

A Troubling Correlation: The Ongoing Economic Deterioration in East Jerusalem and the Current Wave of Terror

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Background

“What do I care about the Temple Mount?” sighs Ali Awasat, an East Jerusalem resident. “As far as I’m concerned, let the Jews take it. They’re all liars. What’s important to me is what I have in my pocket. People in the east of the city don’t have work, don’t have proper salaries. This is the problem, and this is what leads to despair.”¹ Although Awasat’s attitude is not typical of the inflammatory Islamic-nationalistic discourse highlighted on the social networks and in Palestinian media, it reflects the deep roots of the current wave of terror, which stems mainly from ongoing despair in a gloomy economic reality, and the sense among Palestinian youth that all paths to advancement are blocked. Nevertheless, the economic aspects of the current wave of terror are hardly mentioned at all in the public discourse in Israel, which tends to characterize the violence as a dark and ISIS-like Islamic religious war whose participants are a Palestinian “Shabaab” that sanctifies death and sees the world from a different perspective.² In fact, however, an examination of those committing the recent terror attacks in Israel reveals a profile that is secular, young, poorly educated, and lacking any organizational affiliation.

The economic aspects of the current terror wave are reflected in a survey conducted in March 2016 among Palestinian youth from the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip, which indicated that the highest percentage (33.8 percent) believe that the wave of terror that broke out in

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late 2015 stems mainly from the frustration of many young Palestinians with their economic state.³ These findings are akin to the fact that at least 75 percent of the attacks carried out within the Green Line since September 2015 were perpetrated by youth aged 16-22 from East Jerusalem, especially neighborhoods with the worst socio-economic conditions.⁴ The most prominent neighborhood in this respect is Jabel Mukaber, one of the poorest neighborhoods in East Jerusalem and in all of Israel, and from which nine residents perpetrated significant attacks involving the injury of at least one Israeli with moderate wounds, or worse, between September 2015 and May 2016. This number is out of the 28 attacks of similar severity carried out by residents of East Jerusalem neighborhoods during this period.

The attacks executed by Jabel Mukaber residents killed four Israelis and wounded seven with moderate-severe injuries. In this context, two other neighborhoods stand out, which are also among the lowest socio-economic level in the region and the state – Beit Hanina and Sur Baher, which were the origins of five and six attackers, respectively. In contrast, there has not been even one attacker from the East Jerusalem neighborhoods considered to have relatively high socio-economic levels, such as Sheikh Jarrah and Bab a-Zahara. However, despite additional similar data that point to a connection between the deteriorating economic state of East Jerusalem neighborhoods and their high number of attackers, quite often claims are heard that this number is the result of the relatively greater freedom of movement of East Jerusalem residents versus West Bank residents, as well as the neighborhoods' physical proximity to the Temple Mount area (in light of the perceived change in Israeli policy).⁵ Nevertheless, since East Jerusalem residents have always enjoyed great freedom of movement in West Jerusalem and elsewhere in Israel, and given that there is nothing new in Israel's Temple Mount policy, these arguments cannot explain the significant rise in involvement of East Jerusalem residents in the cycle of violence at this particular time. Furthermore, these arguments fail to explain why specifically the poorer East Jerusalem neighborhoods have a tendency to be represented in the cycle of terror at higher rates than the well-off neighborhoods.

In general terms, the poor economic condition of East Jerusalem residents, home to some 320,000 people,⁶ stems mainly from their occupational profile. Although participation in the labor force among East Jerusalem working age men is relatively high in comparison to their Jewish counterparts (82 versus 72 percent⁷), the poor "quality" of their employment, and not the

“quantity,” is the critical factor. In day-to-day reality, most of these East Jerusalem laborers make a living from part time, nonprofessional jobs in a narrow job market where the demand for employment far outpaces the supply, and this in turn depresses wages and terms of employment. These job market characteristics, combined with the ongoing neglect on the part of municipal authorities – against the backdrop of the political conflict – have led to a significant rise in the percentage of East Jerusalem Arab families who live under the poverty line (now 77 percent, versus 64 percent in 2006), as well as an 84 percent poverty rate among children of the area.⁸ This joins the low quality of the local educational, occupational, and welfare institutions, which affects potential for the youth’s future advancement and development. These elements combine to induce much despair among the local population, and prompt solid grounds for religious radicalization, a sense of humiliation and deprivation, and an assumption that there is “nothing to lose.”

