

THE WIDER WORLD

Israel: Constant Clash of Interests

By Diane Chido
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As the Western world recently celebrated the Easter holiday, the historical birthplace of Jesus was in the news a lot. But what is going on in the Holy Land now that calls for our attention?

Let's break these events down into distinct crises and focus ultimately on the anti-government protests, which I think are the most interesting part of this still-unraveling story.

We'll begin by addressing the violence on April 5 at the Al Aqsa Mosque, the most important Muslim place of worship in Israel. The mosque itself was built in the 7th or 8th centuries CE, although construction dates are also points of disagreement adding to the complexity of the tale. By most accounts, it was built to commemorate an event in which Muhammad was miraculously brought to the site from Mecca by Allah and joined in prayer with Jesus, Abraham, Moses, and other prophets, or messengers. Muhammad was then taken up to heaven for a private audience with Allah.

The entire plaza on which the mosque is located is often referred to as Al Aqsa and the physical location as The Dome of the Rock, the third holiest place in Islam, after Mecca and Medina in modern Saudi Arabia.

The problem is that this Muslim holy place is located on top of the holiest place in the Jewish faith, the Temple Mount, where the original Temple of Solomon is believed to have been built in ancient times containing the Ark of the Covenant housing the original Ten Commandments. The area was expanded by King

Herod in 20 CE to build the Second Jewish Temple. This temple was destroyed by invading Romans in 70 CE.

As the Jewish Passover holiday and Muslim Ramadan typically tend to overlap, and with both religions claiming ownership of the space, there are nearly annual clashes among worshippers. This time, police claim to have raided the plaza and arrested over 350 people for “agitating” by throwing rocks and fireworks and barricading themselves in the mosque. Upon news of the raid becoming widespread, rockets were fired from the northern Gaza Strip, allegedly by Hamas and from Lebanon, allegedly by Iran-backed Hezbollah, into Israel proper. This has led to a brief military response from Israel on both locations.

The map of Israel and the Palestinian territories provided may help clarify our understanding. Israel is a tiny territory along the Red Sea that declared independence in 1948. The infant United Nations voted to partition part of historical Palestine to form a safe space for Jews as atonement by Western powers after the Holocaust. This has led to inevitable conflict and there has been a UN peacekeeping presence in the region ever since.



To protect itself from hostile Arab Muslim neighbors, Israel rapidly built up its military and decided to expand its territory to create a buffer zone for security. In successive wars in 1968 and 1973, it gained the Gaza Strip and the West Bank of the Jordan River.

Jews began to settle in these areas contravening international law and, by the early 2000s, nearly 500,000 Jews had gradually settled in the Palestinian Gaza zone under heavy Israeli Defense Forces protection.

In 2005, militant Palestinian group Hamas won election to govern the Gaza Strip. As most Western powers at the time had branded Hamas a terrorist group, they cut off Hamas leaders’ access to Western banking and imposed other sanctions making it difficult for the group to govern. At that time, the settlers were evacuated, and the army left the region, but Israel maintains tight coastal and air control over the area.

Much like early American pioneer families in the period after the Revolution until about 1888, settlers in this area forced their way in, sometimes purchasing Palestinian land and sometimes encroaching on it with force. These settlers tend to be militantly nationalistic and support current Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s aggressive policies toward Palestinians and their territory.

Thus, the Palestinians in Gaza are greatly opposed to Israel's policies toward them, and there are frequent clashes and Israeli police raids claiming provocations, from rock-throwing youth to the occasional missile launch. So much for gaining territory to increase security.

There is *much* more to the story, but these are the basics for our purposes here. As you can see on the map, Jerusalem is in a precarious space barely inside Israel and nearly surrounded by the West Bank region, the inhabitants of which are about as friendly to Israeli settlements and policies as are the Gazans.

In the past week, there have been additional protests by Palestinians across the territory, carrying Palestinian flags and demanding autonomy. This contrasts with the Israeli protests that have been going on for several weeks against Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's governing coalitions' latest policy. Interestingly, Palestinians have largely sat out those protests, claiming that they have always known Israel is not a democracy and now the Israelis are finally realizing it.

