

Israeli Displacement Policies

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The neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah in the Palestinian Territories is at the forefront of the enduring conflict between Palestinians and Israelis. Since Israel's independence in 1948, the two sides have been locked in a ceaseless dispute marked by ethnic and religious tensions with no end in sight. In recent years, Israel began intensifying the demolition of homes in the Palestinian territories in its attempt to "Judaize" the region and integrate Israeli settlers. The Israeli government's attempts to evict the residents of Sheikh Jarrah in 2021 escalated toward a nearly full-scale war between the Israelis and Palestinians, leading to the deaths of over 260 Palestinians – 60 of whom were children – and the widespread displacement of numerous families in the Palestinian West Bank. The justification provided by the Israeli government for the mass demolitions in Sheikh Jarrah – citing illegal settlements and safety concerns – has drawn international condemnation and the ongoing displacement of Palestinians.

However, the violence in Sheikh Jarrah extends far beyond local disputes, fueling ethnic violence between Palestinians and Jews in surrounding neighborhoods. As this issue persists as we speak, I question: Why does Israel persist with its displacement policies toward families in Sheikh Jarrah, despite the cycle of violence they perpetuate? Are these actions driven by religious, political, economic motives, or a desire to bolster global influence? Moreover, are the events in Sheikh Jarrah a microcosm of the conflict between the Israelis and Palestinians?

The issue is of paramount importance because of the potential aftermath. Hundreds of Palestinians were injured near Masjid Al-Aqsa – Islam's third holiest site – after they defied the Israelis claim to Sheikh Jarrah, sparking widespread communal ethnic violence between Jews and Arabs. Additionally, Hamas – a political party recognized as a terrorist organization by several countries – retaliated by launching thousands of rockets toward Israeli cities, viewing these acts as resistance against oppression and colonization. Hundreds of civilians, including children, were killed in

just two weeks after the protests in Sheikh Jarrah occurred. The cycle of violence ensuing from this rather small neighborhood reflects the violent state of affairs between the Israelis and Palestinians.

This paper seeks to unravel and dissect the multidimensional motivations driving Israel's displacement policies in Sheikh Jarrah, asserting that these actions are not merely reactionary but part of a broader strategy to solidify and affirm Jewish identity in the holy lands through the systemic displacement of Palestinian families. By examining religious, political, economic, and global spheres, I seek to shed light on the multifaceted nature of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Exploring this topic is critical for the field of urban politics because of its emphasis on gentrification: bringing higher-class Jewish settlers to replace lower-class Palestinian families under the guise of religious and legal purposes. I have a very deep connection to this topic, having volunteered with Islamic Relief (IRUSA) to help raise over \$500k for Palestinians suffering after the turmoil of this conflict. I hope to use images, academic sources, and media sources to help answer my question. To this end, the paper is structured as follows: firstly, I examine the historical context of displacement in Sheikh Jarrah, followed by an analysis of the politico-religious and economic underpinnings of Israeli policies which motivates them to pursue such measures. I then subsequently scrutinize the international response and its implications before concluding with an assessment of the future prospects for peace in the region.

In this analysis, I contend that Israel's strategic endeavors in Jerusalem, particularly through policies affecting neighborhoods like Sheikh Jarrah, are aimed at creating a predominantly Jewish identity for the city, vehemently denying Palestinians the right to their land. Not only does this process leverage the dynamics of Palestinian neighborhoods to bolster Israel's geopolitical leverage in the Middle East but it also capitalizes on the fragmentation within the Palestinian governance itself. These factors ultimately allow the facilitation of displacement of Palestinian communities. Additionally, the Israeli government uses Palestinian neighborhoods including Sheikh Jarrah to maintain its sphere of influence in the Middle East. Lastly, Palestinians do not have a strong representative government to address their concerns, which is also a reason the Israeli government is easily able to displace the Palestinians from their homes and neighborhoods.

