

# Israel and Jordan Act to Ease Jerusalem Crisis

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Brief Analysis

## The recent events again proved the dangerous potential of the city's holy sites.

**O**n July 24, Israel and Jordan took steps to defuse an explosive crisis surrounding Jerusalem's Temple Mount/al-Haram al-Sharif (TM/HAS). This marks the third time since 2014 that the two countries have worked together to restore calm in one of the region's most contentious areas.

The resolution was facilitated by the release of an Israeli security guard from the country's embassy in Amman who, on July 23, killed a Jordanian attacker and a bystander. For its part, the Israeli security cabinet agreed late on July 24 to remove controversial metal detectors set up at the edge of the TM/HAS compound. Jordanian officials cited the detectors as the price for the guard's release in a phone conversation with Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu.

The metal detectors were installed when Arab Israeli supporters of radical forces killed two Israeli border policemen on July 14, using guns they had smuggled into the area. Israel's decision to deploy the metal detectors without the coordination of Arab authorities -- both Jordanian and Palestinian -- was cited as the rationale for protests. These protests eventually escalated into clashes with Israeli security authorities, leading to the death of three Palestinians on Friday July 21. Later that same night, a lone Palestinian assailant killed three Israeli settlers in their West Bank home, alleging that he was defending TM/HAS.

## De-Escalation

**T**ensions inched higher on the evening of July 23, when the attack played out at the Israeli embassy. In the incident, a Jordanian carpenter doing maintenance work used a screwdriver in an attempt to stab an Israeli. This was when the security guard opened fire, killing the attacker and also apparently inadvertently struck down the innocent Jordanian landlord alongside him. For more than twenty-four hours, some twenty Israeli diplomats and guards were locked in the embassy compound amid security threats. Israeli officials had been nervous that public

Jordanian demonstrations would occur right outside the compound, fueling tensions. When Netanyahu could not reach Jordan's King Abdullah, he instructed Israel's ambassador to Washington, Ron Dermer, to contact Trump's senior advisor (and son-in-law) Jared Kushner at the White House. Kushner spoke to Abdullah and asked that the Israeli be freed.

The next day, Nadav Argaman, who heads the Israel Security Agency (ISA), or Shin Bet -- the agency responsible for protecting Israeli diplomats abroad -- rushed to Amman to meet with his Jordanian counterparts. While Israel refused to allow the guard to be interrogated, Argaman let Jordanian police visit the embassy compound on July 24 to hear the guard's description of the incident in the presence of Israeli diplomats. Subsequently, the entire embassy staff boarded a convoy and headed back to Israel. According to the prime minister's office, all such staff, headed by Ambassador Einat Shlain and including the wounded security guard, traversed the Allenby Crossing at 11 p.m. In Jordan, meanwhile, the guard's release prompted a walkout in parliament.

Minutes after the Israelis were released, the Israeli security cabinet voted to dismantle the metal detectors. A Jordanian official told the Israeli media afterward that a "deal" had been struck, despite the debate over whether an explicit quid pro quo or something more informal had transpired.

## Jordan's Role

Jordan has had to navigate this crisis carefully. On one hand, Jordan and Israel have very close security ties that have deepened owing to common concerns over the Islamic State, other jihadist groups, and Iran. On the other, TM/HAS resonates loudly with its Muslim public, and Jordan is very sensitive about affirming its role as the custodian of the site, a role enshrined in the 1994 Israel-Jordan peace treaty. The Hashemites view this role as a pillar of their religious legitimacy.

Such a background explains why the Jordanians could not be seen as taking Israel's side in the metal detector affair. This public position has also constrained Jordan's actions in recent years when the TM/HAS issue has surged. In those instances, Jordan and Israel have quietly worked out arrangements including deploying security cameras to collect evidence involving threats to public order at the holy site. In November 2015, then U.S. secretary of state John Kerry flew to Amman to preside over the deal, which for the first time included a public statement by Netanyahu that Israelis could visit but not pray at the site. Yet when the Jordan-based Jerusalem Islamic Waqf authorities who administer TM/HAS objected to the cameras, Jordan did not defend the agreement it had struck with Israel.

