

Securing the Occupation in East Jerusalem

Divisions in Israeli Policy

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After the invasion of Gaza in the summer of 2014 and especially between September 2015 and October 2016, Jerusalem became the center of the so-called individuals' intifada (*intifadat al-afrad*), a series of attacks, many of them by teenagers, often from East Jerusalem, armed with nothing more than scissors or a screwdriver.¹ The Israeli response was disproportionate violence which took two forms. The first was the encouragement of Jewish Israeli individuals to carry weapons and use them at the first sign of suspicion (a privatization of the production of security);² and the second was a campaign of preemptive arrests based on algorithms that surveil social media (the automatization of security).³ Nevertheless, the uprising demonstrated that Israeli security policies and technologies are only barely capable of producing a sense of security for the Israeli public, and that Palestinian resistance may disrupt Israeli control at any time.

Jerusalem has been the subject of decades of intensified securitization by the Israeli authorities, including through invasive surveillance and punitive law enforcement. Jerusalem remains firmly under Israeli control, and the Israeli authorities continue to implement punitive policies, segregation, and the illegal expansion of colonies into East Jerusalem.⁴ However, despite the intensification of efforts and increase in budgets directed at securitizing and controlling East Jerusalem, starting in 2014 cracks in the Israeli security apparatus, in the form of disagreements between two factions within the Israeli government, have expanded and created a space for Palestinian residents of the city to resist and, occasionally, to achieve symbolic victories. A closer look at Israeli security policies in Jerusalem reveal the Israeli grip over the city becoming slippery.

It increasingly relies on the application of brute force,⁵ and this brute force fails to discourage Palestinian resistance.

The cracks in the Israeli security apparatus emerge from growing tensions between the Israeli populist right-wing political elite and the Israeli security elite. The former seeks symbolic victories to cement the idea of Jewish supremacy over Palestinians, refuses to differentiate between different kinds of Palestinian resistance and calls for the application of overwhelming force to keep Palestinians meek and subservient. The latter calls for a rational policy of the use of force in order to maintain long-term control over Palestinians and their territory, and for the use of a wide array of policies to sow divisions among Palestinians and create incentives for Palestinians to cooperate with Israeli authorities. The Israeli security elite, however, is quickly losing its hold over the Israeli political system. This does not, however, imply that violence toward Palestinians has, or will be, abated; rather, understanding this ongoing shift is key to making sense of the changing forms of violence to which Palestinians are subjected.

Jerusalem as the Securitized City

The Israeli media published dozens of articles in 2012–14 predicting that the next intifada will erupt in Jerusalem. Critical and leftist journalists pointed to the social crisis in East Jerusalem as a pressure point, which could take the shape of a widespread uprising.⁶ This social crisis is manifested in the 76 percent poverty rate as of 2017; inadequate public services such as health, education, and sanitation; and steady bureaucratic pressure by the Israeli authorities intended to push Palestinians out of the city.⁷ Military strategists and right-wing journalists refused this explanation, because it places the blame on the Israeli authorities.⁸ Many of them, however, accept the prediction identifying Jerusalem as the center for the next Palestinian uprising, drawing on other explanations, such as Jerusalem's religious significance.⁹

Jerusalem became a focal point for Israeli security measures implemented to intercept and suppress Palestinian resistance at its earliest stages of the latest crisis. Indeed, much of the infrastructure in this regard had already been put in place during and after the second intifada. In the early 2000s, for example, the Old City was covered with an interlocking network of surveillance cameras sending their feeds into one central room, covered in screens showing every part of the Old City.¹⁰ It was an effort to apply Bentham's "Panopticon" on a city-wide level, allowing a single security guard to observe the entire Old City. Of course, no individual can pay attention to so many details at the same time, but the knowledge that the system exists leads every person in the Old City to feel that, at any moment, they may be under observation, and to act accordingly. The purpose of a visible network of cameras is to prevent any kind of subversive act before it is undertaken, causing the subjects to internalize the disciplinary power of the Israeli authorities.¹¹