Since its inception in 1947, Israel has pursued the expansion of its territory at the expense of native Palestinians residing in the area. Sheikh Jarrah, a neighborhood currently under Palestinian territory in Jerusalem, is the heart of the religious, political, and economic tension for both groups. Near the al-Aqsa Mosque – Islam's third holiest site – and the Temple Mount – the holiest site for Jews – the area is of religious, political, and economic importance for both sides. To the north are Israeli settlements which used to be part of the Palestinian Territories. Sheikh Jarrah is being encroached on by these Israeli settlements, which leads several scholars to believe that Israeli authorities seek to control all Palestinian areas. Additionally, some areas in the Old City and Silwan to the south are now home to Israeli settlers, further supporting the theory that Israel seeks to control all areas surrounding the Temple Mount. This would be at the

expense of Palestinians, of course, but this would undoubtedly be beneficial to Israeli settlers for several reasons.

First and foremost, Jews would gain easier access to their holy sites and would not have to pay any administrative fees set by the Palestinian authorities, giving Israelis both a religious and political advantage to their taking control of Palestinian lands. Secondly, by reducing the amount of land Palestinians control, Israel's sphere of influence would undoubtedly increase throughout the world. They would push back Iran, one of Israel's sworn enemies, who is doing everything in its power to precipitate Palestinian independence. Thirdly, Israel would be able to remove any people or organizations they perceive to be terrorists, which would include Palestinian residents. In order to protest, several Palestinians near Sheikh Jarrah pelt stones at Israeli officers, creating a danger for settlers. Thus, Israeli authorities would argue that their control of these Palestinian lands is purely defensive.

Central to understanding the dynamics at play in Sheikh Jarrah are three prevailing theories. In his pivotal study, Jubeh delves into the strategic manipulation of Sheikh Jarrah by Israeli policies aimed at transforming Jerusalem's demographic makeup. He posits that Sheikh Jarrah is under Israeli occupation and is used by Palestinians as a survival strategy against Israeli encroachment. The Israeli projects in Jerusalem, known as the "Holy Basin," surround holy cities and Palestinian neighborhoods and seek to change the demographics in these areas. By doing so, Israel will have a larger presence in one of the most pivotal and historical cities on the planet. Jubeh argues that the evictions in Sheikh Jarrah are part of a larger plan to turn Jerusalem and its surrounding areas into a Jewish-Israeli city.¹ Although Israel continues to threaten evictions and the destruction of neighborhoods, over 90 percent of the population within the "Holy Basin" project are Palestinian.² Furthermore, the area is of strategic importance to both Palestinians and Israelis because of the vast amount of national and international institutes that reside in the area. The neighborhood houses, among other governments, British, French, and Turkish consulates. The World Health Organization (WHO), the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), and other prominent international organizations had offices in the region as well.³ Considering that Sheikh Jarrah is essentially an international port, the Palestinians heavily rely on it for resources, employment, and services. Thus, it is of strategic importance for the Israeli government to remove Palestinian control from this neighborhood, undoubtedly increasing their foothold in the region. On the other hand, the Palestinians would suffer a significant loss both economically and humanitarily.

Because of Israeli encroachment into Palestinian territories, Palestinians find themselves facing a generational displacement experience that has placed them into a zone of precarity and hypervigilance, unable to trust attempts for peace due to their

1 Nazmi Jubeh, "Shaykh Jarrah: A Struggle for Survival," *Jerusalem Quarterly File* 86 (2021): 129–148.

2 Jubeh, "Shaykh Jarrah: A Struggle for Survival."

3 Jubeh, "Shaykh Jarrah: A Struggle for Survival."

harsh history.⁴ The 1993 Oslo Accords, although initially promising, was a failed attempt to bring peace to the Palestinians as they witnessed a massive increase in illegal settlements in their areas. The common Palestinian simply saw the peace process as pushing the national security interests of both Israel and the United States, feeling disillusioned and abandoned.⁵ More recently, the U.S. Embassy for Israel was symbolically relocated from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, signaling increased American support for Israel's policies.⁶ The common Palestinian, therefore, does not have much hope for any agreements to be made in their favor.

