

The First Days of Ramadan in Jerusalem: East Jerusalem and the Temple Mount/Al-Aqsa After Five Months of War

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| Background

Five months after the massacre in the Western Negev and the outbreak of the “Swords of Iron” war, the East Jerusalem arena appears to be in a position of tense standby, and at an important strategic crossroads at the outset of the month of Ramadan.

A special meeting of the Jerusalem Institute for Policy Research’s East Jerusalem Forum was held on March 6, 2024. The meeting was conducted in partnership with the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom, with about 100 participants. Speakers at the meeting included senior police officials, representatives of the Jerusalem Municipality, residents of East Jerusalem and civil society representatives. The meeting’s objective was to learn about the complex reality in East Jerusalem and the Temple Mount/Al-Aqsa issue on the eve of Ramadan, from several points of view, and to raise ideas for managing issues related to East Jerusalem and the holy compound during this sensitive period.

| Main Points Raised at the Meeting

Ramadan 2024 in East Jerusalem is characterized by a tense atmosphere and feelings of sadness and despair due to the war and the difficult situation in Gaza. Unlike in previous years, this time the Municipality did not adorn the city’s east with Ramadan decorations. Large events and celebrations will not be held this year, and it seems most activities and ceremonies will be conducted at the familial or neighborhood level.

The harsh economic situation and the ongoing crisis in tourism in the Old City area are making their mark. Many stores are closed. There is no state or municipal mechanism to compensate merchants for their immense drop in revenues. Thus far, checkpoints in the Old City area and at the entrances to the Temple Mount have encumbered commerce in the fields of food, apparel, and holiday gifts. The big questions hovering in the air are: What will happen to commerce in the Old City during Ramadan, which is considered the best sales month of the year? Will Arab citizens of Israel from the

country's north and the "Triangle" region of Arab towns, as well as residents of Jerusalem neighborhoods on the other side of the Separation Fence and the West Bank, be able to get to the Old City and the Temple Mount? It is important to understand that this is not just a religious matter, but also an economic matter of utmost importance.

1. Fear of escalation

There is concern that the relative restraint of East Jerusalemites since the war's beginning will not hold this Ramadan – particularly if an incident occurs in the Temple Mount/Al-Aqsa vicinity. Security officials also fear that, due to such an incident, Hamas could succeed in opening an additional front in Jerusalem and within Israel, or in "unifying the arenas", like what happened in May 2021 during the "Guardian of the Walls" operation. When looking at the bigger picture of the Ramadan season: Israel, the Palestinian Authority, and Jordan have a shared interest in preventing an eruption of violence in the Jerusalem arena, which would serve Hamas. The big question is whether this shared interest will indeed be reflected on the ground.

2. Collective punishment

From an East Jerusalem perspective, Israel has been engaged in a policy of collective punishment towards the Arab population since October 7. The sense is that the Israeli side's trend of "toughness", according to the police and security forces' policy of "zero tolerance" since the war's start, remains in place despite the relative calm in East Jerusalem. This is reflected by restrictions on entry to the Old City and the Temple Mount, clashes during prayers outside the Mount, demolition of homes, prohibition of gatherings, arrests of those who preach ideologies or are suspected of making statements seen as support of Hamas, as well as fines for parking and petty matters – which are perceived as abuse of Arab residents by the Israeli authorities. From the East Jerusalem perspective, Israel is not quieting things down, it is acting to flare things up.

3. The Temple Mount/Al-Aqsa topic

The top question is whether restrictions will be imposed on the number of pilgrims/Muslim worshippers (East Jerusalemites, residents of neighborhoods on the other side of the Separation Fence, Arab citizens of Israel, West Bank residents). Likewise, will free access be allowed to the Old City and Temple Mount area, or will checkpoints be put in place all along the way? Will there be shuttles on Fridays from parking lots in the outskirts of the city, to overcome traffic jams and parking problems, as in previous years? How will Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's declaration at the

beginning of the security meeting on March 5, 2024, be implemented? According to the declaration, “Israel’s policy is to safeguard freedom of worship on the Temple Mount, while properly securing security and safety needs” and “we will enable the Muslim public to celebrate the holiday”. This comes alongside reports that “there will be no significant restrictions on Arab Israelis for prayers on the Temple Mount”. According to media reports at the conclusion of this meeting, “during the first week of Ramadan, the entry of worshippers to the Temple Mount will be permitted, similar to the numbers in previous years.” And “a weekly assessment of the security and safety aspects will be held; a decision will be made accordingly”. However, in view of this decision, which has vague wording and can be interpreted in various ways, quite a few questions arise regarding its implementation on the ground under the different circumstances that may arise during the month of Ramadan.

| Meeting Summary

All speakers at the meeting agreed that Al-Aqsa/the Temple Mount should be opened both to East Jerusalemites and Arab citizens of Israel (except for a limited number of individuals who could disrupt the public order). This could contribute to calming the atmosphere in East Jerusalem and could also lead to an improvement in the economic situation, at least for businesses in the Old City area. This is a shared interest for all parties, except Hamas and other extremists, which are interested in flaring up East Jerusalem and the Temple Mount, to unite all the arenas and cause all-out war in the Middle East and perhaps even beyond.

Additionally, it is important to provide East Jerusalem residents, in all ways, through the various media outlets and social media, with reliable information about decisions regarding access to the Mount, shuttles, parking lots, traffic, and all possibilities to reach the site. This would combat disinformation and fake news disseminated by various parties.

We all hope the coming month will pass peacefully. Remember that first and foremost, Ramadan is an important religious and social event for about 400,000 residents of East Jerusalem (who constitute approximately 40% of Jerusalem’s population). The month of fasting is a central component in the residents’ identity, and its essence is introspection, moving closer to God, and self-improvement. A great effort must be made to enable observance of Ramadan and all the related customs – even under the difficult circumstances of wartime.