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Understanding the 2021 Palestinian Uprising and Resistance Movement

Unit for Political Studies

Understanding the 2021 Palestinian Uprising and Resistance Movement

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Unit for Political Studies

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Table of Contents

Background to the Jerusalem Uprising	1
Understanding the Latest Uprising	2
Characteristics of the Latest Uprising	3
Conclusion	6



On both sides of the Green Line, Occupied Palestine is seeing a popular upsurge in its resistance movement. Beginning in mid-April with the occupation authorities placing iron barriers in the Damascus Gate Square leading to the Old City in Jerusalem and the Al-Aqsa Mosque in the first days of Ramadan, resistance efforts intensified when extremist settlers stormed Al-Aqsa Mosque on 10 May, in their celebrations of the anniversary of the occupation of East Jerusalem. At the same time occupation forces doubled down on attempts to forcibly evict Palestinian families from their homes in the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood of East Jerusalem and replace the Palestinian occupants with settlers, while Israeli soldiers raided Al-Aqsa and attacked worshipers. The Palestinian resistance in the Gaza Strip responded with barrages of rockets in defense of Jerusalem and Al-Aqsa, which was met with a renewed military assault from the occupying military.

Background to the Jerusalem Uprising

Since the Palestinian Nakba of 1948, the Israeli occupation has worked to Judaize the city of Jerusalem, dispossessing and displacing the Palestinian neighborhoods in the west of the city such as Qatamon, Talbiya, and Baka, as well as the Palestinian villages such as Ein Karem, Al-Maliha and Lifta. Israel took control of Palestinian property and prevented the owners from returning through the enactment of a set of laws, most importantly the Absentee Property Law promulgated in March 1950.⁽¹⁾ After the June 1967 war, the occupation authorities annexed East Jerusalem, enabling Jews, under the orders of real estate appropriation, to control homes and land owned by Palestinians, and began establishing a belt of fifteen settlements around the city. A plan was developed to Judaize the geographical, demographic and architectural features of Jerusalem.⁽²⁾ The colonial project came to a head in July 1980 when the Israeli Knesset enacted a basic law stipulating that Jerusalem is the Capital of Israel, declaring that all of Jerusalem, West and East, is the “united” capital of Israel, the seat of the head of state, the Knesset, the government, and the Supreme Court.⁽³⁾

Despite UN Security Council Resolution No. 478 of August 1980⁽⁴⁾ and the General Assembly of the United Nations Resolution No. 15 / 36 of October 1981 rejecting the Knesset Law, considering it contrary to international law and thus illegal,⁽⁵⁾ the occupation has not slowed its settler colonial project in Jerusalem, where it has enforced several policies to demarcate new borders of the city. It has surrounded the eastern part of the city with Jewish settlements that separate East Jerusalem geographically from the West Bank, while ensuring that it remains linked to the western part of the city to complete the Judaization process. In mid-2017, these settlements covered about 35 percent of East Jerusalem, housing about 220,000 settlers out of the 441,000 settlers in the West Bank.⁽⁶⁾ To the

1 “Absentees’ Property Law,” *Adalah*, 1950, accessed on 16/5/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/2RYOLhA>

2 Mahmoud Muhareb, “Israel’s Policy on Al-Aqsa,” *Studies*, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 15/5/2016, accessed on 18/5/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3eWKmDb>

3 “Basic Law: Jerusalem, Capital of Israel,” *Adalah*, 1980, accessed on 16/5/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3w71NH2>

4 “Resolution 478 (1980) / adopted by the Security Council at its 2245th meeting, on 20 August 1980.,” *United Nations*, 1980, accessed on 16/5/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/2SJ9On1>

5 “Recent developments in connection with excavations in eastern Jerusalem.,” *United Nations*, 1981, accessed on 16/5/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/2RXscZ0>

6 “Israel’s Occupation: 50 Years of Dispossession”, Amnesty International, June 2017, accessed on 16/5/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/2SJahWj>



same end, the occupation authorities built an apartheid wall in the West Bank, separating more than 140,000 Palestinian Jerusalemites from their city, and deprived the city of its economic pillar—providing services to surrounding villages and other cities in the West Bank. It also deprives the city of its main source of fresh produce by isolating it from the villages northwest of Jerusalem.⁽⁷⁾ East Jerusalem had already suffered a major blow when West Jerusalem and the Israeli tourism sector pilfered most visitors to the holy city, transforming it from a tourist hub to a mere pitstop in a trip to Israel.