This collective history of failed peace has propelled Palestinians to put matters into their home hands by actively opposing what they see as Israeli occupation. They view neighborhoods such as Sheikh Jarrah as their only homes and a symbol of resistance against oppressive forces. Naturally, then, it is a survival strategy for the Palestinians to resist Israeli oppression because they have no other home. As Brown states in her article, many Palestinians live a precarious lifestyle, not knowing whether their home will be demolished tomorrow, or if a Molotov cocktail will be thrown at them by proponents of the Israeli government.⁷ Thus, scholars like Brown believe that this so-called "military operation," or the occupation, is aimed at both gaining control of Palestinian lands and intentionally placing Palestinians under a cycle of dispossession: "Palestinian life, property, and political rights are constantly violated not only by the frequent actions of the Israeli military but by a process in which their environment is unpredictably and continuously refashioned, tightening around them like a noose."⁸ Through this process, Israel is able to maintain and perpetuate its status quo, with Palestinians at the bottom, and Israeli and Jewish settlers at the top.

The second theory is that Israel seeks to maintain security for its own citizens by displacing Palestinian families. However, they tend to do this by subverting government authorities and using ruthless military strategies against the will of the Palestinians. Beginning in 1967 – after the Israeli-Arab War – Israel devised a calculated strategy to dismantle Palestinian settlements and bring in Jewish settlers.⁹ Under the auspices of a "government building," the Jordanian government in 1967 had finished the construction of a governmental hospital near the "Holy Basin." However, with the land under Israeli jurisdiction, Israeli forces turned this "governmental building" into a headquarters for the Israeli police. In near proximity to this headquarters is another one for the Israeli Border Police, thus ironically turning Sheikh Jarrah into a center

4 Z. Zalloua, "Palestinian Paranoia and the Colonial Situation," *symploke* 29, no. 1 (2021): 281-300.

5 M.A. Jamal, "Beyond Fateh Corruption and Mass Discontent: Hamas, the Palestinian Left and the 2006 Legislative Elections," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 40, no. 3 (2013): 273-294.

6 Mark Landler, "Trump Recognizes Jerusalem as Israel's Capital and Orders U.S. Embassy to Move," *The New York Times*, December 6, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/06/world/middleeast/trump-jerusalem-israel-capital.html>.

7 S. Brown, "Contested Space: Control and Resistance in Rema Hammami's East Jerusalem," *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 51, no. 2 (2016): 287-301.

8 Brown, "Contested Space: Control and Resistance in Rema Hammami's East Jerusalem."

9 Jubeh, "Shaykh Jarrah: A Struggle for Survival."

for Israeli forces. Additionally, Israeli forces rapidly took control of a buffer zone that was meant to separate the two parts of Jerusalem. Hall Amin al-Husayni – the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem – had a palace in the vicinity that was eventually converted into a synagogue.¹⁰ A Jewish billionaire bought the palace in 1985, giving the Israeli Planning and Building Committee the jurisdiction to build housing units for Jewish settlers in the region.

Fast forward to May 7, 2021, when several Palestinians pelted rocks at Israeli police near the Al-Aqsa Mosque and Temple Mount. These rocks served not just as a danger to Israeli police, but also to Israeli authorities and the Jewish settlers residing near the areas. In response, Israeli forces stormed the Al-Aqsa Mosque, aiming to neutralize what they perceived as a direct challenge to their authority. The main stronghold of Palestinian resistance comes in the form of Hamas, a political-military organization designated by several countries in the world as a terrorist entity. Scholars such as El-Husseini believe that another organization – Hezbollah in Lebanon – is actively sponsored by Iran, with them even sending 500 troops to the region during the 2006 War.¹¹ In return, Hezbollah assists Iran in achieving their global interests of reducing Israel’s influence in the region by assisting Hamas, whether it be aiding with suicide bombings or supplying weapons. Such a prospect is dangerous for Israel’s security because they would have an active enemy a mere dozen kilometers from their capital. After Israeli forces stormed the Al-Aqsa Mosque, Hamas responded by launching hundreds of missiles toward Israeli cities. Israel responded by launching massive airstrikes in Palestinian areas, which eventually killed over 260 Palestinians. The events in May 2021 also activated hidden social tensions between Arabs and Jews, amounting to widespread ethnic violence and riots in Israeli and Palestinian neighborhoods. Astonishingly, the violence went so far as to cause several lynchings.

