

CRS Insights

Jerusalem: Recent Israeli-Palestinian Tensions and Violence

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The status of Jerusalem and [its holy sites](#) has been a long-standing issue of political and religious contention between Jews and Muslims. Recently, tensions have intensified owing to various factors, including:

- Efforts by some Israelis, including [an anticipated Knesset bill](#), to emphasize Israel's claim to the [Temple Mount \(known by Muslims as the Haram al Sharif or Noble Sanctuary\)](#) and to gain greater Jewish access to and worship permissions on the Temple Mount/Haram al Sharif ("Mount/Haram"), which have elicited [negative reactions from Palestinians](#) and other Arabs.
- Various indications of [direct or tacit Israeli official backing for greater Jewish settlement in East Jerusalem](#), including via [announcements relating to construction of Jewish residential housing](#) that is [widely opposed internationally](#).
- A spiraling [pattern of unrest and violence](#), including attacks and security responses that have killed or injured Israelis and Palestinians in Jerusalem, the West Bank, and [some Arab communities in Israel](#).

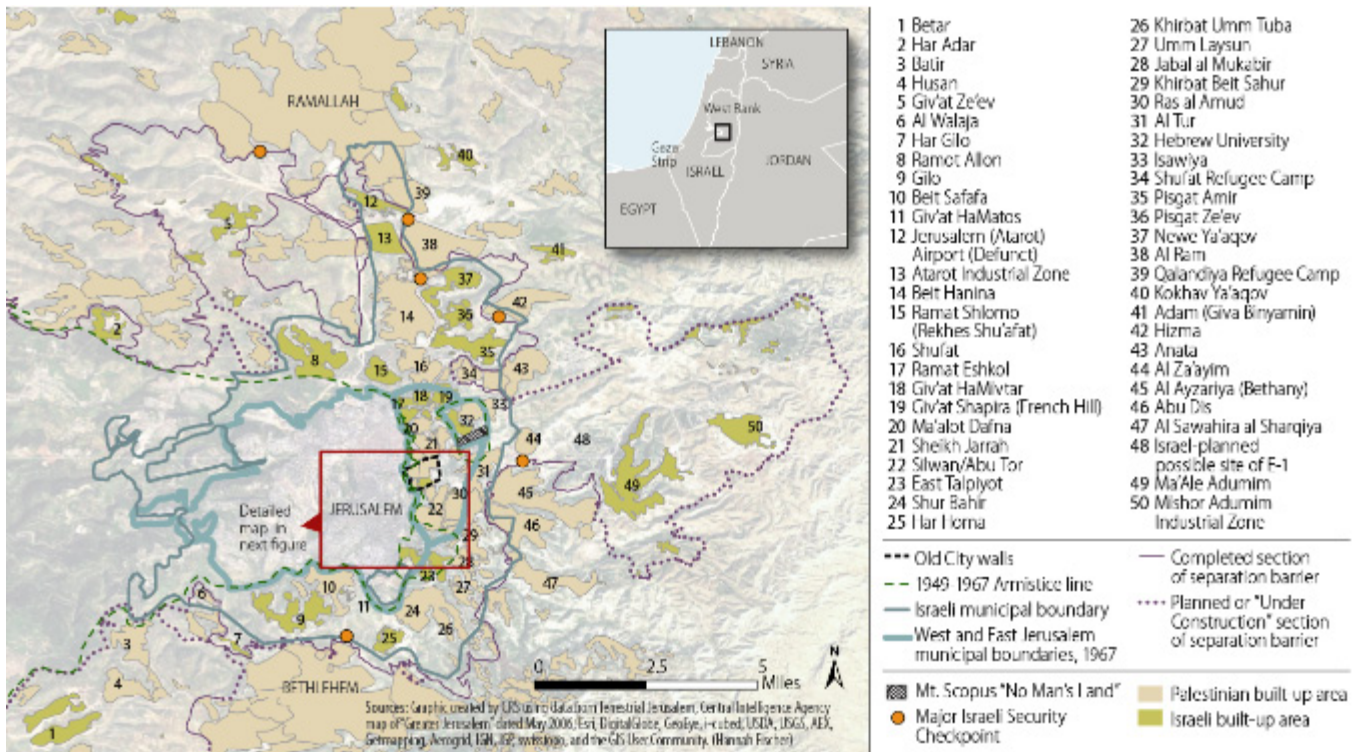
On November 18, two Palestinians from East Jerusalem armed with a gun, knives, and axes [attacked Jews at a West Jerusalem synagogue](#), killing four Israeli worshipers, three of whom also had U.S. citizenship. The attackers were shot and killed by Israeli policemen; one policeman later died from wounds he received in the exchange of fire. [President Obama condemned the attacks](#), as did Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmoud Abbas. The Federal Bureau of Investigation has announced that it will join the investigation.

