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Understanding political violence in Jerusalem

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Few places in the world are as furiously religious as Jerusalem. We cannot fully grasp the intractability of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict without seriously relating to Jerusalem's national-religious fervor.

For more than a hundred years, Jerusalem has been a focus of violence in the Jewish-Arab/Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The sources of the conflict are deeply-rooted and extend beyond the Holy City: an unwillingness to accept the collective identity and political existence of the other side; socioeconomic disparities and a lack of political representation; denial of civil and human rights; discrimination and a denial of self-determination; and finally Israeli control over the lives of the Palestinians. Nonetheless, tensions periodically erupt into violence in Jerusalem and the process unfolds according to a fairly regular pattern: a period of instability, a local incident (usually centered around one of Jerusalem's holy sites during a Jewish or national holiday with symbolic importance) which sparks the violence, and escalation to a nationwide level.

Jerusalem's religious centrality, for both Judaism and Islam, took on national and political importance during the late 19th and early 20th centuries for both the Zionist and Palestinian national movements. For both sides, the claim to Jerusalem is a "protected value" – a term borrowed from psychology to indicate "values perceived by a particular social group as so fundamental that they have been granted protected status against any compromise, concession, or tradeoff [...] a taboo, the violation of which is considered a violation of the society's fundamental rules of ethics^[1]".

The first wave of Jewish-Arab intercommunal violence occurred in Jerusalem during April 4th to 7th, 1920. It occurred during an important national-religious moment: the arrival of the Palestinian convoy from Hebron at "Hebron's Gate" (Bab al-Khalil, also called the Jaffa Gate) as part of the annual Islamic pilgrimage to Nebi Musa^[2]. The 1920s, which was the formative decade of British rule in the Holy Land, also ended with a wave of nationwide intercommunal violence in August 1929, which became known as the Western Wall Riots or the 1929 Revolt. It also centered

around Jerusalem's holy sites and occurred during a national-religious holiday. The tensions that led up to it began on Yom Kippur (September 29, 1928), Judaism's holiest day (known as the Day of Atonement in English) when Jewish worshipers placed benches in the Western Wall alley and a dividing screen to separate between men and women during prayer³.

From the 1930s onward, Jerusalem's holy sites were no longer the focal point of tension and violence between Jews and Arabs. At first, this was due to British policy, and later on—after the British Mandate ended in 1948—the focus of the conflict shifted from the Palestinians to the neighboring Arab countries. The Palestinians returned to center stage twenty years after the 1967 War, when the holy sites in Jerusalem again became the main source of instability and violence. The First Intifada erupted in December 1987 and eventually led to the Israeli-Palestinian peace process during the 1990s. It was during this period that the patterns of violence that characterized the 1920s reappeared. A series of violent incidents in and around Jerusalem's holy places during religious holidays eventually led to the collapse of the peace process and contributed to the rise of politically hawkish religious-nationalists on both sides⁴. The three most notable events were the following:

- The riots of October 8, 1990, in which the Israeli police killed 17 Palestinians on the Holy Esplanade (herein: HE, known to Jews as the Temple Mount and to Muslims as the al-Aqsa Mosque) during the Jewish Holiday of Sukkot. The event, known in Arabic as *majzarat al-'Aqsa* (the al-Aqsa Massacre), had far-reaching diplomatic consequences.
- The Western Wall Tunnel riots (in Arabic *habbat al-nafaq* – the Tunnel Uprising), which lasted from the end of the Day of Atonement on September 23rd, 1996 until the eve of Sukkot on the 27th, claimed the lives of almost a hundred Palestinians and 17 Israeli soldiers (about sixty Israelis and over a thousand Palestinians were injured).
- The al-Aqsa Intifada (also known as the Second Intifada) started in the HE on the eve of the Jewish holiday of Rosh HaShanah (the Jewish new year) on September 28th, 2000. It lasted for five years and claimed thousands of casualties on both sides.

Antagonistic Tolerance and Competitive Sharing

Like the 1920s, the 1990s were a formative decade for Israeli-Palestinian relations in the Holy Land. Both were marked by eruptions of nationwide intercommunal violence that started in and around the holy places in

Jerusalem and were connected to holidays with national-religious symbolic significance. The anthropologist Robert M. Hayden has described this phenomenon as a combination of “Antagonistic Tolerance” and “Competitive Sharing of Religious Sites”^[5]. Hayden has explored the role played by contested holy sites in national-religious and ethnic conflicts around the world and came to the realization that these locations have a long history of peaceful coexistence, with periodic outbursts of violence. Hayden explains that appropriating, controlling or destroying holy places has been a means of demonstrating supremacy and control of one community over another.

