About the Neighborhood

Sur Baher, along with adjacent village of Umm Tuba, is the largest Palestinian neighborhood in southeast Jerusalem, and one of the largest in all of East Jerusalem. Sur Baher developed over the centuries along a mountain ridge extending eastward from the regional watershed line, with the smaller village of Umm Tuba developing on its slopes. Today the two villages span a sequence of ridges branching off of the main one and constituting a single administrative unit, though the residents continue to organize separately. Sur Baher borders on the 1949 armistice line (the Green Line) and Kibbutz Ramat Rachel to the west, on Umm Laysoon and the post-1967 Israeli neighborhood of East Talpiyot to the north, and the Israeli neighborhood of Har Homa, constructed during the height of the Oslo period, to the south.

Sur Baher was established in the 16th century as an agricultural village along Wadi ad-Darajeh (the Darga Valley) and was an important stop on the route between Bethlehem and Jerusalem. At first the inhabitants lived in natural caves, and later they built houses around familial courtyards. During the 19th century the village developed at a fast pace and came to number in the thousands, with its lands stretching in the north from what is known today as the Armon Hanatziv ridge, to the outskirts of Bethlehem in the south. Under Israeli control since 1967, Sur Baher has undergone an accelerated process of urbanization, and much of its land has been expropriated for the erection of Israeli neighborhoods and related infrastructure. Yet the infrastructure within the neighborhood itself remains terribly inadequate. On the eastern edges of Sur Baher are three residential areas that are either not recognized by the Jerusalem Municipality or have no planning status. These areas spill over beyond Jerusalem’s municipal boundaries but are cut off from the rest of the West Bank by the Separation Barrier. The residents of these areas – Deir al-Aamud, al-Muntar, and Nu’eman – have struggled over the years to receive the basic services they need to live in dignity.

**Facts**

- Population: 21,500
- Area: 5,754 dunam
In 1999, a plan (4 2102b) for 410 housing units, at the western entrance to the neighborhood was approved in an expedited procedure. The plan, initiated by the Jerusalem Development Authority, includes a high-density neighborhood intended for the residents of Sur Baher, to be built on lands expropriated from them. The intention was to rely on the centralized development of the neighborhood, via marketing the site to contractors, as is done in many new Israeli neighborhoods. Since the approval of the plan, one school, two kindergartens, and a community center have been built according to it, however the roads and residential areas have not yet been developed, and it turns out that the plan is in fact not implementable: the H-shaped plan of the residential buildings is unsuitable for the steep topography (307 incline) and will incur high development costs for the residents. In addition, the access roads are un-implementable; one of them is too steep and the route of the other is drawn on top of existing houses.

The Qisan Ridge (branching out from the easternmost ridge of the neighborhood) is zoned in the neighborhood plan for future development. Accordingly, the area must undergo general planning before it can be developed. Over the years, as housing in the center of the village became denser, landowners began to build houses in this area, without formal planning or building permits. The Jerusalem Municipality responded by distributing demolition orders. Subsequently, the landowners organized to draw up a plan that included part of this zone as well as parts of the areas of the adjacent valley that are designated as open scenic areas. In 2004, they presented a detailed plan on an area of about 370 dunam to the planning committees for the building of up to 800 housing units, some of which already exist. Despite the efforts of the residents, the plan has yet to be deposited for public review and has been repeatedly obstructed by the planning authorities. Several times, the local planners were instructed to shelve the plan until the work is done for the neighborhood. In 2011 there was an unsuccessful attempt to shelve the plan, and the residents continued pursuing its approval. Recently (2013), anticipating the rejection of the plan, the residents decided to withdraw it for the time being.
The plans designate relatively dense urban construction for the neighborhood core and sparse rural-type construction for the periphery of the neighborhood and its four ridges. In the western neighborhood, the plans allow for much denser construction via higher building rights. Construction in the center of the neighborhood is de facto denser than what is allowed, while construction on the various ridges remains sparse due to a lack of paved roads, problems of access, and bureaucratic difficulties.

Roughly a quarter of the planned areas in the neighborhood are designated as open scenic areas, which preserve the agricultural landscape of the valleys. In addition, the plans contain 25 plots (on a total of about 45 dunam) that are zoned as open public area, and one plot (on about 18 dunam) that is designated as a sports and leisure zone. Only one of the plots has actually been developed. The neighborhood has no playgrounds.

The vast majority of the approved roads in the neighborhood plans have not been implemented, and existing roads designated for expansion and development have been expanded and developed only partially. The neighborhood contains roads that serve the residents, but these are severely neglected and have not been upgraded for years. Having no formal status, no future development of them is foreseeable. In addition, a number of roads that exist in the plans cannot be implemented due to existing structures on their planned routes. Of the 670 dunam designated for roads, some 210 dunam are reserved for the future Eastern Ring Road.

The planned areas of the neighborhood include 22 plots that are designated for public buildings and institutions. Out of these, 19 are designated for educational structures (schools and kindergartens), two are designated for a community center, and one for a family health clinic. Effectively, construction has been carried out on only seven of these plots (even before the neighborhood plans were approved, in two of the cases). The rest, most of which are designated for kindergartens, have remained undeveloped. There is zoning for private institutions in six places in the neighborhood. These have been built, three as mosques, and three as private educational institutions.

Including areas zoned for future planning (216 dunam), commerce (1 dunam), and a cemetery (20 dunam). In addition, some 40% of these 490 dunam are unplanned.

To the east of the planned route of the Eastern Ring Road. Only 30 dunam of the area have statutory plans (see: An Attempt at Expanding).

The extension of the Deir al-Aamud neighborhood, which is trapped between the municipal boundary and the Separation Barrier (see: The Separation Barrier Enclave).

A separate neighborhood adjacent to and beyond the municipal boundary. There is no planning for the neighborhood (see: The Unrecognized Neighborhood).

* The most common residential zoning type in Sur Baher allows a 50% building ratio, with sparse construction of up to two storeys. Exceptions to this are the village core, where building rights reach a 70% ratio, with three storeys, and the areas of the western neighborhood, where building rights are 165% with four storeys.