

# Swimming against the Tide: Shared Living Organizations in Jerusalem in the Shadow of the Swords of Iron War

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## | Introduction

Organizations that work to promote shared living constitute a unique enterprise that developed primarily during the past decade, against the background of deteriorating relations between the city's population groups. Many of these initiatives emerged in the aftermath of events that transpired during the summers of 2014-2015, which were marked by waves of protest and political violence following a relatively quiet decade. Today there are more than 40 initiatives that promote shared living between Jews and Palestinians in Jerusalem. Most of them evolved "from the bottom up" – in light of the dearth of attention to inter-group relations at the municipal level.

The massacre in the Gaza Envelope on October 7 and the war underway in the south sent powerful shockwaves through the social fabric of Jerusalem. On the face of it, the state of security in the city has not deteriorated substantially relative to the other fronts in the south, the north, and the West Bank. Beneath the surface, however, there are fundamental problems that have worsened during the war and additional ones that erupted during the state of emergency. One of the consequences of the war has been a sharp increase in fear, anxiety, and mistrust between Jews and Palestinians in Jerusalem, alongside a stronger desire for separation. The current state of affairs makes it extremely challenging for shared living organizations to pursue their mission.

This review, prepared in partnership with the **Konrad Adenauer Foundation in Israel**, examines the circumstances of shared living organizations in Jerusalem following the events of October 7 and after two and a half months of war in the south. The information presented here is based on a meeting held on December 17 and attended by approximately 30 representatives from shared living organizations in Jerusalem. At the meeting, participants described how they were coping since October 7, both personally and professionally, and also shared their thoughts about the path forward at the personal and professional levels.

## | Main Findings

### 1. Coping with the events of October 7 at the personal level

The activists who participated in the meeting stated that, in the aftermath of the devastating events of October 7, they sense that they are seen as culpable by those in their immediate environment. As peace activists and activists for a shared society, some found themselves in a defensive stance. Such remarks were particularly prevalent among the Palestinian activists, who spoke about feeling that they are being blamed by both sides – the Jewish community as well as the Palestinian community – noting also that they fear adverse consequences or dismissal from work if they express any identification with the Palestinian side.

In addition, many reported feelings of doubt or unclarity with respect to the organizations' activities and the values that guide them. One Palestinian activist recounted:

“I sometimes feel there’s a gap between the Palestinian and Israeli societies. That it’s getting worse,”

Reciprocally, one of the Jewish activists described the difficulty of continuing to operate as usual:

“Most of the Palestinian public supports Hamas, supports its actions – and that’s shocking. This was a punch in the face. I asked myself whether there’s any point in continuing at all.... We can’t continue as if nothing happened.”

### 2. Coping with events at the professional level

Among many of the organizations, the initial reaction to the events of October 7 was to suspend all activities completely and wait to see what unfolds. This reaction stemmed, for the most part, from the assumption that at the time the two sides were unable to meet and that any proposed activity would be met with objection by volunteers or participants. Only after a while, slowly, incrementally, and hesitantly, was there some resumption of activity.

Some of the organizations described conducting an internal process of mediation and a reformulation of values as a preliminary step before resuming activities. According to a director of one of the organizations:

“At the start of the war it was very hard for us to work or function, and we decided not to have the staff work as before, because we felt that everyone needed to be with their family, with their nationality, and with their feelings. In the early days it was hard to express oneself or talk about it. We decided to have daily discussions – each director with her own group.... After the single-nationality discussions we shifted to joint discussions about feelings. It was very hard and we had a professional help us so as to enable the staff to talk.”

### 3. A view to the future

Over the past decade, these organizations have coped with waves of protest, terrorism, and political violence, particularly surrounding the events of May 2021 and Operation Guardian of the Walls. Those developments temporarily hampered joint activities, but until now regular activities had always resumed and, over the years, even expanded in scope and increased in volume. However, according to the activists and organizations, the events of October 7 and the Swords of Iron War have posed a new challenge, one that differs in terms of intensity and impact and makes it impossible to continue focusing solely on pragmatic aspects. Among activists and organizations, there emerged a desire and need to allow for a more direct discussion of political issues. At this stage, notably, it is hard to formulate the right way to do this, as under the current political conditions there is a distinct inequality between the groups in terms of freedom of expression and the ability to speak freely without paying a price.

At the same time, one can discern positive signs in the way in which many of the organizations have coped, successfully maintaining a mixed staff and joint (Jewish-Palestinians) management, and in their ability to create an enclave of cooperation that was not dramatically sabotaged by “external” events. In addition, the leaders and volunteers have demonstrated their commitment to continuing to promote shared living in the city, despite the harrowing events, and possibly even more so than in the past. Furthermore, those organizations that opted to resume activities reported that they still see an interest in volunteerism and participation, so it is certainly too early to “mourn” the enterprise of shared living in Jerusalem.