sup>1</sup> In the State of Israel, permanent residents have the right to vote in municipal and local elections. However, they do not have the right to vote for the Knesset, the Israeli parliament.

## Senior PA officials calling to ban the elections

### Religious ruling by the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem

► **The Supreme Council of Religious Ruling in Palestine**,<sup>2</sup> headed by **Sheikh Muhammad Hussein, the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem and the Palestinian Authority**, published on July 30, 2018, **a fatwa (religious ruling) banning the participation in the elections for the Jerusalem municipality or running for the city council**. According to the fatwa, the damage ensuing from participation in the elections is bigger than the benefit that could result from it. **Following are the main points of the fatwa** (website of the Supreme Council of Religious Ruling in Palestine, July 30, 2018):

- ◆ Participation in the elections could lead to identification with the Israeli side (“the occupation”) and help Israel establish its policy and carry out its “plots” in relation to the application of its control over Jerusalem. Participation in the elections will help Judaize the city and change its historical and religious characteristics with measures taken by the municipality.
- ◆ One cannot agree with the justification of the participation in the elections with the excuse of defending the interests (of the residents of East Jerusalem) because experience with the “occupation” has proved the opposite. Furthermore, strategic matters related to the city such as the outline plan, building plans etc. are authorized by Israel and are not at all the jurisdiction of the elected municipality.
- ◆ **Participation in the elections helps legitimizing the “occupation”** [i.e., Israel], although according to international law, Jerusalem is “occupied” and is “Arab and Islamic.”

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<sup>2</sup> **The Supreme Council of Religious Ruling in Palestine is the supreme religious authority in the Palestinian Authority.** It was founded in 1994 in accordance with a presidential directive by the PA chairman. The council consists of about 20 Muslim clerics from the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. It is headed by the Grand Mufti Muhammad Hussein. It gives answers and issues fatwas on Islamic issues, disseminates Islamic awareness, supervises ritual slaughter according to Islam etc. (website of the Supreme Council of Religious Ruling, September 17, 2018).



**Habib Abu Armilah**, a resident of Jerusalem whose home was demolished by the municipality.

► **On September 6, 2018, Abu Sarah held a press conference at Safra Square, the site of Jerusalem City Hall**, along with Aida Qalibo and Habib Abu Armilah. Aida Qalibo said in the press conference that “the occupiers have obligations for the people occupied.” According to her, they are running in the elections to achieve these rights and help the Palestinian Jerusalemites stay in Jerusalem. She defined their running for city council as an “act of resistance.” **During the press conference, eggs were thrown at Abu Sarah and his colleagues and they were denounced by their opponents** (Mitras website, September 6, 2018; Euronews in Arabic, September 6, 2018) (Note: On September 25 Abu Sarah announced he will not be a candidate in the Jerusalem municipality elections).



The press conference, from right to left: Aziz Abu Sarah, Habib Abu Armilah, and Aida Qaliboh (Aziz Abu Sarah’s YouTube account, September 7, 2018)



Throwing eggs at the nominees during the press conference (QudsN Twitter account, September 6, 2018)

► **In response to the press conference, Al-Aqsa Mosque preacher Sheikh Ikrima Sabri stressed** that the Jerusalemites’ participation in the elections would mean recognizing the legitimacy of the “occupation.” According to Sabri, **it is forbidden to participate in the**

**municipal elections because Jerusalem is an occupied city** and it is also forbidden to change the status quo there. Therefore, **holding elections for the municipality is an illegal act** (Bokra website, September 7, 2018).