Ontological Insecurity: A Case Study on Israeli-Palestinian Conflict in Jerusalem

https://www.e-ir.info/2021/07/23/ontological-insecurity-a-case-study-on-israeli-palestinian-conflict-in-jerusalem/

ELAINE DONDERER, JUL 23 2021

Introduction

The city of Jerusalem constitutes a microcosm of national politics and clashing identities in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Its highly contested Old City is a focal point for recurring intergroup violence and increasing tensions (Rokem, Weiss, Miodownik, 2018). During May 2021, eviction plans of the Arab neighborhood Sheikh Jarrah in East Jerusalem and violent conflicts at the Al-Aqsa Mosque, a holy site to both Muslims and Jews, have led to ongoing protests, evictions, and polarization of intra-communal sympathies (Aljazeera, 2021). While illustrating the violent history of Israeli-Palestinian contestation of space, Jerusalem remains a space for interaction, dialogue, and localized politics in a securitized setting (Rumelili, 2015). Thus, it is informative about potential ways of desecuritizing the conflict and promoting peaceful dialogue.

Notably, the role of cultural practice and collective identity for establishing security is frequently sidelined in traditional IR studies. However, the recent events between Israelis and Palestinians and the ongoing history of division and confrontation in Jerusalem is exemplary in understanding the roots of securitization in a more differentiated manner. Hence, the study explores the construction of Israeli security narratives of both physical and ontological nature. Thus, the study asks: How does the Israeli state's narrative of securitization influence the recurring clashes and violence over contested neighborhoods in the Old City of Jerusalem? The paper sets out by describing the theoretical framework and case study. In answering the research question, the study applies Mitzen's theory of ontological security of states. It is found that Israeli histories and subsequent narratives of ontological security threats contribute to the segregation and contestation of space in Jerusalem. However, the ongoing exchange and interaction with the Other constitutes an opportunity for a politicization of the conflict on a grassroots level. Hence, deconstructing ontological insecurity and its influence on state practice can support a desecuritization process in the highly contested area of Jerusalem's Old City.

Theory

The following section outlines how Mitzen's ontological approach to state security stands in a reciprocal relationship with the politics of home and belonging. Moreover, it argues for the relevance of applying an ontological insecurity perspective to understand the relation of the Israeli state and Palestinian inhabitants of Jerusalem, and ultimately propose ways to desecuritize the area.

Mitzen's ontological security

Theories of ontological security in critical security studies challenge the traditional realist assumption that actors have sufficient knowledge of their environments to act rationally. Inspired by the field of psychology, ontology looks at underlying questions of existence, being, and reality, in other words, the cognitive ability and confidence to perceive our environments as real (Mitzen, 2006). Thus, the understanding of self is formulated based on profound uncertainties about human life and mortality, creating existential anxiety (Mitzen, 2018). As with individuals, states can struggle to maintain a stable identity and notion of being (Mitzen, 2006). This anxiety debilitates a sense of

Ontological Insecurity: A Case Study on Israeli-Palestinian Conflict in Jerusalem
Written by Elaine Donderer

control and can lead to regressive or irrational behavior (Ejdus, 2020).

Thus, according to Giddens's (1991) basic trust system, the process of seeking ontological security is comparable to strategies for managing existential anxiety, such as maintaining routines and predictable relationships with other actors (Mitzen, 2018). This basic trust system aids actors in dealing with the uncertainties of their existence to enable decision-making (Mitzen, 2006). By constructing certainty in categorizing one's environment, actors can safely assume knowledge and make decisions on the potentially competing threats an environment poses to their entity (Mitzen, 2018). Hence, instability of existence becomes the starting point in any attempt to secure meaning (Peoples & Vaughan-Williams, 2010). Therefore, states, as well as the individuals they comprise of, establish cultural practices, rules, institutions, and relations with other subjects to manage their awareness of existential anxieties, or ontological insecurity (Mitzen, 2018).

Inter-group relations and practices of identity

Studying states as ontological-security seekers provides a framework to look at how national group identity and autobiographical narratives establish routinized practices (Mitzen, 2006). According to Mitzen (2006), societies resemble the shared cognitive ordering of an environment. Moreover, situating one's mortality within the immortality of a collective identity can decrease the existential anxieties imposed by death (Mitzen, 2018). Hence, states can solve collective ontological insecurity problems because social order and group identity can cushion the trauma of a states' members (ibid.). Therefore, state distinctiveness is relevant to establish ontological comfort. Strategies for establishing and maintaining tangible national and group identities are autobiographical narratives, constructed by artifacts, literature, and routines (Ejdus, 2020). For instance, a routinization of inter-societal, or inter-state routines can help maintain coherence in identity and thus, reduce ontological anxieties (Mitzen, 2006).

