

April 2021

The Last Gate

The Struggle Over Damascus Gate in the Old City of Jerusalem

After two weeks of violence in Jerusalem, the Israeli police finally backed down and removed the barricades and restrictions at Damascus Gate plaza that arguably triggered the violence we witnessed since the start of Ramadan this year. It is not surprising that the locus of the latest tensions and clashes was Damascus Gate, the main gate, and some would argue, the last entrance to the Old City which is still very Palestinian in character. Arguably, the tensions at Damascus Gate are a result of many small steps taken by Israel in the past few years to engineer changes to the character of the area.

In 2015, Jerusalem experienced violence including a series of nationalistically motivated murders, known as the 'Lone Wolf' Intifada. Most of the incidents in the city took place around Damascus Gate and Haggai/Al Wad Street in the Old City, the route leading from the gate to the Temple Mount/Haram a-Sharif.¹ This year, the beginning of Ramadan coincided with the full reopening of the economy following months of shut-downs during the coronavirus pandemic. From the start, the police erected barriers around the stone steps in the plaza in front of the gate to prevent people from gathering and sitting there as they have done for years.² In parallel, and some may claim in response, incidents of stone-throwing at ultra-Orthodox people

¹ Y. Mizrachi, "[There Reason Behind Multiple Attacks at Haggai Street](#)," (Heb) Local Call, October 8, 2015.

² N. Hasson and Jack Khoury, "[Israeli Forces, Muslim Worshipers Clash in Jerusalem's Old City Over Ramadan Restrictions](#)," Haaretz, April 17, 2021.

entering the Old City from Damascus Gate increased. On the face of it, a comparison cannot be drawn between the violent incidents from 2015 and the current situation.



Some may claim that preventing people from sitting on the steps of the plaza is a minor matter, compared to the destruction of homes or restricting prayers at the Haram al-Sharif. Yet Damascus Gate and the plaza's stone steps, have for decades served as the central public space for Palestinians in Jerusalem, including many young people for whom it is a place to meet friends, to see and be seen. As a social space, Damascus Gate seems to have maintained its independence from the political struggles of the Old City's Historic Basin.

Damascus Gate derives its importance from its historical identity and location. It is situated as the central gateway for Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem to the Old City. Important shopping clusters are located at the entrance to Damascus Gate and the surroundings areas. Alongside shops and street vendors, Damascus Gate and the parallel Saladin Street, are the leading business and commercial arteries for residents

of East Jerusalem. In parallel, in recent years there has been an increase in Israeli-Jewish presence in the area around the gate. Several dozen families and hundreds of yeshiva students live in the Muslim Quarter of the Old City, along with several other families in the Arab neighborhood of Musrara to its north.³ Over the past decade, there has also been an increase of ultra-Orthodox individuals who use this gate on their way to prayers at the Western Wall plaza.

Over the past several decades, and even more so in recent years, the Government of Israel and the Jerusalem Municipality have invested unprecedented sums of money in the development of the Damascus Gate area and the surrounding business centers north of the Old City. Alongside infrastructure work in the Old City, authorities are investing in two tourist sites adjacent to the gate; The 'Roman Square' Museum, which is currently located below Damascus Gate, and Zedekiah's Cave, which is located several tens of meters to its east.⁴ In 2020, the Jerusalem Municipality submitted a plan for a Central Business District (CBD) in the east of the city. The plan includes the area between the city's northern wall, Damascus Gate, Herod's Gate, the neighborhoods of Bab az-Zahara, Arab Musrara, the American Colony, and Wadi Joz.⁵

Two additional developments that have taken place in the Damascus Gate plaza in recent years, are the [clearing of the Palestinian women](#) who sold fruits and vegetables at the entrance to the gate in 2018, and in 2019, the installation of a municipal sign that turned Damascus Gate plaza into [Ma'al and Hadas](#), named after two late border policewomen who were killed in terror attacks near the gate. These are ostensibly

³ "[We] Don't Sleep at Night': Jews Who Don't Leave the Muslim Quarter," Walla, October 7, 2015, Moshe Stainmetz.

⁴ G. Carmeli, "[The Roman Square in Jerusalem Opened After a Decade](#)," ynet, July 14, 2019 and also: [East Jerusalem Development Ltd.'s website](#).