Jerusalem has become a prime example of the logic of securitization, by which policymakers recast social and political problems as security problems, to be addressed

by security tools rather than social or political policies.¹² Securitization is a process of reclassifying the role of government. Public services such as education, health and transportation are reclassified as tools to prevent threats to security (see, for example, the “Prevent” system in the UK, which converts educational institutions into enforcement agencies),¹³ and the jurisdiction of security organizations is reclassified so that it expands into the private sphere (such as Indian prime minister Narendra Modi’s justification of a currency reform that removed large denomination notes from circulation as an “anti-terror” policy).¹⁴

In the case of Jerusalem, decades of neglect in social services to East Jerusalem,¹⁵ institutionalized discrimination of the Palestinian residents,¹⁶ and efforts by extreme-right groups like Ateret Cohanim or Ir David Foundation to exploit East Jerusalem’s poverty to expand illegal colonization,¹⁷ have all contributed to the creation of a socioeconomic powder keg. Rather than dealing with the root causes and working to reduce economic gaps between the Jewish and Palestinian populations, the Israeli authorities implemented mechanisms of control and surveillance, deployed private security companies alongside police and military forces, and used other coercive means to keep the Palestinian population under control.¹⁸ This policy of securitization has its roots in the earliest years of the occupation of East Jerusalem. Jerusalem’s then mayor Teddy Kollek initially attempted to implement “enlightened occupation” policies (absorbing East Jerusalem Palestinians into the system of trade and municipal service), but this policy was overruled by senior security decision makers, and eventually Kollek himself implemented securitization policies, alienating East Jerusalem’s population.¹⁹

Perhaps the most blatant example of securitization was the use of checkpoints operated by the Border Police (a unit situated between the military and the police) to stop drivers on the streets of East Jerusalem. Drivers’ personal data was cross-referenced in a database to check for unpaid taxes; if they had payments pending, their car was confiscated. Only in the case of Palestinians did the Israeli authorities choose to entrust a matter of economic enforcement in the hands of heavily armed and uniformed Border Police, thereby addressing a socioeconomic issue as a security issue. This policy was halted in June 2004 after the state prosecutor wrote a legal opinion against it.²⁰

Cracks in the Security Apparatus

“Security” is, of course, a social construct. Security organizations and companies do not strive to reduce the actual chance of an individual being harmed in an attack, but rather strive to produce a sense of security. This sense of security must remain temporary and fragile, lest the public lose interest in the production of security, but it nevertheless must be successful enough to create confidence, measured by people’s willingness to spend leisure time in public spaces.²¹ In *The Cost of Occupation*, Shlomo Swirski argued that there is a tradeoff between the social priorities and the security priorities in the Israeli political sphere. Governments use the production of a sense of security as justification for leaving

socioeconomic problems unaddressed and for cuts in welfare budgets.²² Securitization thereby seeps into the political discourse, as allocation of funds for basic public services is constantly compared with the urgent need to develop security mechanisms against ever-expanding perceived threats. Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu's February 2015 tweet summarizes this approach: "We're talking about housing prices and cost of living. I do not forget about life itself, living. The greatest challenge standing before us and our lives as Israeli citizens and of this state is the threat of Iran being armed with a nuclear weapon."²³

As tensions rose in Jerusalem, senior politicians called on Israelis to carry arms and defend themselves rather than rely on the security forces.²⁴ Both senior politicians and soldiers on the ground expressed hatred toward Palestinians involved (even indirectly) with the attacks with such vehemence and aggressiveness that the profound impact of these attacks on the Israeli public debate was unavoidable.²⁵ As commercial centers in Jerusalem stood almost empty of customers, little doubt remained regarding the inability of the Israeli security forces to provide a sense of security to Israeli citizens, even if the actual number of attacks and casualties remained lower than in previous rounds of violence.²⁶

