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Israel-West Bank Relations 2016

Arab-Jewish relations in Israel and on the West Bank have never been in greater jeopardy.

Three brutal stabbings by Palestinians that occurred in the Month of June have left Israel unnerved and its leadership more bullish than ever. An Israeli cabinet minister from the hardline Jewish Home party whose 13-year-old cousin was among the victims lost no time pledging even more Jewish settlement construction on the contested West Bank.

The homegrown extremism dominating Israeli politics risks inciting Palestinian defiance beyond anyone's control. Israeli soldiers and police warn that stepped up Arab violence is more about vengeance than reactions to specific events and that it portends broader-based insurgency.

Inflamed by fanaticism, bigotry, and quick-draw reactions, Arab-Jewish relations in Israel and on the West Bank has never been in greater jeopardy.

Both Palestinian and Israeli political leaders could tear apart the moderate majorities of both populations—the people who want to raise their families in peace, go to work, and return home to rest.

“You cannot talk about life, about business in this situation,” said Hamdi Natsheh, 66, sweeping his arm toward shelves of accumulating stock in his Hebron glass shop.

Repeating a common refrain made by merchants all over the West Bank, the third generation glassblower blames instability on Israel's border and road closures, house-to-house searches, and arrests that cut into local tourism and commerce.

Celestial Grace Ministry

Israel-West Bank Relations 2016

Few Americans venture to the West Bank, he complains, and only a handful of European visitors risk the trek.

Natsheh made his comments just days before Israel temporarily sealed off the West Bank, froze thousands of travel and work permits, and sent tanks into the area after Palestinian gunmen opened deadly fire on a trendy Tel Aviv eatery on June 9.

Within hours of the attack, celebrants spilled onto the streets of Hebron, the West Bank town near the assailants' village. Fireworks filled the night sky as locals in this conservative and largely Muslim town shared their glee. Arab social media, the news source for 80% of Palestinians, was in overdrive with raw footage and gruesome re-enactments of the shooting.

Twitter feeds from Hamas and other radical Palestinian groups not only competed for recognition for prompting the gunning that left four Israeli Jews dead and many more injured, they urged further violence during this, the Islamic holy month of Ramadan.

The annual June 5 commemoration of Israel's 1967 capture of East Jerusalem, called Jerusalem Day, also fell on the eve of Ramadan. Uniformed, religious Jewish school children marched through streets and squares of Jerusalem, singing patriotic songs and holding hands while Orthodox rabbis, their followers, and a bevy of the most aggressive ultranationalist groups beat drums, shouted, and waved Israeli flags as they walked through the Muslim quarter. Police and Israeli Defense Force soldiers stepped up their presence.

Celestial Grace Ministry

Israel-West Bank Relations 2016

Israeli government authorities ordered local Muslim shopkeepers to shutter their doors.

Almost 30 years since the first Palestinian uprising, or Intifadah, in June 1987, the Israeli right has hardened its edge as hundreds of thousands of Jews have moved into the contested West Bank.

Whether they've been drawn to this frontier because of space, affordability, quiet, and jobs, or they are moving in based on the notion that the land belongs to Jews and only Jews, the entire lot has incurred the wrath of many Palestinians.

And that protest is on a treacherous path: what started decades ago with young boys hurling stones at patrolling Israeli soldiers and vehicles has spiraled into knifings, kidnappings, sniper strikes, and semi-automatic fire. Some 40% of West Bank Palestinian youth support demonstrations and armed resistance to combat occupation, according to the latest public opinion polls by the Jerusalem Media and Communication Centre, but the Centre's analysts and other polltakers are acutely aware that radicalization can take place quickly as frustrations mount.

"Radicals are growing in a rapid way," says Sahar Qawasmeh, a member of the Palestine Legislative Council. "We are missing people who fight for change with non-violence.

Those voices are under pressure." The West Bank's top gynecologist, Qawasmeh is familiar to Palestinians as a fearless women's rights advocate and a sympathetic, skilled fertility specialist.

Celestial Grace Ministry Israel-West Bank Relations 2016



Sahar Qawasmeh - Photo by Amy Kaslow

Wrapped in a butter-colored hijab, she receives company at her Hebron hilltop villa that adjoins her clinic.

A framed photo of Qawasmeh and Palestinian National Authority President Mahmoud Abbas—who have been vilified by Palestinians who oppose negotiations with Israel—is the lone photograph on a living room sofa side table.

But what looms largest in the elegantly appointed room is a life-size portrait of her father, Hebron’s former Mayor Fahd Qawasmeh.

