

# Palestinian-Israeli Crisis: Leadership, Diplomacy, and Prospects for Renewed Violence

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Brief Analysis

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**An Israeli journalist and a former Palestinian advisor discuss the implications of the violence in Jerusalem. Watch video or read a summary.**

*On October 15, Avi Issacharoff, Ghaith al-Omari, and David Makovsky addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Issacharoff is a Middle East correspondent for the Times of Israel and the Walla web portal. Omari is a senior fellow at the Institute and a former advisor to Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks; Makovsky's observations will be published separately.*

AVI ISSACHAROFF

For more than a year, Israel's security apparatus has warned the political leadership that without diplomatic progress vis-a-vis the Palestinians, an explosion of the type seen today would surely erupt. Since October 1, a wave of terrorist attacks has hit Israelis, often multiple incidents per day. Even the worst days of the second intifada, in

March-April 2002, saw only one or two attacks per week.

The current round of violence does differ in important ways from the first and second intifadas, however. There are not tens of thousands of protestors on the streets. Even on the "day of rage" declared for October 13, only about 2,000 demonstrators mustered in the West Bank. And the emerging phenomenon in which Palestinian assailants seem willing to die just to kill one Israeli stands in contrast to the mass-casualty targeting seen during the second intifada. The current round is also more of a "Jerusalem intifada" -- 80 percent of the attackers have come from east Jerusalem, meaning they have Israeli identification cards, which allow greater freedom of movement. The attackers have generally been youths of both genders who are not connected to any network, making prevention increasingly difficult.

Thus far, the West Bank has largely refrained from joining the uprising, and the bulk of the Palestinian public seems uninterested in a full-scale escalation with Israel. At the same time, this intifada is marked by sustained violence, with attacks continuing daily for the past two weeks. It is also characterized by feelings of panic inside Israel, with many residents fearful to leave their homes. And even if the violence calms down soon, the underlying factors that sparked it will still exist.

Despite heated rhetoric, including an inflammatory televised address on October 14, PA president Abbas has taken steps to lower tensions. He has ensured that the security forces are working with their Israeli counterparts and has ordered the media to lessen incitement. He also transferred money to Palestinian universities to prevent a planned strike that would have left students out of the classrooms and on the streets. On the one hand, he understands the need to avoid escalation, but on the other hand, he believes he cannot let his public see him as collaborating with Israel. Allowing Fatah's Tanzim militia to play a more active role would likely increase the volatility of the crisis, but Abbas may be willing to take that risk in the hope of rallying popular support.

The sad reality is that even Abbas's incitement and false allegations -- such as the claim that Israel executed a thirteen-year-old who stabbed two victims -- have little impact on the ground. This is because the Palestinian public largely views him as irrelevant. Those who support or perpetrate the violence are fed not by Abbas's rhetoric, but through incitement on social media outlets such as Facebook and Instagram. Palestinians have lost faith in Abbas, and most want him to resign, viewing him as another branch of the Israeli occupation.

In short, the latest violence shows that the status quo is not sustainable -- the conflict cannot just be managed. Yet resolving it may be impossible as well, which is why the current reality is so complicated.

## **GHAITH AL-OMARI**

**S**everal factors have led to this combustible moment, with Israelis and Palestinians each contributing to the heightened tensions. Israel had a role in sparking the current crisis given the high rate of Palestinian fatalities, as well as recent statements and policies implemented by the Israeli government. Ultimately, then, Israel has an important role to play in ending the violence.

Although there is much debate on the situation's proximate causes, it is more prudent to focus on the nature of the violence, since it is unlikely to dissipate on its own. When there is stagnation and no hope of ending the conflict, things will naturally become volatile. Recent polls show that 80 percent of Palestinians do not believe a two-state solution can be achieved in the next five years, and 70 percent feel that two states is no longer a viable option at all.

There is also a leadership vacuum on the Palestinian side, at the political and ground level. Abbas faces a credibility deficit and has little to offer his public. As evidenced by his October 14 address in Ramallah and his September 30 UN General Assembly speech, he has no plan or vision for the people to rally around, and the PA continues to suffer from rampant corruption and lack of transparency. Fatah is facing a legitimacy crisis as well, with a disconnect between the leadership and activists on the ground. Abbas has tried to compensate for this problem with strong

public rhetoric, but that approach has only backfired, stirring an already combustible mix. Similar to the late 1930s, the Palestinian national movement is eroding at a time when regional powers are occupied elsewhere.

The violence also has broader implications for the Middle East. The situation is affecting Jordan's internal stability, which is already fragile given the Syrian refugee crisis. Qatar and Turkey are also fueling the incitement for their own political benefit.

Despite all this, it is still premature to call the current round an intifada. It remains a small-scale protest without any leadership at the political levels. Fatah as an organization was much more cohesive and energetic during the second intifada, whose scars are still fresh -- Palestinians remember the price they paid in exchange for little progress on the ground. At the moment, the situation has shown signs that it might begin calming down, but the chance of a major incident (e.g., a large-scale terrorist attack or a wave of "price tag" attacks) still exists.

Therefore, now is not the time for big diplomatic adventures, but rather for small, prudent steps to lower tensions and shape a more positive reality on the ground. The Palestinians should address their public rhetoric/incitement and focus on restarting the reform project, which stalled two or three years ago. For its part, Israel must strongly reassure the PA that the status quo at al-Haram al-Sharif will be preserved, and take more actions on the ground to improve Palestinian quality of life.

Both sides should also work with the United States to further invest in security cooperation. Such cooperation has been a rare bright spot in the current tensions and is helping to reduce violence. More broadly, it has created a constituency within Israel's security establishment that understands the effectiveness of partnering with the PA and is working to lower the temperature.

*This summary was prepared by Gabrielle Chefitz.* ❖

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