

# Palestine Recentered

Yousef Munayyer

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Arab Center Washington DC  
المركز العربي واشنطن دي سي

## Background

In the past 10 days, there has been a significant increase in the level of violence in and around Jerusalem. Over 1,000 Palestinians have been injured, according to the Palestinian Red Crescent Society, and seven Palestinians have been killed. Most of this has come as protests erupted against Israeli policies in Jerusalem. The reverberations of this crisis have been felt across the region, forcing international players to respond and Washington to send envoys to the region in an effort to defuse the tensions. Mahmoud Abbas, who had been on a visit to China, cut his trip short to return to deal with the ongoing crisis. The eyes of Arabs and Muslims around the world have been focused on Jerusalem.

As of this writing it is not entirely clear when the uptick in violence will be quelled, though the number of dead and wounded suggests that it is far from over. This most recent episode serves as an important reminder to all those who assumed that the Israeli-Palestinian issue could somehow take a back seat to other conflicts in the region and did not require urgent attention. Instead, what is clear now is that this issue continues to be a powder keg with the capacity to inflame the entire region and thus demands focused international engagement.

## The Spark

On Friday, July 14, three Palestinian citizens of Israel carried out an attack in the occupied Old City of Jerusalem, killing two Israeli border police officers. The incident, much of which was

caught on video, drew a prompt and harsh response from Israel. In the immediate aftermath, the Israeli government prevented access to the Dome of the Rock and al-Aqsa Mosque complex and the Friday prayer at the mosque was blocked from taking place. Palestinians began to protest these closures by praying en masse on the street and in public as close to the al-Aqsa Mosque as possible. Soon after, the Israelis erected metal detectors at the entrances to the mosque compound, compelling Palestinian worshippers to go through this new security checkpoint to pray there.

This step taken by the Israelis was seen by many as an attempt to alter the already delicate status quo at the holy site, and it was a decision that was made by the government over the objections and warnings of some Israeli security officials who believed it would inflame tensions. Since then, protests have continued and clashes between Palestinian worshippers and protesters and Israeli occupation forces are not abating. Tear gas, rubber-coated bullets, and live fire have been used against the protesters in the days since. But while the attack that killed two Israeli border police officers in occupied Jerusalem may have been the spark that led to this recent escalation, it could not have been ignited without the kindling that had been building in Jerusalem for many decades and had intensified in recent years.

## The Kindling

No singular event in Jerusalem—or elsewhere in the Palestinian territories—can be understood separately from its larger context.

Prior to the attack on the police officers in Jerusalem, three young Palestinians were shot and killed by Israeli forces in raids into refugee camps in both Bethlehem and Jenin. Little attention was paid to these killings; like many others before them, they receded into the background of what has become the normalized violence of occupation that Israel visits on the Palestinian people. But this steady violence and the human rights violations under military rule provide the kindling to be lit by an eventual spark. The general context of military occupation and inequality is constant. Moreover, the specific context of Jerusalem deserves special attention.

For years, and particularly and more aggressively during the tenure of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, the Israeli state has advanced numerous policies in Jerusalem that have had devastating effects on the Palestinian population living within the municipal boundaries of the city and on the Palestinians who revere and are tied to the holy city but unable to easily access it. These policies include but are not limited to the following: residency revocation, which targets Palestinian residents of Jerusalem and forces them to prove, on an annual basis, that Jerusalem is the center of their lives or risk losing their residency permits; home evictions, where Israeli settlers use a legalistic process to claim ownership over Palestinian homes and forcibly evict the residents so that the settlers can take control of them; and house demolitions, where Palestinian homes are targeted for partial or complete demolition for the failure to secure building

permits – which are made either economically or administratively impossible to get for various factors, including blatant and structural racism.

