

# Geopolitical Encirclement combined with Environmental Injustice:

## The Atarot Dual Plan's Assault on Palestinian Viability in Northern Jerusalem

### Introduction

The State of Israel and the Jerusalem Municipality are concurrently promoting two massive and incompatible development projects – the Atarot Settlement Plan and a Waste-to-Energy (W2E) facility – in the strategically critical Atarot/Qalandiya region of northern East Jerusalem (EJ).

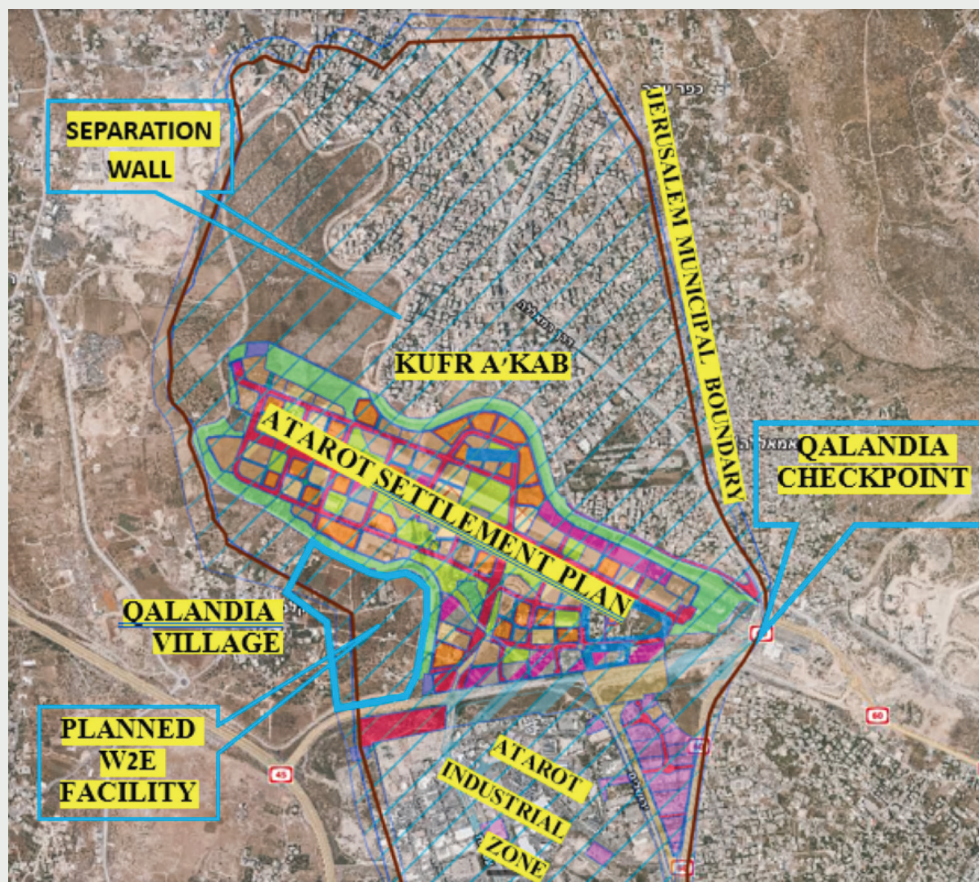
While structurally distinct, these projects are geographically intertwined, advancing Israeli demographic and municipal control over occupied territory at the documented expense of the surrounding Palestinian communities.

The simultaneous promotion of residential development and hazardous industrial infrastructure in the same location generates a profound conflict, violating basic principles of urban planning, escalating environmental risks, and deepening existing political and legal crises.

### I. The Atarot Settlement Plan

The Atarot Settlement Initiative (Plan No. 0764936-101) represents an accelerated effort in Israeli settlement expansion in East Jerusalem, targeting the land of the former Qalandia Airport. The plan, submitted for approval on December 3rd, 2020, and actively advanced in 2025, is critically analyzed as a crucial element of Israel's broader strategy to consolidate control over EJ.

The following sketch shows a regional map of the locations and geographical facts surrounding the planned Atarot settlement and bear relevance to its geopolitical role and context:



Sketch 1: map of the Atarot Settlement plan and the proposed Waste-to-Energy facility in the regional context of North Eastern Jerusalem.

## A. Scope, Location, and Demographic Intent

The plan outlines the construction of 9,000 residential units on 1,243 dunams of land, designed to accommodate an expected population of 30,000 settlers (according to the Israeli Ministry of Housing information). The plan includes 800 protected housing units primarily intended for the Haredi (Ultra-Orthodox) Jewish population. Beyond housing, the plan incorporates extensive commercial zones, employment areas, public institutions such as schools and healthcare facilities, and parks, all intended exclusively to serve Israeli settlers.

Geographically, the proposed settlement is strategically located on the grounds of Qalandiya Airport, which is geographically contiguous with the Atarot Industrial Zone.

This area borders several densely populated Palestinian neighborhoods, including Beit Hanina, Kufr 'Aqab, Al-Ram, and Qalandiya Al Balad. The development is positioned to create a large Israeli-only urban block at the northern entrance of Jerusalem. This strategic placement is intended to tighten spatial restrictions on the surrounding Palestinian neighborhoods and deepen the physical fragmentation of Palestinian communities in the area.

