

Jerusalem's on fire, and it's poised to spread in Israel, Gaza and the West Bank

The Israel Police have failed to contain the violence in the capital — the worst in at least 4 years — and the country's political leadership is nowhere to be found.



Palestinian protesters hurl stones at Israeli security forces amid clashes in Jerusalem's Old City on May 8, 2021. (EMMANUEL DUNAND / AFP)

To get a sense of the unparalleled potency of the city of Jerusalem you would have only needed to look at Latrun Junction on Saturday afternoon to watch dozens of young Muslim men and women, carrying prayer rugs, marching off in the direction of the Temple Mount after police kicked them off buses heading toward the capital for fear they would take part in violent protests at the holy site.

These pilgrims, mostly from Arab towns in northern Israel, made it to the Old City for evening prayers after hiking more than 30 kilometers (19 miles).

For weeks, the raw emotional, religious, and nationalistic power of Jerusalem has been out of control, driven by a deadly convergence of interconnected and disparate events, all taking place during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, which often sees heightened tensions.

The Israel Defense Forces, Shin Bet security service, and Israel Police have struggled to contain the violence and have enjoyed little assistance from the political echelon in attempting to do so, with Israeli lawmakers failing to cooperate with one another as the various parties struggle to form a government coalition.



Hundreds of Arab Israelis marching on Route 1 making their way to Jerusalem, May 8, 2021 (Nowm Revkin Fenton/Flash90)

The Sheikh Jarrah flashpoint

The driver of this current unrest is a deeply contentious court case regarding the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood of East Jerusalem, where a number of Arab families stand to be forcibly evicted from homes they've lived in for decades. Right-wing Israeli nationalists argued successfully that the properties were owned by Jews

before Jordan conquered the area and resettled the current occupants there, and invoked a 1970 law that allows, for all intents and purposes, only Jewish Israelis to reclaim property that was lost to them during the 1948 Independence War.

While the Israeli government has — fairly unconvincingly — attempted to portray this as a “real-estate dispute between two private parties,” the looming eviction of these families has been taken as emblematic of a movement within Israel to move Jewish Israelis into areas that have been historically inhabited by Arabs.

The impending eviction has prompted concern from the Biden administration and drawn criticism from allies throughout Europe, as well as Israel’s newfound friends in the Persian Gulf, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain.



The scene outside a home of a Jewish family during a protest in the East Jerusalem neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah on May 3, 2021. (Jamal Awad/FLASH90)

A High Court hearing on the case is scheduled for Monday, though efforts are underway by the Justice Ministry to convince the court to postpone the matter to a less fraught period.

On Monday, Israel will also commemorate Jerusalem Day, the anniversary of the

IDF's capture of the Old City and East Jerusalem from Jordan during the 1967 Six-Day War. This national-religious holiday is traditionally marked by a controversial Flag March through the Old City, including the Muslim Quarter, which has in the past seen blatant displays of anti-Arab and anti-Muslim racism by far-right Israeli activists.

Israeli security officials have reportedly warned the cabinet that the Flag March may exacerbate the already tense situation.

This all comes as the Palestinian Authority last month announced it was indefinitely postponing Palestinian elections — the first in some 15 years — a move that it blamed on Israel refusing to allow polls in East Jerusalem. (Though it has in the past opposed any PA activities in East Jerusalem, Israel did not officially make a decision on the matter; the finger-pointing was generally seen as an excuse to avoid elections that PA President Mahmoud Abbas would have lost to his rival, the Hamas terror group.)

Worst violence in years



National-religious youth wave Israeli flags as they celebrate Jerusalem Day at the Old City of Jerusalem's Damascus Gate on June 2, 2019. (Menahem Kahana/AFP)

This past weekend saw some of the worst rioting in the capital since the summer of 2017, when Israel installed a number of unpopular security measures outside the Temple Mount following a deadly terror attack just outside the holy site in which two police officers were shot dead.

Friday night saw a massive clash between police and Palestinians and Arab

Israelis on the Temple Mount compound itself — an exceedingly rare occurrence. The rocks and other objects that the rioters threw at police officers had apparently been stashed at the site in advance, in anticipation of the violence.

On Saturday night, known to Muslims as Laylat al-Qadr, one of the holiest days in Islam, riots resumed in Sheikh Jarrah and on the Temple Mount. Indeed, shortly after midnight Saturday, the Western Wall complex was evacuated as rioters on the Temple Mount threw rocks and launched fireworks at the Jewish worshipers below.

