

Raids at Al-Aqsa Mosque: An Attack on Palestinian Identity in Jerusalem

By: Jalal Abukhater



Photo Credit: Awad Hamad

As Ramadan started, all eyes were on occupied Jerusalem, and especially in Al-Aqsa Mosque, where the Israeli policy of intimidation and violence against Palestinians has increased. Jalal Abukhater, a Palestinian writer based in Jerusalem, shares a commentary contextualizing the situation in occupied Jerusalem, where Palestinians (as he puts it) face an assault on what remains of their culture and identity.

In recent days, Israeli forces have undertaken to forcibly remove Muslim worshippers from Al-Aqsa, after the completion of Taraweeh [rest and relaxation] prayers. Those worshippers describe themselves as “Mu’takifeen”; they perform “I’tikaf” which is a ritual of seclusion performed during the nights of the holy month of Ramadan.

During the night of April 1st, Israeli forces shot and killed 26 year-old Mohamad Al-Osaibi inside of Chain Gate at Al-Aqsa Mosque. While Israeli authorities have claimed (without providing evidence) that Al-Osaibi attempted to snatch the weapon of an Israeli officer, eyewitnesses say Al-Osaibi was killed after he intervened to defend a girl who was being harassed in the Mosque. Such harassment is typical during that late hour, as Israeli forces often attempt to clear out Al-Aqsa of Muslim worshippers after Taraweeh prayers (after 10:30 pm).

In the following few days, Israeli forces continued to raid Al-Qibli hall in Al-Aqsa Mosque. They used force and threat of arrest to force worshippers out during the night. Scenes of brutal violence and mass arrest emerged. On one night, 440 worshippers were arrested, and 379 got released on condition they do not come near the Old City of Jerusalem or Al-Aqsa Mosque for a period of time.

These events are not arbitrary actions. Rather, they are part of a broader plan. To better understand the recent raids on Al-Aqsa Mosque, one must understand Israel's bid to transform the identity of the third holiest site in Islam.

The Bid to Transform the Muslim Site of Worship

Al-Aqsa is internationally agreed upon as a Muslim holy site, where Muslims have the right to worship and others may enter as visitors respecting the sanctity of the site. This is the supposed status-quo, applied at a holy site that lies in an internationally-recognized occupied territory.

Since 2015, the Netanyahu-appointed Minister of Public Security, Gilad Erdan, lifted some of the restrictions on Jewish prayer at Al-Aqsa. Later on, during the government of Yair Lapid and Naftali Bennett, talk was common about "maintaining freedom of worship for Jews on the Mount." Finally, Netanyahu's right-wing government included hardliners who publicly proclaim Al-Aqsa should be treated as a Jewish holy site rather than an exclusively Muslim site of worship. Their aim here is to eradicate the internationally-agreed status quo at Al-Aqsa, and to end the Islamic Waqf's authority as the official caretaker of Muslim holy sites in occupied east Jerusalem. Additionally, several Zionist parties hope to extinguish the site's significance as a sovereign space reflecting Palestinian identity in Jerusalem.

The number of Jewish worshippers who enter Al-Aqsa increased from fewer than 2,000 a year a decade ago, to 50,000 thousand a year. Many of the Jewish visitors are now allowed to perform prayers inside Al-Aqsa. Being aware of the intentions, Palestinians view this as a provocation and an attack on the last-standing symbol of centrality to Palestinian identity in occupied Jerusalem.

Following the recent Ramadan raids into Al-Aqsa Mosque, the Islamic Waqf Authority issued a strong statement condemning the raid, assault and severe beatings of the worshippers, the damage to property, the forceful evacuation and the arrest of more than 400 worshippers. It described those actions as a "flagrant violation of the sanctity of the mosque," calling for the continuation of I'tikaf (overnight seclusion) at Al-Aqsa in Ramadan. Meanwhile, the High Follow-Up Committee for Arab Citizens of Israel repeatedly issue statements calling the establishment of Jewish religious rituals inside Al-Aqsa "a violation of its religious sanctity" and "a violation of international agreements and obligations by Israel to change the internationally recognized status quo."

