

Palestinian Messaging About Violence: Blame Israel, but Keep Control

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Brief Analysis

Having stoked tensions in Jerusalem, Mahmoud Abbas and his government now find it hard to reassert their authority.

As two weeks of stabbings and violent demonstrations in and around Jerusalem continue, along with sporadic mass breaches of the Gaza border, official Palestinian statements and media commentary are sending a dual message. Generally speaking, neither Palestinian Authority (PA) nor Hamas messages call for more violence in their own territory -- although Hamas does call for more murder of Jews in Jerusalem. But neither Palestinian government repudiates the violence; both praise its Palestinian perpetrators; and both blame Israel rather than their own people for it.

Background: Temple Mount Tensions

Leading up to this crisis, PA accusations against Israel had turned increasingly shrill. This campaign built upon the widespread but false Palestinian perception that Israel was trying to stake new claims to al-Haram al-Sharif (the Temple Mount) and its al-Aqsa Mosque, sacred to Muslims -- and that Jews have no history or rights in that area. Sadly, repeated disavowals by Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu and others of an extremist Jewish fringe's provocations did not offset incitement by the fundamentalist Israeli Arab "Northern Branch" movement or other radical Islamist groups -- or by the PA itself.

During the Jewish holiday season in mid-September, in the wake of demonstrations and Israeli police action at the al-Aqsa Mosque, PA president Mahmoud Abbas personally and publicly denounced the "filthy feet" of Jews trampling there, while praising "every drop of blood shed...for the sake of Allah." This outburst elicited a highly unusual private admonition against such incitement, according to Israeli press accounts, from UN secretary-general Ban Ki-moon.

Nevertheless, Abbas did not recant, and went on to repeat such inflammatory and misleading accusations against

Israeli policy toward the Temple Mount in his UN General Assembly address a week later. Shortly thereafter, on several occasions when Israelis were shot or stabbed to death by terrorists in the West Bank and Jerusalem, Abbas did not repudiate those actions -- as he sometimes had in the past. His silence was especially noteworthy because a Fatah faction had publicly taken responsibility for two of these most recent killings. Instead, the PA officially called for the UN and the international community to "protect" Palestinians against Israeli "escalation."

Palestinian Statements vs. Actions

Early statements by Palestinian officials blamed Israel for escalating the crisis -- although privately these officials were reportedly trying to rein in the potential for larger-scale disorder. And some Palestinians privately pointed out that most of the violence was taking place not in the West Bank but inside Israel, especially in Jerusalem or on the border with Gaza -- where PA officials and security agents had no access or control. Behind the scenes, according to Israeli officials and experts, PA security continued to coordinate with Israel against Hamas terrorism -- going so far, according to Hamas, as to deliver the five-member underground Hamas cell in the Nablus/Jenin area responsible for shooting two Israeli settlers to death.

By the second week of October, a familiar pattern of mixed messaging had reemerged, but in a higher key. Abbas reiterated, to his own domestic audience in Arabic, that he opposed violence and wanted only "peaceful, popular resistance." To Israelis, he said, "We want peace and our hands will continue to be extended in peace, despite all our suffering at your hands." In the same breath, however, he urged Palestinians to "defend" themselves and "protect" al-Aqsa, and warned Israel to "stay away from our Islamic and Christian holy places."

Moreover, even Hamas statements seem designed to preempt drastic escalation and Israeli retaliation in Gaza. Early on, Mousa Abu Marzouk, a deputy to Hamas leader Khaled Mashal, announced that Hamas would refrain from rocket fire into Israel, so as not to "distract" from the struggle in Jerusalem and the West Bank. And last week, Hamas declared that its side of the border with Israel would henceforth be a closed military zone -- presumably so that it could better control incursions or other incidents. Rival PA -- and some other Arab -- media hinted darkly that this exposed the real Hamas policy toward Israel: a "truce under the table," as the PA official daily wrote on October 13.

At lower levels, every day in early October, the PA official newspaper still labeled Palestinian terrorists killed in action as "martyrs"; termed stabbing and other Palestinian attacks as "operations"; and reported in detail about social media approval for the murder of settlers. It published op-eds with sentences like the following: "My daughter made me happy when she said, 'I want to carry out a martyrdom operation and kill some Israeli soldiers.'" The official daily refrained, however, from openly endorsing such behavior.

But Fatah media, and sometimes official PA television, featured statements by senior party officials -- including Mahmoud al-Aloul and Sultan Abu al-Einein -- and others explicitly praising violence against Israeli civilians, such as by calling settlers "legitimate targets." On October 8, the PA cabinet issued a statement that did not mention Palestinian violence but accused Israel of acting "to kill and assassinate defenseless children and civilians...summary executions and cold-blooded murder." In the past few days, senior PA officials, including Saeb Erekat and Nabil Abu Rudeineh, have repeated and elaborated on these charges. Abbas himself is reiterating this canard in his "important speech to the nation" as this essay goes to press.

A perfect instance of mixed messaging came from an unexpected source. On October 11, in an open letter written from jail and published in Britain's *Guardian* newspaper, leading Fatah figure Marwan Barghouti endorsed the right of "unarmed" Palestinians to "resist the occupation" and denounced "Israeli attacks against the Palestinians in the city [Jerusalem] and in Muslim and Christian holy sites." Elsewhere in the piece, he also wrote, albeit without explicitly affirming support for a lasting two-state solution, that this was still "a solvable political conflict" and that

"the last day of occupation will be the first day of peace." But that message could be found only in English, not in any major Arabic publication.

The differences in these messages are being amplified in the pan-Arab newspapers and satellite television channels -- which surveys show Palestinians watch and read at least as much as they do their own local media. For example, Saudi-owned Al-Arabiya TV or *al-Sharq al-Awsat* and *al-Hayat* newspapers are playing down the latest Israeli-Palestinian violence, with at most one such lead story each day. In sharp contrast, Qatar-owned Al Jazeera TV or *al-Quds al-Arabi* newspaper are playing up the new "intifada," featuring three or four lead stories about it each day, plus inflammatory "analysis" about PA and even Hamas "cowardice" or "treason" in not expanding the violence. So far, the Arab League, in a Cairo statement on October 13, has toed the PA line about "Israeli provocations against al-Aqsa" and "international protection for the Palestinians," rather than the Hamas line calling for greater "armed resistance" activities in Jerusalem and the West Bank.

Back in Ramallah on October 11, according to one Israeli press report, Abbas met with militant Fatah leaders from the Tanzim faction, and asked them to cease incitement. By this time, however, some analysts were speculating about just how much -- or how little -- difference Abbas could make in this volatile climate, given his declining popularity and internal political authority. Indeed, as Palestinian pollster Khalil Shikaki pointed out, two-thirds of the Palestinian public in the West Bank and Gaza now wanted Abbas to resign.

Prospects

Without a clear successor, and with Hamas and other radicals seeking to supplant the PA president, the prospects are very dim for Palestinian messages of peace or reconciliation, either in the current or in a post-Abbas scenario. And the prevalence of inflammatory social media messages could well drown out whatever messages Abbas attempts to convey. In this fraught climate, any official call for nonviolence would require real action if it is to be effective.

David Pollock is the Kaufman Fellow at The Washington Institute and director of Fikra Forum. ♦

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