Ultimately, Israel believes that all of this could be prevented if they controlled all the land. Furthermore, there is a belief that Zahi Zalloua coins – “Palestinian Paranoia” – describing how proponents from far-right supporters and political Zionists categorically misunderstand the Palestinians, believing they are not to be trusted and are prone to bursting into violence. Indeed, several parts of the Israeli government believe that the Palestinians are untrustworthy, therefore making it justifiable to forcefully enter their territories and bring “peace.”¹² Indeed, the Israeli media perpetuates this idea of “Palestinian Paranoia” and repeatedly frames the Palestinian people as an existential threat to the Jewish people. All of these attempts in tandem to paint the Palestinian people as untrustworthy and unwilling to consider peace, therefore, are used as justification for their mass displacement in neighborhoods like Sheikh Jarrah.

As the conflict deepens, the intersection of religious beliefs and global political aspirations becomes extremely evident in Israel’s displacement strategies. Conversely, the last theory is that Palestinian displacement occurs under religious auspices

10 Jubei, “Shaykh Jarrah: A Struggle for Survival.”

11 R.E. Hussein, “Hezbollah and the Axis of Refusal: Hamas, Iran and Syria,” *Third World Quarterly* 31, no. 5 (2010): 803–815.

12 Zalloua, “Palestinian Paranoia and the Colonial Situation.”

as well, to gain full control of Palestinian lands and make the holy sites accessible for Jewish settlers. In Jewish heritage, Shimon HaTzadik was a rabbi that lived when Jerusalem was conquered by Alexander the Great in 332 BCE (JubeH 2021). His name appears in the Talmud – the Jewish religious text – numerous times, giving his figure significant importance. A cave in Sheikh Jarrah was claimed to be his gravesite, although there is an inscription on the wall with the name of a different individual. However, Jewish religious groups continue to flock to the location to perform rituals. Israeli settlers appealed to the government to bring this religious symbol under their control under the Protection of Holy Sites Law of 1967, although this eventually failed with the court not being convinced that the site was indeed holy.¹³ However, this religious auspice is also combined with Israeli legal collusion, showcasing the complexity of this conflict.

In 1956, the Jordanian Ministry of Building and Construction signed a memorandum of understanding with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) to build twenty-eight residential units for Palestinian refugees.¹⁴ With the rise of the 1967 War, this part of the city fell under the control of the Israeli government, who proceeded to seize Jordanian records of this project, giving them to the Israeli Ministry of Justice. In five years, the Israeli Land Department – without notifying the Palestinian residents living in the area – registered the land under Israeli jurisdiction. These Palestinian families hired an Israeli lawyer named Yitzhak Tosia-Cohen to represent them, although he signed a settlement with the Israeli government that recognized Israel’s ownership of the land.¹⁵ This collusion by the Israeli government led to several Palestinian families eventually being forcefully evicted from their homes over thirty years later.

Numerous examples such as this exist where the Israeli government colluded with the law for their benefit. As the first United Nations Conference on Housing and Human Settlements once laid out: “The ideologies of States are reflected in their human settlement policies. These being powerful instruments for change, they must not be used to dispossess people from their land or entrench privilege and exploitation.”¹⁶ Thus, several scholars believe that the dispute that exists between the Israelis and Palestinians is one of apartheid and ethnic cleansing. Apartheid is a deliberate creation of conditions that prevent the complete development of a group of individuals, such as the right to a nationality and the right to movement. Therefore, when considering that Zionism – an ideology that stresses the development of a Jewish nation inside Palestinian territories – actively uses both military force and legal institutions to drive the spatial segregation of Palestinians, it is safe to say for several scholars that Israel is an apartheid state.

