

Wave Of Stabbings Puts Jerusalem On Edge

By Gil Sedan
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For the first time since Jerusalem was reunified more than 19 years ago, Israelis walk through the crowded, narrow alleys of the Old City minding their backs.

The stroll past the colorful shops and stands, the pleasant encounter with the sights, noises and smells of a true oriental bazaar, have given way to the fear of a knife plunged in your back.

On Saturday evening, January 17, two Jewish brothers walking in the Moslem Quarter with a girl friend were stabbed by unidentified assailants. This was the sixth case of stabbing in the same area in the past 16 months. David Lifschitz was stabbed in December, after Friday night prayers. Yeshiva student Eliahu Amedi, 22, was stabbed to death on November 15. A year ago, three other Jews were stabbed. Except for the murderers of Amedi, who were caught shortly after the attack, all other attackers are at large.

"I no longer feel safe," said Zvi Hershko, 27, a student. "I used to walk down to the Old City just for the fun of it. No more -- now I only go there if I have to."

The truth is, nobody really has to go there. Most Israeli Jews visiting the Old City are either from out of town, and consider the bazaar and Arab cuisine part of the fun of a visit to Jerusalem; or residents who get up on Saturday in need of cigarettes, or what have you, with all the Jewish stores shut because of the Sabbath.

More often than not, the stabbing victims could have done without the visit, except that until now, most Israelis did not think twice before going there.

The change that has taken place in the past few weeks is twofold: more and more Israelis maintain a distance from the Moslem Quarters;

and more and more Israelis are getting fed up that they cannot walk in peace in an area they consider to be the heart of "Eretz Yisrael."

"Hell, it is ours, isn't it?" said Dror Eliaz, 20, a soldier. "So why can't we walk there freely?"

The sense of frustration is successfully employed by Jewish extremists. Shortly after the latest stabbings, Jewish hotheads attacked innocent Arabs for revenge. They were not acting in a social vacuum.

Activists of Rabbi Meir Kahane's Kach movement use every opportunity of Jews attacked by Arabs to spread their anti-Arab messages. They make a point of visiting the families of the victims, paying their condolences, cheering up spirits and spreading the word that the status quo is a result of the "lenient official policy toward the Arabs."

Recently, Kahane was quoted as saying that he hoped "a new Jewish underground existed." When he was questioned by police on suspicion of incitement, he tried to smooth his statement, but the strong anti-Arab message picks up momentum every time a Jew is attacked.

The latest victims, brothers Avi and Shalom Chayon, were residents of the Jewish neighborhood of Musrara, across the street from the walls of the Old City. Shortly after the attack, riot police were sent to the neighborhood to prevent revenge attacks.

Eying a column of border policemen, Davis Swissa, 17, a resident of the neighborhood, said: "I identify with the (leftist) Citizens Rights Movement, but I am sick and tired of what's going on. They are blaming us for hitting Arabs, as if nothing has happened here."

Police Minister Haim Bar Lev said that Jerusalem is still one of the safest cities in the world. Perhaps so, but it becomes more difficult to depict the capital as living proof that Arab-

Jewish co-existence is possible. Mayor Teddy Kollek, who deserves perhaps most of the credit for the coexistence that had been achieved, sounded almost desperate following the latest stabbing. "I am enraged," he told reporters. "I don't know what to do ... whatever is happening is very bad."

Kollek warned that although he understood the general rage, he was concerned that if it were expressed, Jerusalem would soon turn into a second Beirut.

Perhaps one of the secrets of coexistence between Arabs and Jews has been the actual physical separation between the peoples.

The Old City is divided among four ethnic quarters -- Moslem, Jewish, Christian and Armenian. However, in the past five years, yeshivas and Jewish families have moved into the Moslem Quarter, upsetting the delicate balance in the city.

This may not be the prime motive for the recent wave of stabbings. On the other hand, it is doubtful that the immigration contributed much to Jewish Arab understanding here.

Judging by previous incidents, Jews are attacked for the purpose of attacking Jews, be they residents or visitors. This was the explicit testimony of the three Arabs who killed yeshiva student Amedi.

Stabbing has become fashionable for two major reasons -- the lack of available arms in the territories, and the fact that this sort of terrorism works. It is a quiet, inexpensive weapon. The knives used to kill Amedi were purchased shortly before the attack at a local store.

At the same time, this mode of terrorism hurts most. Israelis who had learned to live with bombs on buses and grenades at street corners find it harder to bear the knife in the back.

And as stabbings accumulate, Kahane counts additional potential votes.

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