The colonial expansion outside the city's borders coincided with the occupation's restrictions on the urban development of Palestinians inside the city, using urban planning as a mechanism through which to confiscate land and wipe out the Palestinian presence to force a Jewish majority in Jerusalem. To that end, as of the end of 2017, the occupation has revoked the “permanent residency” status (represented by the blue ID card) of more than 14595 Palestinians living in Arab neighborhoods in Jerusalem. The blue card is a document the occupation granted to Jerusalemites after its occupation of the city which does not afford the rights of citizenship but guarantees permanent residency. Thus, a Jerusalemite can lose their “permanent residency” in Jerusalem if they leave for a period of more than three consecutive years.

In addition to colonial policies in Jerusalem, various right-wing parties in the Knesset have been working on legislation since August 2014 to implement a scheme to divide the Al-Aqsa Mosque according to time slots and spatial segregation, in a reproduction of the experience of the Abrahamic Mosque in the city of Hebron.⁽⁸⁾ The work to legislate this scheme coincided with the orchestration of a series of systematic violations of the Al-Aqsa Mosque and its surroundings in recent years, such as closing the mosque's gates to worshipers and workers in October 2014, and an attempt to install metal detectors at the entrances to the mosque in July 2017. The occupation also increased its expulsion and arrest of Palestinians; the number of those expelled from the mosque reached 315 in 2020, and the number of detainees 1979. The occupation forces have often cut the wires of the mosque's external speakers, exposed the employees of the Islamic waqf, and vandalized the locks and facilities of the mosque. They have repeatedly raided Al-Aqsa to protect the entry of extremist Jewish settlers, with more than more than 18,526 settlers having broken into the mosque in 2020.⁽⁹⁾

Understanding the Latest Uprising

Given its political, historical and religious symbolism for Palestinians, and because it remains outside the scope of the Oslo Accords and PA influence as a permanent status issue, Jerusalem emerged as a focal point for the eruption of tensions and popular anger against the systematic Israeli violations and a provocative factor for Palestinian feelings throughout their struggle against the occupation.

7 “The Separation Barrier,” the Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories, “B'Tselem,” 11/11/2017, accessed on 16/5/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3oqnDTq>

8 “Ahmed Qurei Warns against the Occupation's Initiation of Measures to Impose a Temporal and Spatial Division of the Al-Aqsa Mosque,” Wafa News Agency, 14/8/2014, accessed on 16/5/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3eSGXWe>

9 “Jerusalem in 2020... Unprecedented Violations, Settlements and Judaization,” Wafa News Agency, 1/2/2021, accessed on 16/5/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3om51nj>



This was particularly evident in the Western Wall tunnel uprising protesting the digging of a tunnel under the Al-Aqsa Mosque in September 1996, and the second Palestinian intifada (Al-Aqsa Intifada) in September 2000. These confrontations have also intensified over the last five years with the Jerusalem Intifada of 2015, the protest movement against the instillation of metal detectors at Al-Aqsa in July 2017, and the Bab al-Rahmah gate resistance action in February 2019.⁽¹⁰⁾

The start of Ramadan in April 2021 saw an upsurge in the violations by the occupation authorities against Jerusalem and Al-Aqsa, with the aim of implementing the temporal and spatial division scheme. This was evident in the iron barriers set up to prevent Palestinians from staying in Damascus Gate Square, the arrest of young Jerusalemites and children who were in the Al-Aqsa Mosque. The mosque was stormed and its worshipers thrown out, Christians trying to reach the Church of the Holy Sepulcher for the celebration of the Holy Fire in April 2021 were assaulted, and extremist settlers who called to storm Al-Aqsa were offered protection by the police. This escalation coincided with the entry into force of the Israeli Supreme Court ruling issued in September 2020, to expel four Palestinian families from the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood in East Jerusalem on 2 May 2021. The homes would be handed over to Nahalat Shimon, a US based settlement organisation consisting of about 40 immigrant Jewish families from Georgia, claiming ownership of the land called Karm al-Jaouni.⁽¹¹⁾ The Al-Kurd family was evicted from a part of their home in the neighborhood in November 2008, followed by the Hanoun and Ghawi families in August 2009.