While existing Israeli security measures largely prevent Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza Strip from threatening Jewish population centers, [Palestinians who live in Jerusalem and/or have Israeli citizenship](#) can access these areas. Unlike during the two Palestinian *intifadas* (1987-1993 and 2000-2005), those committing violent acts [appear to be acting mainly under their own initiative rather than via direct political coordination](#). Israel's police chief has said that [a lack of apparent organization makes preventing violence more difficult](#).

Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu has blamed Abbas, [Israel's Islamic Movement](#), and terrorist group Hamas for incitement, and [has ordered the homes of Palestinians who attack Israelis to be demolished](#). Yoram Cohen, who heads the Israel Security Agency (also known as Shabak or Shin Bet), [has been quoted as saying](#) that Abbas "is not interested in terror and is not leading towards terror," while adding that Abbas's criticisms of Israeli actions could be interpreted by some Palestinians as legitimizing more active resistance. [Some Palestinian and Arab observers](#) have blamed Israeli official statements and actions for the violence and the tense atmosphere from which it stems. Jordan, which has a formal custodial role over the Mount/Haram, has also criticized Israel, even [recalling its ambassador in early November](#).

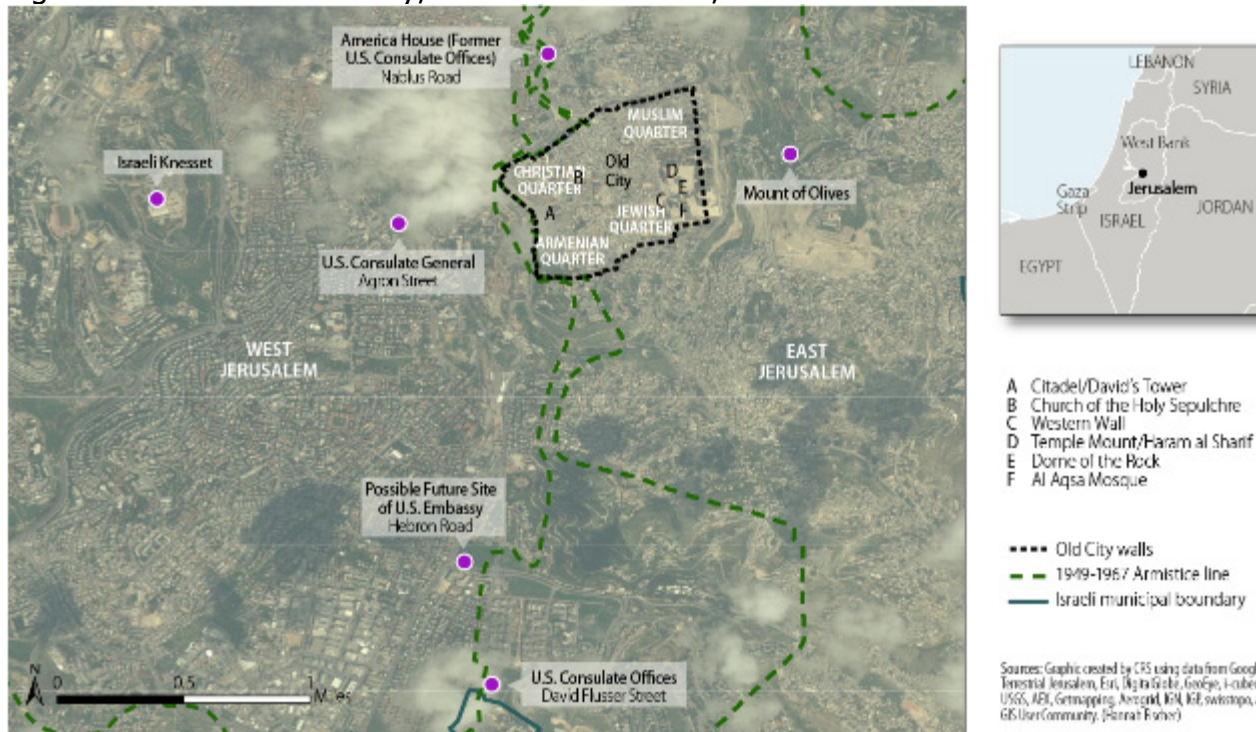
For more on Jerusalem and Israeli-Palestinian issues, see CRS Report RL33476, [Israel: Background and U.S. Relations](#), by Jim Zanotti.