Celestial Grace Ministry

Israel-West Bank Relations 2016

He was assassinated in Jordan in 1984. His murder was never officially solved. But many say Arab terrorists killed the Palestinian moderate for talking with Israelis about an agreement.

Qawasmeh's hometown is a tinderbox. With 200,000 residents, the largest Palestinian population on the West Bank and Hamas' unofficial West Bank headquarters, Hebron is also the region's most volatile arena.

"They want it to be an ideological or religious conflict, 'either you or me,' nothing else. With political conflicts, you can find compromises," she adds, but there is no room for that with Hamas and other hard-liner groups.

Almost three quarters of West Bank Palestinians are under the age of 30, and they have only known life under occupation. The Palestinian Central Bureau for Statistics puts their unemployment rate at 43%.

Given the 100,000 or so Palestinians who work in Israel and in Jewish West Bank settlements, jobless rates soar when Israel imposes travel restrictions and border closures due to unrest and assaults.

In early June, the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research surveyed West Bankers and found that 22% of the respondents want to emigrate, 40% of whom say they are motivated by the job search.

The unease is constant. Driven by ideology, biblical claims, and sheer spite, Jewish terrorists (a small number, relative to some 450,000 to 500,000 total settlers) have torched Palestinian schools, sabotaged their centuries-old olive groves to sever village income, and firebombed their homes.

Celestial Grace Ministry

Israel-West Bank Relations 2016

Just a few weeks ago, Israeli investigators unveiled a West Bank-based Jewish extremist cell responsible for many of these crimes; the perpetrators are radicalized youth—18 to 24 year olds—focused on what Israelis call a “land grab” to force Jews in and push Arabs out.

The cell supports “outposts” on barren hilltop areas, where occupants claim that they are above the rule of law.

The sanctity of land and the safety of citizens has been Israel’s rallying cry since its statehood in 1948 as a refuge for Jews surviving fleeing Germany’s Third Reich and totalitarian regimes in the Middle East.

Yet Israel’s political moderates have been edged out as Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu curries favor from ultra-nationalists to “broaden the base,” a euphemism for politically pairing with even the most divisive, audacious parties to cling to power.

Witness the Israeli leader’s latest move to replace center-right Defense Minister Moshe Yaalon in May, the career military officer who dared to condemn a single IDF soldier for using well-documented excessive force against an Arab.

Enter Avigdor Lieberman, the controversial leader of a Russian Jewish party who quit Netanyahu’s first government, protesting an Israeli-Palestinian accord.

Last week, just after Lieberman assumed his new defense minister post, Israel announced an additional \$20 million more for small business development, tourism, and security for the settlements.

Celestial Grace Ministry

Israel-West Bank Relations 2016

The Israeli budget already spends exponentially more on Israelis living on the West Bank than it does on the rest of the citizenry – largely due to security costs.

Lieberman has called for the death penalty for Arab terrorists, overthrowing the Palestinian Authority, administering “loyalty” tests to Israel’s Arab citizens, and calling for the beheading of those who fail such tests.

Such bravado only emboldens the strident West Bank Settlers Councils that oversee community life, the hilltop vigilantes, and other radicals who “self-govern” and force the IDF to the sidelines as they provoke and retaliate against their Palestinian neighbors.

So, what about the majority of Israelis who remain neutral or those who do not support expanding settlements on the West Bank as a way to fortify their national security?

A recent survey from the [Pew Research Center](#) shows nearly a third of Israeli Jews are wary of the occupation’s impact: 30% of respondents said that “the settlements hurt Israel’s security”; while 40% contend that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s coalition-led government does not make earnest efforts for peace.

Pew reported that an equal percentage of Israeli Arabs (40%) also say Palestinian leaders fail to make sincere moves toward peace.

Amid the violence, poverty, and tension, some Israeli Jews and Arabs are pressing for a public agenda that they believe will ensure a safer, more secure future for everyone: achieving better living standards and economic opportunity for Palestinians.

Celestial Grace Ministry

Israel-West Bank Relations 2016

Consider Lod, an impoverished central Israeli town where the mixed Jewish and Israeli Arab population must contend with crumbling buildings, substandard healthcare, deficient schools, filthy public spaces, and soaring crime rates.

Like Israel itself, the city is 80% Jewish (largely low-income immigrants), but in Lod's old city, that ratio is flipped, where Arabs are the jobless majority and live in crowded public housing.

Mothers, some with a dozen children in tow, carefully avoid drug dealers and addicts (Lod has long been the epicenter of the illicit narcotics trade) as they look for open and safe play areas outside decrepit and abandoned structures.