Luz studied the geography of religious encounters in Jerusalem as a spatial arena that has generated the city’s unique history^[6]. He believes that such eruptions are not a historic deviation from the norm but rather an inherent part of the materialistic experience of holy places. According to this approach, holy places are to be viewed as a fascinating example of the location’s sociopolitical character. Accordingly, I propose that the Israeli-Palestinian national-religious conflict be examined using a *longue durée* approach. This should be based on the development of Jerusalem’s symbolic-iconic sacred space, as perceived by the various national-religious groups who share the city. This approach goes beyond Jerusalem’s boundaries and will contribute to a better understanding of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Forms of Violence

On October 2, 2015 Muhannad Halabi, a 19-year-old Palestinian student from Ramallah, wrote on Facebook: “[...] the Third Intifada has erupted. What is happening to al-Aqsa is what is happening to our holy sites [...] I don’t believe that our people will succumb to humiliation. The people will indeed rise up” (Times of Israel on October 3rd, 2015). The next day he jumped over the barrier separating East Jerusalem from the Palestinian town of Abu Dis, made his way to the Old City of Jerusalem and, not far from the gates of the HE, he stabbed to death two Orthodox Jewish men before being killed by police. The double murder is often cited as the event that launched the October 2015 Knives Intifada. In a wider context, it was part of a three-year wave of violence that started in the autumn of 2014 and was clearly centered, both physically and ideologically, around Jerusalem’s HE. Tens of Israelis and hundreds of Palestinians were killed and many more injured. This wave was characterized by various types of violence, though it was dominated by “lone wolf attacks”, namely attacks by individual Palestinians, including young boys and girls acting on their own and without any connection to a formal organization.

Halabi wasn't the first young Palestinian to stab Jews in retaliation for Israel's actions on the HE. The first "Knives Intifada" began in October 1990 with a triple homicide committed by Amer Abu Sirhan, a 19-year-old Palestinian from the West Bank, who was seeking revenge for the "al-Aqsa massacre". Abu Sirhan started a wave of stabbings during the latter part of the First Intifada, earning him the title *mufajjir thawrat al-sakakin* – "the one who launched the knifing revolt" (Palinfo on October 15, 2011). Similarly, two Jews were stabbed to death in Jerusalem's Old City 95 years earlier – during the first outbreak of Jewish-Arab political violence in Palestine, namely the events of April 1920. Stabbing has been part of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict from the outset. In his book "Weapons of the Weak", anthropologist James Scott showed how violence based on hostility and defiance and the simplest weapons—even if unorganized and lacking a clear goal—may in an instant consolidate into a resistance movement that stirs the masses^[7].

On the first morning of Ramadan in 2021, Israeli police unexpectedly prevented public access to the plaza outside *Bab al-'Amud*, known in English as the Damascus Gate. It is one of the most ornate gates in the Ottoman-era walls surrounding Jerusalem's Old City and is the start of the Palestinians' main route to the al-Aqsa Mosque. During the period 2014-2017, the gate became an Islamic-Palestinian symbol, second in significance only to the al-Aqsa Mosque and was the site of over a dozen stabbings and shootings targeted against Israeli policemen. In response, Israel installed surveillance cameras at the gate and built three fortified watch towers there which are permanently manned by border police officers in full combat gear. This of course only demonstrates Israel's impotence and the weakness of its sovereignty in East Jerusalem.

The plaza at the Damascus Gate is traditionally the site of a colorful open market and a place of gathering during Ramadan. The restrictions placed on this symbolic Palestinian site during Ramadan provoked widespread protest. The public in East Jerusalem was already enraged by an earlier provocation, in which Israeli police disconnected the speakers of the al-Aqsa Mosque on the first evening of Ramadan (April 13th, 2021) in order to prevent any disturbance to a speech by the IDF's Chief of Staff on the eve of Memorial Day for Israel's fallen soldiers, given in the adjacent Western Wall Plaza. This ironically demonstrated "competitive sharing of religious sites".

In the following weeks, the events led to a nationwide escalation. Palestinian protests at the Damascus Gate were met with disproportionate police brutality which only enraged the Palestinians further. During this same period, there was a legal imbroglio that led to

the closing of the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood, which drew attention to the ongoing attempts to Judaize East Jerusalem by state-backed religious-Zionist settlers^[8]. As a result of the protests, the police barriers at the Damascus Gate were removed, but the already existing momentum transformed the localized disturbances into a national wave of political protest centered around national-religious symbols.

Videos of intercommunal and police violence uploaded to social media further exacerbated the situation. Within days, the violence spread to the ethnically mixed (Jewish-Palestinian) city of Jaffa. On May 10th, the Jerusalem Day parade, which celebrates Israel's victory in 1967, was meant to pass through the Damascus Gate into the Muslim Quarter on its way to the Western Wall – a callous religious-Zionist demonstration of power. Hamas, already enraged by the cancelation of the upcoming Palestinian legislative election (scheduled for May 22nd, 2021), fired missiles towards Jerusalem, dispersing the parade and forcing the participants to take shelter. Israel's retaliation marked the beginning of yet another round of violence in Gaza. Both sides portrayed themselves as the guardians of Jerusalem: Hamas called the operation "Sword of Jerusalem" while Israel called it "Guardian of the Walls". In parallel, an unprecedented wave of intercommunal violence erupted between Palestinian citizens of Israel and Jews in mixed cities such as Lod, Ramleh, Acre and Haifa and in the Negev, the Galilee and the "Triangle" (an area in central Israel with a dense Palestinian population). The escalation was also felt in the West Bank. By the end of May, hundreds of Palestinians and about 15 Israelis had been killed and thousands injured.

