

WHAT HAPPENED IN MAY 2021?



VIOLENCE IN ISRAEL AND GAZA

During the month of Ramadan which began in April 2021, Palestinians clashed with Israeli police securing access to Jerusalem's Old City on a nightly basis. In the following days, the clashes spread to the Temple Mount, where Palestinian protestors had gathered toward the end of Ramadan and amassed stockpiles of rocks and firebombs as decisions regarding the evictions of several families from buildings in the East Jerusalem neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah were imminently expected.

In an effort to defuse tensions, the Israeli Supreme Court heeded a request by Israel's attorney general to delay its ruling on the Sheikh Jarrah properties and then-Prime Minister Netanyahu ordered the Israeli Police to prevent Israeli teens from staging their annual Jerusalem Day march through the Muslim Quarter of the Old City.

While Israel was trying to dial things back, the terror groups Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad began firing rockets (over 4,300 by the end of May 2021) from the Gaza Strip at civilian targets in Israeli cities. **On May 11, an elderly Israeli woman and an Indian caregiver** were killed when one of these rockets hit a building in Ashkelon and a third was killed by a rocket attack in Rishon Lezion, a city south of Tel Aviv. Two more Israelis, **an Arab father and his**

teenage daughter, were killed when a Hamas rocket struck their home in Lod. Another rocket slammed into an Israeli school and surely would have led to mass casualties had the school not been closed because of the rocket threat. . Ultimately, 12 Israeli civilians lost their lives due to rocket and mortar fire from the Gaza Strip during the 11-day conflict.

In response to these attacks, Israel defended its citizens by launching hundreds of air strikes to eliminate various Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad targets in the Gaza Strip. Before each pinpoint strike, the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) went to unparalleled lengths to notify civilians and urge them to stay away from each legitimate target, which resulted in a low casualty count relative to the number of airstrikes.

In addition, and troublingly, there was significant unrest in several Israeli cities with large Jewish and Arab populations, including Haifa, Ramle, and Lod. While most Arab citizens of Israel just want to live their lives, a radical minority took to the streets in May, burning multiple synagogues, Jewish-owned shops, and Jewish homes, and smashing windows and cars. There were also isolated reports of Israeli Jews attacking Israeli Arabs, in far lesser numbers. In response, Israeli police reinforcements were deployed to those cities in an effort to keep the peace.

Setting the Stage:

Hamas, a terrorist organization with a charter that calls for the destruction of Israel and the wanton murder of Jews, had been working in the weeks leading up to the violence to inflame tensions in Jerusalem, inciting Palestinian young people to clash with police and attack Jewish Israelis. Conveniently for Hamas, Eid al-Fitr, the Muslim religious holiday that celebrates the final day of the Ramadan fast, falls this week. That Monday, May 10, was also Yom Yerushalayim—Jerusalem Day—which celebrates the reunification of Jerusalem following the 1967 Six Day War. On top of the heightened tensions as a result of these two holidays (which rarely fall so close to one another but always independently draw large Jewish and Palestinian crowds to Jerusalem) are legal disputes in an East Jerusalem neighborhood called Sheikh Jarrah. Located between the Old City and Mount Scopus, Sheikh Jarrah has become the site of a protracted legal battle over whether several Palestinian families would have to move out of homes that, prior to Jordan's occupation of East Jerusalem in 1948, belonged to Jews. You can learn more about the controversy around Sheikh Jarrah by reading this **AJC blog post**. We've also included a brief timeline on the right side of this page.

Who is to blame?

No one should blame Israel—or innocent Palestinian civilians—for this flare-up in violence. As AJC CEO David Harris explains, “The world needs to clearly and unambiguously recognize the nature and aims of Palestinian terrorist organizations, and specifically their desire to wipe Israel off the map.” Israel holds Hamas, which controls the Gaza Strip with an iron fist, responsible for all attacks emanating from the territory. Hamas is using the escalations over Jerusalem and Sheikh Jarrah, which it actively stoked, to spread misinformation about Israel trying to change the status quo on the Temple Mount—something they know will rile their masses and help shift Arab opinion in Hamas's favor. Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad capitalized on the rising tensions by launching over a thousand rockets into Israel, reaching as far as Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. For more on Hamas, please see this **AJC blog post**.

So where are we now?

The flare-up in May 2021 was the most unrest Israel has seen since the 2014 Gaza war. Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad relentlessly launched rockets into Israel and the IDF, in return, used pinpoint airstrikes to eliminate terrorist targets while seeking to minimize civilian casualties. AJC will continue to provide updates on **Twitter** and **Instagram**, and to offer programming to explain what's happening in the Middle East.



Resource—A Brief History of Sheikh Jarrah:

1870s: Pre-Israeli statehood, the land that is now Sheikh Jarrah was **purchased by a pair of rabbis** and a sizable Jewish community was established.

1948-49: Following the establishment of the State of Israel, **East Jerusalem fell under Jordanian Control**, and was repopulated by displaced Palestinians.

1956: The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) and the Jordanian Government promised **28 Palestinian families** property deeds to land in Sheikh Jarrah, in exchange for forfeiting their refugee status.

1967: Israel reunified Jerusalem following the Six Day War, and several Jewish groups, citing historical claims, **attempted to reclaim ownership over the land**.

1970: Following passage of Israel's **Legal and Administrative Matters Law**, Sheikh Jarrah became a part of Israel.

1972: Jewish settler groups filed for ownership of Sheikh Jarrah property, and settled with a Palestinian lawyer, designating Palestinian residents as “**protected tenants**,” and requiring them to pay rent to Jewish groups. However, this rental agreement has **not been entirely honored** by the residents of these homes.

In the years following, Jewish settler organizations have been in legal battles **attempting to evict** the Palestinians living in Jewish-owned property in Sheikh Jarrah. The Israeli Supreme Court, which had already certified the deeds held by the Jewish organizations as authentic, had urged the parties to try and reach a compromise in the week before the current round of hostilities began. The Palestinian families and their representatives refused. The court is set to rule on the competing claims in the near future after a hearing scheduled for this week was postponed so as not to further inflame tensions.