Fear and Loathing in East Jerusalem

Introduction

Between 1 October and 18 December 2015, twenty-four male Palestinians from Jerusalem were killed by Israeli occupation forces (except one, who was killed by a settler). Most were killed as they engaged in alleged attacks on Israeli civilians or soldiers, the so-called “knife attacks” that shook Israel and Palestine during Fall 2015. They were between fifteen and thirty-seven years old, the majority being in their early 20s.¹

This report deals with the social and political realities of young people in Jerusalem, providing a background against which to understand these violent incidents, instead of dismissing them as incomprehensible or senseless “evil” or “terror.”

The violence that hit the headlines during Fall 2015 is not new. It had been going on for at least a year before the spectacular knife attacks propelled it to the headlines of international new outlets. In their 2015 report on the situation in East Jerusalem, the Association for Civil Rights in Israel noted that already “[i]n the summer of 2014, the situation in East Jerusalem reached a boiling point following several years in which the tension and violence gradually escalated.”² The background for this escalation was the abduction and murder of fifteen-year-old Muhammad Abu Khudayr. 1,184 Palestinians, including 406 minors, were arrested in the second half of 2014. Therefore the knife attacks should not be viewed as coming out of the blue. They occurred against the backdrop of mounting frustration and desperation among young Palestinians in general and East Jerusalemites in particular. The aim of this report is to provide a view from the inside of how the dire situation in East Jerusalem affects young people, and how they try to mitigate the economic, psychological and social pressures they have to contend with.

Two main points are made in the pages that follow. First, East Jerusalemite society is on the verge of social breakdown as a result of Israeli colonization policies, social fragmentation among East Jerusalemites and the political isolation from the rest of the West Bank. It is up to the plethora of NGOs to keep society from falling apart and the young from becoming a lost generation, but despite their energetic efforts, they do not have the resources that it takes. The second point follows from the first. As a result of the heavy pressures on East Jerusalemite society, there is no organized political effort to resist the occupation. In the absence of politics, resistance takes on a local and anarchic character. The lack of future prospects and sheer frustration, combined with the access to Israeli society (unique for East Jerusalem as compared to the West Bank), lead individuals...
to commit self-defeating acts of violence against Israeli individuals. If the politics of strangulation in East Jerusalem continues, more outbursts of such individualized violence will likely occur at irregular intervals.

**Jerusalem the Exception**

East Jerusalem lies outside the borders of the Israeli state as established in 1948. It was occupied by Israel along with the rest of the West Bank in 1967. The city’s great symbolic importance and Israel’s stated aim of ‘reuniting’ the city makes it an exception in the West Bank, and the situation for the Palestinian residing there is unique.

Upon occupying East Jerusalem, 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. In short, Judaizing East Jerusalem means getting more Jews and fewer Palestinians to live there and altering the urban landscape so that it becomes more like the Jewish West Jerusalem. This policy has profound effects on the lives of Palestinians. First, and not always given due attention, is the radical expansion of Jerusalem’s municipal borders, with the aim of maximizing the number of Jews who live within the municipality. The Jerusalem municipality (black dotted line) now stretches from Ramallah in the north to the outskirts of Bethlehem in the south, while the settlement of Maale Adummim cuts across the West Bank and overlooks the depression that leads to Jericho and the Red Sea (the separation barrier is planned to follow the perimeter of this settlement). Many more Palestinians have been included in Jerusalem than counted themselves as Jerusalemites before 1967.

Second, there are of course the settlements. As showed in the map above, Israeli settlements now encircle the original Palestinian neighborhoods of Jerusalem in all directions. According to the Israeli human rights organization B’Tselem, nearly 200,000 Israeli citizens lived in “Israeli neighbourhoods” in East Jerusalem at the end of 2012, and the figure increases yearly. The
settlements, with their attendant infrastructure, encircle the Palestinian areas so that they have in effect become enclaves, cut off from each other by the “infrastructural paraphernalia” of the settlements: roads, services and security systems.\(^4\)

Within these enclaves, there are Jewish settler communities that actively encroach on Palestinian East Jerusalem neighborhoods with the aim of dominating them and ultimately emptying them of Palestinians. Such neighborhoods exist in several of the central East Jerusalem areas, such as the Old City, Silwan and al-Tur.

