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SHARED SPACES IN JERUSALEM NEIGHBORHOODS: CHALLENGES AND HOPES

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Abstract

Jerusalem is Israel's most diverse city by the character of its population. But its layout – built as a series of neighborhoods that as early as the mid-19th century expansion beyond the Old City walls was already organized along religious-sectorial-social lines – has engendered a city with distinct separation among the different population groups. Beyond the historical development, the planning approaches adopted over the years resulted in plans based on the neighborhood separation model such that the distinct character of each neighborhood could be established and would not encourage internal diversity.

The Jerusalem municipal boundary line, about which much has been written, resulted in a de facto separation between the city's Jewish and Arab neighborhoods. But the issue at the heart of this study is the boundaries of consciousness and culture drawn among the Jewish neighborhoods that differ from one another in the mosaic of their residents' religious identity. Beyond addressing boundaries, the study focuses on the places where those boundaries are blurred – the mixed neighborhoods of Jerusalem, where populations that differ in religious identity live side by side.

The study was conducted as part of the Shared Spaces in Jerusalem project of the Jerusalem Institute for Policy Research, with the participation of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation in Israel. The aim of the project is to generate horizontal urban considerations with regard to interaction among the diverse Jerusalem populations in daily life. Jerusalem's nature as a mixed city requires consideration of the various needs distinct to each population group, but also of the shared space in which the different groups meet organically.¹

The current study addresses private shared spaces; that is, it doesn't explore characteristics of the encounter among the various populations in public-urban spaces such as major

¹ An array of studies is being carried out as part of the project, exploring shared spaces in the work environment, in open public areas and in hospitals; in addition, workshops and training sessions for relevant professionals are also held to develop knowledge and skills for managing and operating these meeting spaces and for creating accessible, inclusive spaces for diverse populations. For details see the [“Shared Spaces in Jerusalem”](#) project on the Jerusalem Institute for Policy Research website.

shopping malls, open parks, medical clinics, places of leisure activity and entertainment, but rather among the populations that share a common living space.

The question this study wishes to address is: In what way does living in a mixed neighborhood affect the degree of social interaction and the tolerance among people from groups with different religious identities?

The study examined nine Jerusalem neighborhoods that differ from one another in religious homogeneity levels and in social processes of population change. In order to examine the perspective of the population and the opinions and positions of the people who experience the shared space on a daily basis without mediation, the study focuses on the neighborhood residents themselves and not people who hold official positions there (such as community organizers, school principals, etc.) or in the municipality. The study's data and conclusions are based on questionnaires sent to neighborhood residents, on in-depth interviews conducted with residents of each neighborhood and on observations within the neighborhoods.

Over the years different suggestions were made for how to divide the neighborhoods and create intentional separation among populations in order to form a 'living area' for each, minimizing friction and increasing tolerance among sectors. The conclusions of this study call that approach into question.

Below are its main conclusions, which also serve as recommendations for how to generate shared spaces in neighborhoods in a way that would boost mutual willingness to live together rather than diminish it.

1. The first conclusion relates to the main spaces of interaction in the neighborhoods. **The study shows that expressions of tolerance among population groups with different religious identities appear most often when the interaction occurs on the basis of common denominators unrelated to religious identity.** Long-term encounters on such a basis are more effective than chance meetings.

Findings of the study show that the two most important spaces for generating positive ties are a shared apartment building and local educational frameworks, primarily early childhood. In both of these spheres, encounters that take place result from mutual dependence and common goals, and take place on the basis of a common denominator that is not religious identity. In apartment buildings, these may be concern for building maintenance and improvement, assistance in daily needs, friendships between

families of similar age group profiles despite belonging to different religious streams, etc.

In the educational framework, too, the common denominator among populations is not religious identity but issues of child care, education and development. Apart from the encounter itself, educational frameworks have the power to build trust among people who belong to different sectors but care for their children together. This trust is of utmost value in creating social solidarity.

There are additional spaces beyond these two for forging ties that are not based on religious identity but on horizontal segmentation such as personality, vocation, life circumstances and personal interests. What follows are several examples that arose from the study.

Parenthood is one of the central foundations that forge ties among people; relationships among parents with children of similar ages (but not only) coping with similar challenges, and having a similar lifestyle – often bridge religious divides. Even short-term encounters such as parenting classes, post-partum support groups for mothers, leisure and cultural activities for parents and shared activities in the educational framework, playgrounds or any other site have great potential in forging positive ties that cross religious identities.

Another basis for forging horizontal ties, other than parenthood, is age and family status. People of similar age groups and family status often have shared interests or needs that could be a point of encounter. Leisure, sports and cultural activities intended for older people, for middle aged people, for singles or for others who live alone, for youth or for children based on age – form relationships on a foundation that is not religious identity. Support group meetings to address challenges and needs of each of these age groups reinforce the sense of connection among their participants.

Another type of connection that is independent of religious identity is based on medical issues. Coping with physical, cognitive or other limitations, physical or mental medical challenges, temporary or long-term, can all serve as fertile ground for development of relationships, ties, support and understanding among people who are coping with these challenges, as well as for the caregivers and support providers. Coping with such issues and sharing them with people who live nearby crosses religious and ideological boundaries.