⁵ Eastern CBD Plan. [Plan No. 101-0465229](#), Filed on November 29, 2020.

unrelated developments, yet the Palestinian street sellers at Damascus Gate are part of a centuries-old tradition in the Old City and were an integral part of Damascus Gate's identity. With respect to commemorating the women who were murdered at the plaza, any criticism may come off as anti-Israeli, yet nevertheless begs the question of whether Damascus Gate is a suitable place for such a memorial, or whether the fallen may be commemorated elsewhere so as to leave the Old City as a place of encounter with the place's long history and many cultures.

Damascus Gate, called Sha'ar Shkhem (meaning Nablus Gate) in Hebrew, and Bab al-Amud (the Gate of the Pillar) in Arabic, is perhaps the strongest testament to how the Old City and Jerusalem maintains its character and historical context in daily life. From the Roman period through the 20th century, the gate marked the route to the central city in the area, namely Damascus, which served as the center from which the Syria-Palestine region was ruled for quite some time. Preservation of the name Bab al-Amud is quite interesting, as during the Roman period, likely in the second century CE, a victory column was erected in the gate plaza that even appears on a map of Madaba from the sixth century (highlighted in the photo). Over the years the column disappeared but the name was preserved, as a testament to the city's continuity for hundreds and even thousands of years.

Israel's desire to gain a foothold that may enable it to control Damascus Gate, relates to the importance that the city's planners have attributed to the gates of the Old City. For example, development work is carried out at Jaffa Gate, the main gate connecting the west of the city to the Old City, along with a new plan aimed at connecting the gate complex to the Mamilla Mall through an underground passage. The New Gate was renovated during 2020, and Dung Gate and the neighborhood of Silwan were also

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linked via underground passages, alongside a partial extension of the gate's opening.⁶ In this sense, development of the Damascus Gate area has been relatively delayed. Politically and socially, Damascus Gate is a case study for how Israel and Palestinians' economic interests have become intertwined, making it more difficult to take steps toward political and social separation.

The most recent step taken by the Israel Police is part of a broader trend that began over a decade ago and has gained momentum over the past year:



Madaba map of Jerusalem with image of Damascus Gate (including column)

The Roman Plaza Museum Under Damascus Gate

⁶ Plan for the development of Jaffa Gate, [Plan no. 696021](#), submitted to the Planning and Building Subcommittee, December 29, 2020 (Heb).

Damascus Gate was first built in the 2nd century CE by the Roman emperor Hadrian, as part of his plan to design Jerusalem as a typical Roman city. Damascus Gate had three arched gateways, and its central gateway was wider and taller than those on either side. This structure served as the basis for Damascus Gate even during later periods, and has thus been preserved almost in its entirety.⁷



The ancient square is located below Damascus Gate about four meters beneath current street level. The entirety of the Roman gate's structure was revealed in

⁷ M. Magen, 1986. Damascus Gate, Jerusalem: Sites and Tours, Ariel 46, pp. 94-86 (Heb); Geva, H., Bahat, D., 1998. Architectural and Chronological Aspects of the Ancient Damascus Gate Area, Israel Exploration Journal, 48 (3-4), 223-235.

excavations conducted from 1979-1984 by Menachem Magen, within the municipality's project to restore Damascus Gate.⁸ As part of these plans, an amphitheater of sorts was constructed outside the gate. To this end, many shops that had previously been located in and around the gate were cleared away. Following the unveiling of the Roman gate's structure, and in light of its importance to Jerusalem's archaeological research, a decision was made to open a museum to display it to the public. The museum is underground and may be accessed via a door located within Damascus Gate itself. Due to infrastructural issues, the museum closed in 2009. The gate underwent a number of renovations that entailed negotiations regarding the clearing of merchants whose shops were located inside the gate itself. In 2019, the museum reopened to visitors until the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic in March last year.⁹

Throughout construction work in recent years, an underground opening has been breached that connects the Roman Square (located below street level, as noted) with shops located within the western side of the gate. Some of these shops belong to the government-municipal East Jerusalem Development Company, which is engaged in a legal battle with the Palestinian merchants who run the stores, regarding the level of rent or eviction demands.¹⁰

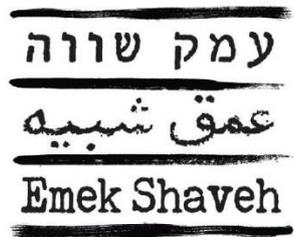
Zedekiah's Cave

The entrance to the cave is located between Damascus Gate and Herod's Gate. It is a natural cave that was enlarged through quarrying. Today it is one of the largest caves

⁸ A. Niv-Crandell, P. Bogod, p. 1986. Rehabilitating Damascus Gate. Jerusalem as a Joint City, Ariel 45-44, pp. 151-149. (Heb)

⁹ G. Carmeli, "[The Roman Square in Jerusalem Opened After a Decade](#)," ynet (Heb), July 14, 2019, and also: [East Jerusalem Development Company's website](#).