Through these evictions in Sheikh Jarrah, scholars believe that Israel plans to

13 JubeH, “Shaykh Jarrah: A Struggle for Survival.”

14 JubeH, “Shaykh Jarrah: A Struggle for Survival.”

15 JubeH, “Shaykh Jarrah: A Struggle for Survival.”

16 J. Schechla, “Deconstructing Israel’s Housing and Land Apartheid,” *HLRN*, accessed March 6, 2022, http://mail.hlrn.org/img/documents/BP_Deconstructing.pdf.

transform Jerusalem into a Jewish-Israeli city. Before Israel was founded, in 1901, the 5th Zionist Congress founded the Jewish National Fund (JNF) and began purchasing lands in Palestine. Their purpose is to “promote the interests of Jews in the prescribed region” and restrict its land offerings “whether directly or indirectly, to those of Jewish race or descendency.”¹⁷ Once Israel officially became a state in 1948, it was stipulated that any properties purchased can be transferred to the government, highlighting how Israeli public organizations actively work with the Israeli government to collude against the Palestinians. The Nakba – or catastrophe – in 1947-48 involved Israeli forces conducting the massacres of approximately 5,000 Palestinians and the razing of over 500 villages.¹⁸ To cover the crimes, the JNF began land transfers to the Jewish people, eventually being given to the Israeli state, thus beginning a mass process of displacement under a religious and political pretext.

I firmly believe in a combination of the three theories: that Israel takes into account religion, global power struggles, and security when displacing Palestinians in Sheikh Jarrah. As a result, the Palestinians are neglected and forced to use their territory as a survival strategy. Furthermore, with these displacement policies, Israel intends to create a pure Jewish state, attempting to maintain its sphere of influence through a religious guise while committing ethnic cleansing. Furthermore, it sheds light on Israel’s religious motivation for expelling Palestinians from their homelands, as well as their interest in maintaining their global sphere of influence. Additionally, Palestinians do not have a strong representative government to address their concerns, which is also a reason the Israeli government is easily able to displace the Palestinians from their homes. Sheikh Jarrah is an area of strategic importance due to the many international organizations in the area. Therefore, Israel also uses that as an incentive to take over the land.

Although this question of Palestinian displacement is entirely urban, scholars often ignore the undoubtedly global influences that push influence from both the Israeli and Palestinian viewpoints. For instance, Iran is attempting to increase its sphere of influence in the Middle East and counter Israel as it sponsors militant groups in the Palestinian Territories, such as Hezbollah and Hamas. Iran’s goal is to see a “liberated” Palestine and therefore attempts to destabilize Israel for the reasons mentioned above.¹⁹ In response, Israel has launched numerous attacks on Iranian-backed rebels, assassinated top Iranian nuclear scientists, and even acquired nuclear weapons. Therefore, it would not be in Israel’s interest to recognize the sovereignty of the Palestinians, and more so recognize Sheikh Jarrah as part of their territory. In fact, it would probably encourage arch-rivals like Iran to spread their military and nuclear program even further if they see its effectiveness transpire through Israel’s recognition of Palestinian neighborhoods. Any positive and constructive peace talks with the Palestinians would decrease Israel’s sphere of influence in the region, which is obviously why Israel is

17 Schechla, “Deconstructing Israel’s Housing and Land Apartheid.”

18 Schechla, “Deconstructing Israel’s Housing and Land Apartheid.”

19 S.J. Frantzman, “Iran Reveals ‘Untold Story’ of Arming Palestinians in Gaza.,” *The Jerusalem Post*, January 11, 2022, <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/article-692178>.

continuing with the apartheid-like policies it has been pursuing.

