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# 'Different' Jerusalem Day promotes tolerance, not nationalism

By Laura Freeman - Special to The Washington Times - - *Sunday, June 5, 2016*

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JERUSALEM — A tent for bereaved families, a symbolic Iranian embassy, a lecture by an Orthodox Jewish journalist in a downtown pub — this is Jerusalem, and this is Jerusalem Day.

Well, not the traditional Jerusalem Day.

Events like these are what organizers are billing as "A Different Day for Jerusalem," a grass-roots initiative promoting tolerance and providing a counterpoint to the day's typically nationalistic overtones.

Jerusalem Day is a national holiday in Israel, celebrating the victory over Arab armies in the 1967 Six-Day War and the subsequent reunification of Jerusalem under Israeli control. On Sunday, over 30,000 marchers — mostly Israeli teenagers from Zionist youth movements and religious schools — sang and danced their way through the streets of the capital city waving Israeli flags.

But not everyone here views the day as one that celebrates unity, or one that inspires patriotic solidarity.

"The first time I left my house and realized what was going on in the streets, I was shocked and horrified," said Michal Shilor, who is spearheading the alternative events. Throughout the year, Ms. Shilor works for the Jerusalem Intercultural Center helping activists and grass-roots organizations on projects that promote tolerance. It's these activities that fill the roster of nearly 50 events that took place from Saturday evening to Sunday night.

"The idea is to say, on Jerusalem Day we want everything that we've been doing all year to come together on this day, specifically because

this is the most important day to show that Jerusalem knows how to be tolerant," she said.

While the Jerusalem Day Flag march is at once a joyous event, celebrating Israel's access to the Western Wall, Judaism's most holy site, for Jerusalem's Palestinian residents, the day is a provocation.

"It's showing oppression," said Ahmed Maswadeh, a 20-year-old law student who lives in the East Jerusalem neighborhood of the Mount of Olives.

For Mr. Maswadeh, who is active in peace initiatives with Israelis, the Flag March, the patriotic centerpiece of the traditional commemoration of the day, simply reinforces the Palestinian plight.

"We did it. We took it from you. Can't you see?" he said, mimicking the marchers. "This is what their message, their eyes, their crazy march is saying. For me, it's very intolerant, crazy and racist."

Mr. Maswadeh is not an Israeli citizen, holding instead a Jerusalem residency permit. In the wake of the 1967 war, Israel annexed East Jerusalem, absorbing 28 Arab villages and neighborhoods. Those who declined to take Israeli citizenship were instead given residency ID cards and, in the 1980s, were granted access to social benefits, health care, allowances for children and the elderly and the right to vote in municipal elections. They can't vote in Israeli elections, and if they want to travel abroad, have to apply for a temporary passport either from Israel or Jordan.

Today, there are around 350,000 Arab residents in East Jerusalem, an overwhelming majority of whom identify as Palestinian.

Compared to the west side of the city, East Jerusalem is plagued by poverty and crime and has proven a fertile recruiting ground for Islamic radicalization.

### **The 'knife intifada'**

In October 2015, the so-called "knife intifada" began when a Palestinian attacker stabbed three Israelis; two died. A "wave of terror," as dubbed by security officials and the Israeli press, took place over six months. Thirty Israelis and four foreigners were killed in attacks that included stabbings and car-rammings. Over 200 Palestinians were killed either carrying out attacks or in violent confrontations with

Israeli forces.

In East Jerusalem, the city set up roadblocks in front of Arab neighborhoods, strip-searched residents and increased the police presence. Today, while the situation remains relatively quiet, police maintain sentries at the Damascus Gate, and body searches continue.

While violence has decreased in recent weeks, a police spokesman said that the security forces were taking no chances. "We are there to prevent and respond to any incidents," the spokesman said in a telephone interview before Sunday's march. He added that up to 5,000 police, including patrol and border police and a paramilitary unit, had been stationed in and around the Old City.

The march was specifically timed by organizers to conclude in Arab neighborhoods before the onset of the monthlong Islamic observance of Ramadan, which began Sunday evening.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu mixed notes of conciliation with words of defiance in his Jerusalem Day remarks, saying in an address at the city's Ammunition Hill that Jerusalem "has its problems, but that we would never go back to a reality of a divided, wounded city."

Pledging to "continue to develop the city for all its residents," the hawkish prime minister immediately added that Israel was in Jerusalem "by right and not by charity," the Times of Israel reported.

While the Flag March traversed main roads and pedestrian walkways in West Jerusalem, the main point of contention traditionally comes when the march passes through the Damascus Gate of the Old City. In 2015, a petition to have the parade route changed — with two left-wing activist groups claiming the parade was an incitement to violence — was rejected by the Israeli Supreme Court. However, the justices also wrote that there should be a zero-tolerance policy toward racist rhetoric and instigation during the event.

By Sunday evening, no major instances of violence were reported.

On the main drag leading through the Muslim Quarter to the Western Wall, Arab shopkeepers shuttered their doors and reinforced their locks with duct tape to offset any potential vandalism. Some Arab residents watched marchers go by on the main cobblestone drag from behind metal barricades. Police stood between marchers and spectators, quick to defuse any tension.

Back in West Jerusalem, most of the alternative events took place behind closed doors in pubs, coffee shops and lecture halls. While the number of those who attended didn't match the thousands of marchers on the streets of Jerusalem, Ms. Shilor remained optimistic at the end of the day.

"The activists in these 50 events gave hope to Jerusalemites all around the city," she said.