Why East Jerusalem is Breaking Down and How to Improve the Situation

Why do young Palestinians from East Jerusalem perpetrate knife attacks against Israelis when it is clear that such attacks are meaningless as resistance efforts? What is the best way to prevent such attacks? This policy brief focuses on the structural reasons for the knife attacks that occurred in Israel and in the West Bank during Fall 2015 and Spring 2016. In short, it argues that:

- Palestinians in East Jerusalem face a situation of social breakdown and community fragmentation, where law and order is not upheld, and institutions of authority are absent.
- This situation is a direct result of Israeli colonization policies.
- Grassroots NGOs attempt to fill the void left by the Israeli occupation and a defunct PLO, but are only able to ameliorate the situation to a limited extent, due to lack of support and the fragmented nature of East Jerusalemite society.
- In the absence of politics, resistance takes on a local and anarchic character. Moreover, the lack of future prospects and sheer frustration lead individuals to commit self-defeating acts of violence against Israeli individuals. If the situation for young people in East Jerusalem is not improved, it is likely that similar waves of attacks will occur again at irregular intervals.
- The single most efficient way to prevent such a scenario is for Israel to take seriously its responsibility as occupier and taxation authority, and stop the unequal treatment of East Jerusalemites. International pressure on the Israeli state should be intensified, since it is unwilling to do so.
Social breakdown

Upon occupying East Jerusalem in 1967, Israeli authorities promptly annexed the city, a move not recognized by any other state in the world. Since this time, Israel has pursued a policy of Judaizing this part of the city in order to integrate it into Israel as the “united” capital of the Israeli state. At the same time, however, its annexation of East Jerusalem means that Israel alone is responsible for providing Palestinian East Jerusalemites with welfare, security and education, particularly as they are obliged to pay the municipal tax.

Israel’s policy of colonization in East Jerusalem has had dramatic effects on Palestinians living in the city. Its wish to control the whole of Jerusalem has induced it to minimize physical borders between East and West. However, the Palestinians and Israelis live completely separated from each other, and Palestinian neighborhoods are readily distinguished from Jewish ones. The infrastructure, including road maintenance, is poor. There is an insufficient number of sewage and water pipes – in some neighbourhoods, only a minority of households are officially connected to the pipe systems. The municipality has not been able or willing to plan for housing according to population growth in East Jerusalem. The result is that people have been forced to build without approval, to provide necessary housing. Today, about thirty-nine percent of houses in East Jerusalem lack a building permit. Israel often uses the lack of such permits as a pretext for demolishing houses in East Jerusalem.

The most serious shortcoming is perhaps the lack of institutions of education and of law, order and authority. Having annexed East Jerusalem, Israel does not allow the Palestinian Authority to run any institutions there. At the same time, Israeli police and the municipal authorities generally leave East Jerusalemites to their own devices, except when there are riots or other threats against Israeli interests. The result is a severe lack of schools, high levels of drug-related and other kinds of crime, and geographically fragmented Palestinian neighborhoods separated by Israeli settlements.

The youth of East Jerusalem feel they have arrived at a dead end. They do not enjoy citizens’ rights; for those who get an education, it leads them nowhere; their status as Jerusalemites is precarious; many of them may at any time have their house demolished, since it is built without permission; the parent generation is unable to provide shelter or guidance; and there is no organized political community to turn to for support, which erodes the level of trust between people. In short, there is little predictability, and no hope for the future.

Grassroots Organizations to the Rescue?

In the absence of a benevolent municipality, legitimate Palestinian institutions, and strong community leaders, East Jerusalemite grassroots
initiatives have stepped in to restore trust and cohesion among Jerusalemites, provide meaningful leisure activities for the city’s underprivileged children and youths, and provide child care and community services. These organizations run community centers with after-school sports and educational activities, as exemplified by the Bab al-Luqluq society in the Old City and Markaz Mada in Wadi Hilwah just south of the Old City, which cater to hundreds of children and youths every day. These organizations aim to ease the feeling of being trapped that threatens to overpower young Jerusalemites, deprived as they are of proper education, employment opportunities and geographical and social mobility.