Third, Israel makes consistent efforts to limit the number of Palestinians living in East Jerusalem. When Israel unilaterally annexed East Jerusalem in 1967 (a move not recognized by the international community), it did not grant the Palestinians living in the city citizenship in the Israeli state. Instead, it issued so-called permanent residence permits. The permit grants East Jerusalemites fewer rights than citizenship does. For the purposes of this report, the most important fact is that it may be revoked by the Israeli state for security reasons, or if the permit holder cannot prove that he or she lives in the city permanently. A concrete example of how this affects people’s mobility is university students, who face the prospect of having their permit revoked if they study abroad or in another city than Jerusalem. If the residency permit is revoked, the Palestinian in question is barred from living in the city, and sometimes from visiting it at all, similar to most West Bank Palestinians. In 2014, the residency permits of 107 Palestinians were revoked; between 1967 and 2014, 14,481 residency permits were revoked.\(^5\)

Fourth, when the Israeli authorities constructed the separation barrier between East Jerusalem and the West Bank, they built it so that a number of populous East Jerusalemite neighborhoods that are officially part of the Israeli Jerusalem municipality were placed on the eastern, i.e. West Bank, side of the barrier. Since the construction of the barrier, Palestinians from these neighborhoods must cross checkpoints to enter their own city, sometimes being denied access, and they currently live in an administrative limbo between the nominal jurisdiction of the Palestinian National Authority in Ramallah and the Jerusalem municipality, which largely ignores the neighborhoods on the eastern side of the wall.

It is a paradox that, apart for the wall that isolates some of Jerusalem’s Palestinian neighborhoods, Israel’s wish to control the whole of the city has induced it to minimize physical borders between East and West, unlike the situation in other divided cities such as Belfast and Berlin prior to 1989. However, the Palestinians and Israelis live completely separated from each other, and Palestinian neighborhoods are readily distinguished from Jewish ones, as the result of years of discriminatory policies. The infrastructure is poor. Roads are not maintained to the same degree as they are in Jewish areas, and until recently, the municipal authorities had neglected to name a great number of streets in the eastern part of the city. 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. This fact has a lot to do with the neglect of planning and zoning in the eastern part of Jerusalem. 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.

Many urban areas of the world are worse off than East Jerusalem, to be sure. However, for East Jerusalemites the situation is imposed on them by a hostile, occupying state. What is more, this state treats them differently from their Jewish neighbors who sometimes live just across the street, and so they are subject to strong relative deprivation. Palestinian Jerusalemites need only cross a couple of streets to come to a completely different city, where services are good and the infrastructure is excellent. In West Jerusalem, there are many green spaces, and urban development plans are thorough and take into consideration the welfare of the residents. These differences exist in spite of the fact that all Jerusalemites share the same obligations. East Jerusalemites have to pay the same tax as their Jewish neighbors, yet they receive only a fraction of the benefits, a fact acknowledged by Israeli policymakers.

Perhaps the most serious shortcoming for young Palestinians is the longstanding neglect of education, since it has momentous effects on their later possibilities in life. The Jerusalem municipality has simply failed to provide classrooms to thousands of Palestinian school-age children, and it spends twice as much on Israeli pupils per year as on Palestinian ones, even though formally speaking they enjoy the same rights. The results are devastating for Palestinian society. The drop-out rate of Palestinian students in East Jerusalem is high: twenty-five percent in 11th grade and thirty-three percent in 12th grade. By comparison, among Palestinian citizens of Israel the corresponding drop-out rates were 4.6 percent and 1.6 percent, respectively. This state of affairs is partly to blame for the fact that Palestinian Jerusalemites often get only menial jobs with low salaries. Since Jerusalem (east and west) is an expensive city in which to live, the poverty rate among East Jerusalemites is high. In 2013, 74.3 percent of Palestinian Jerusalemites were considered to live below the poverty line, according to the National Insurance Institute of Israel.

