

# The East Jerusalem Educational System in the Shadow of the Iron Swords War: Current status and Policy Recommendations

**Dr. Amnon Ramon, Dr. Marik Stern**

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## | Background

Five weeks after the massacre in the Gaza envelope communities and the outbreak of the Swords of Iron War, the educational system in East Jerusalem appears to have taken a significant hit. Contributing factors include a rise in the fear factor and tensions between the city's Jews and Arabs; the difficulties that have arisen at the crossings into the city from neighborhoods outside the fence; mobility issues and checkpoints enroute to educational institutions inside the city; the fragile emotional state of children and teaching staff who are afraid to express their feelings and fears at school; the severe shortage of shelters and safe spaces; and what is perceived by East Jerusalem residents as over-policing and police brutality against students and teachers.

On Tuesday, November 7, 2023, the Jerusalem Institute for Policy Research in collaboration with the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom held an online meeting (via Zoom). The meeting addressed the situation in the East Jerusalem school system in these times of war and state of emergency. More than one hundred participants were in attendance: representatives of the Jerusalem Education Administration in the Jerusalem Municipality, the Ministry of Education, supervisors, teachers, parent committee representatives, East Jerusalem activists and others.

## | Key Recommendations

1. The first, most pressing, issue that came up was the relationships between the police and the crossing authority, and the school system. Our primary recommendation is to reinforce the connections among these three entities by creating a forum or collaborative body. Ties between neighborhoods outside the fence and educational institutions within the city are of utmost importance, as any closure or partial opening of crossings has an immediate impact on the school system in the city. This is also the case for closure of the Old City which has many schools that serve students from throughout the city. An outcome of such coordination could be issuing student cards

to students at East Jerusalem schools and their staff, allowing easier passage through the crossings and checkpoints, with consideration for security needs of course. Organized passage of students on school buses via a special lane could also be weighed, in coordination with the police. In times of emergency, when students from neighborhoods outside the fence cannot get to school, hybrid learning should be considered; this of course requires financial investment.

2. On the relationship between the educational system and the police, we suggest considering reducing police presence at the entry to schools to lessen the friction between police and students, and to avoid as best as possible humiliating body searches, confiscation of cellphones, etc. Keep in mind that such actions are promptly documented, go viral on social networks and cause unrest throughout the city. Such a reality makes it difficult for the school system to function; many parents consequently choose to leave their children at home for fear of their personal safety.
3. As far as what goes on inside the schools themselves, there is a dilemma that must be addressed – should students be permitted to discuss the situation, the war and their feelings, when in school? Should “back to school” entail classroom learning only, or should students be given the opportunity to let off steam, sharing their feelings and frustrations? Is it possible, despite the Israeli side’s great fear of escalation, to create a “safe space” for discussion, sharing and venting their feelings (with appropriate preparation) within school? Perhaps creating safe spaces for open discussion in the schools and the informal educational frameworks could have a positive effect on the level of security in the streets of the city.
4. Another dilemma in freedom of expression pertains to social media, which until the war were an active space in which students could express themselves; at this time, they can no longer do so for fear of Israeli police and law enforcement response. In this context, the question is whether we can delineate a clearly defined boundary between support for Hamas’ murderous actions and identification with Palestinian residents of the Gaza Strip, some of whom have relatives in East Jerusalem.
5. Handling of East Jerusalem youth: It is important to proceed toward reopening the informal educational settings immediately – sports, professional workshops, minicourses in technology – whose budgets have been frozen. Resuming informal and technology programming could be a critical step in channeling students to positive activity in the afternoon hours.
6. Individual attention: We recommend extending the work of guidance counselors and social workers in schools given current student distress, treating problems that have worsened due to the war,

such as dropout, violence in the family, anxiety, dysfunction at various levels and creating a basket of emotional tools for coping with the state of emergency for the educational staff and students.

7. Shelters and safe spaces in schools and preparing them for times of emergency: We propose conducting a comprehensive survey of the shelters and safe spaces in the different schools, in collaboration with the Jerusalem municipality, the community administrations in the neighborhoods and the Home Front Command; we also propose getting shelters in order and mobile shelters in place to prepare for a scenario of escalation with extensive rocket attacks on Jerusalem. We also propose training students in the higher grades for emergency and rescue support (in the event of rockets or an earthquake). Such institutional activity could send a message to the East Jerusalem population that Israeli authorities respect their needs and recognize their contribution to the city.
8. Security issues: The first days of the war were characterized by a firm hand on the part of the police and security forces, to prevent East Jerusalem from becoming an additional front as it was in the spring of 2021 (in the Guardian of the Walls operation); the police therefore imposed a 'zero tolerance' policy toward any signs of protest or violence that could spread and ignite a wildfire. Today, however, five weeks since the onset of the war, security issues need to be viewed in a broader context. In our view, reducing friction between police and students at the gates of the schools in East Jerusalem, resumption of informal education settings and treating students in crisis at schools – could all contribute considerably to security in the city, to reducing tensions within it and to a more speedy recovery from the crisis on "the morning after."