Palestinians have already seen how the Israeli occupation authorities previously divided the Muslim holy site in Hebron's Al-Ibrahimi Mosque. They recognize that a de-facto division in time and space is taking place at Al-Aqsa, as Israeli forces undertake upon themselves to empty Al-Aqsa from its Muslim worshippers, to favor Jewish worshippers to enter the mosque and perform their own prayers at the Muslim site of worship.

Beyond Al-Aqsa: Systematic Target of Palestinian Existence in Jerusalem

Palestinians in occupied East Jerusalem have been facing an onslaught on their existence since the city fell under Israeli occupation in 1967. Not only is their physical existence in this city under constant threat, but the vestiges of their culture and identity are also under constant threat. The raids and ensuing violence witnessed at Al-Aqsa Mosque are part of the bigger picture, which is a war on Palestinian identity in Jerusalem.

Occupied Jerusalem, after all, is a city that is governed by a fully-fledged apartheid system. This is backed up [as comprehensive reports including Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International indicate] by a set of discriminatory laws and annexationist policies that disenfranchise Palestinians and target their physical presence in the city. As UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967 notes, there is today "a deeply discriminatory dual legal and political system, that privileges the 700,000 Israeli Jewish settlers living in the 300 illegal Israeli settlements in East Jerusalem and the West Bank."

The Palestinian person is widely considered a "demographic threat" in Israel, and the situation is pushed to the extremes in Jerusalem, where the Israeli Municipality outlines in its masterplan the intent to keep Palestinian presence in the city below 30%. Having failed to keep the Palestinian:Jewish ratio at 30:70, the Israeli government upgraded the threshold to 40%, in order to maintain its "solid Jewish majority in the city."

To see how those policies translate on the ground, one may look at the number of homes demolished, not to mention the number of Palestinians forcibly displaced, in acts that violate International Humanitarian Law as stipulated in the fourth Geneva Convention. Already in January and February of this year, 106 Palestinian structures were demolished in occupied East Jerusalem alone. 120 Palestinians were made homeless, including 57 minors.

Across East Jerusalem and the West Bank, 953 Palestinian structures were demolished or seized throughout 2022. With 1,031 people forcibly displaced, it was the highest number recorded since 2016. In Jerusalem specifically, the numbers are trending higher. 51% of the structure demolitions in Jerusalem were carried out by the owners, an uptrend from an average of 34% over the last five years. The rise is attributable to a “judicial overhaul” that affects occupied Palestinians in Jerusalem, not the overhaul at the center the Israeli society’s protest movement of today. In October 2017, a legislation was approved by the Israel’s Knesset, which “limits the authority of Israeli courts to intervene and provides the Jerusalem Municipality with several means to exert pressure upon owners to demolish their properties by themselves.” In Israel’s current government, hardline minister of National Security Itamar Ben-Gvir pledged to intensify demolitions of Palestinian homes in occupied East Jerusalem, even during the holy month of Ramadan.

Seeing that at least one third of Palestinian structures in Jerusalem lack an Israeli-issued permit, at least 100,000 Palestinians are at risk of forcible displacement at any given moment. Since the occupation of East Jerusalem, no public planning was conducted at all for Palestinian neighborhoods. In the meantime, 55,000 settlement units were built for Jews in East Jerusalem 1967-2019, with thousands more approved and planned since then.

This is the background that needs to be established when considering the latest Israeli assault on Palestinians’ identity in Jerusalem. Whether this is carried out by banning the Palestinian flag, targeting cultural centers in Jerusalem, or enforcing change on the internationally-agreed status quo of Al-Aqsa Mosque, the war on Palestine’s religious, cultural, and historical identity continues alongside the war on physical presence.



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