

Israel's Urban Policies an Unseen Driver of Jerusalem Tensions

Hanna Baumann | Thursday, Dec. 4, 2014

The spikes in violence in Jerusalem last month, including the brutal killings in a synagogue after a series of stabbings and hit-and-run attacks on pedestrians, are extreme instances of ethnically based violence that has been mounting since last summer, when the flames of local unrest were

fanned by the war in Gaza. But at stake are more than familiar grievances in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. While access to the holy sites of the Temple Mount or Haram al-Sharif remains contentious, the violence in Jerusalem's shared public spaces and on public transportation in particular reflect that this is not merely an issue of religion: Israel's urban planning decisions in the city are also fueling Palestinian anger. As long as Israel's physical annexation of East Jerusalem and the exclusion of Palestinian residents from the city continue, harsher policing and collective punishment are unlikely to stop the violence.

The recent unrest is rooted in decades-old urban planning policy. Palestinian residents of Jerusalem have the status of permanent residents of the State of Israel, but it is precarious, as Israel can revoke their right to live in the city. Since Israel's takeover of East Jerusalem in the 1967 war, over 14,000 residency permits of Palestinian Jerusalemites have been revoked (http://www.btselem.org/english/Jerusalem/Revocation_Statistics.asp). Moreover, poverty rates in East Jerusalem—as high as 75 percent (<http://www.acri.org.il/en/2014/05/24/ej-numbers-14>)—have forced many residents to leave the city due to the high cost of living.

Housing is scarce and costly due to skewed zoning policies, which allocate only small portions of land for Palestinian construction, and restrictive rules on obtaining building permits, which make it close to impossible for Palestinians to build legally; they are at constant risk of receiving demolition orders. Although the 300,000 Palestinians in Jerusalem make up more than a third of the city's population, they only receive approximately 10 percent of the municipal budget. This discrepancy is reflected in the lack of adequate municipal services, from postal service and garbage collection to sewage networks and sidewalks—not to mention amenities such as parks and playgrounds.

Unlike its residents, East Jerusalem was immediately integrated into Israel in 1967. Israeli law was applied in East Jerusalem that year, and it was formally annexed in 1980. Though not recognized by the international community, annexation has been cemented by the construction of the Separation Barrier, which cuts East Jerusalem off from its hinterlands while leaving 50,000 of its residents stranded on the West Bank side.

This isolation from other Palestinians, along with a crackdown on local institutions, civil society and even cultural events, has left East Jerusalem without political leadership, perhaps accounting for the uncoordinated, sporadic nature of the recent attacks. The social fragmentation is mirrored in urban space: Within East Jerusalem, the 200,000 residents of Jewish settlements are connected to Israel by major roadways, which cut through Palestinian neighborhoods without serving them, tearing apart the local urban fabric. The mobility of one part of the population thus hinges on the splintering of the other's space.

Palestinians are therefore suspicious of any permanent changes to East Jerusalem, even if they bring services that promise to make everyday life more bearable, because in the long run, they consolidate Israeli control. The light rail, the city's first means of public transportation connecting Arab neighborhoods to West Jerusalem, has been an uneasily shared space since it opened in 2011, and tensions have only been exacerbated (<http://www.timesofisrael.com/on-jerusalem-light-rail-anxiety-trumps-coexistence>) in the past months.



Palestinians hang a national flag from the apartment of Abdel Rahman al-Shaludi in East Jerusalem. Israeli authorities demolished it after Shaludi's deadly attack with his car on a Jerusalem train station last month, (AP Photo/Mahmoud Illean).

In Shuafat, the area served by the tram, Palestinians found that the light rail opened their neighborhood up to Israeli settlers. Following the killing of Mohammed Abu Khdeir (<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jul/05/palestinian-boy-mohammed-abu-khdeir-burned-alive>) in July, Shuafat residents demolished their neighborhood's light rail stations (<https://www.opendemocracy.net/arab-awakening/hanna-baumann/heavy-presence-of-jerusalem-light-rail-why-palestinian-protesters-attac>), reflecting how much they saw Israeli settler violence as connected to the city's urban planning. Following this, the tram also brought with it the opening of a new police station (<http://www.haaretz.com/news/national/.premium-1.606267>) in the area, as well as drone surveillance of the neighborhood.

It is no coincidence, then, that so many of the recent attacks have focused on roads and public transportation. Israeli buses, especially those on routes serving settlements, are regularly pelted with stones, and Palestinians bus and taxi drivers have increasingly been harassed and attacked while working in West Jerusalem in recent months. Less reported attacks have also involved Israelis accosting Palestinians on the tram (<http://www.maannews.net/eng/ViewDetails.aspx?ID=741632>) or driving their vehicles into pedestrians. Transportation infrastructure can create shared spaces that allow Arab and Jewish populations to mix, but in Jerusalem, it fosters more tension than coexistence. Potential areas of interaction instead turn into zones of friction and violence.

To contain clashes between Palestinian youth and police, Israel often resorts to heavy-handed methods, like blocking off entire neighborhoods (<http://www.maannews.net/eng/ViewDetails.aspx?ID=739952>) to minimize residents' mobility. Suspected perpetrators of attacks against Israelis are often shot dead extrajudicially (<http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/.premium-1.624904>), and house demolitions have also been revived as a punitive measure against their families.

Jerusalem's planning policies have been guided by two main principles since the beginning of the Israeli occupation: maintaining a Jewish majority and ensuring the indivisibility of the city. Such a politicized approach to urban planning has turned neighborhoods into frontiers and city dwellers into combatants. By cementing the status quo and expanding its territorial reach into occupied Palestinian territory through major infrastructure and settlement construction, Israel is essentially precluding the possibility of a shared capital in Jerusalem, making a two-state solution to the conflict all but impossible. Despite their physical isolation from other Palestinians under Israeli rule, East Jerusalemites continue to see their situation as part of a wider Palestinian struggle. A recent bill to outlaw waving the Palestinian flag in Israel (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/israel/11254987/What-is-the-Israeli-anti-terror-bill.html>) won't change that.

In Jerusalem—the linchpin of any solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict—every water pipe and every street curb has political significance. Small-scale urban planning decisions reverberate far beyond a particular street or neighborhood. That is why the creeping, mundane changes on the ground in the past years are so central to understanding the current outbursts of violence. With more Israeli encroachment, marginalized East Jerusalem residents see little to no possibility of a Palestinian capital in their city given its increasing socio-political isolation from the rest of Palestine. Unless Israel changes its urban policies in Jerusalem, no amount of heavy-handedness will quell the unrest.

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