Palestinian Youth at the Edge of the Abyss

Through a series of interviews conducted with young Palestinian Jerusalemites in 2009, Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian identified a number of grievances that result from the exclusionist regime they live under. She found that “most Palestinians in East Jerusalem have developed a strong sense of living in a prison, where they are traumatized, isolated and cantonized.” They repeatedly used the word “trap” in the interviews, and as Shalhoub-Kevorkian comments, “[t]o live in a trap means to live in a space that is incoherent and lacking in any clear organizing principles.” The report dwells on individual experiences and everyday coping strategies.

Complementing Shalhoub-Kevorkian, I focus on the more or less organized and pronounced ways of resisting exclusion. However, we first need to have an impression of the main challenges young people face. When I asked social activists this question, the answers were grouped roughly around four themes: the absence of leaders; social and political fragmentation; lack of trust; and insecurity.

The sense of being left without leaders to represent them is palpable among young people. The Israeli municipality of course has no legitimacy among them, and they suffer from the absence of unifying Palestinian leaders after the death in 2001 of Faysal al-Husayni, the popular Fatah leader.
who established Orient House, the PLO headquarters in East Jerusalem. The following sentiments seem representative of young activists’ view: “There is no leadership in Jerusalem. It has been really left in terms of authority,” and “[t]here is no leadership, or no leader everybody accepts.” The legitimacy of the factions is low, as young people view the local factional leaders as corrupt and obsessed with their personal prestige.

The absence of legitimate leaders leads to political fragmentation and a social vacuum that upsets the social order. Fragmentation is a generic problem in current Palestinian political life. In the occupied Palestinian territories, it is caused to a great extent by the so-called matrix of control, which has carved up the West Bank into a number of “islands” with relatively little contact between them as the result of the closure and checkpoint regime. However, nowhere is the problem of fragmentation as pronounced as in Jerusalem, where some 300,000 Palestinians live in a relatively small space, yet are not organized effectively across neighborhoods. This is, no doubt, partly due to the cantonization of East Jerusalem. However, as people may move relatively freely between the neighborhoods, this is not the sole explanation. There are also internal impediments to unified collective action.

Among youth activists, there is a common perception that “everybody wants to be the leader”, and that each neighborhood has its own issues and causes it pursues, most often without coordinating with other areas. There is a lot of activism going on continuously in East Jerusalem. I have myself witnessed non-violent marches and protests that gathered a sizeable number of people, but as one activist commented, they are not very effective because they do not amount to collective action on the level of East Jerusalem as a whole. Mass riots that rattle the occupying power, like the ones that occurred in Shu’fāt following the murder of Muhammad Abu Khudayr in July 2014, are exceptions that prove the rule.

The perception of being left to one’s own devices has also affected young people’s trust in any organized efforts. Lacking trust in others, young people in the various neighborhoods are often unwilling to pool their efforts with established NGOs in Jerusalem or to have them act as bridge-builders with their community and other Jerusalemite youth communities. An NGO director noted that the young community members who his organization aims to help have an ingrained dislike for anything to do with NGOs, even when the activists are East Jerusalemites like themselves. Without close relationships it is difficult to integrate the various youth communities with each other, leaving each to struggle alone with their often similar problems.

The lack of authorities makes itself felt also in social relations. There are two particularly salient aspects of this problem. First, the absence of police in several East Jerusalem areas has encouraged drug abuse and mafia-like crime, like extortion and protection rackets. Second, the traditional deference to the parents, especially the father, is crumbling, giving way to a nihilistic culture among some of the young. There are no reliable statistics on drug abuse among East Jerusalemites, but the common perception is that it was introduced largely after 1967 and has increased in recent years. In East Jerusalem, the Catholic NGO Caritas has established a section to combat drug abuse, and its employees are probably among the best informed on the matter. They claim that the figure of young addicts in Jerusalem is around 5,000, and hard drugs like heroin and crack abound.
Israeli state’s neglect of East Jerusalem areas has also paved the way for other kinds of crime: Azariyya, outside the separation barrier, is reportedly a haven for petty criminals, and the Israeli system’s indifference to intra-Palestinian affairs (as long as they do not affect Israeli security) facilitates practices of extortion and blackmailing.  

