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From the Temple Mount to the Israeli Embassy in Jordan

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The tension on the Temple Mount and the crisis between Israel and Jordan following the attack on a security guard at the Israeli embassy in Amman need more than ad hoc solutions that leave the basic situation – the catalyst underlying these events – unresolved, and the strategic opportunities in efforts to reach an agreement untapped.

Two major processes underway in the Middle East in recent years have weakened the relatively pragmatic Sunni camp vis-à-vis the West (i.e., the United States and Israel). The first is the final death throes of the myth of the Arab ummah and unity within Arab ranks. About one third of the Arab League nations exist only in name, while others are poised on the brink of regime change. The second process, which the so-called moderate camp views as an existential threat, is the ascendance of the fundamentalist streams within both the Shiite and Sunni strains of Islam: Iran and Hezbollah among Shiites, the Islamic State and al-Qaeda among the Sunnis.

One byproduct of these processes is the devaluation of the Palestinian issue on the agenda of Arab political leaders and in Arab public opinion. Concurrently, Arab states are more willing than in the past to cooperate with Israel, even if cooperative areas and projects are limited, discreet, and direct consequences of the regimes' own existential interests. Israel, of course, is also interested in expanding relations, not just with Egypt and Jordan but with other Arab states, in North Africa and the Gulf. This understanding should guide the Israeli government when it sets out to seek a solution, even a temporary one, to the crisis that erupted over the Temple Mount.

Beyond the recognition of Jordan's standing on Islam's holy sites, it is important to acknowledge that concepts such as "complete control" or "full sovereignty" of the Temple Mount are fairly elusive, and that any attempt to apply them in practice, even if successful, will exact a steep political toll – a much higher toll than Israel either can or

wants to pay. Israeli governments of the past understood this and therefore avoided attempts to impose new arrangements, even if it appeared that Israel had less than full sovereignty over this site. There is no reason for the current Israeli government not to acknowledge this reality. At the same time, the government must distinguish between the radical, destructive forces operating on the Temple Mount and at other places of Islamic significance, and those whose cooperation with Israel is likely to strengthen Israel's status as a relevant, important factor in determining the political and legal future of the Temple Mount.

Based on this distinction, Israel would do well to seize the political and operational initiative before international and regional entities do, and propose, *inter alia*, an international meeting on steps that can prevent radical entities from violating freedom of worship and freedom of access to the Temple Mount, a site holy to both Judaism and Islam. The goal of such a summit would be to provide a solution to immediate security concerns while – most importantly – ensuring that Israel can take back the initiative on certain crucial issues, such as the question of Jerusalem. Parties whose involvement should be considered at such a gathering include:

- Jordan, as host or initiator, given its status in Jerusalem, its peace agreement with Israel, and understandings achieved in Israeli-Jordanian coordination on Islam's holy sites in Jerusalem.
- Egypt, as the largest of the Arab nations, and given its peace treaty with Israel.
- Saudi Arabia, as the custodian of Islam's holiest sites in Mecca and Medina.
- Morocco, as the Moroccan king is the chairman of the Jerusalem Committee of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation.
- The Palestinian Authority.
- The Waqf on the Temple Mount.
- Israel, whose representatives would include Israeli Muslims.

Such a proposal should be raised with both the Jordanian king and the envoys of the US administration. United States involvement in the attempt to convene a regional summit is important, but a desire to have it play a formal role in the meeting itself is liable to generate pressure to involve the other members of the Quartet – Russia, the European Union, and the United Nations.

A summit like this, to be convened quickly, could adopt a declaration on the Temple Mount's holiness to all religions; the importance of freedom of worship and access to the site for members of all religious faiths; the need to prevent radicals from turning the site into an arena of religious strife; the desire for a follow-up summit in two years; and the establishment of a subcommittee to discuss concrete measure to secure the site.

At the same time, it is critical that Israel proposes that the United States hold a “technical” summit to discuss specific suggestions in security and monitoring, while expressing willingness to involve non-Israeli parties in deploying these systems in cooperation with Israel’s security services. Israeli proposals in this context could include installing smart control measures, which could be placed in the access routes to the Temple Mount, patrols, drones, a joint situation room, and other measures. Israel would consult with other parties in the same technical forum on their deployment.

It should be emphasized that all initiatives proposed herein refer to the Temple Mount alone. They are not intended in any way to reduce Israel’s authority of the area or any area where Israel has operated since 1967. These proposals in no way intend to change the status of the city of Jerusalem from the Israeli perspective.

While the crisis that broke out following the attack on an Israeli security guard within the Israeli embassy compound in Amman has been resolved (though there are still aftershocks requiring thought and sensitivity), it is yet another indication of some problematic aspects in Israeli-Jordanian relations. Both states are interested in maintaining their bilateral relations, which advance the strategic interests of both sides. Jordan is a buffer keeping Israel one geographical zone away from the chaos in Iraq and Syria, infiltrated by Iran, Hezbollah, the Islamic State, and others. It is the PA’s entrance and exit corridor and the regulating mechanism for internal pressures within the PA. Jordan thus serves a vital Israeli interest. At the same time, Israel provides Jordan with security and intelligence; eases the pressure on Jordan regarding water and energy needs, which have been exacerbated in recent years after some million and a half Syrian refugees have sought shelter on Jordanian soil; and provides a partial alternative to the ports of Syria, now closed to Jordan, as an exit to the West. Nonetheless, and while Prime Minister Netanyahu spoke with King Abdullah during the crisis, it is necessary to rebuild their interpersonal relationship, a key component in any set of state relations, but especially so in the case of the Jordanian-Israeli connection.

The proposals made on the Temple Mount issue relate to another key issue, namely, Israel’s response to the regional changes mentioned above □ the accelerated weakening of the concept of Arab political unity, including support for the Palestinians, and the strengthening of the parties threatening the survival of the moderate Arab regimes. Although the conventional threat against Israel has all but disappeared; relations between Israel and Egypt have improved; and the Gulf states are voicing different attitudes than in the past, Israel has yet to succeed in maximizing the potential inherent in both processes in order to cement relations with these states and translate them into concrete political and economic achievements that would improve Israel’s ability to deal with specific crises, such as those that erupted over the Temple Mount and the attack in Amman.

Involving Morocco and Saudi Arabia in the effort to resolve the Temple Mount crisis may help improve Israel's relations with these states in a fundamental way with high visibility. The PA's involvement, should the PA respond favorably to a Jordanian-US invitation to participate in the proposed summit, would hardly change the factual situation on the Temple Mount, but would represent a fundamental and positive change in Israel's position in the context of the Jerusalem issue.