

# Managing New Israeli-Palestinian Tensions During Ramadan

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

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**Despite increased readiness and cooperation in the lead-up to the holy month, recent polls provide a discouraging portrait of public hopes for peace, forcing authorities to keep a close eye on any moves that might inflame tensions.**

**R**enewed terrorist attacks against Israelis over the past few days have highlighted the seriousness of the security situation in the lead-up to Ramadan, Passover, and Easter. Although none of these attacks was perpetrated by residents of Jerusalem, tensions in that city have always held particular potential to escalate and spread. In September 2000, Ariel Sharon's provocative visit to the Temple Mount/al-Haram al-Sharif as head of the Israeli political opposition provided the catalyst for the second intifada. In July 2017, Israeli efforts to install metal detectors at the site's entrance—a response to Israeli police officers getting shot there—triggered widespread confrontations that spilled over to other Palestinian areas and brought Israeli-Jordanian relations close to the breaking point.

Such tensions tend to be even more potent when occurring in the holy month of Ramadan. Last May, for example, a perfect storm of combustible factors—Israeli plans to evict Palestinian families from the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood, restrictions on access to the Old City, planned marches on Jerusalem Day, and agitation from various sources—contributed to escalation on the ground that in turn gave Hamas a pretext to begin another all-out military confrontation with Israel. What can the parties do to avoid such escalation in the coming weeks?

## Polls Highlight a Combustible Mix

In the current context, East Jerusalem remains the main source of concern, despite the fact that conditions in the West Bank could trigger instability as well. Israel has controlled East Jerusalem since wresting it from Jordan in the 1967 war, officially annexing the city in 1980. Although the Palestinian Authority has been barred from operating in Jerusalem since the second intifada, members of the PA and its dominant party, Fatah, continue to play a role in the city. Jordanian religious endowment (*waqf*) officials manage al-Aqsa Mosque, and the kingdom's role as "Custodian of Muslim Holy Sites" was recognized in the 1994 Israel-Jordan peace treaty and Amman's separate 2013 agreement with the "state of Palestine."

Extremist elements are active in the city as well. Hamas has a strong following there. Likewise, the outlawed Northern Branch of the Islamic Movement in Israel has been increasing its presence, while far-right Jewish politicians have made the city the focus of their activities.

As for the 350,000 Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem, many have become severely alienated from Israel in recent years, despite the travel, employment, and social welfare benefits they continue to receive in contrast to their brethren in the West Bank and Gaza. Not that long ago, in 2014, polls indicated that just over half of them would prefer Israeli over Palestinian citizenship if they had to choose between the two. Since then, however, that proportion has plunged to less than a quarter, with the large majority voicing anger at their secondary status and supporting confrontation—at least in principle—against Israeli control.

Beyond Jerusalem, Palestinian popular attitudes are also widely resentful toward Israel and their own rulers in Ramallah, though not visibly inclined toward mass protest. According to a credible March survey by veteran Palestinian pollster Khalil Shikaki, a plurality (44%) say that "the most effective means of ending the occupation" would be "armed struggle"—though just one-quarter say they would opt for "popular resistance." A majority (61%) maintain their rejection of security coordination with Israel.

On the political front, support for Hamas appears roughly stable at 36% after a brief spike from last May's conflict, barely edged out by Fatah at 42%. Fatah chairman and PA president Mahmoud Abbas is very unpopular, with more than 80% wishing he would resign. Even the Palestine Liberation Organization has suffered a slow decline in its standing as the "sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people," from 69% in 2006 to 51% today. Around half say they would support dissolving the PA, which they feel has become "a burden" on their society. All of this suggests that even if Abbas, Fatah, and the PA did come out unequivocally against violence, they would probably not have the full desired effect.

Why then has there not been a third intifada so far? Instead of guessing, Washington Institute polls conducted in 2019-2020 crowdsourced the answer by asking Palestinians themselves (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/nation-divided-palestinian-views-war-and-peace-israel>). Around one-quarter said the absence of a renewed mass uprising was due mainly to fear of harsh responses by the Israeli or Palestinian government; a second quarter pointed to greater public preoccupation with daily needs; and a third quarter cited distrust of their leaders' capacity to manage an intifada toward some positive outcome. Only the remaining quarter noted their lingering hopes for peace negotiations with Israel.

So what do Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank now see as the preferred solution to their plight? The hard truth is that most of them no longer believe in the proverbial "two-state solution." Support for that option has dwindled in recent years to just 40%, compared with a high of two-thirds or more in the 1990s following the Oslo Accords. An increasing minority (32%) say they prefer a "one-state solution (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/one-state-solution-unworkable>), with equal rights for Arabs and Jews." Moreover, according to Shikaki's latest poll, a solid majority (73%) say the Quran predicts Israel's eventual demise. Reliable polls by The Washington Institute indicate that around half believe this will occur in the next thirty to forty years—either because "Allah is on

our side” or simply because “the Palestinians will outnumber the Jews some day.”