Thabet Abu Rass and Amnon Be'-eri Sulitzeanu are co-CEOs of the Lod-based Abraham Fund, an organization focused on economic and social empowerment for struggling families.

Walking past the local community center serving both indigent Arabs and Jews, they point to the nearby make-shift dwellings: hastily assembled walls of chicken wire, plastic sheeting, and mismatched drywall topped off by rusting corrugated steel.

The two men point to an overgrown area just behind the community center: a Holocaust memorial scrubbed of graffiti.

The Fund sponsors community-policing projects that enhance Arab presence on the local force, the development of civic leaders, job training, and job placement for women. Cultivating Arab-Israeli cooperation is complicated, of course. Good will is hard to build and easily violated.

Celestial Grace Ministry

Israel-West Bank Relations 2016

Beyond a large synagogue, protected by a high fence and barbed wire, a minaret stands in the distance, sounding the afternoon call to prayer. As the speaker crackles, Be'-eri Sulitzeanu winces as he describes the right-wing party "Jewish Home" and its goal to silence the muezzin's five-time-a-day call.

Last month, the "mosque bill" failed to secure unanimous support in a ministerial committee and was dropped from the Knesset agenda. "This kind of thing can really stir a place like this up," Be'-eri Sulitzeanu says, shaking his head.

Across the street, Arabs in galabyias share space with Jews in skullcaps as they pick through the best string beans, berries, and melons.

Nearby the market, Jindas, an Arab-Israeli group that converts abandoned buildings into upgraded housing, is reclaiming a rundown area, which the city gave to the organization.

Enlisting local families to help with the repair and renovation for homes that eventually become their own, Jindas gives them a stake in their future.

Jindas promotes this as a sustainable way to improve the living standards of indigent Arab-Jewish communities throughout Israel. Other grassroots groups concentrate on education, the primary determinant of work-readiness and economic success.

There are big deficits: Israeli Arabs' performance on both national and international tests is poor compared to Israeli Jewish students. Their high school dropout rate is double that of Israeli Jewish students.

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Israel-West Bank Relations 2016

And their share of seats at Israel's colleges and universities hovers around 11%.

Urgent needs in places like Lod drew much attention at Netanyahu's Prime Minister's Conference a few years ago. Gathering the country's finest minds, the PM's Conference focused on the economic insecurity among the 1.2 million Arab citizens who largely descend from Palestinians living in Israel pre-1948.

More than half live in poverty, and Arab women, the fastest growing portion of Israel's population, suffer the highest dropout rates, the lowest college and university matriculation, and the poorest employment prospects.

"One of Israel's top priority employment policies is integrating Arab women into the workforce," contends a Prime Minister's office spokesman.

By 2020, the Israeli government aims to reach 42% employment for Arab women, compared to the 27% today. Israel's robust mix of engineering, design, and high-tech firms are all but closed to Arab women.

Private employers simply hire Jews, according to Israeli government data. The PM's spokesman credits the government with well-established training and transportation subsidies for Arab women.

But in the three years since Netanyahu's stated goal to draw more young Arab Israeli women into Israel's "startup nation economy," there has been little to show for what has been invested.

Celestial Grace Ministry

Israel-West Bank Relations 2016

Prospects are far worse for Arabs living in congested East Jerusalem. Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics and its National Insurance Institute report that 82% of these residents and 86.6% of their children live below the poverty line; it is the worst in the area's recorded history.

Some 28,000 Arabs live inside the Old City's walls; 330,000, all told, reside within Jerusalem city limits.

The Israeli High Court continues to hear pleas from legal teams fighting to address overcrowding, hygiene, and safety concerns in existing schools and for more classrooms to accommodate the many Arab youth not attending school.

Many of these problems are a result of political choices. And as Arab and Jewish populations continue to grow and put additional strains on both natural and manmade resources, there will be a scramble to meet basic human requirements.

On the West Bank, water shortages this summer further test Palestinian patience, leaving household pipes dry and industries inoperative.

Arab social media contend that Israeli water authorities diverted water to settlements, where residential, commercial and ongoing settlement construction usage is at an all-time high. No matter the truth of this claim, the suspicions have currency.

During this last week of Ramadan, Jerusalem's largely Muslim Arab population abstains from food, drink, smoking, and sex from sunrise to sunset. The daylight hours can be long and tedious.

Celestial Grace Ministry

Israel-West Bank Relations 2016

Tempers flare under the best of circumstances, but here on the world's most contested turf, residents have used this time of year to launch attacks. Add in the hot prods from Hamas and ISIS for Ramadan terrorism, and the prospects for trouble are strong.

