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Jerusalem Clashes: How Palestinians Rallied Behind Sheikh Jarrah

Palestinian residents of the East Jerusalem neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah have been fighting for nearly a decade and a half against their eviction



A protest in Sheikh Jarrah in April. Credit: Ohad Zwigenberg

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Something has been happening recently in the pro-Palestinian movement that hasn't occurred in years. The fight by Palestinian residents in Jerusalem against their eviction from their homes by organizations seeking to settle Jews in their neighborhood has become a pan-Palestinian cause. It has been embraced from East Jerusalem to Arab towns in Israel to Palestinians in the Gaza Strip. And no one really understands what brought it about.

Palestinian residents of the East Jerusalem neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah have been fighting for nearly a decade and a half against their eviction by organizations seeking to settle Jews there. And for more than a

decade, weekly Friday demonstrations have been held, attended by both Israelis and Palestinians, against efforts to expand the Jewish presence in the neighborhood.

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Israel was shocked a month ago by footage of police officers beating Joint List lawmaker [Ofer Cassif](#) at one of the protests in the neighborhood. Prior to this, however, other than during brief periods, efforts to expand the protest to the wider public failed. Even inside East Jerusalem it was viewed as another local issue – just as the East Jerusalem village of Isawiyah was fighting police violence or Silwan was protesting archaeological excavations, Sheikh Jarrah was fighting against Jews' efforts to evict them.

Recently, however, it seems that Sheikh Jarrah has become a symbol. The young Palestinians who have been meeting at Jerusalem's Damascus Gate since the beginning of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan have begun urging people to go to Sheikh Jarrah after mosque services. And they have been coming there every evening.

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Israeli police have responded aggressively and dispersed them by force. The stench of skunk water fired by police has not faded from the neighborhood following the recent nighttime clashes, which have included arrests, the use of tear gas and the deployment of mounted police.

A wider circle of support has come from Arab citizens in Umm al-Fahm, Jaffa and elsewhere who have expressed their identification with Sheikh Jarrah and come to the neighborhood for the Friday protests. On Wednesday of this week, they also protested in the center of Umm al-Fahm over the issue.

Another source of support is the underground commander of the military wing of Hamas, [Mohammed Def](#), whom Palestinian media reported as saying, "If Israel doesn't stop attacking the residents of the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood, they will not remain with their hands tied, and the enemy will pay a heavy price."





A Palestinian resident reacts during scuffles with Israeli in Sheikh Jarrah, East Jerusalem, May 2021. Credit: AMMAR AWAD/ REUTERS

Sheikh Jarrah has become a hot topic on social media. This week, an Arabic version of the #SaveSheikhJarrah hashtag has been trending in fourth place in Israel on Twitter, ahead of the English version. Each of them has attracted tens of thousands of tweets and retweets. Social media have also been flooded with video clips, caricatures and statements in support of residents of the neighborhood.

Again, the reason for this upsurge in activism isn't entirely clear. Undoubtedly the sense of victory that Jerusalem Palestinians felt following the Israeli police decision to back down and remove crowd-control barriers at [Damascus Gate](#) encouraged young people to look for a new cause. In addition, Hamas appears to have been looking for reasons to heighten tension with Israel over Jerusalem, after Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas decided to postpone elections to the Palestinian Legislative Council. Hamas fired rockets from Gaza in identification with Palestinians in Jerusalem over the barriers at the Damascus Gate.

But all of that follows the legal drama that is coming the fore again on Thursday. For roughly 30 years, Palestinian residents of Sheikh Jarrah have faced the risk of eviction because they live on land that was purchased by Jews at the end of the 19th century in the vicinity of the Tomb of Simeon the Just. The legal battle is being waged between the Palestinian residents and a company called Nachalat Shimon, which is controlled by right-wing activists seeking to bring Jews into the neighborhood.

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In recent months, the Palestinians have suffered a series of legal defeats that put about 300 neighborhood residents, including dozens of children, at risk of immediate eviction. Unlike the handful of prior evictions of residents, the number of cases now involved is evidence supporting the Palestinians' claim that this is not a

residents, the number of cases now involved is evidence supporting the Palestinians' claim that this is not a local civil dispute over land but a more concerted attempt to change the character of an entire area by bringing in Jewish residents.



A Palestinian protester confronts a Jewish settler in Sheikh Jarrah, East Jerusalem, May 2021. Credit: AMMAR AWAD/ REUTERS

On Thursday, representatives of the Palestinians and the Jewish organizations are due to inform the Supreme Court over whether they have reached a settlement agreement. An agreement, which by all indications has not been reached, would include a statement of mutual recognition. The Palestinians would recognize the Jews' right to the land and the Jews would recognize the right of the Palestinians as protected tenants. The bottom line is that any eviction would be deferred but become an eventual certainty.

In the absence of an agreement, Supreme Court Justice Daphne Barak-Erez will be forced to rule on the Palestinians' request for leave to file a further appeal to the Supreme Court after the Jerusalem District Court confirmed the eviction. If she decides against the Palestinians, dozens of residents would face the risk of immediate eviction in the middle of the month, after Ramadan ends. In August, there would be another wave of evictions.

The legal proceedings have considered the boundaries of the plots of land purchased by the Jews, the nature of the purchase, relevant Ottoman land law and the rights of the Palestinians, who were settled at the site by the Jordanian government and the United Nations in the 1950s, when Jordan controlled East Jerusalem. Other matters include consideration of legal proceedings over the past 40 years.

But all of this might be seen figuratively as the trees rather than the bigger picture, the forest: Israel's policy in Jerusalem, which only permits Jews to recover property that was abandoned during Israel's War of Independence in 1948. Only Palestinians are subject to eviction from homes where they legally settled 70 years ago.

Recent weeks have demonstrated that what happens in Sheikh Jarrah doesn't stay in Sheikh Jarrah. If the evictions proceed, as the Jewish groups hope, and hundreds of people are thrown out of their homes, it would sharply fuel security tensions in Jerusalem and elsewhere. Hopes that with the end of Ramadan, calm will be restored to the city would be dashed. What won't end is the injustice.