

The Present Violence in Jerusalem: An Explainer

The Rev. Robert O. Smith, PhD
10 May 2021

The present escalation of violence in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has gained worldwide attention. This round of state violence and popular resistance helps unmask the structural and systemic violence permeating the lives of Israelis and Palestinians on a day-to-day and decade-to-decade basis.

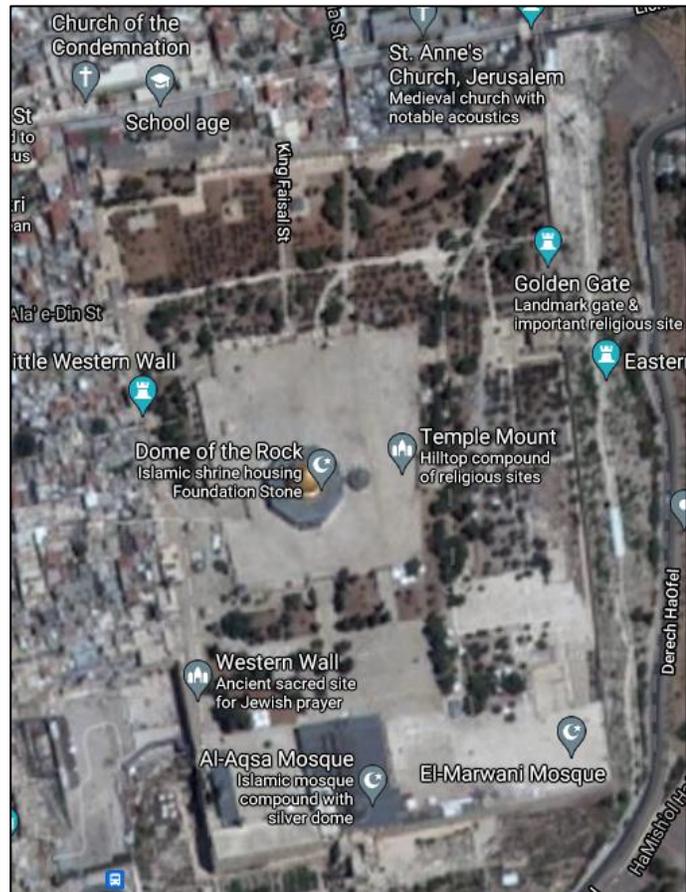
The current tensions have many causes and flashpoints.

Conflict at Al-Aqsa Mosque can be understood as a normal outgrowth of late-Ramadan tensions intensified by the current political climate.

The end of the Islamic [holy month of Ramadan](#) always focuses attention on Masjid Al-Aqsa, the third holiest site in Islam. Located in the Old City of Jerusalem, the site contains the iconic Dome of the Rock, built over the site where Muslims believe the Prophet Muhammad ascended into heaven. In addition to being a holy site for Muslims, the structure is known by Jews as the Temple Mount; many Jews believe that the Temples built by Solomon and Herod were located there.

Intensified Ramadan Muslim pilgrimage to Al-Aqsa from throughout Israel and Palestine creates increased traffic around the Old City, increasing public safety concerns and questions of freedom of access to holy sites.

Palestinians—both Muslim and Christian—are deeply suspicious that Israeli efforts to control crowding are stealthy attempts to discourage Palestinian presence in Jerusalem. Orthodox Christians regularly file complaints with Israeli police officials regarding access restrictions.



The Haram al-Sharif in Jerusalem, considered holy by both Muslims and Jews.

Conflict over Sheikh Jarrah can be understood as an outgrowth of Israeli domestic politics.

Conflict over Sheikh Jarrah has simmered since 1967. Before 1948, the area, located just north of the American Colony Hotel, was populated by Jews who had emigrated to Palestine. During the 1948 war, those Jews left the frontlines of fighting and settled in areas west of the Green Line / Armistice Line. The United Nations then placed Palestinian refugees in those homes.



The Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood in Jerusalem. The neighborhood is East of the so-called Green Line, the armistice line established after the 1948 war separating Israeli- and Jordanian-controlled territory. Notice the nearby diplomatic missions.

Israeli settler organizations seek to reclaim Sheikh Jarrah from those Palestinian refugees by arguing for hereditary Jewish land rights in what is present-day East Jerusalem. The problem with those claims is that the organizations make no such claim for land seized by the State of Israel from Palestinian refugees in the same 1948 war, what Palestinians refer to as the Nakba (literally, catastrophe). The [United Nations has made it clear](#) that any eviction of Palestinian residents from homes in Sheikh Jarrah would be illegal under international humanitarian law.

