The Escalation in the Palestinian Arena: Ramifications and Responses

Kobi Michael, Udi Dekel, and Assaf Orion

Recent weeks have been marked by terrorist attacks and rioting in Jerusalem and the West Bank, as well as rocket fire from the Gaza Strip and protests by Israeli Arabs. Many observers and politicians have been quick to affix the familiar label of "intifada" to the current wave of violence. Calling the escalation a "third intifada," however, is not an accurate portrayal of the current events, and therefore does not invite the right response to the situation. Rather, only an understanding of the particular characteristics of the current situation will allow the formulation of relevant responses.

The many systems that dominate the Palestinian arena – in Jerusalem, the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, and the regional and international arenas – are driven by independent logic and forces that at the same time interface with one another. The most prominent feature of the various Palestinian systems is terrorism, violence, and deliberate confrontation with the security forces. The struggle over the Temple Mount and Jerusalem is motivated by Palestinian concern about Israel's alleged intention to change the status quo, and fomented by ongoing incitement by the Palestinian Authority (PA) and the northern branch of the Islamic Movement. The West Bank violence features primarily actions by individuals suffering from despair and hopelessness caused by the weakness of the PA and Fatah and their crisis of legitimacy and leadership. Signs of a change in the situation of Mahmoud Abbas himself were reflected in his vitriolic speech at the UN General Assembly and his willingness to take risks in the belief that he can control the pace of events and levels of escalation, and his refusal to condemn the recent deadly terrorist attacks in the West Bank and Jerusalem. Once he realized that he himself might be the victim of what he was instigating, he called for a cessation of violence. Added to this context is the ongoing crisis of Hamas, following the destruction in Gaza in the post-Protective Edge period.

There is a prevalent dynamic of mutual inspiration among the Palestinian systems, where the national struggle and the religious struggle are intertwined. The multi-level distress and the feeling that there is no way out of the Palestinian predicament are easily ignited by the ongoing incitement and the absence of a response from the institutional leadership.

All this enhances the cognitive sense of struggle – even if thus far and in most cases, it is expressed in individual actions, rather than organized operations.

The Palestinian security agencies are grassroots organizations. They recognize the PA weakness that underlies the regional upheaval, and have not exhibited concerted determination to deal with outbreaks of violence and terror. This behavior, combined with the failure of Fatah/PA and Hamas – each in its own way – to improve the Palestinians' national and domestic situations, augurs ominous developments, and may constitute additional evidence of the collapse of the Palestinian governmental structure.

At this stage, the stabbings and vehicle attacks are carried out by individual terrorists, and the shooting attacks are usually based on local initiatives, with most of the Palestinian population uninvolved in the escalation processes. The masses have not taken to the streets, and no popular uprising – intifada – is underway. The trend is one of transition from the logic of institutional operations to the logic of individual, local, and decentralized operations, based on the idea that the response to distress is independent, personal, or local. It is this way in which a phenomenon of large scale activity in many locales is created, similar to the process of disintegration of states in the Middle East in recent years. This phenomenon may have also reached the Palestinian theater.

Policy Recommendations
The recommendations can be divided into two categories: efforts at stabilization in the immediate future, which are of a security-policing nature, and efforts at shaping the situation for the longer term, which are of a political nature. These efforts should be directed toward three theaters: Jerusalem, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip.

In the immediate future, provocateurs should be kept away from the Temple Mount, which should be stabilized with the help of the Jordanian Waqf. Stricter triage and control measures should be prepared for use once the Temple Mount is reopened. At the same time, meticulous checkpoint procedures should be employed at the entrances to the Old City of Jerusalem and within the area. In addition, a special effort to systematically monitor the social networks is recommended for the purpose of uncovering operatives, trends, and plans. Capabilities for disruption and counteraction on the social networks should be developed. Activity on the Temple Mount should be coordinated with the Jordanian monarchy and accompanied by public relations efforts. Similar coordination efforts should be made with Egypt concerning the Gaza Strip. Reconstruction in the Gaza Strip is an essential Israeli interest, lest Israel suffer the consequences of a collapse of the Gaza infrastructure.

