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On East Jerusalem streets, Palestinians say settlements trump social media as source of violence

Al Aqsa Mosque seen from Silwan (Jad Sleiman)

Israel has been grappling with lone-wolf Arab violence against Jews for more than a year. The identities of the attackers—young Palestinians often killed at the scene—are clear. But their motivations remain a source of debate.

Israeli leaders blame social media incitement. But Palestinians who live on the East Jerusalem streets that are home to the lion's share of attackers say the motivation is clear: increasing Jewish settlement in Arab areas.

An East Jerusalem man due to begin a prison sentence went on a shooting spree in the city last month largely without warning, killing a policeman and a pedestrian.

His murders added to a gruesome total: more than 35 Israelis and at least 200 Palestinians killed since October of 2015 in Arab attacks against Jews, and during intermitted clashes between protestors and police.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government quickly pegged Facebook and social media as the new villains inciting Palestinians to violence.

"We are seeing Osama Bin Laden meets Mark Zuckerberg," he said last October, laying blame on the Facebook founder. After a July Tel Aviv attack that killed four, Israeli Minister of Interior Security Gilad Erdan was even more blunt, saying Zuckerberg had "blood on his hands."

Palestinian officials blame growing desperation surrounding stalled peace talks.

Children in Silwan (Jad Sleiman)

In East Jerusalem Palestinians say that while they have no faith in Netanyahu's government, they have little more in Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas' Palestinian Authority, which is widely seen as corrupt and ineffective.

I spent last summer in East Jerusalem, side stepping the politicians and spokespeople to interview people from the neighborhoods that produce the killers Israel's government refers to as "terrorists" and many Palestinians call "martyrs."

Settlement spreading

Israel captured the eastern portion of Jerusalem and the West Bank following the 1967 Six Day War, annexing the

former and occupying the latter in moves largely unrecognized by the international community.

Palestinians in East Jerusalem — numbering more than 260,000, are not quite full Israeli citizens. The vast majority instead hold permanent residency cards for Jerusalem, and carry Jordanian passports.

Unlike in previous spates of violence between Palestinians and Israelis, this round lacks a war raging in Gaza to inflame tensions. The status quo surrounding Jerusalem's Harem Al Sherif and Temple Mount sites — points of friction holy to both Jews and Muslims and effectively built on top one another — remains exhaustingly unchanged.

Still, blood is being spilled, and in a relatively new way. Arabs with no organizational backing or affiliation are carrying out unpredictable attacks against Jews often using knives, the family car or crude firearms.

Increasing settler activity, especially in East Jerusalem, is one of the few changes in this country of endless status quos, according to Palestinians

It's the process by which Jews move into contested, predominantly Arab areas, and world leaders outside Israel say it's standing in the way of peace.

A settler building in East Jerusalem (Jad Sleiman)

Israeli watchdog Peace Now counted an average of 460 new settler homes built per month in East Jerusalem and the occupied West Bank since Netanyahu began his third term in 2013. Jewish settlers in East Jerusalem now number more than 200,000 according to conservative estimates. And East Jerusalem's Arabs say new Jewish families pop up each month.

“Look at this pig,” an East Jerusalem Arab teen once told me, pointing to a middle-aged Arab man he and his friends suspect sold a home to recently arrived settlers. “The whole neighborhood knows what he’s done.”

As more Israeli Jews move into East Jerusalem neighborhoods, the prospect of a future Palestinian capital dims. This angers Palestinians. Thus, settlers often arrive armed, with private security in tow.

The settlers' existence in these neighborhoods is precarious. Kids, even individual girls and boys simply walking from front doors to shops or schools, are shadowed by an armed, armored guard.

“Our kids get used to any reality, even if its a warped, hate filled environment thrust upon them by some of the local Arabs,” a lawyer for a settler organization explained. “Kids don't blink, and are not really phased , even when their bullet proof van with steel mesh on windows, is attacked by a few Arabs or Molotov cocktails and stones. Its life, a sad one, but life.”

East Jerusalem's Palestinians have lived there for generations. But many Israeli Jews see ownership of both

East and West Jerusalem as their birthright, achieved either through military conquest or by religious mandate.

Echoing past Israeli leaders, the current prime minister said “all” of Jerusalem belongs to Israel and will remain under Israeli control while speaking at a commemoration of the Six Day War last year.

“Jerusalem has forever been the capital of only the Jewish people and no other nation,” he said.

What much of the world call settlements in East Jerusalem, many Israelis simply call Jewish neighborhoods.

Most of the holy sites that make Jerusalem so precious to so many are located in the eastern, older portion of the city.

