

I've seen every Jerusalem flag march in last 16 years. This one was the ugliest

by Nir Hasson, June 06, 2024

The Flag March on Jerusalem Day is an accurate thermometer of the condition of Israeli society. It measures the levels of hatred, racism and violence in the religious Zionist society and the tolerance of the police and the rest of society to these traits. This year's diagnosis is terminal. Wednesday's march was one of the most violent and ugliest I have seen – and I have witnessed every single one over the past 16 years.

A few years ago, following criticism from the High Court of Justice and in a bid to salvage the event's public image, organisers, police and rabbis made an effort to restore something of the innocent festivity it had in its first years. At times, the effort even succeeded and a few Palestinian-owned stores even remained open along the march's route.

This year, due to the war and the October 7 massacre, the feelings of hate overflowed and the adults appeared to give the youths a free hand. The general spirit was that of revenge. The leading symbol on the marchers' shirts was the Kahanist fist, the popular chant was a particularly bloody revenge song, alongside chants of "Death to Arabs" and "May their village burn." The most popular minister was Itamar Ben-Gvir and the overall atmosphere was frightening.

From the morning, hours before the official march set off, groups of Jewish youths dressed in white showed up and ran rampant in the streets of the Muslim Quarter. They pushed, cursed, spat, threatened and attacked Palestinian passersby and journalists. The group moved back and forth in the Quarter, intimidating the shopkeepers and residents. Police tried to get them out unsuccessfully. As in every previous year, shopkeepers shuttered their stores along the route.

This time, police strongly urged merchants in other parts of the Quarter to shut their shops as well and so they did. Palestinian families shut themselves up in their homes until the storm passed. In the absence of Palestinian victims, the youths turned their violence toward journalists. They repeatedly threatened, cursed and pushed news photographers and anyone identified as a journalist or who tried to photograph them – like a group of Standing Together volunteers, for example.

For the first time since I have been covering the march, I was attacked by a group of youths. They pushed me to the ground and kicked me for a period of time I find hard to gauge – until I saw the Border Police pushing them away. One of the Border Police officers helped me to my feet. Another found my glasses. I emerged with scratches and light bruises, while two photographers suffered blows from objects thrown at their heads.

The incidents continued until police decided to keep journalists of all people out of the area, and to put them in a fenced compound above Damascus Gate. Journalists who refused were

threatened with arrest. In one case, police officers pushed Ynet journalist Liran Tamari away by force. Numerous other journalists were cursed at, threatened and had water bottles thrown at them. Five participants in the march were arrested.

But journalists are not the story. The story is the depth of the cesspool to which the religious Zionist society has sunk. This is a society whose main annual event is a sickening demonstration of racism and violence. The youths – boys and girls alike – march in groups with their schoolmates. All wear white shirts with inscriptions printed especially for the event. The march sets off from West Jerusalem and when it reaches the Old City the marchers sing religious songs. Before entering the Old City, the marchers split.

The girls enter the Jaffa Gate and the Jewish Quarter and the boys go through Damascus Gate and the Muslim Quarter. When the boys approach Damascus Gate, something in them changes. They are gripped by ecstasy, bursting into song and screams, as though reenacting every year the conquest of the Old City. After dancing in the entry plaza they burst through the gate, banging on the shops' tin doors. The din is deadening, fuelling the ecstasy further. The joy is plain to see on faces of the youths and their rabbis – as is the hatred.

Tens of thousands of people took part in the march, among them most of Otzma Yehudit's Knesset members. Smotrich came despite reports of a drone strike in the north. That did not prevent him from dancing happily with the youths to the sounds of "Work for God in joy." But then the youths switched to another popular revenge song – the same one that was sung at the so-called 'hate wedding' several years ago. Israel's finance minister continued jumping up and down. He was followed by Zvi Sukkot, Simcha Rothman, Almog Cohen and others. But none of them got the kind of reception reserved for National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir. The boys greeted him with shouts of "Here comes Israel's next prime minister."

Ben-Gvir could not speak for several minutes because of the turmoil around him. "I came here for one thing, to convey a message to Hamas," he finally said. "In every house in Gaza and the north – there are pictures of the Temple Mount and pictures of Jerusalem. And we say to them that Jerusalem is ours. The Damascus Gate is ours. The Temple Mount is ours." Then he repeated his reckless statement from the morning about revoking the status quo on the Temple Mount. "Today, according to my policy Jews freely entered the Old City. And on Temple Mount Jews prayed freely. We say in the simplest way, this is ours."

Shortly afterward, the last marchers passed through the gate, leaving behind them piles of garbage. As it does every year, this demonstration of bullying proved the exact opposite of what Ben Gvir was talking about. The louder the cries for revenge and the wilder the violence, the stronger the sense that this whole effort covers a hollow sovereignty and a failed policy. Fifty-seven years after Jerusalem was united and eight months since the outbreak of the war, the Israeli leadership that passed through Damascus Gate on Wednesday has no relevant answer for the future and for the people of Jerusalem and Israel. They have no plan, no solution and no hope to offer. Instead, they hope we will make do with revenge.

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