

INTERVIEW

‘The Israeli police wanted to show that they are in control of Al-Aqsa’

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Writer Jalal Abukhater explains the context behind a violent raid in Al-Aqsa, and why the mosque is more than a place of worship for Palestinians.

In a shocking display of violence, Israeli police forces on Tuesday night [raided](#) Al-Aqsa Mosque in occupied East Jerusalem, beating and arresting hundreds of Palestinian Muslims during the holy fasting month of Ramadan. About 400 people were detained, according to media reports, with many of those released showing bruises and other marks of violence on their bodies. The Palestinian Red Crescent said that the police prevented their medics from accessing the wounded during the raid.

Although such incursions into the mosque have happened before, the scenes from the latest raid still startled many. Videos taken inside the mosque [showed](#) police officers relentlessly hitting worshippers with batons and the butts of their guns ; women and children were heard screaming amid the mayhem ; a long line of [detainees](#) with their hands zip-tied behind their backs were escorted through the Old City streets.

The police [claim](#) that their forces were compelled to enter the mosque in order to “restore order” after Palestinians locked themselves inside with stones and fireworks, some of which were fired at officers during the raid. It is unclear, however, why the police thought it necessary to storm the mosque itself or to use such excessive force. Moreover, it is a common practice for Muslims, as individuals and as families, to spend nights in the mosque during the holy month.

Significantly, these events occurred on the night before the eve of Passover, prior to which tensions had been stirring for weeks. Some of the Palestinians present in the mosque had reportedly planned to stay in the vicinity in response to attempts by Jewish fundamentalists to perform sacrificial rituals at the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount ahead of Passover — an act considered a severe religious and political affront to the area’s so-called “status quo.” Several such fundamentalists, who have been ascending to the compound in [growing numbers](#) in recent years, were reportedly caught by police attempting to bring sacrificial animals into the Old City.

To understand the backdrop to these events, +972 spoke with [Jalal Abukhater](#), a Palestinian writer based in Jerusalem. He highlighted how Israeli attempts to alter the dynamics at the holy site — fueled especially by the [Temple Mount movement](#) and their advocates in the new far-right government — have led to intensifying violence over the years, as exemplified by last night’s events. The interview has been edited for clarity.



Jalal Abukhater, Palestinian writer based in Jerusalem.

Vera Sajraw - What is the context to what happened at Al-Aqsa last night ?

Jalal Abukhater - Israeli occupation authorities want to impose a new reality at Al-Aqsa — something we've seen over the past few years, but is now escalating and increasing. The settlers are emboldened by having their allies in the government like [Itamar Ben Gvir](#). It is reaching a point where Israel is showing everyone that it is the one to dominate, control, and have full sovereignty over Jerusalem, including the holy sites such as Al-Aqsa Mosque.

Muslim holy sites are supposed to be under the guardianship of the Jordanian Waqf [endowment], but the new reality they want to impose is for Jewish worshipers to have “equal” rights to enter Al-Aqsa as Muslims do. The baseline we have here [the “status quo”] is that the Al-Aqsa compound is open [during certain hours] for everyone to visit without discrimination, while Muslims pray there. Jewish worship in Al-Aqsa has been completely rejected by Muslims, who consider the mosque the third holiest site in Islam.

The new reality Israel wants to impose is a division of time and space — even if they have to use violence — so that there will be areas for Jewish worshipers to pray. What we saw last night was Israeli police using all the force they have to ensure this policy goes on, so that Jewish worshipers can come in uninterrupted.

Things had been relatively calm in the Old City since the start of Ramadan. Why did Israeli forces attack last night ?

People went to Al-Aqsa for an overnight retreat of worship from Tuesday night till Wednesday morning — a spiritual practice common in Ramadan called *i'tikaf*. But Wednesday is also the first day of the Passover holiday, and Palestinians wanted to be present at Al-Aqsa when a large number of Jewish worshipers were expected to enter the compound.

The Israeli forces wanted to show everyone last night that they are in control. Tensions have been rising with Jewish settlers, especially the Temple Mount movement, who are planning to make a [ritual animal] sacrifice at Al-Aqsa. The police have not allowed this, and have even carried out pre-emptive arrests against some Jewish hardliners.

Unlike previous years, the police haven't tried to restrict access to Muslim prayers as much. But they have also been determined to show us that *they* are the ones who allow us to pray. If they decide overnight that something is prohibited, they will come in and kick people out from Al-Aqsa. It is a show of force and dominance.

Israeli security forces clash with Muslim worshipers after a prayer outside the Lion's Gate in Jerusalem's Old City, during the holy month of Ramadan, April 5, 2023. (Jamal Awad/Flash90)

I want to say, though, that I witnessed an amazing atmosphere in Jerusalem over the last ten days.

One thing that everyone was sharing and agreeing upon is that, in Damascus Gate, Palestinians were most festive on the nights when the police were busy in West Jerusalem with [anti-government] protesters. So when the Israelis were protesting, we had a happy Ramadan.

How have things changed in Jerusalem since the new Israeli government was sworn into power in late December ?

There is one thing that we all agree on : Jerusalem has been suffering for decades from policies that target Palestinian presence in the city, such as settlement expansion, lack of construction permits, and choking and confining our living spaces.

The new government wants to inflame all this and be even more brutal and blunt than the ones before. We feel we are under attack from many fronts : they want to change the reality in Al-Aqsa ; they want to escalate demolitions while we have nowhere to go or build ; and we are facing more hostility and violence as time passes. This has been [trending](#) more in the past few years, but under the new government, it is peaking.

We especially see this manifesting with Ben Gvir who, since January, has been determined to speed up demolitions of Palestinian homes in the city. Ben Gvir claimed [the demolitions] would be in response to “terror attacks,” but the families whose homes were being demolished were not involved in any attacks — they just happen to live in homes that Israel considers illegal construction, because they were not granted permits to build them. In Jerusalem, one third of Palestinians — about 100,000 people — are estimated to live in structures that were built without permits.

Ben Gvir is just using the pretext of terrorism to escalate this campaign. He wanted to escalate it also during Ramadan, which means people are currently losing their homes and being thrown in the streets. This is the man who directs the police [as national security minister] and who recently got [authorization for] his own private militia, which will operate against Palestinians in the Galilee, the Naqab, and Jerusalem.

Israeli National Security Minister Itamar Ben Gvir delivers a statement on the first Friday of Ramadan, at the Western Wall, Jerusalem, March 24, 2023. (Yonatan Sindel/Flash90)

This will be a militarized version of the police — but here in Jerusalem, we already have a militarized version of the police. Ben Gvir just wants to have more versions [of security forces] to target Palestinian presence in the city.

What trends have you seen through the years during Ramadan in terms of Israeli violence ?

Let's go back to [May 2021](#) in Jerusalem, during which the Israeli authorities made a series of [bad decisions](#). Just before the start of Ramadan, the police [set up barricades](#) around Damascus Gate, where Palestinians gather following *iftar* festivities. This was a very provocative act.

Then, on Laylat al-Qadr [the celebration of the first verses of the Quran being revealed to the Prophet Muhammad], when Muslims worship from sunset to sunrise, the Israelis stopped buses coming to Al-Aqsa from many cities. To deny access and freedom of worship at Al-Aqsa was a silly decision that backfired, because protests [erupted](#) across the country.

Vera Sajrawi

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