Delegations the embassies and international organizations operating in Israel should be taken to the Temple Mount area, in order for representatives to get a firsthand sense of

Israel's policy of maintaining the status quo there. Israel should make appropriate preparations for the likely contingency that the violent events at the Temple Mount area will be used by BDS activists seeking to delegitimize Israel. At the same time, no effort should be spared in preventing provocations by extremists, both Muslims and Jews, which contribute to escalation on the Temple Mount. It is important to step up enforcement efforts against nationalistic and anti-religious crime by Israeli citizens as part of the effort to reduce pressure and alleviate the growing religious nature of the conflict.

In the long term, the Israeli government must work to improve the living conditions in East Jerusalem in order to ease the frustration of the city's neglected population and the distress of unemployed young people; these conditions constitute fertile ground for incitement and agitation, which often translates into violence and terrorism. Along with greater police presence in East Jerusalem, services for the Palestinian population in the city should be improved, to mitigate the harm caused to his sector by the current tense situation.

In the West Bank, Israel must continue the security coordination with the Palestinian security agencies, and present unequivocal demands regarding those in PA territory engaged in terrorism and violence. Together with these coordination efforts, Israel should step up its campaign against terrorist groups in PA territory. It is also important to allow a number of Palestinian workers into Israel, as has recently been done, and not to halt the easing of restrictions on movement and trade. An arbitrary and indiscriminate hard line toward the Palestinian population will not serve the Israeli security interest, and is liable to increase the number of flash points.

Efforts at stabilization in the long term should assume that Abbas, due to the Palestinian leadership crisis, the struggles between Fatah and Hamas and within Fatah, and the loss of legitimacy for Abbas's continued rule, will continue adhering to the political struggle against Israel – not only in international institutions, but also in the field, to the point of brinkmanship. Israel therefore must devise responses to various scenarios of loss of governance in the PA, including the extreme scenario that Israel is seeking to prevent – the collapse of the PA and a return to full Israeli control of the territory and the local population. As of now, Abbas's threat to "give back the keys," in other words to dismantle the PA, has not been realized, but he may have already lost the keys. In this context, the post-Abbas situation should be considered, whether in terms of who his successor will be, or in terms of the continued collapse of the Palestinian establishment as a result of succession struggles and the absence of leadership and direction, combined with the rise of local power centers. Abbas's departure from the scene, even if it is delayed, will occur eventually, perhaps even as a result of the current escalation.

In addition, policy initiatives by the Israeli government aimed at changing the situation in the West Bank in the absence of any chance of achieving a permanent settlement are recommended. A number of frameworks should be presented, including transitional arrangements, unilateral measures to shape a reality of two states for two peoples, and new/old ideas, such as a trusteeship for the PA territories (possibly led by the pragmatic Arab states). In this context to attempt should be made for the refugee crisis in Syria to include solutions for the Palestinian refugees in the context of international efforts aimed at alleviating the refugee crisis in the Middle East.

At this stage, there is no intifada according to its recognized meaning, but the current escalation, accompanied by the disintegration of the institutional order in the PA, contains the seeds of decline and loss of control. It therefore requires an Israeli response that is both direct and indirect, immediate and for the longer term, and public and undeclared.

The growing friction between the Palestinian population and the Israeli security forces, combined with efforts by Hamas to undermine the PA, given the PA's leadership and functional crisis, is liable to escalate the violence. An increase in the number of young Palestinians outside the labor market and educational frameworks who are being channeled into violent circles also contributes to escalation. In addition to its security effort to prevent further escalation (with an attempt at coordination with the Palestinian security agencies), the Israeli government should therefore avoid measures that will be interpreted as collective punishment of the Palestinian population.

At the same time, the Israeli government should avoid misleading the Israeli public about its ability to put a complete end to terrorism. With all the difficulty involved, the Israeli public must understand the reality of conflict management in a situation such as the current one, in which Palestinian violence draws its inspiration from religion and the regional upheaval.