The crisis in the Israeli security apparatus is also reflected in the gradual replacement of "humint" (human intelligence) by "sigint" (signal intelligence) as the focus of the Israeli intelligence practice.²⁷ The Israeli police and military increasingly rely on sophisticated digital technology in their efforts to enforce Israeli law and confront Palestinian resistance. There is a steep decline in the number of Israeli security personnel who can speak Arabic (even if Arabic is studied only as the "language of the enemy").²⁸ In this technological conflict, the roles of the Israeli forces and of Palestinian resistance have changed. Instead of Israeli forces introducing new security innovations – such as drones, checkpoints, the separation wall, and so on – to cement their control over Palestinians, it is now Palestinians who are introducing new modes of resistance – homemade rockets, tunnels, incendiary kites and balloons, and the introduction of various tactics to attract media attention to video recordings of nonviolent protests – and the Israeli security forces that scramble to develop technologies to contain them.

In the past months, several events beyond the limits of Jerusalem began with the application of Israeli security mechanisms and ended with Israeli authorities losing control of their media coverage. Israeli forces arrested the poet Darin Tatour over a poem published on Facebook;²⁹ the seventeen-year-old Ahed Tamimi for standing up to soldiers who entered her home in al-Nabi Salih;³⁰ and a man whose post of "good morning" on Facebook was mistranslated as "attack them" by the algorithm deployed by the Israeli police to preempt Palestinian attackers.³¹ Each of these stories, just three out of many, exposes the weakness of the Israeli dependency on sigint. Each of the arrests has boosted the global support for the Palestinian struggle and provoked rage against the Israeli colonial policies. In Jerusalem, however, this tendency is even more prevalent. The government's willingness to invest resources to pacify the city is directly correlated to statements expressing fear of losing control over the city through the use of coercive mechanisms.³²

Al-Aqsa Mosque Protests

In July 2017, an attack by three Palestinians from Umm al-Fahm near al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem claimed the lives of two Israeli police officers and the three shooters, and sparked a new round of violence.³³ The Israeli government used the attack as an opportunity to change the fragile status quo around the mosque and to encroach on the autonomy of the Jerusalem Islamic Waqf. Security cameras were installed around the mosque and gates with metal detectors were placed at the entrance, so that every person coming to pray at the mosque would be controlled and surveilled by Israeli security forces.³⁴

An international uproar ensued against the Israeli decision and several heads of state appealed to the Israeli government to remove the cameras and metal detectors.³⁵ Palestinians organized mass protests across the West Bank and Gaza and did not relent even after three protesters were killed by Israeli forces and hundreds were injured and arrested.³⁶ Three Israelis were killed by Palestinians during this period as well. Most importantly, however, was the strike organized by Palestinian Muslims who refused to pray at the mosque and instead organized mass prayers around the mosques.³⁷ This last act of protest proved especially effective and the Israeli government eventually ordered the cameras and metal detectors removed, restoring the status quo in what was celebrated as a major Palestinian victory.³⁸

The outcome of this confrontation can be analyzed from a perspective that focuses on the conditions that enabled an effective, large-scale, and well-coordinated nonviolent protest by Palestinians, or from a perspective – as I wish to do here – that considers how, despite superior force, economic power, and international political legitimacy, the Israeli government failed to come up with an effective strategy and follow through on it. From the very beginning of the crisis, Israeli authorities were divided into two factions. The old security elite, represented in the high command of the military, the police, and the General Security Service (GSS, also known as Shin Bet), advocated a “rational” approach and suggested that the Israeli government remove the cameras and metal detectors quickly and restore the status quo in order to preserve the overarching Israeli interests of maintaining control over the city of Jerusalem and over the occupied Palestinian territories as a whole.³⁹ Their voices were drowned out, however, by the populist right wing. Presenting the conflict as a form of religious war, Israeli politicians framed any Israeli concession to Palestinian demands as a form of humiliation.⁴⁰ They argued that the Palestinian resistance must be broken in order to cement Israeli control.⁴¹