## Israel's Role

After the July 14 killing of the two Israeli border policemen, the country's security establishment was split on whether to use the metal detectors, with some military and Shin Bet officials fearing a Palestinian backlash, according to multiple Israeli media reports. In contrast, the Israel Police, led by Netanyahu confidant Gilad Erdan, propagated the view that the detectors would help restore security, noting that metal detectors are used at religious sites around the world, including the Vatican and Mecca, as well as the nearby Western Wall. What these Israelis saw as security, however, Palestinians regarded as an instrument to exert control over a contested holy site. At the July 24 security cabinet meeting at which the decision was taken to remove the detectors, Netanyahu made clear he was doing so at the request of the security establishment. Meanwhile, he denied an explicit quid pro quo with Jordan, although without similarly denying an understanding with the kingdom.

Thanking Abdullah for his cooperation, Netanyahu told the Jordanian king that Israel has other, less-intrusive measures to ensure security at TM/HAS, apparently including biometric facial-recognition technology that can identify suspects and will be installed in the coming months. Sensing an opportunity, Netanyahu's three right-wing rivals in the security cabinet -- led by Education Minister Naftali Bennett -- attacked him for yielding to Palestinian pressure, insisting the gesture represented a pullback from Israeli authority at the Temple Mount that, in turn, would

only lead to further Palestinian demands. Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman supported Netanyahu in the effort.

Netanyahu, in general, hates to ever be perceived as weak and often says he is acting on the recommendations of the security establishment when decisions, such as this one, could open him up to such a charge. Here, the public had learned the security establishment was divided, making the situation more complex than usual. Separately, a risk-averse Netanyahu is very much aware of the resonance of TM/HAS for Palestinians and the broader Arab world. In 1996, during his first term in office, he learned firsthand of the destructive potential of the area, when incorrect rumors that an Israeli tunnel ran beneath the al-Aqsa Mosque led to fighting that killed seventy Palestinians and seventeen Israeli soldiers. More recently, he has touted Israel's quiet dealings with a variety of Arab states on regional threats, and likely did not want this issue to torpedo these common efforts. Like the Sunni states involved in such relations, Israel may feel it has more to lose than in the past.

The Israeli decision to remove the metal detectors, it should also be noted, came one day before a planned UN Security Council meeting on the Jerusalem crisis, potentially nudging along the move. A final process-related note: Netanyahu had agreed to *install* the detectors on the eve of a trip abroad, before he could engage in wide-ranging consultations on the matter.

## Palestinian Authority on the Sidelines

**A**s in earlier such crises, the Palestinian Authority (PA) was content to let Jordan take the lead in seeking a resolution. PA president Mahmoud Abbas, for his part, echoed public anger in his remarks, although he did agree to talk by phone with Netanyahu. While publicly announcing the suspension of security cooperation with Israel, indications suggest such cooperation continued by phone and other means. Ekrima Sabri, the head of Jerusalem's Supreme Islamic Council, said the council would soon review Israel's role in the crisis.

## U.S. Envoys

**I**n seeking to resolve the situation, the Trump administration brought together a statement from the Quartet (EU, UN secretary-general, United States, and Russia) encouraging a lead Jordanian role. As noted above, Kushner did intervene at a key juncture with his request that King Abdullah personally help de-escalate the embassy crisis. Trump envoy Jason Greenblatt also visited the region to ease tensions. So far, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson has been publicly absent from the scene, appearing to defer to the White House amid a lack of personal relationships with the pertinent leaders.

## Conclusion

**T**he unfolding crisis around TM/HAS, and in Amman, again proved the dangerous potential of the Jerusalem holy sites. It also showed that relevant players -- namely, the Israelis and Jordanians -- will work together to avert a wide-scale tragic outcome if they perceive one looming. But the tensions have not died down altogether, and this crisis could easily reignite.

*David Makovsky is the Ziegler Distinguished Fellow and director of the Project on the Middle East Peace Process at The Washington Institute. His publications include the Transition 2017 paper [Toward a New Paradigm for Addressing the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/toward-a-new-paradigm-for-addressing-the-israeli-palestinian-conflict) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/toward-a-new-paradigm-for-addressing-the-israeli-palestinian-conflict>) (coauthored with Dennis Ross). ❖*



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