The above-mentioned routinization of relations with other actors serves a sense of stability in being and attaches a sense of ontological security to the continuity of those relations (Zobeydi, Ebrahimi, Shafaee, 2019). These relational practices entail positive or antagonistic identification and can be cooperative, as well as conflictual (ibid.). In any way, the linkage of identity and ontological security leads to courses of action that are compatible with the societal or state identity in relation to the Other (Rumelili, 2015). Hence, inevitably, the Other has the potential to be a threat to the stability of ontological security and is often categorized as radical or dangerous (ibid.). The distinction between a notion of differing identities between Us and Them is maintained through social practices and identity discourse. These mechanisms help to prevent any instabilities in the relations with the Other (ibid.). However, it is noteworthy that ontological attachment can both prevent and lead to physical insecurity and depends on the nature of the routinized relationship (Mitzen, 2006).

Ontological insecurity and desecuritization

Thus, ontological security theory challenges the realist perspective that the primary goal of states is achieving physical security (Ejdus, 2020). In protecting national identity and thereby, a sense of immortal continuity, actors in world politics are often willing to compromise their physical security or other material gains (ibid.). However, pointed out by Rumelili (2015), this distinction of physical and ontological security is what lies at the basis of any desecuritization process. Ontological insecurity does not necessitate that the state's survival is at risk and vice versa (Zobeydi, Ebrahimi, Shafaee, 2019). However, ruptures in socio-political practices or narratives can hinder the reproduction of discourse on the distinctive other and its potential threat (Mitzen, 2018). This could lead to social disorder and subsequent physical security threats. Thus, the process of desecuritization in an ontologically sensitive environment is a delicate matter.

Case Study: The Israel-Palestinian conflict in Jerusalem

The history of an Israeli nation-state and narratives of ontological insecurity

Since centuries, Jewish communities are exposed to anti-Semitism and othering, creating a historically isolated identity and the formation of mistrust in its cognitive environment (Adisönmez, 2018). The Zionist movement, on the

Ontological Insecurity: A Case Study on Israeli-Palestinian Conflict in Jerusalem
Written by Elaine Donderer

other hand, offered religion and national identification as tools to provide a notion of home and belonging (Zobeydi, Ebrahimi, Shafaee, 2019). These mechanisms are particularly prevalent in the autobiography of Israelis and Jews who have been persecuted and confronted not only with individual, but also collective mortality in the face of the Holocaust. While death is a shared human experience, the trauma of the Holocaust and Jewish diaspora has been a confrontation with a threat to both physical survival and ethnic ontological security (Ejdus, 2020). Additionally, the Jewish community endured losses of national identity that could have supported the members of the community in coping with their trauma of existential anxiety (ibid.). Hence, the biblical land of Israel was seen as an opportunity of a physical and ontological union (Busbridge, 2020). Thereby, the Israeli state and its land assumed the role of a security provider, protecting the existence of Israeli identity in the perceived hostile political environment of other Arab countries (Lupovici, 2012). Some scholars argue that the fatalistic idea of the future is ingrained in the Israeli national identity and has through its recurrence become a source of ontological security (Ejdus, 2020).

Other factors identified in Israeli narratives of ontological insecurity are unstable borders, and internal incoherence of identities and affiliation. Firstly, borders can aid a group in creating a sense of belonging and affiliation (Lupovici, 2012). Despite the expansionist foreign policy of Israel and engagement in conflict to expand territorial borders the state finds itself in an isolated security environment (Zobeydi, Ebrahimi, Shafaee, 2019). Particularly, Jerusalem's Old City as a historic basin of biblical and political claims for land has become a source of great insecurity for Israeli sovereignty (Busbridge, 2020). Although religion as an identity factor is weakened in modern societies, divisive discourse on land claims through biblical stories remains prevalent in the de-legitimization of Palestinian claims (Ejdus, 2020). Nevertheless, the vagueness of Israeli borders undermines the states' ability to realize its role as a security, as well as an identity provider (Lupovici, 2012). Furthermore, the lack of recognized legitimacy of the Israeli state by neighboring countries threatens the Israeli national identity (Zobeydi, Ebrahimi, Shafaee, 2019). To remain in an ontologically secure position, the Israeli state provides a narrative of self-reliance which is fundamental to the Israeli security approach. This is brought forward through a militarized education system and specific social practices of exclusion and inclusion that are sanctioned and rewarded by both state and religious institutions (Svirsky, 2021).