Prime Minister Netanyahu rode the populist wave for as long as he could, but it is noteworthy that those members of the Israeli government who most clearly and forcefully supported intensifying the conflict, rather than managing it, were politicians of Mizrahi origin.⁴² These politicians draw a clear connection between the struggle against discrimination toward Mizrahim in Israeli society (perpetrated by Ashkenazi elites, most prominently the security elite, which is overwhelmingly Ashkenazi) and the struggle for Jewish national pride.⁴³ These politicians are not members of the Israeli security elite and have refused to bow to their recommendations, demanding that the security organizations

serve the political agenda of the government. Populist right-wing Israeli politicians invoke anger in their political speech and demand an end to the rule of the “old elite.”⁴⁴ They rarely mention, however, that the Ashkenazi elite maintained its hegemony through a highly militaristic system, in which political and economic decisions were subordinated to military considerations and in which the minister of defense occasionally outranked the prime minister.⁴⁵ The attempt to dismantle the dominance of the Israeli Ashkenazi elites has dealt a major blow to the Israeli security elite, as the two elite groups are highly intertwined.

The protests around al-Aqsa Mosque, the popular support for the Israeli soldier Elor Azaria (who executed ‘Abd al-Fattah al-Sharif at close range as he lay injured in Hebron),⁴⁶ the purchase of German submarines for the Israeli navy against the wishes of senior officials at the Ministry of Defense,⁴⁷ and other such events, demonstrate the growing tension between the rising populist right, anchored in Mizrahi politics and religious discourse, and the established militaristic tradition that is losing its hegemonic position. After the murder of ‘Abd al-Fattah al-Sharif, then minister of defense Moshe Ya’alon warned against the military becoming “beastly.”⁴⁸ Azaria’s family and their numerous supporters criticized Ya’alon’s statement as racist: comparing Azaria, who is Mizrahi, to a “beast” resonates with decades of racism against Mizrahim, which can be understood as a form of anti-black sentiment.⁴⁹ The deputy commander of the Israeli military, Major General Yair Golan, repeated the phrase “like beasts” in a speech delivered during a Holocaust Remembrance Day ceremony and further warned of the populist right driving Israel in the direction of fascism. His speech was widely criticized and delegitimized by the government.⁵⁰

The Temple Movement, an extreme populist religious-right Jewish movement seeking to destroy al-Aqsa Mosque and rebuild the ancient Jewish Temple in its stead, also played a major role in instigating the crisis, the protests, and the disagreements within the Israeli government. The regulations forbidding Jews from praying in al-Aqsa is central among the Israeli security elite’s policies toward the occupation. Relying on a theological concern of rabbis that Jewish prayer in the compound may lead to a desecration of the “holy of holies” of the destroyed Jewish Temple, the policy is in fact an effective way to keep a low Jewish profile in the sensitive religious area and avoid direct religious confrontations that could get out of control. The Temple Movement has been intensifying their provocations, defying most of the rabbis and the security elite to instigate a confrontation that will lead (so they hope) to replacing the more calibrated control mechanisms presently used by the Israeli security forces with a direct violent takeover and destruction of the mosque.⁵¹ Since the occupation of the holy basin in 1967, only a handful of rabbis supported the construction of the “Third Temple,” but the rise of the populist right has infiltrated religious institutions as well, and in 2016 the chief Ashkenazi rabbi David Lau (representing pro-Zionist Ashkenazi ultra-Orthodox Jews) said that he would like to see the Third Temple built, hinting that the al-Aqsa Mosque must be destroyed.⁵²

The growing tension between the different elite groups in Israel shows that the decline

of the Israeli security elite may not reduce settler-colonial violence toward the native Palestinians, but likely heralds the privatization and decentralization of this violence, now increasingly expressed in the form of individualistic religious and political violence, and decreasingly expressed as organized violence executed according to orders through the chain of command.⁵³