¹⁰ East Jerusalem Development Company's Financial Reports, 2018, pp. 22, 20, 18.



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in Israel, spanning 9,000 square meters. The cave extends below the Old City, from the northern wall to the Via Dolorosa in the Muslim Quarter. The walls of the cave retain indications of quarrying, along with graffiti from modern and ancient times, in Arabic, English, Greek, and Armenian. Areas of the cave are separated by walls and stalagmite that the miners' left to support the ceiling of the cave-quarry.¹¹

In the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions, the cave was given different names that attribute it to different traditions. In Judaism, a tradition dating to the 16th century has it that King Zedekiah allegedly fled to this cave during the destruction of the First Temple. There is evidence that this cave was also referred to as Hezekiah's Tunnel. The English name of the cave is "King Solomon's Quarries". According to this tradition, Solomon mined the stones used to build the temple from this cave. Influenced by this tradition, Muslims call it the Cave of Kings. They also refer to it as Korach Cave after to a tradition that identifies it as the site where Korach and his congregation were swallowed by the earth.¹²

¹¹ M. Adelpop, 2009. [Jerusalem: Zedekiah's Cave. Donor File – Site Development Program](#). Conservation Department website (Heb).

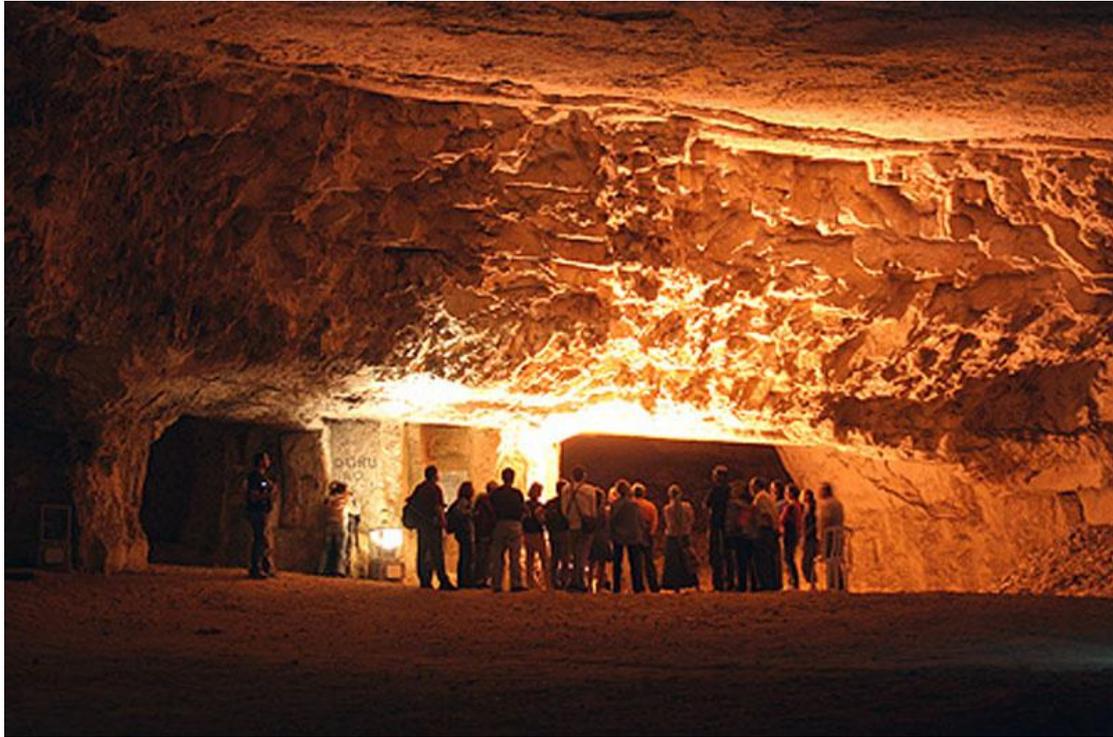
¹² R. Yizre'el. 2004. *Milestones in Knowledge of the Land [of Israel]*. Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben Zvi, pp. 221-218.