Constructing the Palestinian Other

According to Mitzen (2006), state distinctiveness to a constructed narrative of the Other is relevant to establish ontological security. In the case of Israel and Palestine, Zionism is presented as a modernizing project not only for the nation of Israel but the Jewish community (Busbridge, 2020). Hence, in diametrically opposing religious and national identities, Palestinians are often conceptualized as underdeveloped and backward, with the Palestinian land being framed as "uncultivated and effectively empty" (Busbridge, 2020, p.3). Moreover, Israeli narratives of Palestinian identity, particularly by the Israeli populist right-wing elite, are frequently generalizing between different kinds of Palestinian residents and resistance (Hever, 2018). Additionally, Palestinians are conceptualized as Arabs, and thus become a source of existential threat. This discourse is complemented by the notion that historically and religiously there is an exclusively Jewish past and future on the land of Israel (Busbridge, 2020). Although most Israelis show no opposition to living and interacting with the Other, the securitization of the state in opposition to the perceived Arab perpetrator excludes Palestinians from assisting and re-imagining the promised land in collaboration with its Israeli inhabitants (Adisönmez, 2018). Hence, the historical trauma and conceptual rigidity of threats that lie at the core of the Israeli state has become a guide to prioritize ontological security over desecuritization (Zobeydi, Ebrahimi, Shafaee, 2019).

Effectively, the exclusion and eviction of Palestinian residents in Jerusalem lead to numerous forms of resistance, including military and terrorist attacks with casualties on both sides (Lupovici, 2012). Israeli security practice uses measures of restricting Palestinian movement, disrupting communications, and evicting Palestinian inhabitants based on accusations of Palestinian terrorism (Naser-Najjab & Haver, 2021). However, establishing an internally coherent and uncontested Israeli identity is a considerable factor in the division process (Lupovici, 2012). Identifying an external threat helps differentiate the self from that threat and make decisions, for instance, by imposing an Israeli narrative on uncomfortable information. Frequently, the Israeli state frames Palestinians as terrorists, associating them with suicide operations and bombings in Western media (Zobeydi, Ebrahimi, Shafaee, 2019). However, a careful evaluation of events shows that instances of unrest are often carried out by specific groups, sporadic in nature and most notably, reactive (Naser-Najjab & Haver, 2021).

Ontological Insecurity: A Case Study on Israeli-Palestinian Conflict in Jerusalem

Written by Elaine Donderer

For each side of the conflict, the land is crucial for maintaining their identity and thus, reducing existential anxieties by representing their cultures, and religions (Lupovici, 2012). "Loss of that land, or the threat of its loss [. . .] implies the loss of the self." (Lupovici, 2012, p.822). It is, however, noteworthy, that in the past, international solidarity with Israeli security needs has outweighed similar concerns of Palestinian ontological insecurity and thus, resulted in an effective marginalization of Palestinian populations (Naser-Najjab & Haver, 2021). The consequences of these divisions are particularly evident in the context of Jerusalem.

The geographies of violence and identity in Jerusalem

Several factors distinguish the context of Jerusalem from other contested cities, making it an exemplary case to look at how narratives of securitization by the Israeli state influence recurring violence. Firstly, Jerusalem is a religious epicenter and location of numerous historically contested sites with Jewish, Muslim, and Christian communities populating the area (Rokem, Weiss, Miodownik, 2018). Secondly, both Israelis and Palestinian claim Jerusalem as their national capital, making it a focal point for disputes (Ibid.). Thirdly, the United Nations and most of the world's countries do not acknowledge Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, thereby, increasing the vulnerability of Israeli ontological security in this particular geography (Ibid.). Lastly, the population of Jerusalem is comprised of both Israeli populations (60,7%), and Palestinian populations (39,3%) (ICBS, 2016). Demographically, the city is clustered in homogeneous neighborhoods, both in terms of religion and ethnicity, and thus resembles conditions of apartheid (Rokem, Weiss, Miodownik, 2018). Therefore, Jerusalem is a prime example of ethnonationalist confrontation and resistance.

