

The Fogel Murders: A Call to Combat Incitement

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Brief Analysis

Incitement to violence, long a secondary issue in Israeli-Palestinian diplomacy, has returned to the front burner. About a year ago, the Israeli government began publishing an "incitement index" that tracked Palestinian Authority (PA) statements and publications. Then, on March 11 of this year, the Fogel family was massacred in the West Bank settlement of Itamar, prompting large numbers of U.S. senators and congressmen to press senior U.S. officials to take steps to end incitement. Contentious as this issue may be, recent developments suggest the possibility of a modest path forward -- and one that could provide a bridge to broader bilateral negotiations.

The PA and Israeli Positions

Palestinian officials do not deny that incitement is real and problematic. They do, however, argue that the Israeli side engages in its own incitement. For example, the Palestine News and Information Agency (WAFA), in an apparent response to concerns sparked by the Itamar murders, published its own list of Israeli acts of "incitement and racism against the Palestinians and Arabs published by the Israeli media between March 11 and 17." Featured on the list are calls by a rabbi and several journalists for a response to or revenge for the Itamar murders. But the list lacks examples of any Israeli leader, government official, or government-sponsored publication advocating or condoning violence against Palestinians. Such a distinction reveals an attempt to widen the definition of "incitement" to include opinions and expressions by any individual, rather than limiting it to declarations by officials and state-run media.

In private meetings with Americans, PA president Mahmoud Abbas has suggested reviving a diplomatic mechanism to combat incitement. Concurrently, a once-skeptical Israeli government has, according to press reports, quietly indicated its willingness to consider reestablishing the U.S.-Israeli-Palestinian working committee on incitement -- a committee formed in 1998 and suspended with the start of the Palestinian uprising in 2000.

Before the latest incidents, the Israeli index registered its lowest levels yet for the last quarter of 2010 -- probably owing to PA efforts to rein in Hamas and incendiary preaching and propaganda. Overall, however, Israel claims that the PA still contributes more to an environment of hostility and violence than to one of peace and reconciliation. Recent examples of the most inflammatory types, taken not from Israeli accounts but directly from Palestinian

sources, appear in the discussion to follow.

Demonization and Delegitimization

In a striking case, the Palestinian Ministry of Information disseminated an article by a deputy minister claiming that Jews have no historical connection to the Western Wall. After the article was exposed by Israeli nongovernmental organizations, the PA removed it from its official website -- but the story remained online at semiofficial Palestinian news sites.

For its part, PA television targeted the Israel Prison Service, alleging that it tortures prisoners with hot irons, amputates limbs, and harvests organs. PA television also perpetuated the libel that the deranged Australian Christian who attempted to set fire to the al-Aqsa Mosque in 1969 was Jewish and supported by the Israeli government.

Finally, last week, the PA-owned daily al-Hayat al-Jadidah wrote that "for more than sixty years...[the Holocaust] has aroused a great amount of controversy and fabrication." Along these lines, PA officials and press have uniformly spoken out against rumored plans by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) to include Holocaust education in its curriculum, calling the prospect "disgraceful," "political," and "mistaken." Furthermore, Israelis are sometimes depicted as "the new Nazis" who "commit new holocausts, everywhere and at all times."

Glorifying Terrorists

On March 11, the PA prompted new accusations by Israel of incitement when it dedicated a town square in al-Bireh to Dalal al-Mughrabi, the female participant in the 1978 Coast Road massacre. Abbas has vacillated on the matter, supporting the commemoration in 2010 on PA television only to renounce it the next year on Israeli television. On March 23, PA radio issued a statement, also cited in al-Hayat al-Jadidah, praising four imprisoned women who had either driven suicide bombers to their destinations or set bombs themselves. Even now, in PA print and broadcast media, Gaza militants killed while firing rockets at Israeli towns are routinely referred to as "martyrs."