The present political climate empowers extremists rather than moderates.

The present domestic political climates in both Israeli and Palestinian life are not conducive to promoting coexistence. The election of the Palestinian Legislative Council was indefinitely postponed in late April, further decreasing Palestinian confidence in their political representation. This past March, Israel held its fourth national election in the last two years. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, facing multiple corruption investigations, is desperate to remain in office.

In both Israeli and Palestinian political cultures, political and religious extremists seize moments when their voices can hold sway. Islamist extremist organizations like Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, who launched rockets from Gaza today, are seeking to increase their influence in the West Bank. Israeli political blocs are actively courting the support of Ultra Orthodox and settler constituents.

Under PM Netanyahu's leadership, Israel has pursued a policy of managing rather than resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict while working to normalize diplomatic relations with

states throughout the Middle East. This goal was advanced through the Trump Administration's regional policy, culminating in the "Abraham Accords" shepherded by Jared Kushner. Demonstrating Israeli military superiority over Palestinian resistance has long been a staple of Israeli incumbent electoral politics.

The international community is distracted.

In the past, the international community—especially within the EU and the United States—could bring sufficient pressure to bear on Israeli political and military leaders to force a change in policy. Now, in a world challenged by the pandemic and fragmented by intensified economic and ideological competition, it will be more difficult to bring moderating pressure to bear. American influence is limited: relations with the PA were deeply wounded by the Trump Administration; Israel strongly preferred the previous US administration.

International responses to this current round of conflict have been ineffective. Most countries have used well-worn formulations condemning all violence and calling for peace for the sake of a two-state solution. Most Israelis and Palestinians have moved past those formulae for characterizing their goals. It is time for innovations in how the international community comprehends the conflict and seeks to organize

The conflict is moving out of the higher realms of political leadership and has come to the streets. Israeli settlers are engaging in more direct confrontation with Palestinians; Palestinian young people, disaffected from their political representatives, are again taking matters into their own hands. With explicit [street-level violence](#) moving into [direct confrontation](#), the Israeli-Palestinian conflict may be entering a new phase.

—

Lutheran Christians are compelled to view the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through the lenses of ecclesiastical relationships and historical responsibilities. The present phase of the conflict is no different. Lutheran Christians are conscious of our historical responsibility toward Jews, including [repudiation of Martin Luther's anti-Judaic diatribes](#) and recognition of Lutheran [participation in the Shoah](#), the attempted eradication of European Jewry. At the same time, Lutherans around the world are in relationship with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land (ELCJHL), a fellow member of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF). We therefore cannot accept any devaluation of Palestinian lives.

Because Lutherans seek the wellbeing and flourishing of all peoples in the Holy Land, we are grieved by the latest escalation of violence in the Israeli-Palestinian context. We are aware, however, that this violence does not take place in a vacuum. As in the United States, we are aware that structural and systemic violence permeate the lives of all people in both Israeli and Palestinian territories. Many of the same conditions of [racism](#), [settler colonialism](#), and imperialism afflict societies in the United States and the Israeli-Palestinian context. We therefore call for justice, even as we hope for peace.

For decades, the ELCA (along with its predecessor church bodies) has supported the educational ministries of the ELCJHL and the vital, life-saving medical care of Augusta-Victoria Hospital. Because we are on the ground, with the people, we offer no simple platitudes. We understand that much of the fault for this ongoing conflict lies with the United States rather than with Israelis or Palestinians alone. We pray that this new round of violence will renew our efforts toward Accompaniment, Awareness-building, and Advocacy, the three pillars of the [ELCA's Peace Not Walls](#) strategy.

The Rev. Robert O. Smith, PhD, is a pastor in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America presently serving as an Associate to the Bishop of the Northern Texas–Northern Louisiana Synod of the ELCA and Director of [Briarwood Leadership Center](#). Between 2014 and 2018, he lived in Jerusalem, where he served as Academic Director for the University of Notre Dame's Jerusalem Global Gateway. Prior to that, he served in the Global Mission Unit of the ELCA as Area Program Director for the Middle East and North Africa, as Special Adviser to the President of the Lutheran World Federation (ELCJHL Bishop Emeritus, Munib A. Younan) and, with Dr. Muna Mushahwar, Co-Moderator of the Palestine-Israel Ecumenical Forum of the World Council of Churches. He is the author of [More Desired than Our Own Salvation: The Roots of Christian Zionism](#) (Oxford, 2013).