Some 100 people were treated by the Palestinian Red Crescent on Saturday night and Sunday morning, 10 of them in the Old City and 90 in Sheikh Jarrah. Seventeen police officers were also injured in the clashes.



Israeli security forces deploy next to the Dome of the Rock mosque amid clashes with Palestinian protesters at the Temple Mount compound in Jerusalem, on May 7, 2021 (Ahmad GHARABLI / AFP)

This unrest has also spread outside the capital, with dozens of rocket attacks from the Gaza Strip last month and a return of balloon-borne incendiary and explosive devices from the enclave, as well as multiple attacks and attempted attacks

against Israeli civilians and security forces, including a deadly drive-by shooting on Sunday in which a 19-year-old student, Yehuda Guetta, was fatally wounded, succumbing to his injuries three days later.

Last week, Mohammed Deif, the elusive head of Hamas's military wing, warned that Israel would pay a "heavy price" if the Sheikh Jarrah evictions went ahead — which Israeli security forces do not take as an empty threat.

Indeed there is growing concern among Israel's security services that the anger and violence emanating from the capital will expand in the coming days. The Israel Defense Forces have called in reinforcements to the West Bank in order to provide additional protection to Israeli civilians at common sites of terror attacks, notably junctions and bus stops. The IDF has also deployed additional Iron Dome missile defense batteries in the case of renewed rocket fire from the Gaza Strip.

Police failures

The Israel Police have so far failed to curb the violence in Jerusalem and have even been accused of inflaming it, using unnecessarily aggressive and tactless measures during a, particularly sensitive period.

This was seen most clearly last month, toward the beginning of Ramadan, after protests in East Jerusalem when the police set up barricades blocking the steps around Damascus Gate, an area that is regularly visited by pilgrims and residents of the surrounding neighborhoods. This prompted far more violent protests around the site until police eventually capitulated and removed the barriers, which did not end the violence but mitigated it.

Police roadblocks set up for several hours on Saturday afternoon to prevent young Muslim Israelis from traveling to the Old City were similarly unsuccessful, failing to prevent riots on the Temple Mount and spurring further protests and denunciations.



Israeli security forces disperse Palestinian protesters at Damascus Gate outside Jerusalem's Old City on April 24, 2021. (Ahmad GHARABLI / AFP)

The police have furthermore failed to rein in far-right Israeli activists, who have held regular counter-protests, some of them violent, around Sheikh Jarrah and elsewhere in the capital. Far-right nationalist lawmaker Itamar Ben Gvir set up what he declared to be a “parliamentary office” in Sheikh Jarrah in order to force the police to deploy additional troops to the area and force the government to get more directly involved.

The police have officially shown no inclination to significantly limit Monday's Flag March of Jews through the Old City, raising the potential for further clashes and violence. However, reports suggested on Sunday that talks were underway on the matter.

Preoccupied politicians



Police Commissioner Kobi Shabtai, right, meets with press near Damascus Gate in Jerusalem on April 24, 2021. (Yonatan Sindel/Flash90)

Israel's political leadership, meanwhile, has been largely uninvolved.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who called for calm and assured Muslim Israelis that their freedom to worship would be upheld during the start of Ramadan when the unrest began — while, it should be noted, he was actively courting the Islamist Ra'am party for his government — has been largely silent on the matter in recent days. "We are acting responsibly to ensure law and order in Jerusalem while maintaining freedom of worship at the holy sites," he said in a statement on Saturday.

Defense Minister Benny Gantz has met with top IDF, police, and Shin Bet officials about the growing tensions with Palestinians and Arab Israelis, but he has largely approved existing operational plans rather than issuing new directives. In his capacity as justice minister, Gantz is trying to delay the High Court of Justice's decision on Sheikh Jarrah in an attempt to take at least some of the fuel out of the fire currently raging in the capital.

Public Security Minister Amir Ohana, who is responsible for the police, has mostly done the same, receiving situational assessments and signing off on measures.

Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi has left the country entirely, traveling to South Korea to sign bilateral trade agreements, rather than focusing his attention on enlisting the help of Jordan, which plays a key role in the politics of the Temple Mount, to try to calm the situation.

Without a functioning government capable of making difficult and unpopular decisions, it seems, the country's security services are largely being left to their own devices to keep the Jerusalem powder keg from blowing up.

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