Both Israeli and Palestinian residents of Jerusalem experience different forms of violence. Notably, most Palestinians living in Jerusalem do not hold Israeli citizenship but are registered as residents of the city (Avni, 2020). Hence, they must continuously provide evidence of their resident status to Israeli authorities (Ibid.). Losing their status of permanent residency would result in a stateless status for most Palestinians, as they do not hold any other national citizenship (Avni, 2020). Additionally, Palestinian residents are subjected to house demolitions and ongoing evictions, thereby, experiencing ongoing insecurity (Pressman, 2020). Moreover, cultural practices such as religious events are often hindered by the armed forces of the Israeli state (Ibid.) These uncertainties threaten the stability of Palestinian identities and affiliation to the geography of Jerusalem. As a result, hostilities and violence occur in the contested space. Collective violence is more frequent in more segregated neighborhoods, whereas individual violence is more frequent in the more connected parts of the city (Rokem, Weiss, Miodownik, 2018). Hence, both sides endure and perpetrate violent attacks. Although these sentiments decreased since the second Palestinian uprising in 2005, recent riots have led to recurring violent exchanges (Rokem, Weiss, Miodownik, 2018). This shows that localized geographies of citizenship are pivotal in the struggle for ontological security.

Violent attacks, including Palestinian terrorist attacks, do not only create a physical threat but challenge the ontological security of the Israeli state by interrupting its routines (Lupovici, 2012). Furthermore, it threatens the narrative of the Israeli state as a security provider. In 2014, a series of attacks by Palestinian youths in Jerusalem, prompted by the Israeli invasion of Gaza, led to a militarization of space (Hever, 2018). While encouraging Israeli citizens to carry weapons for self-defense, the Israeli government used a campaign of preventive arrests targeted at Palestinian individuals surveilled by algorithms on social media (ibid.). However, these efforts had little effect on the sense of security experienced by the Israeli public (ibid.).

Psychologically, societies are known to adopt conflict-supporting beliefs to cope with the negative consequences and stress of ongoing threats (Canetti et al., 2017). Although these are valuable coping mechanisms, the perpetuated belief systems on the antagonism of the Other can bias narratives of conflicts and can inhibit peaceful solutions, thereby routinizing the very practice of conflict. By sustaining these narratives, the state of Israel continued to pursue policies of segregation and illegal expansion into East Jerusalem to secure its position of ontological stability (Hever, 2018). Nevertheless, particularly in the context of Jerusalem, both Israeli citizens and Palestinians are becoming increasingly sensitive to the contribution of these routinized relations of conflict to the cycle of violence (Lupovici, 2012). Thus, securitized practices of establishing ontological security by the Israeli state have perpetuated tensions and further complicated the inherent beliefs and identities of Israelis. Consequently, current developments show a rising demand to create space for alternative ways of security and narratives of identity.

Ontological Insecurity: A Case Study on Israeli-Palestinian Conflict in Jerusalem
Written by Elaine Donderer

Discussion and Conclusion

The contestation of Jerusalem's Old City is a prime example of the process of securitization under a narrative of ontological insecurity. Israel does not only experience physical threats over border disputes with its neighboring countries but an existential identity and stability threat in the form of conflicts between Islamic and Jewish, Arabic, Hebrew, and Zionist identities. Thus, the status of Jerusalem is elevated to an issue of survival. However, the process of securitization sidelines social and political problems by framing the geography of Jerusalem as a security issue that requires military and institutional intervention rather than policies to reduce the tensions. The perceived threats to a coherent Israeli identity and the subsequent militarization of Israeli practices do not strive to reduce the probability of violence and inter-group clashes but rather seek to provide a sense of security through isolated group identity.

The routinization of conflict and securitization has perpetuated both ontological and physical insecurities in the context of Jerusalem. Nevertheless, simply reminding Israelis and Palestinians of the constructed nature of their identity is likely not an effective strategy for desecuritization. At the same time, the reproduction of antithetical identities undermines political attempts for de-escalation and leaves little theoretical space for the emergence of alternative identities. Hence, to desecuritize, both parties must recognize each other as legitimate counterparts while simultaneously addressing inherent instabilities and the complexity of a multitude of ethnonationalist identities. While Jerusalem remains a highly segregated space, there are also opportunities for grassroots organizations to create dialogue and investigate common identities and experiences.

Notably, the investigation of Palestinian narratives of securitization lay outside the scope of this study. Nevertheless, the research hopes to encourage a more detailed investigation of how the security and existence of a Palestinian identity are influenced by the presence and practices of the Israeli state.