Finally, encounters and generation of ties on the basis of gender also often allow deepening of positive feelings among members of different population groups.

Beside these horizontal segmentations, it appears that certain groups show a higher degree of openness to others who are dissimilar, such as new immigrants; people who don't define themselves as belonging to a particular sector or who don't define themselves at all on the basis of their religious identity; people who belonged to a particular sector in the past but now belong to a different one; families without a uniform religious identity among the nuclear family members or the extended family, etc. These and others could serve as a bridge to forge ties that are not based on religious identity among populations residing in a mixed neighborhood.

2. The second conclusion relates to the physical space and how it is viewed by the neighborhood residents. The study shows that **in order to create safe spaces for all populations, it is not necessary to live in separate neighborhoods, but rather to create anchors of identity within mixed neighborhoods.**

The approach by which a particular population could feel secure only in a homogeneous environment or in areas in which everyone is similar – loses credibility in light of the study's findings. As we have shown, most residents feel comfortable where they live on condition that their needs are addressed and they feel a part of a large enough group, even if the general character of the neighborhood does not align with their religious identity.

3. An additional conclusion that arose repeatedly from the interviews is that **a positive experience of shared living in mixed neighborhoods takes place for the most part when the relationships are formed naturally between private people, and not when interested parties get involved.**

A consequence of this conclusion is an increase in influence of community administrations, neighborhood committees and private initiatives from the neighborhood to create more pleasant spaces and points for encounter among the different populations.

From these conclusions arise directions for future consideration on how to improve the encounters taking place in mixed neighborhoods and to boost the level of tolerance among the different sectors:

- Reinforcing relationships that are not based on religious affiliation and finding common denominators;
- forming identity anchors in the neighborhoods for each type of population and/or guaranteeing their continuity;

- reducing intervention from external elements on the goings-on inside the neighborhoods, and increasing activity by internal ones.

We have chosen to close with the words of President Reuven Rivlin, seeking to turn a challenge into an opportunity:

What seems at the political-national level as an unresolvable conflict, a zero-sum game between secular, national-religious and Ultra-Orthodox, between Arabs and Jews, about budgets and resources, about control and character, can be transformed at the regional level to an opportunity – an opportunity for a meeting of interests and of will, an opportunity for cooperation. Regional development, development of infrastructure and health services, improvement in quality of life – all these become more possible when we work together, when we leverage the advantage of size. When my neighbors' quality of life is higher, my community's personal security is higher.

[President Reuven Rivlin, "Four Tribes Speech", Herzliya Conference, 2015]

As the outcome of this study and its conclusions have shown, shared living in mixed neighborhoods is not easy. It brings to their doorstep social questions, conflicts and tensions that people sometimes try to avoid. But that's exactly where the hope lies, and it seems that people of all population groups are aware of this.

Perhaps living in separate neighborhoods is easier, allowing a freer hand for the population within each neighborhood, and perhaps it does not harm the sense of general social solidarity and tolerance. But if Jerusalem has a will to live, it cannot allow itself to carry on in totally separate spaces. The findings of this study support the importance of meaningful meeting points among populations, including living in mixed neighborhoods, to reinforce Jerusalem's social fortitude.

Demographic forecasts predict that in a few short decades Israel's population and sectorial divisions will be similar to the breakdown in Jerusalem today. Jerusalem, therefore, plays a central role in laying out the models for how public and private spaces are to be shared. If Jerusalem and its residents can conduct themselves positively and wisely in shared spaces, they can create hope for managing shared spaces in Israel at large.

If this study adds just a single Jerusalem stone to the shared edifice that is the State of Israel, that alone will be our reward.

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Jerusalem is Israel's most diverse city by the character of its population, but due to historical developments and adopted planning approaches, the different population groups are distinctly separate. This study focuses on Jerusalem's mixed neighborhoods, in which Jewish populations with diverse religious identities live side by side. The study examined nine Jerusalem neighborhoods that differ from one another in the degree of religious homogeneity levels and in social processes of population change. Using a variety of research techniques, the study focuses on resident perspectives and outlines their approach to the challenges and opportunities of living in mixed neighborhoods. The study then presents recommendations for how to realize the social potential of living in mixed neighborhoods, improve the nature of encounters among the populations in the neighborhood and increase mutual tolerance among them.

The study was conducted as part of the Shared Spaces project, with the participation of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation in Israel.

Tehila Bigman is a researcher at JIPR and a doctoral candidate in Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies at Hebrew University. Her research explores the deep processes taking place among Jerusalem's populations, in particular among the Haredi population and the population of East Jerusalem.

The Jerusalem Institute for Policy Research is a think tank bringing forth from Jerusalem a sustainable social, economic and spatial doctrine. Policymakers have been turning to JIPR for investigation, advancement and specification of critical issues in the study of Jerusalem and Israel since its founding in 1978. JIPR's research, services and activities facilitate institutions and other entities in shaping innovative policies and implementing them effectively. For JIPR, Jerusalem serves as a source of inspiration, a field for study, a laboratory and a target space for influence. Highest on JIPR's agenda is Jerusalem's development for the greater good of its diverse inhabitants, its believers and all those who love the city, along with reinforcing its international standing.

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