Together, these policies have been aimed at demographically engineering Jerusalem in such a way as to increase the grip of the Jewish community over Jerusalem and to strengthen the Israeli state's control over the city and its status in any negotiated agreement. Combined with Israeli settlement expansion and generous government spending on Jewish communities, along with the failure to spend in any equitable way on the Palestinian residents of the city, these policies send a clear message to both the Palestinian residents of Jerusalem and the Palestinian community at large that Israel is actively and aggressively tightening its grip on the city and that the statements of government officials that Jerusalem will never be divided are being backed up by facts on the ground.

This specific crisis, however, is even more intricate: it involves the very sensitive area of the holy sites in the Old City. The Noble Sanctuary, or al-Haram al-Sharif, includes the plaza of the Dome of the Rock and the al-Aqsa Mosque, which are revered by Muslims. The compound is also believed to be built directly on top of where a temple sacred to Jews once stood; the Western Wall, which makes up one of the walls of the plaza, is today considered the holiest site in Judaism.

Early on, after the creation of the state of Israel and the occupation of the Old City by the Israeli military, the Israeli government worked to

prevent Jews from accessing the Noble Sanctuary plaza so as not to create the impression that Israel sought to destroy the Muslim holy site and replace it with a newly built temple. In 1969, a messianic Australian Christian set fire to the al-Aqsa Mosque from the inside, in an attempt to destroy it so that a Jewish temple could be rebuilt. The outrage that this prompted led the Israelis to realize how volatile even the perception of such a desire could be to the Arab and Muslim worlds. Another important reminder was in the year 2000, when Ariel Sharon, a right-wing Israeli politician who was vying for the role of prime minister in an upcoming election, visited the al-Aqsa Mosque compound with a massive armed entourage. This visit was taken by Palestinians as a message of intent to use force to impose a Jewish presence at the site and it sparked what has come to be known as the second intifada.

Palestinians also look at what has taken place in Hebron's Ibrahimi Mosque as a likely indicator of Israeli intentions in Jerusalem. After Israel occupied Hebron in 1967, the site of the mosque was made to accommodate Jewish worship during particular holidays of the year. This not only led to tension with the Muslim community there but it also brought along with it an increased security presence that added fuel to the fire. In 1994, an Israeli-American carried out a massacre of 29 Muslim worshippers at the mosque. The heightened sensitivity around security for the site ultimately led to a decision in the 1996 Wye River agreements to partition control of the building so that part of it would be exclusively for Jewish prayer.

Over the years, and particularly since the second intifada, Israel has increasingly limited access to the Old City of Jerusalem to Palestinians and has also curbed access to the al-Aqsa Mosque to certain Palestinians as well. During this time, Israel has permitted Jewish visits to the al-Aqsa Mosque plaza, although Jewish worship is not allowed. From time to time, Israel has also permitted Israeli members of parliament, some of whom are outspoken about their intentions to increase Israel's grip over Jerusalem and even over the holy site itself, to visit the al-Aqsa Mosque plaza. These visits routinely cause tension with wary Palestinians who view them with suspicion. There has also been, in recent years, a mainstreaming of the idea that Israel should build a new temple in the same place as the Dome of the Rock and al-Aqsa Mosque. While these ideas had been relegated to the fringes of Israeli discourse in the past, they have garnered increasing numbers of adherents who hold this view, some of whom are lawmakers today in the Israeli Knesset.

In the past, as men were often prevented from accessing the compound unless they were above a certain age, some female worshippers often played the role of protecting the sanctity of the compound. However, a group of such women was banned in 2015 by the Israeli defense ministry.

The delicate status quo for the management of the al-Aqsa Mosque and Dome of the Rock plaza has been ongoing since 1994 when, after a peace agreement with Jordan, Israel conceded that the Jordanian Islamic Waqf institution of

Islamic endowment) would manage the site. A few years before, Israeli border police officers used live fire to repress protests on the plaza, which ultimately left 20 dead and garnered international condemnation. This incident highlighted the importance of achieving a status quo understanding so that worshippers would not have to be confronted by Israel's security forces in the compound. Over the years, Israel has chipped away at the authority of the Waqf by permitting visits, sometimes escorted by security personnel, of provocative figures as well as members of the Knesset. Israel has also often regulated entry to the compound area, preventing men under a certain age from entering. While the metal detectors may be removed after the current uproar, Israel will likely seek to install cameras to monitor worshippers or other forms of surveillance, further diminishing the Waqf's responsibility.

