

# East Jerusalem and the Swords of Iron War: Current Status and Policy Recommendations

**Dr. Amnon Ramon**

October 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2023

## | Background

Two weeks after the outbreak of the Swords of Iron War it appears that East Jerusalem is relatively calm compared to the other fronts in the south, the north and the West Bank. This picture, however, conceals serious problems brewing under the surface. Some of these are existing problems that have been aggravated by the war, and others are issues that have arisen in the last two weeks in the state-of-emergency period.

In the first days of the war, the impact of the previous major cycle of violence of May 2021 that led to Operation Guardians of the Wall was palpable. Infiltration of Hamas terrorists and a Gazan mob to the Gaza envelope Jewish communities and the massacre perpetrated raised fears among many residents of the Jewish neighborhoods on the seam line of Jerusalem of a wave of violence that would be directed toward them. On the Palestinian side many seemed to have been surprised by the extent of the “success” of the Hamas forces and many holed up at home for fear of an Israeli reprisal. The police force and the traffic municipal police patrols increased their presence in the seam line neighborhoods. But large-scale demonstrations and violence – such as those in the summer of 2014 after the murder of Mohammed Abu Khdeir – did not happen.

Violent clashes between young East Jerusalemites and the police did take place on a relatively small scale in Isawiya (where two neighborhood youth were killed) and in Silwan (two youth were killed there as well). Beit Hanina, At-Tur, Ras al-Amud, Sheikh Jarrah, the Shu’afat refugee camp and Kafr ‘Aqab also saw clashes. A terrorist who threw a Molotov cocktail was killed at the Qalandia checkpoint. Two policemen were injured in a terror shooting at the Shalem station on Salah al-Din Street. The terrorist, a 21-year-old from Beit Hanina, was killed. His house was marked and measured for demolition. Tensions also flared around the Temple Mount / al-Aqsa when restrictions were imposed on entry of Muslims under age 50 for prayer and the opening of the Mount for Jewish visitors.

The police declared a “zero tolerance” policy toward demonstrators and violence during the time of war. It arrested dozens of East Jerusalemites suspected of participating in demonstrations and riots, incitement, and support for Hamas on social media. Some Arab residents who posted what was perceived as support for Hamas on social media were fired from their jobs.

Most East Jerusalem residents locked themselves down at home. Many were afraid of acts of revenge by Jews and from clashes with the police. Jewish youth attacked Arabs near Kiryat Hayovel and in the Mahane Yehuda market. Many videos were posted on social media showing harsh violence by police leveled against East Jerusalem young adults. Police spokespersons claim that the arrests were carried out against those suspected of riots and the videos present only part of the picture.

On the first days of the war, most East Jerusalemites employed in the western part of the city did not go to work. Some people were afraid to go to the hospitals in the western part of the city. Eventually many returned to work, but the city has not yet resumed full functioning, and the shortage of workers in certain areas – such as public transportation and sanitation – is felt. Schools have not yet reopened their doors.

Suhaib Abu Amar Al-Razm, a 22-year-old East Jerusalem transportation service driver who drove Jewish young adults to the party near Kibbutz Reim was murdered by the terrorists. In (Jewish) WhatsApp chats, rumors spread that he was a terrorist and that riots are expected by Jews at his funeral in East Jerusalem. An effort was made to dispel those rumors, and the funeral passed without incident. This seems to best demonstrate the catch-22 that East Jerusalem residents are caught up in during this difficult period.

On October 18, 2023, the Jerusalem Institute for Policy Research held a meeting on the reality in East Jerusalem in this time of war and state of emergency. About 100 participants attended, including activists and residents of East Jerusalem, social organization representatives active in the eastern part of the city and representatives of the National Insurance Institute, the Jerusalem municipality and the Home Front Command.

**The conclusion that arose from the discussions was that all parties have a common goal which is to make sure that East Jerusalem does not heat up in this period, which could last several months at varying degrees of intensity. It appears that East Jerusalem is in an extremely sensitive state of restrained tension; at this point it has not yet reached the boiling point, but it is possible that that point is approaching. Given Israel’s current volatile state, an additional front in Jerusalem could cause escalation in the other spheres and even beyond.**

## | Central problems in East Jerusalem during the wartime state-of-emergency

**Economic and employment crisis** – decline in the number of people going out to work; closing of the Bank Hadoar (postal bank); shortage in food and increase in prices of food; difficulty in utilization of rights with the National Insurance Institute, welfare authorities and Israeli civil social services.

**Tension and fear of violent clashes** with police and security forces and with Jewish extremists.

**Poor state of shelters in East Jerusalem neighborhoods** – few open shelters available to the public in schools; limited familiarity with safety guidelines during air raid sirens.

**Closure of security crossings** – making entry difficult for students living in neighborhoods outside the separation fence to study inside the city.

## | Main recommendations

1. **Set up a situation room common to all authorities** (the Jerusalem municipality, government ministries, the Home Front Command and civilian social organizations) to handle the complex problems that arise in this emergency period in the eastern part of the city in a coordinated manner.
2. **Open all shelters that meet code in East Jerusalem schools.**
3. **Hold a discussion specifically on Kafr 'Aqab and the Qalandia crossing and find solutions as soon as possible:** (a) open Bank Hadoar office at the Qalandia crossing and allow residents to reach there, or operate a mobile service immediately; (b) create a humanitarian access route for the sick who require medical services in Jerusalem; (c) consider steps for increasing the number of permits at the crossing as long as the security situation remains quiet.
4. **Open additional lanes** for entering and exiting the Shu'afat refugee camp to reduce lengthy waits and **open the crossing** between Jabel Mukaber and Arab al-Sawahira for students.
5. **Reconsider the issue of demolishing homes during the war** due to its highly sensitive nature on the ground.
6. **Maintain a tough yet professional and respectful stance** toward East Jerusalem residents, especially young adults and youth.

- 
7. **Make sure the line between incitement and support of the Hamas massacres on one hand, and identification with Palestinian suffering in the Gaza Strip on the other is clearly defined.** Space must be made available for East Jerusalem residents – many of whom have relatives in the Gaza Strip – to express identification and pain for the condition of the Palestinian population in Gaza.
  8. **Reinforce the community administration in the eastern part of the city** through meetings with senior decision-makers and a full engagement of neighborhood emergency teams as much as possible. Connect all municipal entities to the civil operations room, exploiting the community leadership such as school principals, community center administrators and activists in emergency and life-saving organizations.