The problem is perhaps most serious in areas that fall within the Jerusalem municipality but have been left outside the city by the erection of the separation barrier: Shu’fāt refugee camp and the suburb of al-Ram are reportedly centers of drug abuse. These are areas where the PNA has no jurisdiction, and at the same time, having been left outside the barrier, they are neglected by the Israeli police, which has the formal responsibility to maintain law and order. East Jerusalemites suspect that Israel purposefully ignores the drugs and crime problem in East Jerusalem in order to weaken Palestinian society. As the director of Caritas commented: “If an Arab boy is arrested for throwing stones, he risks years in prison. But if kilos of heroin are sold on the street, no one does anything. How can one explain this?”

Finally, young people feel abandoned by their elders, and this leads to diminished respect for the older generation and a rootlessness that is manifested in conspicuous displays of material well-being and political apathy. UNDP official Sufyan Musha’sha, who helped found the youth organization Sharek, described the problem:

> These kids say, "I’m the breadwinner, I am the one who saves the family, I’m the one who suffers because of the old generation’s mistakes and inability to combat the authority, and the security people will arrest you for this and for that..." There is resentment, there is total resentment against the older generation. (...) All of the institutions are the problem. Young people are left to their own affairs. (...) For me, those in the university are a lost generation. They dream only about getting a suit and tie and working for Jawwal [Palestinian cell phone company] or the Arab Bank."

NGOs to the rescue?

The feeling of not being in control of one’s own life, of struggling merely to survive, is overpowering for young people. The situation seems to be one of impending social breakdown, defined as the “inability of the society to mobilize for an attack on situations which it has defined as undesirable.” Everybody agrees that high drop-out rates, rampant crime, increasing drug abuse, decrease of trust and widespread poverty are seriously endangering Palestinian society in East Jerusalem, yet occupation and political fragmentation impede attempts at improving the situation. This is where community self-help efforts and youth activism comes into the picture. This section will present the efforts of grassroots NGOs to struggle against or dampen the effects of social breakdown, and the limits of their activism. These organizations all receive support from external actors, like the important Welfare Association, a Palestinian-Arab organization, and various international NGOs that channel funds from donor states and provide administrative expertise. However, at the end of the day, it is the grassroots NGOs that really are in contact with the street and ordinary people’s lives, and are thus best positioned to understand what is happening on the ground.

I will briefly touch on three areas where grassroots NGOs play a role: in restoring trust and cohesion among Jerusalemites; in providing meaningful leisure activities to the city’s underprivileged
children and youth; and in providing childcare and community services. Towards the end, I comment on the issue of direct resistance, to which NGOs cannot contribute, but which forms an important part of the political and social dynamics at street level in Jerusalem.

There is little Jerusalemites can do by themselves to reverse Israeli encroachments on their land and human rights. However, they can try to prevent them from happening, and the prime means for doing that is to practice the core Palestinian value of steadfastness (ṣumūd) in the face of ever-present threats and intimidation. A prerequisite for steadfastness is trust, since the social solidarity that makes it possible to stand firm against oppression is premised on trusting one’s neighbors. However, trust has been eroding in this society, as shown above. Consequently, the rebuilding of trust is an important part of the work of grassroots organizations I visited, whether directly or indirectly. One of the organizations that engage directly in such work is Jerusalem Grassroots, a small NGO located in Shaykh Jarrah, north of the Old City, an area Israeli settlers currently focus on. The director of the organization, Amany Khalifa, explained that after having mapped the needs of various local communities, the organization arranged for other Jerusalemites to come and help fulfilling these needs, thus facilitating contact and friendships across neighborhoods that had little contact:

*The communities here are divided, and don’t really exchange news, resources, knowledge. Youth from Shu’fat camp wouldn’t cooperate with youth from Shu’fat village, even though it’s only ten minutes away. It’s so divided. The idea is to connect these communities through specific projects.*

In order to facilitate such connections, Jerusalem Grassroots gathered two busloads of volunteers from Shu’fat, Anata and Jabal al-Mukabbir and drove them to al-Walaja, a village south-west of Jerusalem that faces the prospect of having much of its land expropriated for the purpose of building an Israeli national park. To stop or slow down the process of land grab, the villagers had to work the land they owned actively, but they had not been able to mobilize among themselves. Jerusalem Grassroots set the youths to work, and then community organizations based in al-Walaja took over from there and organized two more joint labor days. For the volunteers the initiative was a resounding success: It was the first time they had visited al-Walaja, and many of them hadn’t even heard about it before, much less known that the villagers consider the village to be part of Jerusalem.

Another way of integrating different Jerusalemite communities is to offer education and meaningful leisure activities for children and youth from all over East Jerusalem. I visited three organizations in Jerusalem that engage in such activities on a rather big scale. Tucked away at the northern corner of the Old City is Burj al-Luqluq society, a community organization that cater to hundreds of children and youth every day, offering educational activities, kindergarten, and a range of organized sports activities: they have teams in football, handball, taekwondo, and basketball, to mention some. In addition to such activities they also support university students and they run a women’s empowerment program. The organization owns a plot of land second only to al-Haram al-Sharif in size, which is a very big property in terms of old city measures. The property is a mix of **waqf** and privately donated land, and the organization was set up by Faysal al-Husayni in the early 1990s as part of an effort to resist Israeli plans to build some 840 settler apartments in the area.
Having started out as an organization to serve the Burj al-Luqluq community, it has now grown considerably and caters to East Jerusalemites from a wide range of neighborhoods. The young director Muntasir Dkaidek explained the mission of the Society:

I think our work is to make these different people connect with each other and talk to each other, finding solutions for the kind of life they have here in Jerusalem. We're working hard to change people’s mentality and to support their education, because we believe that the big problem we have in Jerusalem is education. Fifteen-to-sixteen-year-olds prefer to abandon their education and go to work on the Israeli side in order to support their families, given the very high living costs in Jerusalem.²⁴

Several other community organizations in high-pressure neighborhoods of East Jerusalem engage in the same kind of activities as Burj al-Luqluq, often without the support that this organization received from private donors. Directly south of the old city is Wadi Hilwah, a part of Silwan, which has for years been subject to enormous pressure from settlers and the Israeli state, which decided to make the area into a heritage site commemorating the “City of David,” the first Jerusalem. A consequence of these plans has been targeted settler efforts to buy and otherwise take over Palestinian properties and excavate the area secretly, which made the ground beneath one of the Silwan’s main thoroughfares collapse. Faced with hostile and aggressive settler neighbors and no community services, the inhabitants set up a big tent where they built community spirit and discussed ways of resisting the Israeli encroachments. Out of these discussions were born the Markaz Mada and Wadi Hilwah Information Center. Markaz Mada was set up in 2007 without any external support. It offers art classes and sports activities to children and teenagers, and sports a library and computer room used for educational purposes. Since its humble beginnings it has grown to be one of the biggest community centers in East Jerusalem, comprising four buildings and serving the whole of Silwan, a big area with at least 60,000 inhabitants. It provides a safe and positive learning environment for children and youths who experience daily hardships and hostility and harassment from the settler community and the Israeli occupation authorities.