## B. Planning Status and Environmental Findings

The Atarot settlement plan was subject to discussion at the Jerusalem District Planning Committee meeting in January 2025, which reviewed critical aspects including security, land ownership, and pollution. The security measures proposed for the settlement included limitations on construction distance from outer boundaries and the erection of substantial protective fences, which were deemed adequate for future settlers by the committee. In fact, the potential impact of increased military presence and expanded surveillance on neighboring Palestinian communities was not addressed.

Crucially, the statutory review highlighted severe environmental deficiencies at the proposed settlement site:

1. **Soil Contamination:** The land of the former airport suffers from significant soil pollution. Environmental inspection revealed particularly alarming findings, such as Cobalt concentrations vastly exceeding the regulatory threshold. Elevated levels of Manganese and Thallium were also detected. These findings strongly suggest existing industrial pollution and underscore serious environmental risks.
2. **Air Pollution:** The neighboring Atarot Industrial Zone is documented as a major source of air pollution. The committee reviewed data showing that PM10 (particulate matter) concentrations in the area consistently exceed the regulatory ceiling. This pollution, confirmed to be industrial in origin by the sharp drop in levels over the weekend shutdown, disproportionately affects vulnerable Palestinian communities nearby.

The advancement of the Atarot settlement plan, despite documented severe contamination levels, reflects a strategy that **prioritizes demographic and Judaization goals over environmental challenges and the well-being of the existing population living in the area.**

## II. The Waste-to-Energy (W2E) Facility

The Waste-to-Energy facility project (W2E) involves establishing a large-scale municipal waste incineration plant designed to burn waste to produce energy, primarily serving the waste disposal needs of the broader Jerusalem metropolis.

The geographical location of the proposed facility is shown in sketch 1 above.



## A. Project Scope, Location, and Legal Context

The project was officially accelerated by Government Decision 2025/3067 based on Decision 1836 (June 5th, 2024), aimed at strengthening the resilience of Jerusalem and improving waste treatment in the metropolis.

The W2E facility is planned for construction on lands near the Atarot Industrial Zone, immediately adjacent to the Palestinian village of Qalandiya al-Balad and the proposed Atarot settlement.

This requires the confiscation of approximately 130 dunams of Palestinian land. The project has already resulted in the Israel Land Authority delivering eviction orders to families in Qalandiya al-Balad, demanding they vacate within 20 days and facing the loss of their farmland and homes.

The legal foundation for the land seizure relies on the Finance Minister's expropriation notice (May 27th, 2025), which reactivated three old expropriation orders dating back to 1970 and 1982. While the plan is undergoing a 40-month statutory planning track, including a detailed Environmental Impact Assessment between months 18 and 30, implementation is already underway, with the issuance of land-expropriation and demolition notices.

## B. Geopolitical Manipulation and Legal Contestation

The W2E facility plan is politically and legally contentious. Government Decision 3012 (May 2025) explicitly instructed the Defense Ministry to relocate the Separation Barrier northwards. Rerouting the separation wall aims at annexing the facility site officially into Jerusalem's municipal boundaries (according to the borders imposed by Israeli authorities).

In fact, the displacement of the barrier route, originally claimed to follow security "needs", is an act of de facto forced annexation.

It suggests that the fence's route is flexible based on Israeli settlement needs rather than strict security necessities, reinforcing an unequal territorial arrangement.

Furthermore, the legal basis for designating the land use as a W2E facility is false. The land was originally expropriated decades ago for purposes like "security" or "industrial use"; its subsequent conversion to a harmful, contaminating municipal waste facility serving Israeli urban centers constitutes an unlawful change of purpose under international humanitarian law, which forbids an occupier from using occupied land for its own population's benefit. Authorities utilize Amendment No. 3 to the Land Ordinance to convert the land into general state land to be used for any purpose. Originally, the amendment was intended to allow the State ownership over vast land swaths confiscated over the years from Palestinians (in Israel) without any identified objective.

The W2E facility, positioned adjacent to the Atarot settlement, must be understood within the broader context of the Atarot Settlement Plan (Plan No. 0764936-101), as the region already suffers from dangerously high pollution levels.

### III. Analysis of Conflict and Incompatibility

One of several planning challenges posed by the Atarot Settlement and W2E facility is their mutual incompatibility. These two projects, located in the same geographic area, generate insurmountable contradictions in urban planning, public health, and geopolitical stability, making their simultaneous advancement deeply problematic.

#### A. The Planning Paradox: Residential vs. Hazardous Industry

The core conflict lies in the illogical placement of a major pollution source immediately next to a dense residential zone. Standard urban planning requires significant buffer zones between hazardous industry and population centers, a principle entirely violated by the Atarot dual proposal.

**1. Acute Public Health Risks from Incineration:** Incinerators are known as major stationary sources of air pollution, releasing hazardous compounds even with modern filtration.