In March 2022, a new wave of "lone wolf" terrorism occurred, in which 19 civilians and 15 Palestinians (including the perpetrators) were killed. An Israeli operation was launched in the West Bank, in which dozens were killed, including, Palestinian journalist Shireen Abu Akleh (on May 11) and one Israeli SWAT policeman. Abu Akleh, an Al-Jazeera journalist from East Jerusalem, became a Palestinian national symbol and an Arab feminine role model. She was killed in Jenin, a city in the northern West Bank, most probably by Israeli bullets^[9]. Her death echoed all over Palestine, in the Arab world and internationally. On May 12, Israeli police stormed Abu Akleh's coffin that was covered with a Palestinian flag. Images of Israeli policemen brutally attacking the mourners in Abu Akleh's funeral in East Jerusalem were defused all over world media, sending a harsh reminder of the tragic connection between the divided and concurred Palestinian Territories, East Jerusalem and the West Bank.

Thus, when Ramadan and the Jewish Passover occurred simultaneously in April, tensions were already high. In mid-April, on Passover eve, riots

erupted in the HE, fueled by the general atmosphere and by the announcement by Jewish Temple activists of their intention to sacrifice a lamb on the HE (as they attempt to do every year and are always blocked by Israeli police). The police confronted the Palestinians on the HE, but this time acted with restraint. As a result, the violence on the HE and at the Damascus Gate—which was left open this time—remained localized and did not evolve into another nationwide escalation.

The circles of violence around Jerusalem have continuously expanded during the 21st century. While they were once restricted primarily to Jerusalemites and West Bank Palestinians, today they encompass the entire landscape—including Jews and Palestinians, the West Bank and Gaza—and they have merged with broader regional and international entanglements.

The Jewish-Arab conflict has many causes and underlying motives. From its inception, tensions at Jerusalem's holy sites have evolved into violence during religious holidays, with the result being waves of nationwide intercommunal violence and hundreds, and sometimes thousands (if one counts the victims of the Second/al-Aqsa Intifada that was ignited in Jerusalem), of casualties. Be it a bench, a divider, a metal detector or a fence, even a mundane object becomes a symbol that reflects competing claims of sovereignty and control.

The actions by Israel or the Palestinians can sometimes influence the course of events in Jerusalem, but it is clear that as long as the conflict and the Israeli occupation continue, Jerusalem—with its competing national-religious symbolism— will one day erupt into violence again.

Notes

Notes

- ↑1 Shiri Landman, « Barriers to Peace: Protected Values in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict », in *Barriers to Peace in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, Jerusalem, The Jerusalem Institute for Israel Studies and the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Israel, 2010, p. 136.
- ↑2 Emma Aubin-Boltanski, *Pèlerinages et Nationalisme En Palestine : Prophètes, Héros et Ancêtres*, Paris, Éditions de l'EHESS, 2007.
- ↑3 Hillel Cohen, *Year Zero of the Arab-Israeli Conflict 1929*, [Waltham, Massachusetts](#), Brandeis University Press, 2015.

- ↑4 Eran Tzidkiyahu, "From the Margins to the Center : Religious-Nationalism in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict : A Comparative Approach", thèse de science politique, Paris, Institut d'études politiques, 2021.
- ↑5 Robert M. Hayden, Erdemir Aykan, Tuğba Tanyeri-Erdemir, Timothy D. Walker, Devika Rangachari, Manuel Aguilar-Moreno, Enrique Lopez-Hurtado, and Milica Bakić-Hayden, *ntagonistic Tolerance: Competitive Sharing of Religious Sites and Spaces*, London, Routledge, 2016.
- ↑6 Nimrod Luz, « Holy Religious Encounters and the Development of Jerusalem's Urban Landscape: Between Particularism and Exceptionalism", in Maria Giora & Marian Burchardt, *Geographies of Encounter: The Rise and Fall of Multi-Religious Spaces*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2021, pp. 29-54.
- ↑7 James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. New Haven, Connecticut, Yale University Press, 1985.
- ↑8 See [Clothilde Mraffko](#), « "Ils veulent aller vite, nous expulser, détruire les maisons" : dans la Ville sainte, la bataille pour Jérusalem-Est », *Le Monde*, 10 août 2021. [En ligne] https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2021/08/10/ils-veulent-aller-vite-nous-expulser-detruire-les-maisons-dans-la-ville-sainte-la-bataille-pour-jerusalem-est_6091111_3210.html (accessed on July 24, 2022).
- ↑9 [Online] <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/7/4/us-shireen-abu-akleh-killing-investigation-israel-likely-responsible> (accessed on July 24, 2022).

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