Many of these gloomy sentiments are seemingly mirrored at the Israeli grassroots level. According to a wide variety of solid surveys throughout the past decade, most Jewish Israelis (who constitute 75% of the total citizenry) believe that “ending the occupation” would not reduce (and might actually increase) the incidence of terrorism and other violence against them. That belief is presumably based on their experience after previous Israeli withdrawals—from the West Bank’s major cities under the Oslo Accords in 1995, and from all of Gaza in 2005. As a result, only a minority of the overall Israeli public (around 40%) continues to voice support for a two-state solution. Yet many polls indicate that only a very small minority of Jewish Israelis back settler violence against Palestinians, Jewish militant demonstrations on the Temple Mount, reprisals against Arab Israeli citizens, or other moves that might escalate tensions to an even higher level.

In short, both sides have largely lost faith in finding a peaceful settlement of their conflict—but neither actively supports a return to mass violence at the moment. Israelis are well aware of the human and diplomatic toll that violent outbreaks can take, including the type of domestic intercommunal spillover seen last year. The PA is concerned that widespread violence might undermine its shaky standing among Palestinians. Jordan worries that violence could affect its authority over Jerusalem holy sites, trigger unrest at home, and put tremendous strain on its strategic relations with Israel. In contrast, Hamas welcomes instability in the West Bank as a means of undermining its PA rival and serving its agenda of attacking Israel.

## Current Preventive Measures

In light of these factors and the traumatic experience of May 2021, authorities have been taking various steps to deescalate tensions and prevent violence. Jordan and Israel are deeply engaged on the operational level regarding procedures at al-Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount. King Abdullah has discussed these issues during various recent meetings in Amman with Israel’s president and its ministers of defense, foreign affairs, and public security; he also raised them during his visit with Abbas in Ramallah [earlier this week](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/making-most-jordans-peace-diplomacy) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/making-most-jordans-peace-diplomacy>).

Israeli-Palestinian security cooperation continues as well. Such cooperation has been effective in containing past episodes of deterioration, whether through intelligence sharing, joint operations to dismantle terrorist infrastructure, or using PA security forces to prevent Palestinian demonstrators from reaching friction points. Simultaneously, Israel has embarked on confidence-building gestures in the West Bank and Gaza to improve the atmosphere.

The United States is likewise trying to maintain calm. During his March 27 visits to Israel and the West Bank, Secretary of State Antony Blinken “emphasized the imperative of having a peaceful Ramadan, Easter, [and] Passover,” enumerating specific measures that both sides could take in this regard. Previously, the U.S. government resumed its funding to both the PA and the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East—though the former assistance remains modest because American aid is legally constrained by the PA’s continued policy of paying stipends to imprisoned terrorists and the families of individuals killed while conducting terrorist attacks. Importantly, U.S. support for the PA security forces was part of this resumption, which has meant increasing their capabilities, boosting their coordination with Israeli forces, and giving more leverage to the U.S. Security Coordinator. The coordinator’s office has played an invaluable role during past moments of heightened tension.

Yet for all these efforts, the environment remains ripe for escalation. The PA is going through one of the direst financial crises since its creation, which has accelerated the [erosion of its legitimacy](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/palestinian-politics-are-more-divided-ever)

(<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/palestinian-politics-are-more-divided-ever>),

diminished its moral authority among Palestinians, and reduced the effectiveness of its security forces. Fatah

elements continue to praise terrorist attacks even on those occasions when Abbas condemns the violence. Hamas continues to agitate rhetorically while plotting terrorist attacks from the West Bank. Israeli settler elements have increased the magnitude and brazenness of their violence, further inflaming the situation. And attacks by individuals affiliated with the Islamic State have raised concerns that the jihadist group may now be focusing on Israel.

## U.S. Policy Recommendations

**W**hile the United States has no direct role to play on the ground, it can still mobilize its diplomacy to encourage positive trends and discourage negative ones. Toward that end, U.S. officials should keep a close eye on developments in realtime and apply pressure when needed, similar to how they successfully urged Abbas to condemn this week's shootings in Bnei Brak. Particular attention should be paid to developments on the Temple Mount/al-Haram al-Sharif, as well as PA/Fatah messaging, Israeli settler violence, and evictions and home demolitions in Jerusalem.

Washington should stay in close contact with Jordan as well, not only regarding measures in Jerusalem, but also as a conduit to the PA. Coordinating closely with Egypt is important too, since Cairo has significant leverage on Hamas.

Finally, the United States should urge other regional allies to refrain from counterproductive actions. Specifically, Qatari media—Al Jazeera in particular—have been glorifying the Bnei Brak attack this week, in line with their traditional praise for Palestinian terrorism. These actions are not acceptable from a newly minted “Major Non-NATO Ally”—Washington should call for a clear condemnation of terrorism from Qatari leaders. Doha also enjoys significant influence on Hamas and should be encouraged to employ it at this sensitive moment.

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Tuesday, April 5, 2022, starting at 2:00 p.m. EDT (1600 GMT)

◆  
Anna Ahronheim,  
Ghaith al-Omari,  
Matthew Levitt

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Ghaith al-Omari

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