- **Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs):** The combustion process releases highly toxic pollutants, which are carcinogenic and accumulate in the food chain and human body, posing severe health risks to the adjacent Palestinian village of Qalandiya and the other Palestinian townships around, and even to Atarot settlers.
- **Fine Particulate Matter (PM2.5):** The facility will release ultrafine particles that penetrate deep into the lungs and bloodstream, exacerbating chronic respiratory diseases (asthma, COPD) and cardiovascular events, particularly for a population already suffering from high existing pollution.
- **Heavy Metals:** Emissions include mercury, lead, and cadmium, posing severe neurotoxic risks, especially to children in nearby residential areas.

**2. Toxic Waste Byproducts:** Incineration does not eliminate waste; it converts it. Up to 30-20% of the volume remains as highly toxic "fly ash," concentrated with heavy metals and dioxins. The plan necessitates the transport and landfilling of this hazardous ash, posing a grave threat of leaching into the soil and the Mountain Aquifer—a shared water source for both populations—if mishandled.

Placing a high-temperature waste facility within meters of population centers violates the very logic of building and/or maintaining "healthy" neighborhoods and densely built townships.

## B. Cumulative Environmental Degradation and Environmental Injustice

The simultaneous projects significantly amplify the environmental hazards in an area already struggling with chronic pollution, creating an unacceptable cumulative impact.

1. **Oversaturation of Pollutants:** The Atarot Industrial Zone is already a documented pollution hotspot. Official data presented in January 2025 showed that PM10 levels surpassed the regulatory ceiling ( $130 \mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ ), reaching up to  $153 \mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ . This heavy existing load, combined with the severe soil contamination (Cobalt levels nearly 100-fold above standard) found on the settlement land, means the environment is already degraded. Adding a massive industrial incinerator to this setting, which is already burdened by traffic and cement production, creates an "oversaturated" pollution environment, likely trapping smog in the residential valleys of Beit Hanina and Kufr Aqab.
2. **Environmental Externalization and the "Sacrifice Zone":** The W2E project is viewed as an extension of a policy of environmental externalization. The waste management benefits flow to Israeli urban centers, while the environmental burdens—air pollution, odors, and increased heavy-vehicle traffic—are imposed almost exclusively on Palestinian communities, such as Qalandiya al-Balad and Kufr Aqab. The location designates the Qalandiya/Atarot seam zone as a "sacrifice zone". These Palestinian neighborhoods are particularly vulnerable due to pollutants discharged from the facility, bearing in mind that they lack the political leverage to object to the plan or enforce safety regulations on the Israeli-run facility. Israeli planning authorities are advancing both the settlement plan and the W2E project without assessing their cumulative impacts on these nearby Palestinian neighborhoods.

## C. Geopolitical Conflict and Erosion of Future Viability

The dual development proposal is a strategic move that fundamentally threatens the viability of a two-state solution and the future status of East Jerusalem as the capital of a future Palestinian state.

1. **Blockade on Palestinian Capital Infrastructure:** The Qalandiya Airport is the only site in the area capable of serving as an international airport for a future Palestinian capital in East Jerusalem. Establishing a Jewish-only residential settlement on this site permanently removes this critical characteristic from a potential future Palestinian state, undermining both connectivity and sovereignty.
2. **Strategic Encirclement and Fragmentation:** The Atarot settlement and the W2E facility contribute to the increasingly comprehensive encirclement of Palestinian communities in northern EJ. By creating a large Israeli urban block and utilizing municipal infrastructure to cement control, the plans deepen the physical and political fragmentation of Palestinian neighborhoods and restrict their future expansion. The required rerouting of the Separation Barrier for the W2E facility reinforces this political objective, using utility needs to justify *de facto* annexation.

## D. Legal and Socioeconomic Objections

The projects exacerbate socioeconomic disparities and violate international legal norms regarding occupied territory.

- 1. Inequitable Land Allocation:** In fact, the projects represent the "theft of precious land". The land is being utilized for an Ultra-Orthodox Jewish settlement and a waste facility, ignoring the acute housing crisis and extreme overcrowding in surrounding Palestinian communities (some reaching densities of 60,000 to 150,000 residents in small areas such as Kufr-Akab). The development reinforces economic and social segregation, as the commercial hubs and infrastructure are designed exclusively to serve Israeli settlers and interests.
- 2. Violations of International Law:** Both the settlement and the waste facility contravene multiple international legal instruments. The projects violate the Fourth Geneva Convention (Article 49), which prohibits the transfer of the occupying power's civilian population into occupied territory. They also contravene the advisory opinion by the ICJ (July 2024), which ruled that Israel's presence in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem, is unlawful. The planned land seizures and use of expropriated land for the occupier's benefit violate international property rights and the Hague Regulations (1907).

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the two projects are mutually exclusive and incompatible with each other in terms of resources or goals. The objective of housing 30,000 new residents (the Atarot Settlement Plan) is fundamentally contradictory to the immediate elevation of health and safety risks caused by introducing a massive waste incinerator (the W2E facility) directly adjacent to the neighborhood.

This deliberate juxtaposition of housing and hazardous industrial infrastructure illustrates a planning bias that prioritizes strategic territorial control and demographic engineering over public health, environmental integrity, and the fundamental rights of the surrounding Palestinian population.