Figure 1. Greater Jerusalem



Note: All locations and lines are approximate.

Figure 2. Jerusalem: Old City, U.S.-Relevant Sites, and Some Other Sites



Note: All locations and lines are approximate.

The Mount/Haram "Status Quo" and Recent Developments

Notwithstanding Israel's takeover and unilateral annexation of East Jerusalem as a result of the June 1967 Arab-Israeli War, it allowed the Jordanian *waqf* (or Islamic custodial trust) that had been administering the Mount/Haram and its holy sites before the war to continue doing so, and established a "status quo" arrangement that has been Israel's proclaimed policy since then. [Under the arrangement](#), Muslims can access the Mount/Haram and worship there, while Jews and other non-Muslims are permitted limited access but not permitted to worship. Jewish worship is permitted at the

Western Wall at the base of the Mount/Haram. The status quo [is criticized and challenged by some individuals and groups](#) who assert that Israel should advance Jewish historical and religious claims to the Mount/Haram, despite [Chief Rabbinate rulings proscribing Jewish visits there](#). Various past events apparently triggering concerns among Palestinians about possible Israeli attempts to change the status quo have arguably fueled tensions, including [a September 2000 Mount/Haram visit by Likud Party leader \(and future prime minister\) Ariel Sharon](#) just prior to the outbreak of the second Palestinian *intifada*.

Recently, [some right-wing Knesset members](#) and [Jerusalem's mayor](#) have visited the Mount/Haram. Although Netanyahu and [other ministers from his government](#) have criticized such visits as potentially provocative, these and other such visits have taken place within a larger context in which Israeli politicians apparently vie with one another through statements and policy proposals to insist that Israel's proclaimed sovereignty over Jerusalem is not subject to Palestinian or international challenges. Such political actions may be more pronounced in light of [widespread speculation that Knesset elections could take place sometime in 2015](#). Jewish Israeli public opinion [overwhelmingly opposes any division of the city](#) in a potential agreement with the Palestine Liberation Organization.

Tensions in Jerusalem have lately increased. In July 2014, after the June killing of three Israeli teenagers in the West Bank by Hamas-connected Palestinian militants, a group of Israeli extremists burned a Palestinian teenager to death in Jerusalem, contributing to subsequent unrest. During protests in July, [an Israeli policeman was filmed beating a U.S. citizen of Palestinian origin](#) who happens to be a teenage cousin of the burning victim.

Tensions re-escalated in late October after a rabbi known for supporting Jewish worship on the Mount/Haram [was wounded in a drive-by](#) shooting. In response, Israeli authorities killed the Palestinian shooter and on October 30 completely shut off access to the Mount/Haram, claiming the need to calm tensions. [Abbas called the closure a "declaration of war."](#) Access resumed the following day, and [Netanyahu insists that the status quo will continue. At least one member of his cabinet has openly supported Jewish worship on the Mount/Haram.](#)

U.S. Policy Implications

These developments raise a number of questions for U.S. policy makers, including:

- What can and should the United States do to protect U.S. citizens in and around Jerusalem?
- What are U.S. interests regarding Jerusalem, and what executive or legislative action, if any, would best promote them?
- What are the likely ramifications of various actual or potential Israeli or Palestinian actions—i.e., statements from leaders, [security measures](#), [proposed Knesset legislation](#), [announcements related to Jewish residential construction](#), [initiatives in international fora](#)—for Jerusalem, Israel, and the West Bank, and what should the United States do in anticipation of or response to such actions?

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