“We are still dealing with each other like it was 1,000 years ago,” says Sahar Qawasmeh, referring to rigid leaders who feverishly fight to push people away from reasoning with each other.

These leaders may strike a match to this tinderbox and light a fire that cannot be snuffed out.

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Israel-West Bank Relations 2016



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Israel-West Bank Relations 2016



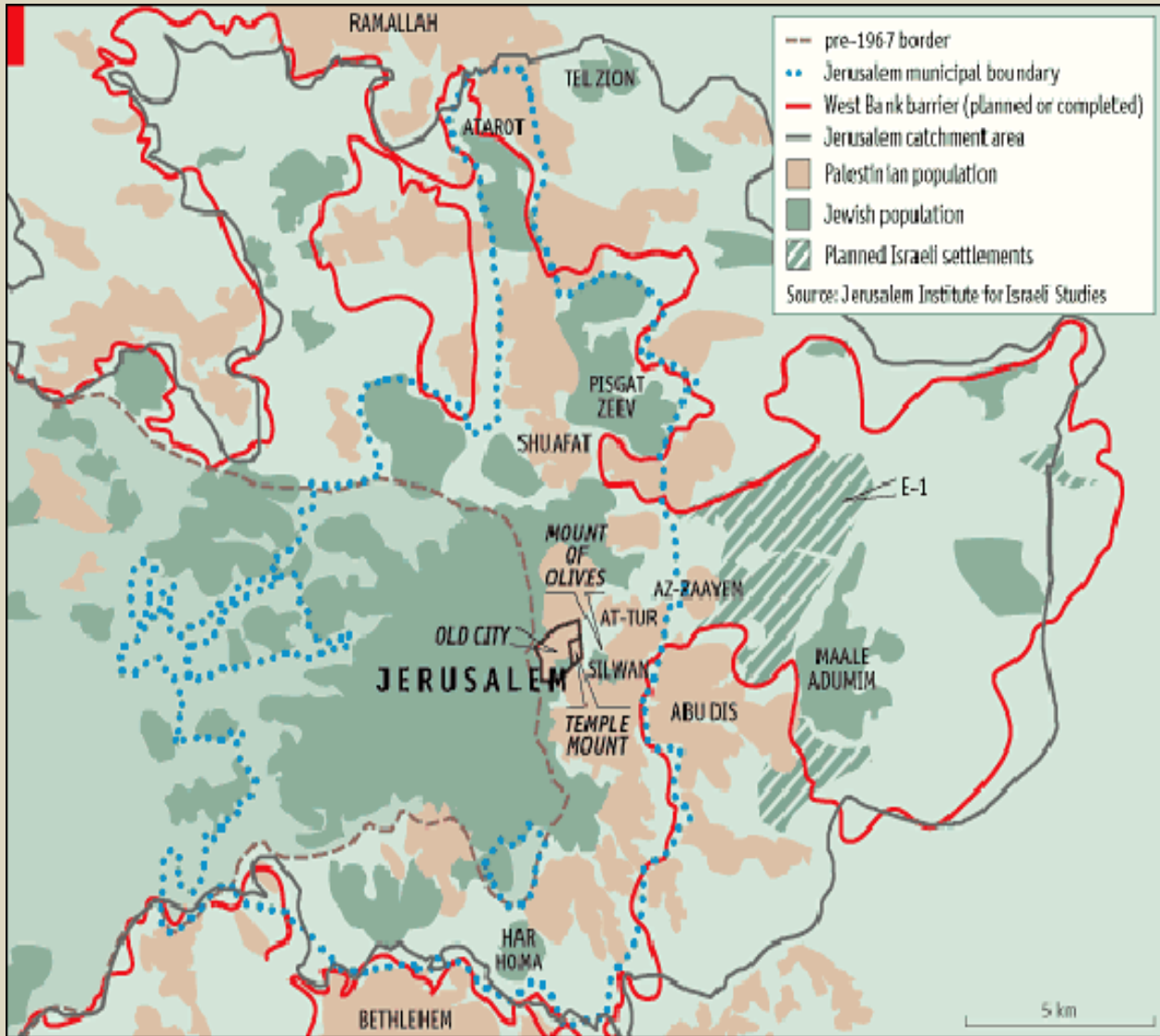
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Israel-West Bank Relations 2016



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Israel-West Bank Relations 2016



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Israel-West Bank Relations 2016

Peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians have been frozen for almost two years. But Palestinians say that doesn't mean events aren't happening on the ground.

