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The brother of Palestinian Ahmed al-Shenbari, who was killed during Israeli-Palestinian violence, cries during his funeral in the Gaza Strip May 11. (CNS/Reuters/Mohammed Salem)



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"Yesterday was a very difficult and dangerous day for Jerusalem, especially for those of us who live in the Old City," wrote Sami el-Yousef in an email early Tuesday morning. "Now Gaza is in flames and with the next few days, we will probably see further escalation.

"When will all this madness stop?"

I have known Sami for years. A native of the Christian Quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem, Sami's family is among the oldest Christian families residing there — his roots reach to the earliest years of the Christian community.

Each year on Holy Saturday, according to the Julian calendar, Sami bears a family standard that for centuries has been a part of the Ceremony of Fire held in the rotunda erected over the site of Jesus' tomb. But each year, the burden becomes heavier, as the descendants of those first families depart the region, leaving Sami with the responsibility of finding some collateral relative to maintain the privilege and the tradition.

A Greek Orthodox layman, Sami serves Archbishop Pierbattista Pizzaballa, Latin patriarch of Jerusalem, as his chief executive officer, after years of distinguished service to Bethlehem University and to the Catholic Near East Welfare Association, or CNEWA, an agency of the Holy See founded to serve the Eastern churches.

Educated in the United States, as are his wife, daughter and two sons, Sami's voice is calm, measured and rarely shaken. But hunkered down in his home with his family, located at a busy intersection not far from the New Gate, the fear in his words was palpable.

For, just hours before on Monday, the Israeli police had invaded the grounds of Al-Aqsa Mosque. Firing rubber bullets, they dispersed the worshippers who had gathered there for prayer on one of the holiest days in the Islamic calendar. The holy day for Muslims coincided with Jerusalem Day, which commemorates the Israeli capture of East Jerusalem and the Old City during the Arab Israeli War in 1967.

May 10 is fraught with tension every year, as the narrow streets of the Old City become the parade route for extremist Jewish groups whose actions are described as increasingly confrontational and provocative, designed to elicit violent responses. While Israelis celebrate the military victory as a unification of their ancient capital, Palestinians lament it as a de facto divorce of the city from the West Bank, the vast majority of which remains occupied by the Israeli Defense Forces.

The confrontation at the mosque and its grounds "violate the sanctity of the people of Jerusalem and of Jerusalem as the City of Peace," wrote the heads of the Christian churches. They stated further that these actions undermine the safety of worshippers, noting, "The special character of Jerusalem, the Holy City, with the existing status quo, compels all parties to preserve the already sensitive situation in the Holy City of Jerusalem.

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"The growing tension, backed mainly by right-wing radical groups, endangers the already fragile reality in and around Jerusalem."

Although Israeli officials eventually announced alternative Jerusalem Day parade routes — to avoid more violence and bloodshed — some marches continued nevertheless, the chants demonstrating "full scale racism and hatred ... with the backing of the government," said one Palestinian Christian observer, who asked to remain anonymous.

As of May 17, since the escalation of violence, BBC News reports that 197 people have been killed in Gaza, including 58 children and 34 women, with some 1,230 others being wounded. At least 205 Palestinians were wounded on the grounds of the Al-Aqsa Mosque on May 7.

Seven Israeli civilians and one soldier have been killed and hundreds injured as Hamas, the Islamist militant group in control of Gaza, has launched rockets and mortar shells into Israeli civilian centers, including for the first time Jerusalem itself. As many as 17 members of the Israeli police who stormed the grounds of the mosque were injured.

After reciting the Regina Caeli before hundreds of people in St. Peter's Square on Sunday, May 9, Pope Francis expressed his concern about the growing violence

between Palestinians and Israelis. "With particular concern I am following the events that are happening in Jerusalem," he said.

He added, "I invite everyone to seek shared solutions so that the multireligious and multicultural identity of the Holy City is respected and fraternity prevails. Violence begets violence. Enough with the clashes."

