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An Intifada a Jerusalem: A Self-Fulfilling Prophecy?

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Jerusalem is experiencing difficult days. Recent months have witnessed growing friction between Palestinians and the Israeli security forces, more disturbances of the peace, especially in the Temple Mount area, and an effort to attack Jews, most recently through car attacks and stabbings. Concurrently, there is increased friction between *those* Jews seeking – sometimes provocatively – to realize the right to visit and/or pray at the Temple Mount, and Palestinians who view these efforts as a threat to the status quo. *However, the vast majority of Palestinians in Jerusalem oppose the violence and clearly prefer to maximize the advantages of Israeli residency peacefully; it is not coincidental that the number of people involved in the protests and violence is a few hundred only. Nevertheless, the city is rife with tension and the seething atmosphere threatens to boil over.*

The murder of an Arab teenager by Jews – retaliation for the abduction and murder of three Jewish teenagers in the Gush Etzion area – was the catalyst that ignited the current fire, which itself is the product of a psychological infrastructure that the Palestinian Authority leadership has nurtured zealously and systematically. The PA's policy is supported by extremists and inciters from Israel's northern branch of the Islamic Movement, which cooperates with Hamas in one way or another. For its part, Hamas is stirring the Jerusalem pot, partly out of frustration with the results of Operation Protective Edge and the organization's stymied efforts to expand its influence in the West Bank and undermine the PA. These parties would like to maximize the potential of the religious volatility in Jerusalem in order to destabilize the city and the entire Israeli-Palestinian arena, as well as strengthen their own status as serious players therein.

In the Palestinian reality of despair and political hopelessness it is easier to make this happen. Similarly, it is impossible to ignore the lack of determined restraint toward Jewish provocateurs shown by Israel's leadership and its failure to communicate a clear message of commitment to the status quo in Jerusalem. Israel's leaders have also failed to display the requisite sensitivity in their announcements about construction or purchase of real estate in particular parts of the city.

Systematic and ongoing incitement by the PA leadership shapes the Palestinian narrative, which combines the denial of any Jewish links to Jerusalem in general and the Temple Mount in particular with allegations of Israel's intention to change the status quo at the Temple Mount and blur the Palestinian links to the city by stressing its Jewish character. The PA is using these accusations to justify its strategy of unilateral diplomacy, designed to further the delegitimization of Israel and its international marginalization.

PA President Mahmoud Abbas is trying to contain the violence and keep it from crossing a line that would endanger the PA itself. The Palestinian security services are working to prevent the spread of violence into the areas controlled by the PA, given their understanding that a development in that direction could easily backfire and redirect the violence toward the PA and its leadership, neither of which currently enjoys a broad base of support. Such a reversal might spell the end of the PA. The Palestinian leadership is therefore tiptoeing between its commitment to the narrative it has woven and the steady incitement against Israel and developments in Jerusalem on the one hand, and concerns for its own survival on the other. It seems that the PA's leadership is confident of its ability to maintain this tension. However, it is highly doubtful whether the PA can in fact continue to control what it has created, which in Frankenstein-like fashion might well turn on its creator.

At this point there is no established, significant organizational infrastructure behind the recent terrorist acts. There is no collective Palestinian consciousness supporting these acts, and there is insufficient energy and motivation among the Palestinians for an intifada. Moreover, activity is almost entirely focused on the Jerusalem area, and the sporadic incidents in the West Bank are not indicative of a widespread phenomenon throughout the areas under PA control. The Palestinian collective consciousness still remembers the lessons of the second intifada, which took a steep toll of the Palestinian economy and society and left them further behind than ever without yielding any political dividends. Nonetheless, under certain circumstances, spontaneous violence on the part of individuals could spiral and engulf others in its wake, and translate into a more organized, systematic pattern, feeding off general public sentiment and rising frustrations that are fueled by a desire for vengeance.

The chain of events and a sense of insecurity have led many Israeli politicians, senior officials, analysts, and journalists to attribute a familiar pattern to the recent incidents. The use of the phrase "the third intifada" is gaining ground, even though the car attacks and stabbings were carried out by individual terrorists on their own initiative. While certainly affected by the tense atmosphere in Jerusalem, they did not carry them out as organizational operatives or in the name of any particular group, and were not part of any organizational or planning infrastructure. This, among many elements, distinguishes – at least for now – these incidents from the intifadas of 1987-93 and 2000-5 (and those two were also dissimilar).

It seems that using the word “intifada” helps categorize recent events, ascribing a certain logic to them and making them easier to understand. But it is important to stress the negative effect this rhetoric is liable to have on the consciousness of Palestinians and Israelis alike. Frequent use of the word in headlines by Palestinian and Israeli spokespeople may well nurture Palestinian motivation for a struggle whose framework already exists. From the Israeli perspective, other than ramping up fear of the Palestinian public and leadership’s intentions, the term also trickles into the consciousness of the security forces. They are the ones most directly exposed to the growing friction; relating to the incidents as if they were an intifada is liable to lead them to excessive use of force against demonstrators and terrorists. There is therefore a danger that frequent use of the loaded word could become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Absent the trust between the Israeli and Palestinian leaderships in a reality of an absolute freeze in the political process, and absent any legitimacy for cooperation (except for security cooperation, though this too is eroding somewhat), local incidents are liable to lead to complications and escalation, in Jerusalem and elsewhere.

For its part, Israel is still not doing all it could to prevent further escalation. It would do well to act with firm resolve to lower the flames, in part by acting with greater determination against provocation and incitement from Jewish quarters, as well as taking the necessary action against violence and disturbances by Arab protestors. It must also underscore that it has no intention of changing the status quo in Jerusalem. Furthermore Israel’s leaders must work to improve the welfare and living conditions of Jerusalem’s Palestinian population, especially with regard to infrastructure, education, and employment. This is both a sovereign and a moral imperative.

At the same time, it is crucial to emphasize to the international community that as long as the Palestinians continue to nurture and promulgate their psychological infrastructure, based on both the refusal to recognize the Jewish people’s links to Jerusalem and the incitement about Israel’s alleged intentions regarding Jerusalem and the Temple Mount, there will be elements that seek to undermine order and security. These will continue regardless of any efforts Israel may make to improve the welfare of Jerusalem’s Palestinian population, and may in fact intend to purposefully harm such efforts so as to claim that Israel is seeking to damage Islam’s holy sites. But this challenge must not weaken Israel’s resolve or absolve it of its duty to improve the welfare of the Palestinian population; on the contrary. Determined action in this direction will broaden Israel’s base of legitimacy to use a heavy hand against lawbreakers and terrorists. It will be an important component in the effort to prevent isolated acts of terrorism and violent incidents from evolving into an actual third intifada, something that Israel and the majority of Palestinians are anxious to avoid.