Recently, the Israeli military issued orders calling for evacuation and demolition of nearly a dozen Palestinian communities in the occupied West Bank. Palestinians see this as evidence of Israeli plans to annex the territory, though Israel denies this.

Palestinian Ismael el-Adrah, 67, is a shrunken man with a snow-white beard and a bright blue shirt, who is unusually dapper for a farmer in the remote Hebron hills. He lives in a collection of tin-roofed shacks, tents and concrete homes with his four wives, 33 children and 150 sheep.

Scattered nearby are other villages similar to this one, all of them under threat of evacuation and demolition.

Palestinian Amer Dhabreh waters trees on his land in the village of Ein Yabrud, near the West Bank city of Ramallah, on June 10. Dhabreh believes that rehabilitating his land, which falls in Area C, will protect it from Jewish settlements and Israeli restrictions.

Adrah says the land has been the property of his family since the days of the Ottomans, who ruled the area until the end of World War I. For generations, the family has farmed and raised sheep, he says.

The Israeli military, though, says it needs the area for a firing range, and it's pushing to get the villagers out through the Israeli courts.

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Israel-West Bank Relations 2016

The Battle Over Area C

But Palestinians say the fight isn't over a single piece of land. It's a much broader battle, they say.

The communities lie in what is known as Area C. The Oslo peace accords of 1993 divided the West Bank into three sections pending a final settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Area A, which includes the Palestinian cities and towns, is supposed to be under Palestinian control. Area B, which is made up mostly of Palestinian villages and farmland on the fringes of Palestinian towns, is supposed to have Palestinian civilian rule and Israeli security control.

Area C is under full Israeli administrative and security control and accounts for some 60 percent of the West Bank.

Most Jewish settlements in the West Bank are located in Area C, and Israel restricts Palestinian building in these areas.

Abdul Aziz Abu Fanar works in the nearby Hebron municipal center of Yatta. He says the Israelis' actions in Area C indicate strongly that they want to annex it.

Celestial Grace Ministry

Israel-West Bank Relations 2016



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Israel-West Bank Relations 2016

It's a suspicion that has only been fueled by recent statements from right-wing leaders in Israel who have come out publicly in support of such a plan.

"The idea is to apply Israeli sovereignty and law on the Israeli-controlled areas, so it becomes Israel," says Naftali Bennett, a former adviser to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and an advocate of the settlements.

"The Israeli-controlled areas become effectively Israel, which is what happened in Jerusalem, various neighborhoods, what happened in the Golan Heights."

West Bank Territory

Area C, which is under full Israeli control, makes up 60 percent of the West Bank.

Relatively few Palestinians live in Area C — the estimates vary from 90,000 to 150,000 out of some 2.5 million Palestinians in the entire West Bank.

A De Facto Annexation?

So far, annexation of the West Bank is a fringe view that hasn't gained mainstream support in Israel.

Dan Meridor, Israel's deputy prime minister, dismisses claims that Israel will unilaterally annex any part of the West Bank, which he calls by its biblical name of Judea and Samaria.

Celestial Grace Ministry

Israel-West Bank Relations 2016

"There is no policy of annexing any part of Judea and Samaria. It's 45 years [since Israel took the West Bank in the 1967 war], and with the exception of Jerusalem, we didn't annex one inch," Meridor says. "Not only this, we agreed to the paradigm of a Palestinian state living alongside Israel as a final agreement."

In court documents, Israel claims that it's the Palestinians who are trying to create "facts on the ground" in area C. It says with the support of the Palestinian Authority and the international community, Palestinians are moving people and building structures in Area C in contravention of the Oslo Accords.

Yossi Beilin was one of the architects of the Oslo peace accords. A left-wing Israeli politician who is now an analyst, he says Israel has no need to formally annex Area C and incur the wrath of the international community.

"We are building there, we are announcing universities there," he says. "There is no problem whatsoever for any Israeli to move around freely in Area C and to do whatever he or she wants to do there. Why bother and make it an official annexation if de facto, it is annexation?"

And that, say some Palestinians, is exactly what's happening.

Back in the Hebron hills, Adrah, the farmer, says despite the pending court case over his land, the Israeli army is trying to make his life impossible so that he will leave of his own accord.

There is just one unpaved road that leads to his homestead. It's how his children get to school and his only way to get into town.

Celestial Grace Ministry

Israel-West Bank Relations 2016

As we were leaving the village of Bir el-Aid on a recent day, Israeli army vehicles blocked the way. A military bulldozer set up concrete blocks across the road to prevent villagers from crossing in or out of the area.

And then an Israeli soldier told us that us we had to leave because this was now considered a closed military area.