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Until the 16th century, the cave remained open and is well documented in the descriptions of various visitors' who traveled to the site. Yet under the reign of Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent, he ordered the construction of the city wall and blocked off the cave to prevent enemies from entering the city. The cave was rediscovered by the British physician and biblical scholar James Barclay, after his dog slipped inside. At first, he entered the cave disguised as an Arab, yet upon the publication of its existence it became the subject of much research.¹³

The cave reopened at the end of the 19th century, yet was closed once again during the First World War. Following the start of the British Mandate, the cave was

¹³ Ibid.



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reopened until Jordan took East Jerusalem in 1948. It remained closed until the 1980s, when the cave was transferred to the East Jerusalem Development Company, which arranged for a pathway and lighting and reopened it to the public. With the outbreak of the Second Intifada in 2000, it closed again, only reopening to visitors in 2006.¹⁴

Since 2016, the East Jerusalem Development Company has promoted a number of plans to further tourism development of Zedekiah's Cave. The purpose of such development is to attract tourists and Israelis to this part of Jerusalem. Among other things, these plans include the opening of a "crawlway" that will run through the northern part of the cave through tunnels that were previously not open to the public. Moreover, in recent years Zedekiah's Cave has become one of the focal points of the Festival of Lights, where light installations are erected throughout the city. Additionally, Zedekiah's Cave has become a popular site to hold events and musical performances.¹⁵

East Jerusalem CBD

The East Jerusalem CBD plan was submitted to the Planning and Building Committee by the Jerusalem Municipality in May of 2020. The plan was submitted for public objections in November of the same year. The Jerusalem Municipality presents it as part of its master plan aimed at improving the lives of residents and promoting the business center in the east of the city. The municipality claims that the program will

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Untitled, 2017. [Zedekiah's Cave and the Ramparts Walk](#). Ministry of Jerusalem and Heritage (Heb); A. Shapira, 2018. "[Above, Below, and Around the City: Three Unknown Jerusalem Experiences.](#)" WallaNews (Heb).

create about 10,000 jobs and bring in tens of millions of shekels per year.¹⁶ The development plan includes a long list of buildings for historic preservation, for which there are many restrictions aimed at safeguarding them from destruction. A significant part of the plan naturally entails restricting the height of buildings to maintain the Old City's skyline. It is evident that alongside the development plan, much thought has been devoted to the preservation of historic buildings and ancient sites outside the walls of the Old City. The plan includes the preservation of eight complexes such as the Rockefeller Museum and the Garden Tomb, along with a list of 146 structures. Among the buildings slated for preservation, commercial areas and hotels such as the Jerusalem Hotel, American Colony, Orient House, and more, may be found.¹⁷ Palestinians' leading concern is that the master plan entails preventing future construction that is essential for the development of businesses, hotels, and tenants. The strict conservation plans in the Damascus Gate area should be judged in relation to approved development plans near Jaffa Gate, including the Mamilla Mall and hotels; as well as development plans around Dung Gate by the Western Wall, where the Elad Foundation's massive Kedem tourism complex is slated for construction, including a cable car station on the roof of the building.

Conclusion

Over the past two decades, the Old City's Historic Basin has undergone unprecedented development. The State of Israel has invested billions of shekels in tourism projects and archaeological excavations alone, whether in the neighborhood of Silwan, excavations of the Western Wall tunnels, or on the Mount of Olives, among other

¹⁶ G. Draigor, "[Tidings for East Jerusalem's Economy: A Plan for the Creation of 10,000 New Jobs](#)," Kol Hair, May 25, 2020 (Heb).

¹⁷ East Jerusalem CBD, Conservation Appendix 2B – Building List and Ranking.

initiatives. As noted, Damascus Gate is just the latest in this chain of investments. Damascus Gate is the most convenient gate from which to enter the Old City. It has a broad entrance and does not require walking up hill, as with Jaffa Gate or Zion Gate. Moreover, it is close to the center of Jerusalem. While Israel claims that it aims to develop the area around the gate, it is effectively redefining its character, promoting tourism, and increasing Israeli presence so as to diminish or conceal the Palestinian character of the area. The recent clashes along the stone steps of Damascus Gate plaza should be considered in the context of this development boom. Perhaps the authorities' concern with young Palestinians sitting on the steps was just another chapter in the struggle over identity, belonging, and sovereignty, as with many in the Old City's Historic Basin. After so many changes to the gates of the Old City, Damascus Gate is one of the last bastions of this ongoing struggle.