It is worth emphasizing that these organizations are grassroots initiatives, started by volunteers from the communities and without external support. They, and indeed most of the independent activists I have met over the years, contrast such work with that of the NGO sector which has grown up as part of the Oslo framework, in which most of the actors are not volunteers, but rather well-paid employees. In the eyes of the Jerusalemite grassroots activists, the NGO sector that receives funding from the US and the EU is suspect, because it does not engage with what they see as the real issues on the ground, but instead caters to foreign donors’ wishes to see dialogue and partnership with Israeli organizations. Whatever the case may be, it is beyond doubt that the grassroots organizations have stepped in to ameliorate a situation that the Israeli occupation regime has created, and the international community has been unable or unwilling to engage with properly.

Resistance without organization or hope

The grassroots organizations cannot engage in political or non-violent resistance, however, and without support from above, there is only so much they can do to ameliorate the dire social reality of young East Jerusalemites. This reality has paved the way for the emergence of many angry young men who regularly engage in street fights with Israeli security forces. Typically in their early or mid-twenties, they are either unemployed or work as unskilled laborers. They seethe with resentment against a system that deprives them of life possibilities, and they have little trust in the Palestinian leadership or the plethora of NGOs in the West Bank and Jerusalem. They are disconnected from “official” activism, but are very much connected to the street, and they have forged bonds of trust across neighborhoods – that is, forged at university or at their workplaces in West Jerusalem, where they are all subject to the same discrimination.

East Jerusalem street riots are often spontaneous, born of anger and resentment, and are not calculated to draw attention. This adds to their aura of legitimacy among Jerusalemites, who refer to street activists as “the people” and NGO activists as “the elite,” commenting that street activists are normal people who engage out of a moral concern, without any desire or scheme to attract media attention to themselves.

At the same time, the spontaneity and affective triggers are symptoms of the absence of politics in East Jerusalem. Street resistance is informed by a turf attitude, where the honor and integrity of the neighborhood are fundamental values, while the larger Palestinian cause is relegated to the background. The resistance in the streets of East Jerusalem
is essentially reactive, devoid of strategy and without institutional connections. The characteristic features of the near-daily protests — the anger, frustration, spontaneity and lack of organization — point to an underlying social and political dysfunction that is very damaging to East Jerusalemite society, and that may to a large degree explain the wave of stabbings and other murders or attempted murders carried out by East Jerusalemites in 2015. These are unorganized and aimless acts, born out of hopelessness and frustration. The young men and women who have engaged in lone-wolf stabbings of Israelis during Fall 2015 perhaps seek an exit from a life that they deem impossible, an exit that also provides them with an opportunity to harm people they see as representatives of the system that oppresses them.

What to Do?

The reasons for this condition are ultimately found in Israeli occupation and colonization policies, whereby Palestinians in Jerusalem have been hemmed in, geographically and politically isolated, and discriminated against for decades. Their situation has now deteriorated to a point where desperate, self-defeating, individual acts of violence will probably continue to occur at irregular intervals.

There is no reason to believe that Israel will abandon its efforts to colonize East Jerusalem in the foreseeable future, and the best option available to prevent further social breakdown and senseless acts of violence in the future is therefore to mitigate the effects of Israeli occupation policies. The grassroots organizations mentioned in this brief are important for maintaining social cohesion and providing young people with a sense of meaning and purpose in a difficult environment. What the international community should do in East Jerusalem is therefore provide more direct and unconditional support, including funding with no strings attached, for NGOs that demonstrably rely on volunteer work to a large degree, and primarily offer concrete community services in the areas of education, culture and sports. Simultaneously, the international community should bring more pressure to bear on Israel with regard to the Jerusalem question. As a first step, East Jerusalem should start receiving the same level of funding and services from the government and municipality as West Jerusalem does. In the longer run, the only viable way Palestinians in East Jerusalem can get a decent, dignified life is through the end of the illegal occupation of their city.