

# *Netanyahu vows to build thousands of new settler homes in East Jerusalem*

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Tel Aviv, February 22 (RHC)-- Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has announced that he is pushing ahead with the construction of 5,000 new illegal settler homes in key areas of occupied East Jerusalem, where critics say additional building could cut Palestinian residents off from the rest of the occupied West Bank.

On a visit to the illegal Jabal Abu Ghneim (also known as Har Homa) settlement, Netanyahu pledged to build homes there and in the illegal Givat Hamatos settlement. Both lie on some of the last spaces of land linking the Palestinian areas of Bank to their hoped-for capital in East Jerusalem.

Netanyahu pledged to turn Har Homa into a "mid-sized city," expanding a presence many believe has already dealt a devastating blow to the Palestinian dream of independence.

Building in the areas has previously sparked an international outcry, which has at times reined in Netanyahu's settlement-building sprees. But emboldened by U.S. President Donald Trump's support and his favorable Middle East plan, he appears to be charging ahead with construction there.

"We are connecting Jerusalem. We are connecting all parts of the united Jerusalem, the rebuilt Jerusalem," Netanyahu said. "We did it in the face of fierce international opposition. We surmounted all the obstacles and we have done it."

Netanyahu said he was pushing forward with 5,200 homes for Jews in the area, in addition to 1,000 new homes for Palestinians who live in nearby Beit Safafa neighbourhood, which lies along the Green Line in both West and East Jerusalem.

The Palestinians want East Jerusalem, along with the West Bank and the Gaza Strip -- land Israeli captured in the 1967 Middle East war -- for their future state. They have long opposed construction in this part of East Jerusalem, claiming it would isolate Jerusalem from the West Bank.

Nabil Abu Rudeineh, a spokesman for President Mahmoud Abbas, denounced the move as another of Netanyahu's "attempts to destroy the two-state solution and any possibility of peace." "This is a grave violation of the international law which says that settlements in all the Palestinian territories, including East Jerusalem, is illegal," he added.

The Israeli settlement watchdog Peace Now said expanding in both of the controversial neighbourhoods amounted to "state suicide."

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