It is in this context—one in which Palestinians experience the general pressures of the military occupation, with the particular intentions of the Israeli state to further monopolize occupied Jerusalem and the incremental indications at the holy site itself—that metal detectors were placed at the entrance to the holy site compound. For this reason, the metal detectors cannot be understood as the innocuous security measures that may be commonplace in much of the world, but rather as a red flag that fits into a pattern of actions and which ultimately leads to increased Israeli control over the holy space.

### **The Conflagration**

As Palestinians prayed in the streets of the old city, refusing to cooperate with the metal detector screening and thus not entering the al-Aqsa Mosque, solidarity protests began to erupt in several countries throughout the region. Demonstrations were held in Malaysia and in Turkey, where some even attacked Jewish places of worship. And in Amman, Jordan, the country which is officially recognized as the custodian responsible for the Noble Sanctuary, there were protests as well as acts of violence, including an attack on the Israeli embassy. Even the GCC crisis which had dominated headlines out of the region for the past two months, began to take a backseat to what was happening on the streets of Jerusalem. The various messaging networks that had espoused dueling narratives either in support of the blockade of Qatar or against it came together on an issue for the first time in weeks. The emir of Qatar also mentioned the situation in Jerusalem in a speech on July 21, and the Arab League cautioned Israel not to play with fire.

Within days, events transpiring on the ground in Jerusalem reverberated across the Arab and Muslim worlds, reminding us once again that despite the hot spots elsewhere in the region, Palestine—with Jerusalem at its core—remains at the very geographic and emotional center of the region.

### **Policy Implications**

The Trump Administration has elevated the Israeli-Palestinian issue perhaps more than any other, and has focused on it in traditional

fashion. President Trump's first foreign trip was to the Middle East and he spoke in Saudi Arabia about the importance of Israeli-Palestinian peace. He then went to Israel-Palestine himself to speak to the leaders about his commitment and the need for concessions to be made. But if the events on the ground in the last several days prove anything, it is that photo-opportunity diplomacy will not be sufficient for dealing with this issue. Instead, it will take sustained good-faith engagement, and this is something we have not yet seen from the Trump Administration.

Indeed, as this crisis unfolded the president of the United States has been embroiled in one scandalous headline after another. News continues to percolate that his secretary of state may tender his resignation. While regional leaders were on the phone attempting to resolve the situation on the ground in Jerusalem, and others were calling for restraint as well as American and international engagement, the White House merely dispatched envoys and kept at a distance. The lack of substantial staff in the State Department focused on these issues was evident. With Washington in disarray as the situation in Jerusalem deteriorated, the message sent to the players involved was that

the United States did not seem to have the time or the attention span needed for the Israeli-Palestinian issue. How, they will surely ask, could the United States be committed to seeing through a negotiated solution if it was incapable of focusing on even this brief period of escalation?

The eruption of events in Jerusalem, should also serve to clarify a number of policy questions. For example, the notion that the United States' embassy move to Jerusalem could somehow be achieved without provoking significant unrest should clearly be retired. Further, the reaction by Arab and Muslim publics to events taking place in Jerusalem—even as regimes throughout the region have secretly sought warmer relations with Israel and attempted to quell the situation—should firmly put to rest the fanciful “outside-in” approach to Middle East peace.

The underlying lesson from these events is that the situation in Palestine cannot be ignored. Nor can these issues be managed or dealt with without serious, sustained, and committed engagement in good faith. Despite many efforts to prove the contrary, Palestine and Jerusalem continue to assert their centrality to the region.