

Time to Stop Incitement to Murder -- Again

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Brief Analysis

In responding to a spike in Israeli-Palestinian incitement, Washington should encourage constructive suggestions and focus on the worst cases.

This week, after a young rabbi and three children were shot to death at a Jewish school in France, Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas cabled condolences to French president Nicolas Sarkozy. In that brief cable, according to the official Palestinian news agency Wafa, Abbas claimed that he always absolutely opposed any killing of civilians. And yet, just a few weeks ago, Abbas held a meeting in Turkey to honor the Palestinian prisoner, released by Israel as part of the Gilad Shalit deal, who had used the internet to lure an Israeli high school boy to his terrorist murderers last year.

This month also marks the first anniversary of the Fogel murders, for which two Palestinian teenagers were convicted of killing a family of five in the West Bank settlement of Itamar. At the time, Abbas condemned this attack, earning an acknowledgment from some American and even some Israeli observers. Nevertheless, on the very same day, the PA officially dedicated a major town square in honor of Dalal al-Mughrabi, a Palestinian woman implicated in the murder of thirty-seven Israeli civilians during a bus hijacking in 1978. And within a few days, official PA television broadcast a new song lauding the "heroism" of the killers at Itamar.

In the year since the Itamar massacre, particularly in the past few months, the PA's record about glorifying violence against civilians has generally taken a turn for the worse. The PA youth magazine Zayzafuna, for instance, recently published a girl's dreamy vision of Hitler -- ironically prompting UNESCO to withdraw funding for this publication, even as Palestine was admitted to that organization as a full member. The official mufti of Jerusalem delivered a televised sermon invoking the hadith (quotation attributed to Muhammad) about "the Muslims killing all the Jews" to bring on Judgment Day -- in sharp contrast to earlier PA efforts to scrub Hamas-style rhetoric from mosques under its jurisdiction. And Abbas himself delivered a highly inflammatory address to a conference on Jerusalem held in Doha last month that falsely accused Israel of planning to destroy the al-Aqsa Mosque. In each case, the PA response to criticism was not apology or even acknowledgment, but denial or deflection, by pointing to supposed Israeli

provocations or transgressions.

Worst of all, tributes to terrorists convicted of mass murder have become almost routine in official PA media and ceremonies. Numerous examples are documented in the "incitement index" compiled by the Israeli prime minister's office, and also by the NGO Palestinian Media Watch. The PA has countered by issuing several compilations of alleged Israeli incitement: a short list of media citations, published in the immediate aftermath of the Itamar massacre; a similar, slightly longer list published in January of this year; and a very long and detailed report about "price tag" or other settler attacks published this month, indicating a dramatic increase over the past year. Many of these events are indeed deplorable. Notably absent from these lists, however, are any instances of official Israeli tribute to unrepentant or active terrorist murderers.

The full spectrum of mutual incitement by various elements on both sides is admittedly wide and murky. Both use religious arguments and imagery to bolster their competing political claims. Palestinian maps do not show Israel, but neither do Israeli maps show the Palestinian Authority. Individual extremists on both sides indulge in hate speech. And neither side's official statements spend much time talking about the need for compromise or reconciliation. But official encouragement to killers should be clearly put beyond the pale -- especially if it is preached or practiced by the most senior political leaders, as has been the case lately on the Palestinian side.

What accounts for this negative shift? The absence of any peace process may be partly to blame. But that absence makes it even more, not less, important to try to counter incitement, as difficult as that may be. Otherwise, the political vacuum gets filled by extremist rhetoric, generating a vicious circle in which any eventual peacemaking effort becomes increasingly unpalatable and unlikely. Reviving the peace process may one day be the best remedy for this gloomy prognosis -- but it should not be the only one, for later may prove to be too late.

Other factors play a role in the current downward spiral as well. In the short term, hostile rhetoric against Israel pays domestic Palestinian political dividends -- and most leading Palestinian politicians, like their counterparts elsewhere, are usually thinking short-term. Related to this is Abbas's fitful but continuing attempt to play the "unity card" with Hamas, which naturally puts a premium on hardline declarations. And related to that is the broader context of the Arab uprisings in neighboring countries and around the region, which are generally taking an increasingly Islamist and anti-Israeli direction.

Moreover, Palestinian anti-Israeli or even anti-Semitic incitement incurs no real cost from the United States, despite its nominal opposition and occasional pro forma protests against it. U.S. officials have reportedly shown no interest in reviving the (admittedly frustrating and ultimately futile) Oslo-era trilateral anti-incitement committee -- even when Israeli and Palestinian officials agreed to suggest that modest procedural step, around the time of the Itamar massacre a year ago. The main U.S. effort in this area today appears to be confined to supporting an exhaustive and painstaking joint academic study of possible incitement in Israeli and Palestinian textbooks, with results not due to be published until several months from now. While laudable, this project by nature comes nowhere near addressing a problem that is at once more far-reaching and more urgent.

Yet some bright spots do remain. Abbas sometimes does praise terrorists, but he has so far stayed steadfast in support of a two-state solution, implying coexistence with Israel, and usually speaks of peaceful rather than violent resistance as the preferred path to that end. PA prime minister Salam Fayad has kept away from direct personal praise for terrorists, although there have been a few instances when such praise was issued in his name. In practice, relatively few (fourteen) Israelis were murdered in the West Bank last year in the roughly 500 attempted terrorist attacks there -- mainly because of Israeli security measures, with some PA support. On the Israeli side, settler and other vigilante violence, and instigation by some extreme rabbinical or other right-wing activists, is usually condemned and disavowed by senior officials. More important, the Israeli security establishment continues to monitor, preempt, and punish at least some of the worst offenses in this area. No Palestinians were murdered by

Jewish terrorists last year -- although eleven West Bank Palestinians were killed in altercations with Israeli security forces, according to a new report by the Israeli NGO B'Tselem.

On both sides, too, some NGOs, schools, religious institutions, and private businesses keep struggling to maintain human contact across the divide, and to call attention to common interests and values. The recent visit to Washington of the Norwegian-backed Council of Religious Institutions in the Holy Land, including representatives of Israel's chief rabbinate, the PA Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs, and Lutheran and Catholic church leaders from the region, was one such admirable initiative. Without political leadership, however, such efforts can probably help only on the margins. And the PA's new de facto ban on most forms of educational, cultural, social, or even charitable "normalization" with Israelis makes such efforts almost impossible.

More should therefore be done to combat incitement, even (or especially) in the absence of any immediate "political horizon" for Palestinian-Israeli peace. The first step is to focus on constructive suggestions, at least as much as on mutual finger-pointing. The next step should be to narrow the focus to the worst cases: any support by senior officials for violence or violent offenders. Leaders must set the right tone, and stick to it without exception or equivocation.

The United States should do more to support this minimal standard. It can not only quietly encourage regional leaders to refrain from incitement but also hold them to account in some concrete fashion whenever they step over the line. It can help craft more positive high-level messages with some realistic prospect of seeing the light of day. For example, Abbas and Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu could each reiterate their firm adherence to a two-state solution, their total rejection of terrorism, and their acceptance of both sides' historic links to the land. Finally, as part of a package of practical confidence-building measures, the United States should explore with both sides whether either could offer some concrete quid pro quo for curbing incitement. None of this will be a sufficient condition to revive the peace process, but all of it is probably a necessary one.

David Pollock is the Kaufman fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on the political dynamics of Middle Eastern countries. ❖

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