The Decline in the Economic Condition of East Jerusalem Arabs

The gradual worsening of the economic state of East Jerusalem Arabs can be traced back to 2002, when the Israeli government commenced construction of the security fence, which cut off the neighborhoods of East Jerusalem from the Palestinian villages surrounding the city and the West Bank. For the residents of these neighborhoods, who commonly worked in the hotel and restaurant industries (25 percent), education (19 percent), and general services (19 percent),⁹ the geographic division dealt what in many respects was a fatal blow.

First, the stricter checkpoint policy made access to the neighborhoods more difficult and led to a sharp drop in the influx of foreign and domestic tourists to the area. Significantly, this policy reduced the access for residents of the West Bank and Palestinian towns near Jerusalem who would commonly shop in East Jerusalem and use its educational, health, and welfare institutions. The preference of these Palestinians to shop and seek services in areas that do not require crossing checkpoints raised the status of West Bank cities such as Ramallah on the one hand, and left East Jerusalem hotel owners and service providers without work, on the other.

Second, the security fence restricted access for East Jerusalem residents to sources of employment, education, and welfare located in the West Bank. The long waits at checkpoints, stemming mainly from unforeseen delays and sudden closures, worsened individual lives and potential options.

For example, a drive from the East Jerusalem neighborhoods to Ramallah, where there are many sources of employment and trade, or to Bir Zeit or Bethlehem, where there are developed educational institutions, today takes some two hours in each direction, despite the short geographical distance involved. The checkpoint policy also increased the cumbersome bureaucracy involved in export from East Jerusalem to the West Bank, which raises the price of merchandise produced in these neighborhoods, lowers the economic feasibility of trade, and deters businesspeople from starting economic ventures in East Jerusalem.

The ugly employment reality that has taken shape continues to cast shadows over the local educational system, which has been significantly weakened in respect to infrastructure and quality. The East Jerusalem educational system, which has some 100,000 students, has three types of educational institutions: official-municipal, unofficial recognized, and private. The fundamental difference between the first type and the other two is that in the official-municipal schools, Hebrew is taught as a mandatory subject, and the curriculum relies on textbooks routinely overseen by the municipality.¹⁰ Nevertheless, due to the severe shortage of

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classrooms in the official-municipal institutions, only 43 percent of local elementary school-age students are “privileged” to attend these schools, while the other 57,000 elementary school-age students are left without any place and forced to purchase education at unsupervised educational institutions.¹¹ In any case, the official-municipal educational institutions, which cost significantly less, are perceived by the locals as low quality and neglected, and thus mainly students from the weaker strata attend them. Moreover, the severe shortage of classrooms in the East Jerusalem educational institutions affects more than just the elementary schools. For example, 30 percent of students who remain in the elementary schools drop out afterwards due to a shortage of space in the secondary education system. Dropout rates of older students are even higher – 16 percent among

tenth graders; 26 percent among eleventh graders; and 33 percent among twelfth graders – with nearly half of the students from these neighborhoods failing to complete 12 years of education.¹²

Based on the above data, and given the connection between education level and occupational and economic development on the one hand, and between development and occupational potential and the recourse to violence and crime on the other, it is no surprise that all of the East Jerusalem attackers who perpetrated significant attacks since September 2015 lacked higher education. Moreover, the future for some 60 percent¹³ of twelfth grade students in East Jerusalem neighborhoods, who pass the local matriculation exams, is not much brighter. The fact that the institutions of higher education in Israel do not recognize matriculation certificates received in the Palestinian schooling track (Tawjihi), which is the system in 172 out of 180 local educational institutions,¹⁴ leads to the situation where East Jerusalem recipients of matriculation certificates are rejected repeatedly by these institutions, unless they pass special exams. In this situation, holders of Tawjihi certificates interested in higher education are forced to relocate to the West Bank or Arab countries where such a certificate is recognized, a process that involves significant economic expense. And even after receiving an academic degree, these individuals have much difficulty integrating into the Israeli job market, which does not recognize their education and requires them to pass additional exams. Therefore, besides emigration, most degree holders, similar to dropouts of the local educational system, have one option – employment in the Israeli labor market in unskilled occupations, due to the restricted access to the West Bank and limited industry in their neighborhoods, which cannot support the great demand for work among the local population.