Characteristics of the Latest Uprising

Although the Palestinian struggle in Jerusalem has endured since its occupation, there are features that distinguish the most recent resistance. The emergence of spontaneous popular resistance regarding the struggle of Jerusalemites, without organized partisan and factional action has been a significant feature. After a spontaneous, unorganized youth movement, Jerusalemites forced the Israeli police to remove the iron barriers from Damascus Gate Square on 25 April 2021, two weeks after they were installed. The Jerusalem movement in cooperation with Palestinian youth and university students with Israeli citizenship, prompted the Israeli Supreme Court to postpone the decision to expel Palestinian families from their homes in Sheikh Jarrah, after a request submitted by the Israeli Attorney General, Avichai Mandelblit, following daily demonstrations demanding to save the neighborhood from forced displacement and ethnic cleansing. The solidarity of Jerusalemites, taking advantage of the accumulation of experience in the last five years, offered various forms of popular resistance against the occupation authorities. In addition to the daily demonstrations, they channeled social media to amplify their voice globally and encourage Palestinians to come to Jerusalem. They intensified their interaction with influential social media accounts around the

10 Kamal Jihad Al-Ja'bari, "Popular Resistance in Jerusalem: The Uprising, Movements, and the Birth of the Popular Situation 2012-2019", Al-Zaytouna Center for Studies and Consulting, 10/5/2021, accessed on 17/5/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3eSKoMt>

11 "The Israeli Supreme Court is Looking into an Appeal against the Decision to Expel 4 Families from Sheikh Jarrah," Wafa News Agency 2/5/2021, accessed on 17/5/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3w73oww>



world to create infographics and publish pictures and video recordings of the occupation crimes in Jerusalem. Forms of social solidarity were also strengthened in Jerusalem, with communal prayers and iftar gatherings during Ramadan. Interactions between Palestinian with Israeli citizenship and Jerusalemites also increased when the occupation forces prevented worshipers from other cities from alighting their busses or cars in Jerusalem, forcing Jerusalemites to transport these Palestinians in their own vehicles.

Another crucial factor in the latest uprising is that Hamas decided to interact with what is happening in Jerusalem from Gaza. There would thus be some Palestinian resistance to deter the occupation measures, especially given international disregard for Jerusalem since the transfer of the US embassy and official Palestinian incapacity. In the absence of a comprehensive national framework that brings together the main Palestinian forces, Hamas' decision was unilateral. The resistance factions in Gaza reacted with the uprising of Jerusalem by launching its "Sword of Jerusalem" operation, which showed the development of its qualitative capabilities in the manufacture of local missiles that penetrated the Israeli Iron Dome. Within a week of the launch of the operation the resistance factions had fired more than 3,000 rockets towards Israel, that is, approximately 500 rockets per day.⁽¹²⁾ In addition to the intensity of firing, the quality and range of rockets has also developed, especially the A120 missile, which was launched by the resistance factions towards occupied Jerusalem on 10 May and carried explosive warheads with a high destructive capacity and a range of 120 kilometers. The Ayyash 250 missile launched by the resistance factions towards the Ramon International Airport on 13 May, with a range of 220 km, was the farthest a Palestinian missile has reached since the first missile launched by the resistance factions in 2001. They also carried out attacks using homemade "Shehab" drones, for the first time, targeting Israeli centers, including a gas platform off the coast of northern Gaza.

It is important to note that these rockets were developed and manufactured in the Gaza Strip in the context of a suffocating siege that Israel has imposed since 2007. Meanwhile, in an effort to terrorize and suffocate the Palestinians in Gaza, the Israeli army intensified its aggression against Palestinian civilians. Within one week, more than 200 civilians were killed in the Palestinian enclave, including 58 children and 34 women, and about 34,000 were displaced, numbers that are escalating daily.⁽¹³⁾ The army also intensified its destruction of infrastructure, with 90 buildings bombed in just a week, including 6 residential towers, 3 of which were completely destroyed, in addition to the destruction of facilities providing water, sewage, electricity, and internet.⁽¹⁴⁾ While the aim of the resistance is to demonstrate that Gaza will not be isolated from the rest of the Palestinian people and to deter the occupation's violations in Jerusalem, the overall destructive Israeli response aims to destroy the infrastructure that enabled the resistance factions to produce this many missiles and disable any resistance and solidarity from Gaza.

¹² "No Sign of Israel-Gaza Conflict Ending," *The New York Times*, 17/5/2021, accessed on 16/5/2021, at: <https://nyti.ms/3ootUyO>.