Why the Israelis are protesting is the real story for this post. Many see unrest in modern democracies, like the French protesting President Emmanuel Macron's executive order to raise the retirement age by two years to protect the pension system, as cause for alarm. However, if you follow French politics closely, you will see the true controversy is really a question of executive power overreach.

Akin to our own beleaguered former president, Donald Trump, a close friend of Netanyahu, the Israeli prime minister is under investigation for corruption. This led to his resignation as the head of the Likud Party in 2008 and subsequent retirement. Apparently, retirement did not agree with Bibi, as Netanyahu is affectionately called. As the longest serving prime minister for five nonconsecutive terms, Netanyahu decided to get back into the game in 2009.

As Israel is a parliamentary democracy, the leader of the party with the most seats in the Knesset, Israel's unicameral legislature, becomes prime minister. In the most recent election in December 2022, Netanyahu appeared to have worn out his welcome with much of the electorate as the only ones willing to bind themselves to him were far right nationalist parties. Netanyahu is left trying to herd a fractious coalition of groups with their own fierce agendas of aggressive resettlement and autocratic leanings for a slim majority of 61 out of 120 seats.

Israel observers, such as Natan Sachs of the Brookings Center for Middle East Policy, have voiced concerns over the policy directions this coalition is likely to pursue. As the coalition was forming, much ink was spilled over self-proclaimed "far, far right" Jewish Power party leader Itamar Ben-Gvir being given the West Bank border security portfolio. Ben-Gvir has backed an ultranationalist group

named an Israeli terrorist group by both Israel and the US and was convicted in 2007 of using language inciting violence against Palestinians. Both Palestinians and moderate Israelis fear his security apparatus could become a thuggish militia threatening those on either side of this internal border.

In addition, most of the members of the new coalition favor continued occupation of Palestinian regions and are in opposition to a two-state solution that would give Palestinians more autonomy and even full rights of citizenship. These positions are expected to cause future violence and oppression depending upon what policies are instituted in their cause.

The Israeli protests are largely against the nationalistic rhetoric and installation of such right-wing ministers but specifically about a recent effort by new Justice Minister Yariv Levin to reduce the power of the Supreme Court as the sole arbiter in disputes between the legislative and the executive branches. Unlike our own precious system of checks and balances, this would essentially morph the government into a single branch with no limits on the power of the simple right-wing majority in the current Knesset. Levin actually admitted this facet of his plan in an interview on April 3, noting that this new judicial “reform” bill “could not exist in a democratic country.”

As a political scientist, I see the anti-government protests as a sign that democracy is still alive and well in Israel, albeit less so within its current government. This is precisely why people *should* be out on the streets airing their grievances with the government as Americans are permitted under the Bill of Rights.

Israel has had a tumultuous history since independence and the fact that its citizens feel so strongly about protecting its democracy and ensuring people are at the center of power is a positive sign. Even more telling is that the leaders relented soon after the protests began and shelved the judicial “reform” bill to be revisited in May.

However, people are still out on the streets protesting the recent and potential future attacks on democratic institutions by this government and not letting it forget how slim its majority is. The people are giving notice they are watching for any sign that this coalition will try again to take autocratic power.

Whether you mark Easter, Nowruz, Passover, Ramadan, or just spring, this is a time to watch and celebrate the power of the people.

End Notes

Israeli Police Raid at Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem Sparks Protests and Violence, *Le Monde* with *AFP*, April 5, 2023, available [here](#), accessed April 13, 2023

Israel's Majoritarian Nightmare Should Be a US Concern, Brookings *Order from Chaos* Blog, February 23, 2023, available [here](#), accessed April 13, 2023

Israel's Justice Minister Admits Original Judicial Coup Bill 'Couldn't Exist in a Democratic Country', *Haaretz*, April 3, 2023, available [here](#), accessed April 13, 2023

Map Source

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14628835>

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