Earlier, about a month before the Itamar massacre, PA television aired a tribute to a "hero" of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine who had killed three Israeli civilians, also in Itamar, in 2002. Other proclamations at the PA ministerial level reinforce a similar line. On March 8, for example, the ministries of Information and Prisoners Affairs used International Women's Day as a platform to honor female terrorists, including Mughrabi and others.

By contrast, Palestinian prime minister Salam Fayad has spoken out regularly against violence. After the Itamar murders, he quickly issued a condemnation to a Palestinian audience. "It is shameful," he said, "that after all the catastrophes which such actions have brought upon our people...our struggle, and the justice of our cause, some Palestinian party still insists on renewing these shameful operations." Still, speaking on PA television in a different context, Fayad contended that Palestinians were understandably angered by settlers who uprooted or set fire to olive trees. "Armed resistance," he said, remained a Palestinian right but required a political "decision."

Explicit Calls for Violence

In mid-March, Sabri Saidam, undersecretary of the Fatah Revolutionary Council and an advisor to President Abbas, publicly "emphasized that the weapons must be turned towards the main enemy [Israel] and that internal differences of opinion must be set aside." Azzam al-Ahmed, a member of the Fatah Central Committee, attended a Fatah gathering in January at which "self-sacrifice activity" was reaffirmed, with participants asserting Fatah's right to "use all means of resistance."

Calls for violence also circulate at the grassroots level. Last week, Facebook removed a page with nearly 350,000 "friends" urging a "Third Intifadah" and citing the hadith (traditional Islamic quotation attributed to Muhammad)

that "Judgment Day will be brought upon us only once the Muslims have killed all of the Jews."

Differentiating Incitement

Not all incitement is the same. Whether Israeli or Palestinian, incitement varies greatly by source: social media, municipal or regional officials, clerics, journalists, or political leaders. In an interview with Israeli TV on the Mughrabi commemoration, Abbas rightly pointed out that "the municipalities have a degree of independence." This variety raises tough questions: To what degree should higher Palestinian offices be held accountable for the comments made by officials throughout the West Bank? How independent are editorial boards and the media more broadly? What can be done about social media forums such as the "Third Intifadah" Facebook page? Finally, to what extent should Palestinian leaders' opposition to the idea of "a Jewish state," which they label "racist," be considered incitement against peace with Israel?

Policy Implications

Notwithstanding public statements against violence by the Palestinian president and prime minister in both the foreign and Arabic press, the practice of official PA incitement continues at lower levels. This suggests a problem within the Palestine Liberation Organization, whose legitimacy was first premised on armed struggle and then on a political settlement with Israel. Hamas is competing on the former count, and progress lags on the latter, so the PA feels it cannot give up wholly on "resistance" as a platform. But the PA's equivocation on this matter has serious consequences, putting the entire peace process at risk.

At the same time, the issue of incitement presents the United States with an opportunity. With progress on the peace process virtually nonexistent, and the risk for violence increasing, a resumption of the trilateral anti-incitement committee would give Israelis and Palestinians the chance to meet face-to-face and commit to a common cause. Unlike the broader peace negotiations, neither side insists on immovable preconditions, and both have signaled their interest. For the U.S. administration's part, brokering such talks offers the chance both to address an important issue and to restart at least some form of direct negotiations.

Learning from previous failure, the United States should set clear guidelines for such talks. Anti-incitement discussions should be held at a very high level. They should be quick, and relentlessly focused on results. They should concentrate narrowly on official incitement -- by government officials and institutions under governmental authority or funding -- not on vague historical or cultural issues. Neither side should use allegations against the other to excuse its own failings. And, most important, both sides should view anti-incitement discussions as a bridge to broader peace talks, not as a substitute for them.

David Pollock is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on the political dynamics of Middle Eastern countries. He would like to acknowledge the assistance of Andrew Engel, a Schusterman Young scholar at the Institute, in preparing this piece. ❖

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