¹³ "34 Thousand Displaced Palestinians Seek Shelter in UNRWA Schools," Anadolu Agency, 17/5/2021, accessed on 17/5/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3uUsizg>

¹⁴ "The Aggression Continues ... Gaza Municipality: The Raids Targeted the Infrastructure and the Occupation Talks about Bombing a Giant Tunnel Network", Al-Jazeera Net, 17/5/2021, accessed on 17/5/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3tRFEuL>



The Israeli attacks on Al-Aqsa Mosque, Sheikh Jarrah, and the Gaza Strip were the main catalyst that called for Palestinians in the inner cities to participate extensively in the recent popular uprising. However, another significant factor for this uprising is the violence of extremist Jewish settlers during the recent events under the protection of the Israeli police. The escalation of this violence came to the fore with the martyrdom of Mousa Hassouna in the city of Lydd after a Jewish settler shot him on 10 May, sparking an all-out uprising in most of the cities occupied in 1948, especially in the “mixed cities,” inhabited by Palestinians and Jews. Mass demonstrations took place in Arab cities and towns denouncing the Israeli aggression on Jerusalem and Gaza. After the expansion of the demonstrations in 1948 occupied land, the Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, announced on 12 May a state of emergency in the city of Lydd, and granted the Inspector General of the Israeli Police, Yaakov Shabtai, the powers to call on the Israeli army to help curtail the demonstrations.⁽¹⁵⁾ This spurred settler extremists to escalate their violence towards the Palestinians, attacking them in their homes, streets, shops and universities, especially in Akka, Yafa, Haifa and Lydd. The Israeli police have arrested more than 700 Palestinians since 9 May⁽¹⁶⁾ and fired metal bullets coated with rubber and tear gas at the demonstrators.

This resistance and solidarity action has served to reaffirm the refusal of Palestinians with Israeli citizenship to be separated from the Palestinians in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, linking their demand for their national and civil rights with their defense of the Palestinian cause as a whole.

Limited demonstrations have taken place in the West Bank since the escalation of the popular uprising on 9 May, initiated by young people not affiliated with specific factions or parties, joined by factions that include Fatah. These demonstrations expanded and spread intensively after Friday prayers on 14 May to include various parts of the West Bank, including Hebron, Ramallah, Al-Bireh, Bethlehem, Salbit, Qalqilya, Tulkarm, Jericho and Nablus, during which 11 Palestinians were martyred and dozens wounded. This rose to 21 martyred, including a child by 16 May, as a result of Israeli military escalation aiming to prevent the West Bank from participating in the popular uprising, fearing the outbreak of a new intifada, as happened in 2000. Despite the haste of some forces and factions to the call for a “general strike” across Palestine, including the West Bank, the response of the younger generation in the West Bank has continued to assert its spontaneity. This generation appear are reluctant to be restricted by political frameworks, especially since a large segment of them feel disappointed with the behavior of the Palestinian Authority and factions, most recently by the Palestinian President’s decision to postpone the April elections.

Undoubtedly, the West Bank has displayed the potential for a full-scale uprising that could pose a huge obstacle to the occupation following a ceasefire with Gaza. The current resistance could build on Gaza’s legendary defiance to transform the uprising into an all-out intifada if the Palestinian Authority has the political will and realizes that it has no other alternative.

¹⁵ “Netanyahu Gives the Green Light to Carry out Administrative Arrests and Bring the Army into Cities.” Arab 48, 13/5/2021, accessed on 17/5/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/2S2Gyap>

¹⁶ “1500 Palestinian Detainees Since the Start of the Escalation of the Confrontation in Jerusalem,” The New Arab, 16/5/2021, accessed on 17/5/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3ePVmly>



Conclusion

Regional and international diplomatic efforts to cease the Israeli aggression on Gaza and restrict Israeli violations against the Palestinians in Jerusalem continue to collide with Israeli intransigence linked to Netanyahu's desire to save face in Israeli public opinion after the resistance factions placed six million Israelis in the range of their missiles, and the Palestinian display of unity against Judaization and fragmentation policies. On the other hand, Netanyahu is seeking to eliminate the chances of his opponent, Yair Lapid, leader of Yesh Atid, which was charged on 5 May 2021 with the formation of a new government. However, regardless of the path the confrontations will take, whether Israeli aggression escalates, or international mediation brings about a ceasefire, Palestinian forces and factions must agree on a unified strategy that harnesses all forms of struggle at home and abroad to end the occupation instead of focusing on establishing an authority that serves, strengthens and prolongs the occupation. This cannot happen without an inclusive national framework and requires continued non-reactive resistance.