References

Adisönmez, U. C. (2017). Ontological (In) securities in Turkey and Israel: Unpacking the Nation-Building, Security Culture, and Conflict Resolution Triangle (Master's thesis). Retrieved from Lund University: https://lup.lub.lu.se/student-papers/search/publication/8911688

Alatout, S. (2006). Towards a bio-territorial conception of power: Territory, population, and environmental narratives in Palestine and Israel. *Political Geography, 25*(6), 601-621. Doi: 10.1016/j.polgeo.2006.03.008

Aljazeera (2021, May 12). Rising attacks in religiously 'mixed' Israel towns amid Gaza push. Retrieved from https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/5/12/gaza-crisis-fuels-escalating-violence-mixed-towns-israel

Avni, N. (2020). Between exclusionary nationalism and urban citizenship in East Jerusalem/al-Quds. *Political Geography*, 102314. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/345759567

Busbridge, R. (2020). Messianic time, settler colonial technology and the elision of Palestinian presence in Jerusalem's historic basin. *Political Geography, 79*, 102158. Doi: 10.1016/j.polgeo.2020.102158

Canetti, D., Elad-Strenger, J., Lavi, I., Guy, D., & Bar-Tal, D. (2017). Exposure to violence, ethos of conflict, and support for compromise: Surveys in Israel, East Jerusalem, West Bank, and Gaza. *Journal of conflict resolution, 61*(1), 84-113. Doi: 10.1177/0022002715569771

Ejdus, F. (2020). Crisis and Ontological Insecurity. Cham: Springer International Publishing.

Giddens, A. (1991). *Modernity and self-identity: self and society in the late modern age.* Stanford University Press.

Hever, S. (2018). Securing the Occupation in East Jerusalem: Divisions in Israeli Policy. *Jerusalem Quarterly, 75*, 104. Retrieved from https://www.palestine-studies.org/sites/default/files/jq-articles/Pages_from_JQ_75_-_Hever.pdf

Ontological Insecurity: A Case Study on Israeli-Palestinian Conflict in Jerusalem
Written by Elaine Donderer

Hoffmann, N. & van Heeswijk, E. L. S (2018). Thinking across Borders and Boundaries-Separation and Interaction between Palestinian and Isrealis (Bachelor's thesis). Retrieved from Utrecht University: https://dspace.library.uu.nl/handle/1874/368678

ICBS (2016). Israel Central Bureau of Statistics. Retrieved from http://www.cbs.gov.il/reader/?MIval=cw_usr_view_SHTML&ID=807

Lupovici, A. (2012). Ontological dissonance, clashing identities, and Israel's unilateral steps towards the Palestinians. *Review of international studies, 38,* 809-833. Doi: 10.1017! S026021

Mitzen, J. (2006). Ontological security in world politics: State identity and the security dilemma.*European journal of international relations, 12*(3), 341-370. Doi: 10.1177/1354066106067346

Mitzen, J. (2018). Anxious community: EU as (in) security community. European security, 27(3), 393-413. Doi: 10.1080/09662839.2018.1497985

Naser-Najjab, N., & Hever, S. (2021). Elite and popular contradictions in security coordination: overcoming the binary distinction of the Israeli coloniser and the colonised Palestinian. *Critical Studies on Security,* 1-14. Doi: 10.1080/21624887.2021.1875712

Peoples, C., & Vaughan-Williams, N. (2010). *Critical security studies: An introduction.* Routledge.

Pressman, J. (2020). Horizontal inequality and violent unrest in Jerusalem. *Terrorism and political violence, 32*(6), 1161-1185. Doi: 10.1080/09546553.2018.1453502

Rokem, J., Weiss, C. M., & Miodownik, D. (2018). Geographies of violence in Jerusalem: the spatial logic of urban intergroup conflict. *Political Geography, 66*, 88-97. Doi: 10.1016/j.polgeo.2018.08.008

Rumelili, B. (2015). Identity and desecuritisation: the pitfalls of conflating ontological and physical security.*Journal of international relations and development, 18*(1), 52-74. Doi: 10.1057/jird.2013.22

Rumelili, B. (Ed.). (2014). *Conflict resolution and ontological security: Peace anxieties.* Routledge.

Svirsky, M. (2021). The Reproduction of Settler Colonialism in Palestine. *Journal of Perpetrator Research, 4*, 1-36. Doi: 10.21039/jpr.4.1.79Zobeydi, Z., Ebrahimi, N., & Shafaee, S. M. (2019). The Revolutions of 2011-2012 in the Arabic Countries and Ontological Security of Israel. *Journal of Contemporary Research on Islamic Revolution, 1(*1), 117-137. Retrieved from https://jcrir.ut.ac.ir/article_72796.html?lang=en