In the same vein, young people from isolated neighborhoods of Abu Dis, Izariyya and al-Sawahirah decided in 2003 that, faced with difficult living conditions, high drop-out rates and crime, they needed to take matters into their own hands. They started the community organization Future Builders Forum, which has grown considerably since then, and today runs a kindergarten in addition to serving as a community center focused on competence building and women’s empowerment. Dina Farūn, the director, emphasized the importance of volunteer work for the organization. People engage in order to help the community. The bonds of trust they thus forge are contrasted with the alienation they feel in relation to the Palestinian National Authority:

There are neither Israeli nor Palestinian police here. We live in a situation of lawlessness. There is absence of authority, absence of executive power. We also do not have leadership [marjaʿiyya] to which we can refer. For this to exist there needs to be a bond of trust between the leadership and the people, and this is missing. There is fragmentation [tashattut].²⁵

It is worth emphasizing that all of the three organizations in Burj al-Luqluq, Silwan and Abu Dis are thoroughly local 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 the NGO sector that has grown up as part of the Oslo framework, where 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 EU is suspect because it does not engage with the real issues on the ground but instead caters to foreign donors’ wish to see dialogue and partnership with Israeli organizations.

The precision of such criticism can be debated. It seems to be on target as far as support from the United States is concerned, while the EU has been more willing to annoy Israel by supporting initiatives for preserving the Arab heritage of Jerusalem. Norwegian People’s Aid has in fact supported Future Builders Forum in Abu Dis. Whatever the case may be, it is beyond doubt that the grassroots organizations I have presented examples of above 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. It is equally clear that poorly funded community organizations cannot possibly deal with the massive problems of poverty, lack of schooling, disintegration and crime that are the result of Israel’s ongoing attempt to colonize Jerusalem. In the face of gross neglect by the municipality, continuous land grabs by the state and settler organizations, and a life of poverty and insecurity where arrests and hardship are the order of the day, the best community-based NGOs can do is mitigate the harmful material and psychological effects of occupation and discrimination on East Jerusalemites. This is where the disturbances and riots of 2014-2015 enter the picture.

**Resistance Without Politics**

The district of ʻIsawiyya has for a long time been one of the hotspots of clashes between East Jerusalemite youths and Israeli security forces, yet very few of those outsiders who are engaged in the Palestine-Israel conflict have ever been there. When I took a stroll in the neighborhood in 2015, the reactions were the same as I have received in out-of-the-way Egyptian rural villages: a long tail of kids bombarding me with questions and requests for ballpoints pens, and old ladies asking cautiously but politely why I was there and what I was doing. As far as I was able to ascertain, there is only one community center in this village and no NGOs that work with the community. Diplomats – and many foreign NGO officials – hardly ever see these areas. They live in a separate world of reading field reports and meeting with “local partners” who rarely take them to the run-down, miserable neighborhoods they sometimes live in. It is not necessarily the officials’ fault: the local Palestinian NGOs often prefer central East Jerusalem as a meeting place. When I suggested to one of my contacts that we meet in the less-than-attractive area he lives in, he brushed aside the suggestion and, unsurprisingly, suggested Jerusalem Hotel instead, the preferred location for civil society activists and freelance journalists working on East Jerusalem and Palestine.

However, it is by actually seeing these areas that one understands the massive need for welfare services and infrastructure that goes unmet in East Jerusalem, and consequently the rage of the young men who create urban disturbances and riots, confronting the Israeli occupation forces by throwing stones and Molotov cocktails, burning tires, and the like.

Who are the angry young men? According to Sufyan Musha‘sha, who participated in founding the youth organization Sharek, the young men who are able to mobilize in and across neighborhoods
are in their mid-twenties and 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 – in university or at their workplaces in West Jerusalem, where they are all subject to the same discrimination:

The non-existent leadership does not know how to deal with these guys. These are the ones who can actually mobilize people. They relieve each other: When one neighborhood feels the heat, such as Wadi al-Joz, the al-Tur youth step in, and so on. They call each other, use social media. (... What we noticed in the neighborhoods is that there is better communication between the activists...)

The risk of being detained by Israeli police is high for these youths. Many cannot afford to take that risk, and the community organizations presented above cannot engage in resistance work proper without facing the prospect of being shut down completely by the Israeli authorities. However, there is a palpable sense of support for, and pride in, the street activists. As one NGO official told me: “There are many movements that focus on cultural activities, but when you hear that there are youth in ‘Isawiyya throwing stones, morally you will feel safe because they show that we don’t lack the capacity for doing what we did in the first intifada. We are still capable of fighting them.”