However, even when the residents of East Jerusalem turn to the Israeli labor market as a last resort, they encounter high barriers. First of all, the fact that most East Jerusalem schools do not teach Hebrew at a reasonable level, whether as a mandatory or elective subject, significantly limits the ability of the neighborhoods' young people to integrate into the job market. Furthermore, the lower cost of employing West Bank Palestinians, along with the Israeli interest in granting work permits for Palestinians, has led to a competition with West Bank Palestinians for unskilled jobs that East Jerusalem Arabs cannot win. In this situation, most East Jerusalem Arabs have been left to work within their neighborhoods in part time, limited jobs, as store clerks and laborers in the industry and construction sectors. This reality explains why such a high percentage of East Jerusalem residents live under the poverty line, and why some 8,501 children from these neighborhoods have been categorized as at-risk. Notwithstanding these

figures, and despite the fact that 37 percent of welfare service recipients in Jerusalem offices are East Jerusalem residents, only five welfare offices operate in East Jerusalem neighborhoods, employing 88 social workers. This is in contrast to the 22 welfare offices operating in West Jerusalem, which employ 300 social workers.¹⁵ Therefore, it is no surprise that over 800 East Jerusalem families who applied for social work assistance are still waiting.

The reality described above produces a three-phase process that is common among East Jerusalem youth. First, they absorb their parents' ongoing sense of frustration, deprivation, and neglect. Second, based on their own limited options, they consider their occupational future as similarly bleak. Third, they come to an understanding that they have nothing left to lose, an understanding that is liable to translate into a worsening of the capital's already precarious security situation.

A Tale of Two Neighborhoods

While the economic situation of all East Jerusalem neighborhoods is not good, a comparison between two of them, Jabel Mukaber and Bab a-Zahara, demonstrates the link between socioeconomic conditions in a specific neighborhood and the participation of its residents in the cycle of terror over the last 10 months.

Jabel Mukaber

The Jabel Mukaber neighborhood, which is the western portion of the original Palestinian village al-Sawahra, is located in the southern portion of East Jerusalem and numbers some 30,000 residents.¹⁶ This neighborhood formed its identity in the wake of the Six Day War, when the original village of al-Sawahra was split into two parts: the Western part was annexed to the Jerusalem municipal territory, and its residents received blue identification cards, while the eastern part remained outside of municipal territory and its residents received orange identification cards. This division was made despite the fact that in many cases members of the same family lived on different sides of the village. Until the construction of the security barrier, access between the two parts of the village was relatively easy, and the population's living routine was unaffected. However, since the security fence was for the most part built along the route of lands annexed in 1967, the fence now represents an actual barrier between the two parts of the village. On a related note, the fence divides between the original parts of two other Arab neighborhoods in East Jerusalem, Sur Baher and Beit Hanina.

One of the main problems faced by the Jabel Mukaber neighborhood is its singularly low level of transportation infrastructure, which affects access to educational institutions and local residences. Due to neglect on the part of the municipality, the roads were paved by neighborhood residents in unprofessional and dangerous fashion. Nor is this the only example of poor infrastructure. Many neighborhood homes are not connected properly to the water system or to the municipal sewage and electricity systems, and only 19.9 percent have a regular internet connection.¹⁷ Twenty schools operate in the neighborhood and suffer from overcrowding and a shortage of classrooms, such that out of 183 neighborhood classrooms, nine are bomb shelters, 22 are in residential buildings, and three are in trailers set up in schoolyards.¹⁸ Regarding employment, approximately 77 percent of neighborhood residents work in the Israeli labor market, most of them in unskilled occupations, with the rest being self-employed and shopkeepers.¹⁹ According to Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) data, based on the 2008 census, the average salary of the neighborhood worker is NIS 1,603, and 53 percent of income earners in the neighborhood earn less than minimum wage. The figures also show that Jabel Mukaber is ranked in Cluster 2 regarding socioeconomic classification (1 being the lowest and 20 being the highest), and ranks 150 out of 153 statistical zones in Jerusalem. On a national scale, the neighborhood ranks 1,608 out of 1,616 statistical zones in Israel.²⁰

