



Jerusalem Day, 2011

Christopher J. Lee

The story is one that has become engrained in the history of the city. On June 7, 1967, Israeli paratroopers invaded the Old City of Jerusalem, fighting their way from the Mount of Olives to enter through the Lions' Gate, eventually reaching the Western Wall—the most sacred religious site for Jews around the world. The capture of Jerusalem during the Six-Day War (June 5-10, 1967) between Israel, Egypt, Jordan, and Syria was not fully anticipated, given the United Nations presence in the city and the accords that had been reached through the 1949 Armistice Agreements following the 1948 Arab-Israeli War. Israel started the Six-Day War through a surprise air strike on Egyptian air force bases. However, Jordan's alliance with Egypt and Syria and its consequent attack on Israeli positions in West Jerusalem provided a pretext for the Israeli assault, one that fulfilled long-standing Zionist ambitions

for the city and led to the Israeli occupation of the entire West Bank—a legacy that continues to this day.

Jerusalem Day commemorates this event for Israelis. First established in 1968 and made a national holiday in 1998, it marks an annual occasion to celebrate the repossession of the Western Wall and the unification of Jerusalem under Israeli control more generally. With support from the Israeli government, it has also become an attraction specifically for Zionist youth groups from the United States, Europe, and other nations to come and fulfill the Passover Seder prayer of “Next year in Jerusalem.” But from a different political standpoint, this holiday has also reinforced the Israeli occupation for Palestinians, with Zionist youth and families re-enacting the 1967 entry into the Old City by rallying and chanting nationalist slogans as they proceed to the Western Wall. Instead of entering at the Lions’ Gate, the Damascus Gate has also served as the point of entry for the annual parade, encouraging participants to march through the historic Muslim Quarter in waves lasting from early afternoon to early evening. For a city whose complex history embodies so many religious, national, and ethnic narratives, Jerusalem Day marks a more exclusive and contested story of this city, one that emphasizes Israeli political claims over Jerusalem as its undivided capital as well as promoting the Zionist goal of removing the Palestinian community from its vicinity altogether.

The following series of photographs offer a sense of Jerusalem Day this past year. An estimated 40,000 people participated. I was in East Jerusalem and the West Bank as a research fellow of the Palestinian American Research Center, with an interest in understanding the situation of apartheid that has resulted in a system of expanding Zionist settlements and shrinking Palestinian enclaves in the West Bank through the Separation Wall, settler roads, and military checkpoints, among other means. The celebration of Jerusalem Day may appear distantly related to these territorial measures, but it is undoubtedly part of a national project that has entrenched an Israeli historical perspective and narrative at the expense of others, despite the still-present diversity of religious, ethnic, and national communities that live and work in Jerusalem. These photographs do not capture the sounds of the day—not only the chanting and singing, but vociferous slurs against Palestinians—nor do they depict acts of violence between Zionist and Palestinian youth that occurred. Twenty-four people were arrested, most of them Jewish. But they do offer documentation of the police and military presence, the energy and boldness of Zionist youth and families, and the disempowerment of Palestinian residents in a neighborhood and city they consider home.

All photographs of Jerusalem Day © 2011 by Christopher J. Lee.

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