There is also recognition that this violent street activism is not a form of theatre, unlike the non-violent resistance that takes place elsewhere in Palestine. Non-violent resistance is of course dependent on as much media coverage as possible, and it is staged in a media-friendly way. By contrast, the East Jerusalem street riots are often spontaneous, born of anger and resentment, and 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. Such clashes occur on a semi-daily basis all over East Jerusalem, as a cursory glance at the Journal of Palestine Studies for 2015 chronology makes clear.

Considering that the clashes with Israeli security forces are largely spontaneous, the frequency with which they occur indicates how high the level of frustration is among Palestinians in Jerusalem.

The power of such spontaneous anger and resentment was displayed during the riots in Shu’fat after the abduction and murder of teenager Muhammad Abu Khudayr in July 2014. People opened their homes to complete strangers, and youths from different neighborhoods flocked to the refugee camp to stand with its youth against the Israeli military and police. The result was riots that rattled the occupation forces.

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 honour 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. While most East Jerusalemites sympathize with the stone-throwing youth, they are keenly aware of the limitations of this activism. As a veteran of the second intifada put it:
The Palestinian organizations have to devise a strategy for fighting the occupation, one which includes everybody, trying to integrate all these youths (...). What’s happening now is not effective, because they are all individual incidents and actions. The Palestinian leadership does not invest in this kind of activism, and it is not effective because it’s not collective. We have to devise one common strategy for all the Palestinians.  

However, as shown in this report, the situation in East Jerusalem makes such an endeavor exceedingly difficult. East Jerusalem is isolated from the West Bank and its political institutions; organized political activism is often punished by the occupying forces; a majority of East Jerusalemites live in poverty and they are forced to take unskilled, low-paid work in Israel to get by, eroding their sense of dignity; the lawlessness and infiltration by Israeli security agents have broken down trust among East Jerusalemites; and young people generally believe that their prospects are bleak. In light of these realities, it is understandable that activists regard any level of cooperation and coordination as positive, and take pride in the resilience of youths who continue to challenge Israeli soldiers with stones and Molotov cocktails, despite the hopelessness of the endeavor.

**Anomie and Violence**

At the same time, 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. “Political anomie” is a term that provides a good explanatory lens for street riots as well as individual acts of violence. Political anomie points to a situation where rules and norms are floating or contested, and it fits the situation in Jerusalem well:

> In a general sense, anomie is a condition in which uncertainty rules. It destabilizes a social system's sources of predictability, which includes collective social aspirations, regulative procedures, and moral guidelines. This condition dissolves the “social glue” or solidarity between different parts of the society, which encourages types of behavior that challenge the social order as such. Anomie can be caused by quite different factors, such as a disconnection between specialized institutions operating within the same system, social (and personal) crises that disturb the normative order, or a mismatch between ideology or cultural values and institutionalized social norms.

This is exactly the condition that many young East Jerusalemites experience, and that the organizations presented above struggle to improve. The youth of East Jerusalem feel they have arrived at a dead end: education leads them nowhere; they do not enjoy citizen rights; 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, uncertainty rules, there is little predictability, and there are numerous and continuous “crises that disturb the normative order.”

At the individual level, there are different ways of coping with anomie, from accepting the hopelessness of the situation to outright rebellion by different means. The young activists who work for community organizations have chosen to invent ways of staying afloat and beating the system without challenging it directly. The youths who confront Israeli soldiers with stones and
Molotov cocktails when they enter Palestinian neighborhoods rebel against the system. In a way, so do the young men and women who have engaged in lone-wolf stabbings of Israelis during Fall 2015, but theirs is just as much a desperate exit from a life that they deem impossible, providing them with an opportunity to harm people they see as representatives of the system that oppresses them.

These are not controversial suggestions. Indeed, Israeli intelligence experts point to the same symptoms, although they blame Palestinian “incitement” rather than hopeless life conditions for the actual attacks. A counter-terrorism center in Israel that is closely associated with military intelligence recently issued a report on the wave of stabbings, where it was observed that

the typical stabber is a teenaged Jerusalemite “unknown to Israeli security, not affiliated with a terrorist organization (...). He carries out the attack by himself following a spontaneous personal decision without instructions from any organization or leadership.”