The shallow roots of the current violence involve the responses of Palestinian youth to recent Israeli actions. These include:

- Restricting gatherings at the Damascus Gate Plaza to the Old City, a favorite gathering place for Palestinian families and friends from East Jerusalem;
- An impending (and now delayed) Israeli Supreme Court decision regarding the Israeli eviction of Palestinian families from their homes in the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood of East Jerusalem, and the subsequent occupation of their homes by Israeli settlers;
- A police blockade near Jerusalem that prevented thousands of Israeli Arab pilgrims from traveling by bus to celebrate Lailat al Qadr (the night the Quran was first revealed to the prophet Muhammad) at the Al-Aqsa Mosque. Rather than turn around, however, the pilgrims resumed their pilgrimage to the mosque on foot, creating a traffic jam as sympathetic Palestinians in Jerusalem fetched the pilgrims by car to bring them to the city.

There is no lack for theories as to why now this escalation of violence. Some suggest political opportunism. Others believe it is motivated to consolidate the gains — or harvest the fruits — attained by Israel through recent political developments in the Mideast, including agreements brokered by the last U.S. administration.

Other observers suggest that Palestinian youths are simply fed up with record unemployment levels, postponed Palestinian elections and constant Israeli harassment.

Regardless, innocent families of all stripes, Israeli Jews and Israeli Christians, Palestinian Muslims and Palestinian Christians, hunker down in fear. And if rockets and air strikes are not enough, rival groups of angry Israeli Arab and Jewish mobs are now taking to the streets, clashing in Israeli cities and towns with mixed Arab and Jewish populations.



A woman holds her dog as she is evacuated by medics in Ashkelon, Israel, May 11, after being wounded from a rocket was launched from the Gaza Strip. (CNS/Reuters/Amir Cohen)

"It is a nightmare," Joseph Hazboun, CNEWA's regional director in Jerusalem, wrote as he described the street clashes and fear of retribution among bystanders, including Christians, who because of their small numbers are "sensitive and terrified."

"Violence only generates violence," the Middle East Council of Churches has stated, "and hatred only leads to more hatred, racial discrimination only makes revolution, and extremism only breeds extremism, and deprivation only engenders uprising, and the only way out of this destructive cycle is to give everyone his rights, through recognition of the rights of the oppressed firstly and, secondly, by taking this recognition to the realm of implementation without procrastination or equivocation."

As I write this, my thoughts are flooded with memories that I have been fortunate to experience in my many trips to Israel and Palestine in the last three decades. Long

lingering dinners with Christian and Muslim friends in the Old City and Bethlehem. Taking strolls on Ben Yehuda Street with American Jewish and Israeli friends. Visiting the many communities of women religious to report on their works with those with special needs in Gaza and Haifa, migrants in Tel Aviv, and the deaf in Bethlehem. Following the Via Dolorosa with my friends and confrères on pilgrimage. And observing young married Muslim couples praying at the place of Jesus' birth, asking the Virgin Mary for her help in having a child.

There was a time when this land was incontestably holy, when Jerusalem was the city of peace. But no more, even if glimpses of holiness remain.

"Right now," said my friend and colleague, Atonement Friar Elias Mallon, "when I think of that piece of geography where the prophets preached, where Jesus was born, preached, suffered, died, was raised from the dead and exalted at the right hand of the Father, all I can think of is Jeremiah 8:11: 'Peace, peace!' they say, though there is no peace.'

"If this land is ever to be holy again depends on us human beings," Father Elias continued. "We have desecrated it with our hatred, violence and oppression. We cannot excuse ourselves or blame God for what we have done."

Indeed. Until the fear of the other evaporates, mutual respect returns and the humanmade weapons of destruction disappear, the lands sanctified by the presence of God will remain bereft of the greatest of gifts, peace.

Read this next: Comboni sister outside of Jerusalem talks about escalated violence
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