Of all East Jerusalem neighborhoods Jabel Mukaber has produced the highest number of attackers (nine) during the current terror wave, including the two terrorists who perpetrated the attack on Egged Bus 78 in the Armon Hanatziv neighborhood on October 13, 2015, which killed three Israelis, and the Bezeq technician who carried out a car ramming attack that same day, killing another Israeli. This latter terrorist was the cousin of two other neighborhood residents who perpetrated the Har Nof synagogue attack in 2014, which killed six Israelis. Furthermore, a survey of the 740 criminal cases opened against East Jerusalem residents in 2015 for national security crimes, which included, inter alia, illegal arms possession and stone and firebomb throwing, indicates that 125 cases were opened against residents of Jabel Mukaber (17 percent). This is despite the fact that the neighborhood's population is less

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than 10 percent of the total East Jerusalem population.²¹ The survey also indicated that 42.5 percent of the cases were opened against residents of Jabel Mukaber, Beit Hanina, and Sur Baher – as noted, three neighborhoods where the security fence created an actual barrier between their different original sections – despite the fact that they comprise less than 20 percent of the entire East Jerusalem population. Finally, 62.5 percent of these criminal cases were opened against residents of East Jerusalem neighborhoods whose socioeconomic level was categorized as Cluster 2.

Bab a-Zahara

The Bab a-Zahara neighborhood is located in the northern section of Jerusalem's Old City, between Damascus Gate and Herod's Gate, and is home to 3,500 residents.²² This neighborhood, which was one of the first Arab neighborhoods outside of walled Jerusalem, has since 1948 become the commercial and business center of East Jerusalem, with major bank branches and restaurants. Thirteen schools, all of which are official-municipal schools, operate around the neighborhood, and the average number of students per class is 25 (the lowest in East Jerusalem). Not surprisingly, therefore, 46.8 percent of neighborhood residents hold an academic degree (the highest percentage in East Jerusalem).²³ According to CBS statistics, the neighborhood ranks in socioeconomic Cluster 5. Out of 153 statistical zones in Jerusalem, the neighborhood ranks 106, and its poverty ranking is mid-range; in national ranking, it is 1,336 out of 1,616 statistical zones. The neighborhood's average monthly salary per person is NIS 2,089 (59 percent lower than minimum wage) and 48.6 percent of the residents have internet access.²⁴

Thus a comparison of the two neighborhoods shows clearly that the socioeconomic state of Bab a-Zahara is much better than that of Jabel Mukaber. The average salary is 33 percent higher, 28.7 percent more people are connected to the internet, and 38 percent more hold academic degrees. In contrast with Jabel Mukaber, since the outbreak of violence in September 2015, not one attacker has come from Bab a-Zahara. Furthermore, only 13 criminal cases of a national security nature were opened against neighborhood residents (1.7 percent of all cases), lower than its proportionate share of the East Jerusalem population.

Attempts to Improve the Situation

Following many years of neglect, in 2014 Israel's government launched a five-year plan for East Jerusalem with a total budget of approximately NIS 300 million. Already then, the architects of the plan acknowledged the "understanding that there is a close connection between the extent and level of violence among East Jerusalem residents and the standard of living in the neighborhoods in the city's east side."²⁵ Beside the fact that only two thirds of the total sum was in the end actually allocated for improving local infrastructure, the main problem with the plan was that the funds would not necessarily go toward the welfare of the residents. Thus, for example, NIS 18 million, 38 percent of the budget designated for development of the educational institutions, were allocated for increasing the number of students completing Israeli matriculation exams, although only 4 percent of East Jerusalem educational institutions teach the Israeli curriculum.

Moreover, in order to deal with the poor level of Hebrew among East Jerusalem residents, the government allocated a negligible sum of approximately NIS 4 million to institutionalize a Hebrew studies booster program in the local schools.²⁶ In addition, the government invested NIS 5 million to deal with the dropout problem among neighborhood students, NIS 11 million less than the municipality's educational administration requested for the issue,²⁷ while completely ignoring the urgent need for construction of new municipal schools, though this shortage serves as one of the primary roots of the problem. Furthermore, instead of investing funds for construction of commercial centers for the local population, a step that could provide long term employment for many residents, the government preferred to invest NIS 100 million in increasing security in East Jerusalem neighborhoods in the framework of the five-year plan, and an additional NIS 85 million for securing adjacent Jewish neighborhoods, as part of the Ministry of Construction and Housing budget.²⁸

The government's shortsighted attitude toward the East Jerusalem distress can also be seen in its response to the current wave of violence. Instead of taking steps with long term effects capable of rooting out the problem that increases the likelihood of new terror, the government has preferred steps such as revocation of

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the residency status of a number of the residents who were involved in the planning and execution of terror attacks, erection of concrete barriers separating Jewish and Muslim neighborhoods in East Jerusalem, and consideration of the option of deporting attackers' families from East Jerusalem to the Gaza Strip. Beyond the fact that such steps are meant to curry public favor, and to put a "small, used, Band-Aid on a bleeding wound," the question remains to what extent they are effective in eradicating the basic causes leading to 16-year old children fearlessly taking a kitchen knife to stab Israelis.