Two Voices in the Israeli Government

Shortly after the removal of the cameras and metal detectors, two senior Israeli politicians, Minister of Culture Miri Regev and Coalition Whip David Bitan, vehemently criticized the GSS for its recommendation to reach a compromise. Regev called it “delusional” and Bitan described the GSS as “cowards who just want to return home safely.”⁵⁴ Regev and Bitan argued that an unrelenting and uncompromising Israeli government would have forced the Palestinians to give up. Retired Lieutenant General Dan Halutz, interviewed on television in defense of the GSS, responded that “according to Darwin’s laws, they say that man’s origin is from the ape. The problem is that in the Israeli public life there are too many people who did not complete the transition.”⁵⁵ Halutz’s racist remark must be understood in the context of both Regev and Bitan being Mizrahi Jews of Moroccan origin.

Halutz himself is a classic representative of the faltering power of the Israeli security elite. Although he is himself of Mizrahi origins (his parents originate from Iran and Iraq), he has adopted Ashkenazi culture, accent, and social circles. His career has been an attempt to advance socially through paths of mobility created by and for the Israeli security elite. Despite rising to the top of the Israeli security elite, Halutz was among the first Israeli generals directly affected by the devaluation of military prestige in Israeli society. Former commander of the air force and of the Israeli army, Halutz was disgraced in the 2006 Israeli invasion of Lebanon.⁵⁶ He attempted unsuccessfully to enter Israeli politics on the force of his military credentials, joining the Kadima party, but he was never elected to the Knesset.⁵⁷ He has also failed to leverage his military credentials into success in the private sector: he served for three years as chairman of the company Jobookit, during which the company lost 70 percent of its value, prompting Halutz to resign.⁵⁸

Halutz’s attempt to defend the security rationale of the GSS was calculated to launch himself back into the public sphere, but when the opportunity arose to talk about the merits of the Israeli security experts, he resorted instead to a vulgar racist statement, exposing the weakness of the Israeli security elite discourse in the face of the Israeli (and the global) populist right. U.S. president Donald Trump’s recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, and his fulfillment of his promise to move the U.S embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, played into the hands of the Israeli populist right. It heightened the symbolic importance of Jerusalem on the agenda of the Israeli government and was used as “proof” that an uncompromising show of strength achieves better results than a calculated and careful strategy.⁵⁹

Conclusion

While the Palestinian Authority maintains a clear policy rejecting the framing of Palestinian resistance as a religious movement, the Israeli government has increasingly adopted religious language to justify the occupation of the Palestinian territory. Two positions have emerged among Israeli authorities on the best approach for maintaining the occupation of Palestinian territory, especially East Jerusalem. The Israeli security elite has lost power within the government, but continues to express its opinion from its positions in the GSS and the military brass. It calls for a “rational” approach to the occupation, operating behind the scenes by relying on intelligence gathering, recruiting collaborators, and sowing divisions among Palestinian factions. The second approach, which is increasingly associated with the populist right and strongly represented in the present government, calls for a direct show of force. It considers Jerusalem to be of tremendous symbolic value, and therefore complete and open Jewish-Israeli control over the city, especially the Old City and the Temple Mount, trumps the security considerations of the Israeli security elite.

The Israeli security elite finds itself in its weakest situation since the establishment of the State of Israel. Recommendations by senior members of the security elite fall on deaf ears in the Israeli government, and public opinion favors the populist right. As a result, the sophisticated colonial administration apparatus that the Israeli security elite established to keep Palestinians under control and to take the sting out of their resistance is becoming riddled with internal contradictions. The Israeli authorities’ increasing resort to brute force to attempt to crush the Palestinian resistance in Jerusalem, and elsewhere, has proven very limited in its effectiveness.

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