

Short-Term Dividends for Abbas's Gamble, but at What Price?

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The Palestinian president has maneuvered his way back into the political discussion -- partly as a result of Israel's failure to act promptly on diplomatic understandings with Jordan -- but his call for "escalatory measures" could carry dire consequences.

In a bid to reestablish his diplomatic and political relevance, Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas on July 26 threatened an escalation unless Israel rescinds all measures enacted in Jerusalem after the July 14 terrorist attack that killed two Israeli policemen. The threatened escalation was ostensibly nonviolent but has an extremely high risk of spinning out of control. Shortly after Abbas made his statements, Israel removed residual security structures after having already taken down metal detectors -- which had been installed after July 14 and served as the main spark for Palestinian discontent -- in response to Jordanian and international diplomacy.

While Abbas declared credit for ending the crisis, no one knows whether he will be able to control developments on the ground. Israel, too, bears its share of the blame. If it had more speedily implemented its decision to return fully to the pre-July 14 situation, the crisis could have ended with a victory for Israeli, Jordanian, and international diplomacy.

Background

Since the al-Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount crisis began July 14 with the murder of two Israeli policemen and the subsequent killing of the gunmen by Israeli forces, Abbas, the Palestinian Authority (PA), and the president's Fatah movement have been largely regarded as absent. Israel and Jordan acted as the main diplomatic players, with the Hashemite Kingdom having been recognized as the custodian of the Islamic holy sites in Jerusalem both in the 1994 Jordan-Israel peace treaty and in a 2013 treaty between Jordan and the Palestinians. The Palestinian Jerusalemites involved in the crisis, meanwhile, were mainly unaffiliated with any political movement. And while Fatah and PA leaders made statements from the outset, many of which were inflammatory, public messaging was dominated by energetic and well-coordinated Hamas calls for escalation. Sensing his own growing marginalization, Abbas acted upon Fatah's longstanding threat to sever security cooperation with Israel. This drastic move, however, did not gain much traction on the Palestinian street and was overshadowed by the clashes on Friday July 21, in which three Palestinians were killed, and later by the removal of the metal detectors.

The removal of the detectors, though, which likely occurred late on July 24, did not end the crisis. This was because residual security infrastructure -- mainly metal scaffolding used to mount security cameras -- remained. Muslim worshipers continued to refuse to enter the al-Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount without a full return to the pre-July 14 situation. Hamas seized on this development, calling for a "day of rage," to occur Friday July 28. It was faced with this developing situation that Abbas made his call for escalatory measures, evidently to restore his relevance.

Analysis

In the short term, Abbas's move has paid off. Soon after his announcements, he held a telephone conversation -- his first since the outbreak of the crisis -- with King Abdullah of Jordan in which the two leaders agreed to coordinate, in effect establishing Abbas again as an indispensable interlocutor. Politically, he positioned himself to claim that his defiance had forced Israel's walk-back of all its security measures.

These immediate gains, however, may prove very costly in the longer run. Jordan, ever vigilant about protecting its special role in Jerusalem, is unlikely to be happy about sharing the diplomatic stage with Abbas (and later ceding it to him), and already-tense PA-Jordan relations could suffer further as a result. Abbas -- having weathered criticism in the international community for his poor governance and diplomatic passivity -- could now also lose his key remaining reputational asset: a perceived commitment to nonviolence.

On the ground, Abbas's move could set in motion an uncontrollable downward spiral in the West Bank security situation. Already, Fatah activists have begun preparing for dramatic activity, and tensions are high owing both to the Israeli measures in Jerusalem and to inflammatory rhetoric coming from various Palestinian and Arab quarters. If large demonstrations take place Friday, whether in protest or celebration, the risk for escalation will be palpable. Fatah activists, long frustrated by what they see as Abbas's neglect and not known for discipline in

the best of circumstances, may well override his call to keep demonstrations peaceful. Such activists include the Tanzim, an armed Fatah element that was involved in terrorist acts during the second Palestinian intifada and that, in recent months, has clashed intermittently with PA security forces, mainly in West Bank refugee camps. Meanwhile, Hamas, which has long sought to ignite confrontations in the West Bank with the goal of weakening Abbas and the PA, will be highly motivated to turn these protests violent, a relatively easy task. An excessive Israeli response, in turn, could cause high Palestinian casualties.

For Israel, a failure to return fully and immediately to the pre-July 14th situation following the diplomatic understanding with Jordan created an opening for Abbas to engage in his brinkmanship. Indeed, after deciding to de-escalate the crisis, Israel engaged in a slow-drip implementation, robbing the move of its potential ameliorative force. Ascendant in responding to -- if not resolving -- the al-Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount component of the crisis will now be those forces who threaten escalation rather than advocating diplomacy, whose proponents will be weakened.

Another consequence of these developments will be further strained Israeli relations with Jordan. Despite its apparent resolution, the July 23 incident in which an Israeli security guard at the country's embassy in Amman killed an assailant and a bystander has remained at crisis levels -- indeed worsened. Israel-Jordan cooperation on this matter, though both sides officially deny a quid pro quo, was initially viewed as the driver to end the Jerusalem crisis, but on July 27 the Jordanian king, in response to the developments in Jerusalem, called on Israel to prosecute the guard rather than treating him like a hero.

Conclusion

For all sides, the most immediate priority is cooperating to the extent possible to ensure the security situation does not deteriorate on Friday July 28. To this end, Washington must impress on Palestinians the urgency of resuming security cooperation and on both Palestinians and Israelis the importance of reducing the potential for confrontation and exercising maximum restraint. Specifically, both the Trump administration and its regional Arab allies need to convey unmistakably to Abbas that threatening violence, even implicitly, is unacceptable and comes with a clear, discernible cost.

If and when the immediate security risk passes, one major lesson from these developments will be that a failure to fully embrace diplomacy during crises -- and to credit diplomacy for resolving crises -- will embolden proponents of violence, who will always be waiting to fill the vacuum.

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