What Can be Done?

Improved economic circumstances for East Jerusalem residents will not completely eradicate their involvement in terror. As central as it is, the economic factor alone does not account for the rise of involvement in terror. On the contrary, the increase stems from a broad spectrum of causes, including the political stalemate, the issue of the residents' legal standing, and religious radicalization in the mosques. Nevertheless, an improved

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economic state for East Jerusalem neighborhoods will significantly reduce the pool of potential attackers, mainly thanks to the hope such a change will instill in the residents, suddenly creating "something to lose." Therefore, the Minister of Jerusalem Affairs, together with the Ministers of Welfare, Finance, and Education, would do well to formulate a new strategy for the Israeli government's policy in East Jerusalem. This strategy should be built in conjunction with the Jerusalem municipality, and in dialogue with neighborhood representatives in order to understand their problems and build an orderly, joint work plan to deal with educational and employment issues.

In the short term, regarding education, it is recommended that extensive budget resources be used to increase the number of classrooms in the official-municipal schools, both elementary and secondary, and to improve their quality significantly.

In this way, more East Jerusalem students will be able to acquire proper education at supervised educational institutions. At the same time, in line with the School Supervision Law (1969), which applies, inter alia, to the

recognized unofficial schools as well, the Jerusalem municipality should increase enforcement and supervision of educational content studied in these institutions. Furthermore, the municipality should make sure that Hebrew language is taught as a mandatory subject at all local educational institutions, starting from a young age, and ensure that proficiency in Hebrew is a condition for a matriculation certificate within these institutions. Moreover, it is important to improve the municipal preschool system, which currently does not meet local needs, and thus prevents many East Jerusalem mothers from joining the labor force (only 22 percent of East Jerusalem women aged 25-54 are currently employed, compared with 82 percent of their Jewish counterparts in Jerusalem, and 35 percent of their Israeli Arab counterparts²⁹). It is also recommended to build and develop institutions and organizations dealing with informal education in the afternoon hours, a type of institution that barely exists today.

From an employment perspective, it is important to invest extensive funds in the creation of jobs in East Jerusalem. This should be done through the creation of commercial and industrial zones near the most disadvantaged neighborhoods such as Jabel Mukaber and Beit Hanina, which will provide at least minimum wage. In this context, it is crucial to encourage and subsidize both Israeli and Arab companies, with an emphasis on hi-tech companies, so they will open branches in these commercial zones.

In the long term, regarding education, the inability of East Jerusalem residents holding Palestinian matriculation certificates to attend Israeli institutions of higher learning should be addressed, as well as their need to obtain professional jobs appropriate for their education. Perhaps the Palestinian curriculum currently taught at East Jerusalem educational institutions should be replaced with the curriculum taught in the Israeli Arab educational system, or at least Israeli core subjects should be added to the Palestinian curriculum. Regarding employment, subject to security arrangements, it is worth reconsidering access of West Bank residents to East Jerusalem neighborhoods and vice versa, or at least easing the bureaucracy involved in the process, in light of the positive effect this will have on East Jerusalem commerce and employment. Furthermore, a long term program should be institutionalized for development and empowerment of the private sector in East Jerusalem, especially in the sectors of tourism, trade, and hi-tech.

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this area that injured at least one Israeli with moderate or more severe wounds, is of no relevance to the highly volatile situation that is liable to explode in the future and take a toll on additional Israeli casualties. If the foregoing recommendations are implemented, the “opportunity cost” for East Jerusalem residents turning to violence, i.e., the cost for lost opportunities, will increase dramatically. This cost, which barely exists today, and which will include lost possibilities of future education, employment, and welfare for local youth, will make them think twice before taking one problematic path or another, and contribute to the creation of healthy competition oriented toward careers and personal development, rather than dubious fame rooted in violence.

Notes

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