These characteristics seem to indicate the depth of the frustration and desperation felt by the younger generation of Palestinians at the forefront of the wave of attacks. (...) They are frustrated by what seems to them as the ongoing Israeli occupation, disappointed by the PA and apparently also by the Palestinian terrorist organizations.

The politically loaded language aside, the authors point to some of the same elements as identified in this report. They are also right to mention stone-throwing and knife attacks as two aspects of the same phenomenon – as argued here, both are ways of dealing with widespread anomie. However, the Israeli analysis is fundamentally flawed with respect to identifying the reasons for this anomie. It mentions frustration and disappointment as background variables, while the direct cause of the attacks is claimed to be incitement by Palestinian media, the Palestinian National Authority (PNA), and the various resistance movements. The rhetorical device used to make this claim seem plausible is to conflate all kinds of Palestinian activism, from protest marches to knife attacks, under the rubric of “popular resistance.” In other words, if the PNA supports the popular resistance, it necessarily also supports knife attacks. This argument represents flawed logic and is hardly convincing. While it is true that some resistance organizations, such as Hamas, have applauded the knife attacks, few of the attackers have had any affiliation with Hamas or other organizations. A much more likely explanation for the attacks is the structural and daily physical violence experienced by young East Jerusalemites, together with the feeling that nothing will ever improve.

**Conclusion**

The knife attacks perpetrated by young Jerusalemites are only the most dramatic symptom of widespread anomie in East Jerusalemite society. 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 with irregular intervals.

There is no reason to believe that Israel will change its policies towards 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 organizations I have covered in this report all receive or have received support from external donors, such as the EU. However, there is deep-seated skepticism towards such funding even among those who receive it. As Grassroots Jerusalem states on its website: “By implementing project-based, short-term plans and acting without accountability to the local community, they disempower Palestinian leadership and organizations and inhibit the development of grassroots movements, long-term visions, and local and international political change.” As this report has attempted to show, the work of these grassroots organizations is very important in 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 service from the government and municipality as West Jerusalem. 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.
3 See http://www.btselem.org/settlements/statistics for these figures.
10 Interview with Amany Khalifa, director of Grassroots Jerusalem, Shaykh Jarrah, 27 May 2015.
11 Interview with Muntaser Dkaidek, director of Bāb al-Luqluq society, Old City, 30 May 2015.
13 Interview with Obay Odeh, East Jerusalem, 30 May 2015.
14 Interview with Rami Nasir al-Din, East Jerusalem, 1 June 2015.
16 Interview with Salam, Abu Dis, 22 April 2013; Interview with Rami Nasir al-Din, East Jerusalem, 1 June 2015.
18 Interview with Sufyan Musha’sha, East Jerusalem, 28 May 2015.
19 Interview with Obay Odeh, East Jerusalem, 30 May 2015.
21 Michael Dumper notes that the WA is one of the most important of the NGOs that “offer a critical minimum level of welfare provision” in the absence of formal institutions: Dumper, Jerusalem Unbound: Geography, History, and the Future of the Holy City, 124.
22 Interview with Amany Khalifa, Shaykh Jarrah, 27 May 2015.
Waqf, a centuries-old Islamic institution, is a permanent donation of money or property for the good of society, often administered by a religious body.

Interview with Muntasir Dkaidek, Burj al-Luqluq, 30 May 2015.

Interview with Dina Farūn, Abu Dis, 11 April 2013.


Interview with Sufyan Musha’sha, East Jerusalem, 28 May 2015.


Skype interview with Dawud Mahmud, 30 May 2015.

The chronology is available free of charge at [http://www.palestine-studies.org/jps/chronologies](http://www.palestine-studies.org/jps/chronologies).

Interview with Obay Odeh, East Jerusalem, 30 May 2015.


Ibid.