By ethnically cleansing Palestinians, they would be pushing against rivals like Iran and their attempts of pushing for Palestinian self-determination. Additionally, the theory fails to recognize the fragile, corrupt power of the Palestinian government that allows violence against the Palestinians in Sheikh Jarrah to occur. The scholars mention that Palestinians lack any meaningful representation to fight the Israeli government, but fail to mention why this is the case. The Palestinian authorities have been met with internal political feuds, corruption, nepotism, mismanagement, and numerous other factors that have decreased their effectiveness. Israel takes advantage of this political weakness by committing flagrant ethnic cleansing against the Palestinians.

Furthermore, some scholars refuse to acknowledge that religion has any role in this conflict. Although they mention it in their scholarly writing, they insist that this issue in Sheikh Jarrah is entirely urban. There is no doubt that Israel feels justified in displacing the Palestinians because of a sense of religious fervor they hold in the land. According to Jews, there is a prophecy in the Bible stating that, after a long period in exile, they will return to their Jewish homeland. Being an apartheid state according to many, when Israel commits ethnic cleansings and displacement against Palestinians, they are essentially fulfilling this alleged prophecy and ensuring the creation of a purely Jewish state. However, my analysis of the scholarly evidence suggests that the scholars tend to ignore the religious importance of Jerusalem for the Palestinian Muslims. Home to Islam's third holiest site, where the Prophet Muhammad was believed to have ascended towards the heavens, the areas surrounding the Al-Aqsa Mosque are pivotal for Palestinian Muslims.

Conversely, future studies should incorporate the religious importance of the Sheikh Jarrah area for Palestinian Muslims. A focus on the global implications of either Israel recognizing Palestinian sovereignty, or the Palestinian government becoming stronger, should also be warranted. That way, scholars and the common reader are better able to understand the motivations of both states as they both navigate an increasingly globalized world. My work continues in the field of IR by highlighting the lack of competence of the Palestinian government, Israel's eventual goal of ethnically cleansing Palestinians from Jerusalem to create a "Jewish city," and their attempt to maintain their sphere of influence from the Middle East.

Ultimately, I firmly believe that there is a mix among the three theories: Israel considers religion, security, and global power struggles when hitching plans for their displacement policies. In terms of religion, they seek easier access for Jewish settlers to their holy sites, such as the Temple Mount and Simon HaTzadik's tomb. With the rise of Hamas, the Palestinian military organization responsible for launching thousands of rockets toward Israeli cities, Israel would justify their displacement policies by stating that they are attempting to mitigate their attacks. Furthermore, Hamas has significant military capabilities, such as deep underground tunnels that house military equipment aimed at targeting Israeli assets. A more cynical belief amongst some sections of the Israeli population is that Palestinians advocate for violence against Israelis, creating an incentive for them to "clear" those areas. In terms of global power

struggles, it is in Israel's best interests to maintain the status quo they have created and prevent the Palestinians from gaining more power. Giving the Palestinians more power would certainly reduce Israel's legitimacy and global power status in the world, giving adversaries like Iran a moral victory. As such, Israel considers global power struggles, too, in this urban issue, highlighting the complexities of this seemingly small neighborhood.

However, I believe the field of IR would benefit from analysis of the events in Israel-Palestine as a humanitarian issue. Currently, hundreds of thousands of Palestinians are suffering due to a lack of supplies entering the Gaza Strip—one of the most densely populated areas in the world. Malnutrition is common as a result, alongside a lack of access to clean water and shelter. The UN Secretary-General, after witnessing the 2021 tragedies, said: “If there is a hell on earth, it is the lives of children in Gaza.”²⁰ When the main focus is on the causes of the conflict, rather than its aftermath, people tend to lose the perception of what is happening on the ground. Thousands of Palestinians are suffering and living precarious lives, merely relying on donations and international aid. When scholars begin to recognize the result of this conflict and tackle it as a humanitarian one, more awareness will be given to the issue, which could galvanize the public to pressure their governments to do the right thing.

20 United Nations, “Gaza Children Living in ‘Hell on Earth,’ UN Chief Says, Urging Immediate End to Fighting,” *UN News*, accessed April 30, 2022, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/05/1092332>.