Palestinian children play near armed settler private security contractors.
(Jad Sleiman)

But while the destruction of the Second Temple, the crucifixion of Christ and the Prophet Muhammad’s midnight journey are the type of events that make this place so important to so many, the day-to-day conflict here plays out with concerns about space and opportunity trumping religious fervor in the virtual world.

A self-taught Palestinian lawyer for the poor scans over deeds and rental agreements to find a way to block development that will displace locals. Kids look for a place to hang out after a soccer pitch in a run down neighborhood closed by an expanding tourist attraction.

It's the kind of metro page fodder found in cities around the world, debated in dull city council meetings. But because these events are taking place here, they can lead to bloodshed here and debate at the United Nations.

Nowhere is the process of settlement more stark than in Silwan, an impoverished, flashpoint Arab neighborhood carved into the slopes adjacent to the Old City. Many of the lone wolves involved in attacks come from East Jerusalem neighborhoods like this one as violence has largely been focused in and around Jerusalem.

Legal battles to street battles

Wadi Hilweh (Jad Sleiman)

Batan Al Hawa is a neighborhood in the heart of Silwan, where a handful of monolithic gray concrete buildings draped in Israeli flags tower over squat ramshackle homes. The high rises house Jews settled by the right-wing Israeli organizations through a combination of legal wrangling and shadowy purchases from Arabs facilitated by intermediaries for enormous sums.

While Facebook faces a billion dollar lawsuit brought in US court by bereaved Americans and Israelis who lost friends or family to Palestinian attacks, Batan al Hawa's Arab locals are also fighting in court.

Over the past year, Ateret Cohanim, a settler organization, has raised suits against 12 Arab families, made up of more than 300 people, in an effort to evict them. The organization bases its claim on a land trust once owned by Yemenite Jews.

The Israeli government transferred the trust to Ateret after it remained without a custodian for more than a century. The statute of limitations on the claim may end this year.

Palestinian camera salesman Zuhier Al Ragabi was the first to receive his lawsuit notice. Ragabi has become a reluctant community organizer and activist. He is a bit older than most on Facebook, pushing 50, and prefers talking to texting. His phone is almost always ringing.

He speaks fluent Hebrew and invited me and a Jewish activist to his home, where his young daughters giggle while scampering underfoot. He lives in a three-story apartment building surrounded by settlements.

Ragabi says he has no qualm with the Jewish people and only mentions Al Aqsa—the nearby third holiest site in Islam—when giving directions. It's the settlers he has a problem with.

“It's not just Jews moving in, it's what comes with them,” he said.

Jewish school children walk the streets outside his home with armed private security guards in tow. Battered, armored vans clog the neighborhoods narrow streets as they ferry Jews to and from work and school. The Israeli government foots the bill for settler security in Arab neighborhoods to the tune of \$24.4 million annually while basic infrastructure crumbles.

The current total is nearly double what it was in 2013. A 2014 increase that was expected to be temporary has been maintained ever since.

Israeli border police in Batan al Hawa (Jad Sleiman)

“Any little thing happens and an entire army comes through here,” said Al Rajabi.

He shows me security footage from days ago when Israeli border police came to his home to question his cab driver brother about picking up a suspect. A dozen men carrying assault rifles in full kit block the streets and shoo away passers by while one knocks on his door to speak to him.

Another section of tape shows an armored settler shuttle clogging the road and Al Rajabi’s cousin approaching the driver to speak to him. His cousin peers into the vehicle and is sent flying back by a blow before several security men descend on him with fists and a spray of tear gas.

Al Rajabi, like many in his neighborhood, says he doesn’t have to go online to get upset.

In June, a new settler development was approved in a move that Daniel Seidemann, a lawyer and Jerusalem expert with Terrestrial Jerusalem, calls the latest in a series that jeopardize any hope for a two-state solution where Palestinians govern East Jerusalem.

“In the past year and a half, this effort has accelerated and today threatens the fabric of these Palestinian neighborhoods,” he wrote in a July report. “ [Settlement efforts] are marked by increased security presence to secure the settlers and fuel the type of tensions and frustrations that led to violence seen in the city starting in Fall 2015.”

A mural in Wadi Hilweh (Jad Sleiman)

Al Rajabi puts his hope in reams of copies of the various lawsuits against him and his neighbors. He speaks evenly, expressing confidence in the Israeli court system. But when pressed about the worst, losing these cases, he grows quiet and leaves the room to prepare more tea.

