

Civil Society in a State of Emergency: A Snapshot of Major Jerusalem Initiatives

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| Background

The various population groups residing in Jerusalem maintain a delicate balance of relations whose stability is affected by security-related, societal, and economic events. Following the outbreak of the Swords of Iron War, the Jerusalem Institute for Policy Research began examining how the present state of emergency is affecting Jerusalem and its residents, while also monitoring the trends that have emerged in the city.

In Jerusalem, as throughout Israel, one of the most notable reactions to the war was civilian mobilization on an exceptional scale. Within a few days hundreds of initiatives sprouted and organized themselves in order to provide assistance to both the home front and the frontline. Some focused on specific areas of activity (transport, food, housing, medical assistance, etc.), while others sought to provide full and comprehensive assistance to their target population.

This review, prepared with the support of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation in Israel, surveys a few of the main initiatives that emerged in Israel during the war. Given the tremendous scale of activity in Jerusalem, the review will focus on only five main initiatives, but it should be emphasized that there were many other important initiatives operating alongside them. These include initiatives by Jerusalem youth movements, neighborhood initiatives, initiatives by religious communities, initiatives by individuals, and initiatives by Jerusalem institutions and organizations, among others.

This review covers five initiatives whose activities stood out in terms of their scope of assistance, the diversity of the activists involved, the initiative's impact on relations among the different population groups, or its impact on the relationship between civil society and the public sector in the city. The information presented here is based on interviews conducted with the initiatives' directors or prominent activists, as well as official data provided by the various initiatives.

Major Jerusalem Initiatives

HAMAL Situation Room Lev Ehad in Jerusalem

A joint initiative of political movements in Jerusalem, protest organizations, academic institutions, and the civilian assistance organization Lev Ehad



Main areas of assistance

Frontline assistance, response to home front needs in Jerusalem, and comprehensive assistance to evacuees being hosted in Jerusalem



Number of volunteers

5,000, mostly students and young people; over time older and professional volunteers joined as well

One Jerusalemite Community
(مجتمع مقدسي واحد)

An initiative of influencers from East Jerusalem



Main areas of assistance

Distribution of food packages, legal advice, realization of rights, purchase of medicine



Number of volunteers

About 40, mostly women

HAMAL HaAhdut (Unity War Room)

A national initiative of two Haredi groups: Machon Tatia and Kikar HaShabat



Main areas of assistance

Assistance to soldiers, support for bereaved families, assistance to evacuees being hosted in Jerusalem, agricultural assistance through fieldwork



Number of volunteers

60 in the war room, 15,000 across the country

Beit Hakerem Neighborhood War Room

A women's community initiative, with the support and assistance of the community administration



Main areas of assistance

Frontline assistance, response to neighborhood home front needs, assistance to evacuees being hosted in the city, and agricultural assistance through the purchase of produce



Number of volunteers

800, mostly young women who are neighborhood residents

Helping Hand (يد العون)

An initiative of three Jewish-Arab NGOs: Rosing Center for Education and Dialogue, Kulna Jerusalem, and MAAN Workers Association



Main areas of assistance

Distribution of food packages, realization of rights, workshops for women



Number of volunteers

About 50 (20 from East Jerusalem, 30 from West)



| Main findings

Civil society in a state of emergency: Efficiency, flexibility, and speed

During the first weeks of the Swords of Iron War, civilian assistance initiatives apparently filled the role of the army and municipal and governmental authorities. Even after the latter began to operate, civilian bodies demonstrated exceptional efficiency, greatly bolstered morale on the frontline, and contributed substantively to addressing the many needs that arose, and continue to arise, on the ground.

A review of the initiatives highlighted the major advantage of civil society: in contrast to public organizations, civilian HAMALs (“war rooms”) were able to enlist funds and personnel quickly and adapt their objectives and activities as necessary, with no need to wade through municipal or governmental bureaucracy.

At the same time, caution should be exercised so as to avoid over-reliance on civil society. By its nature, civil society lacks coordination and oversight mechanisms, which can lead to redundant assistance on the one hand, or in communities or individuals “falling between the cracks” on the other. Moreover, the limited oversight that applies to these initiatives may result in lack of transparency, misuse of resources, or dominance by individuals or groups with their own interests. To promote efficient emergency responsiveness in the city and maximize its potential influence, it is important to pursue cross-sectorial cooperation during both the planning and operational stages, and to examine ways of implementing successful models for the activities of governmental and municipal authorities.

Diverse activities, women’s leadership

The review found that the areas of assistance covered by the war rooms were many and varied. Some sought to provide assistance “in any way needed” (as reported by HAMAL HaAhdut, for example) – to soldiers and security forces, to evacuees being hosted in the city, to Jerusalem residents who required assistance, and to various initiatives throughout the country. Others focused on specific areas and served a distinct community (for example, the two war rooms operating in East Jerusalem).

The review also points to the key role played by women. In many cases, it was women who identified the needs and moved swiftly to form and launch the initiative. This evidently stemmed, among other factors, from the fact that many men had been called up at the start of war or during the war, and thus women remained the main force on the home front. In addition, the women’s predisposition to join such initiatives was also linked to their professional skills and the existing social infrastructure; where there

was strong communal capital, a social network, and access to resources at the municipal and neighborhood levels – assistance initiatives emerged.

In terms of population groups, the Jerusalem war rooms appear to be primarily initiatives of the non-Haredi Jewish population, with a few exceptions. The target audiences, in contrast, were varied and not limited to the volunteers' community of origin (for example, the Haredi war room arranged for agricultural volunteers in the south and assistance to soldiers on the frontline, and the East Jerusalem war room Yad LeSiyua (Helping Hand) was largely operated by Jewish volunteers).

A view to the future

A few weeks after the war broke out, the municipality and the government became involved and have remained so. Reciprocally, donations to assistance initiatives and the scope of volunteerism have declined. Consequently, a number of Jerusalem and other initiatives were scaled down or shifted their focus of activity.

Today, nearly two months after the war broke out, each of the war rooms appears to be reassessing its course of action and future activities. In a few of the war rooms there was talk of paid employment or stipends for volunteers, so as to maintain their engagement over time, and others noted their focus on raising the necessary resources.

At this time it is evident to all that the Jerusalem initiatives played a decisive role in reinforcing the frontline and the home front, addressing the many cases of hardship that emerged on the ground, and in so doing also cultivating community resilience in Jerusalem during this difficult time. Time will tell what course these initiatives will take in the ongoing "routine" state of emergency, and whether they will maintain their strength and influence over time.