Eyal, the Jewish activist, later tells me he asks the same question often, and has never gotten a response from Al Rajabi, or any other Arab. In the past, when a Palestinian family lost a home, neighbors would pay for an apartment, but such funds are nearly dry.

When Al Rajabi returns, I ask him, “God forbid it, but what will you do?”

He passes out the tea, and places a fresh ash tray in front of Eyal. “We will have nowhere to go,” he says in Arabic. “There will be a massacre.”

He doesn't specify who will do the killing.

‘It’an,’ stab in Arabic

East Jerusalem teens hangout in Silwan (Jad Sleiman)

In a western section of Silwan known as Wadi Hilweh I met a group of young Muslims hiding out from the summer heat, sneaking midday meals when they should be fasting in accordance with the holy month of Ramadan.

We chat for bit about New York, where I've come from, and the girls there. We almost immediately add one another on Facebook using our smart phones.

Their Facebook virtual ‘walls’ are mostly a series of selfies: the boys in a car, the gang on the stoop, dressing up for a night out.

But on the plywood wall of their makeshift clubhouse hangs a picture of a young man killed by Israeli security forces whom they refer to as a martyr. And on the floor a punching bag lays on its side.

They are the type of young Arabs Israeli authorities fear will take part in attacks against Jews, saying they are vulnerable to religious or cyber incitement.

The vast majority of attackers involved in the wave of violence are under 23.

“What we see now is like an octopus with many hands but no brain,” Orit Perlov, an expert on Arab social media at the Institute for National Security Studies told the New York Times last fall. “You don’t need something sophisticated. We’re talking about 15-year-old boys. You just write the word ‘it’an,’ stab in Arabic, and then whoever has a knife in his house and wants to go, that’s it.”

Surveillance above a settler home in East Jerusalem (Jad Sleiman)

Israeli Jews have also shared increasingly hostile, violent content against Arabs online over the past year.

But the boys in the clubhouse don’t mention anything they read online.

Though they live a short walk from the Al Aqsa Mosque, they mention less famous, offline locales as the source of their frustration.

They mockingly ask what precisely Mahmoud Abbas is the president of— and invite him over for tea if he's brave enough.

Politics, religion and 'likes' are far from their concerns.

Dauod Al Qaq, 17, walks me through the alleys around his house. He points to a fenced off playground, sealed after settlers moved in. He is a high school dropout, saying frequent arrests and home detentions have made school impossible. East Jerusalem's high school drop out rate is nearly 40 percent, many orders higher than the rest of the city and the Israeli average.

Next, he shows me a group of benches on precious flat ground, it's off limits too.

Months ago, the boys lost the neighborhood's last soccer pitch. A coach who ran a 50-strong youth league said wide cracks had begun forming in it's paved surface, spurring fears that the closest thing the neighborhood had to a proper field may collapse.

Locals blame Elad, a right wing Israeli settler organization that has been supporting digging downhill as part of their excavation efforts of a tourist destination the group refers to as City of David. It's believed to be the original site of Jerusalem and rich in archeological artifacts.

“What’s happening with the digging is terrifying,” said the coach, Noor Krameh, 23. A middle aged man who lives nearby, said workers were at the site for up to 15 hours a day, hauling out dirt.

An Elad spokesman has previously stated the goal of the organization is “the Judeazation of East Jerusalem.”



The City of David tourist site in East Jerusalem (Jad Sleiman)

In Silwan, Elad has moved in hundreds of Jewish settlers among tens of thousands of Arabs since the '90s through

legal wrangling and. More recently, the group has convinced more residents to sell as East Jerusalem's record poverty rate crept up to above 80 percent this year. In dramatic, highly publicized fashion, the group orchestrated the overnight takeover of 25 apartments in the neighborhood in 2014.

The boys in the pseudo-club house used to play soccer in the field, and erected late night campsites of their own there last summer.

They left the pitch when excavation began worrying locals, they said, and played in the streets for a time before settlers began complaining about that.

Now the guys stay inside watching one TV that plays sitcoms and music videos, while occasionally eyeing a second that other displays CCTV footage from the street out front.

"Sometimes the settlers or the police come by at night, bang on the doors randomly or break something," said his cousin Ali. "This way we know not to open."

Almost all of them have been arrested at least twice and a criminal record can make work in wealthier West Jerusalem impossible.

"This is it, all that's left for us," said Dauod.

He invites me to return and hang out sometime, maybe bring a case of beer.

On his Facebook I see photos of him and the boys over the following weeks, then a stock image of a pistol with the word "tomorrow" superimposed in Arabic. Next, a relative takes

over the account and posts photos of his ransacked home and an appeal “God release him safely.”

He had been arrested again.