



The Institute for National Security Studies
Strategic, Innovative, Policy-Oriented Research

INSS Insight No. 960, August 3, 2017

The Temple Mount Crisis and Israel's Cabinet: Recommendations for the Future

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The crisis concerning the Temple Mount that erupted in July 2017 appears to have ebbed. Despite predictions to the contrary, the Middle East is not ablaze; peoples and leaders of the region remain preoccupied with other crises; and there is no third intifada at Israel's doorstep. At the same time, the attack on the Temple Mount that left two Israeli policemen dead brought on serious additional consequences, including the murders in Halamish, the tension with Jordan, worsened relations between Israel's Jewish population and its Arab sector, and further erosion of Israel's vague sovereignty on the Temple Mount.

The question now addresses the results of the crisis and the insights to emerge in its wake. More specifically, can Israel claim any political or security achievement? The event does not warrant a commission of inquiry or another report on the performance of the cabinet. Nevertheless, insofar as similar events will likely occur in the future, it is important that Israel study and review the incident in a process that is not a witch hunt that seeks to single out guilty parties, but rather one that strives to derive lessons that will help the political-security cabinet function more effectively during the next crisis.

The ability of the cabinet to take critical decisions is impeded by fierce political rivalries among its members, leaks to the media, fears of future commissions of inquiry, and the weakness of the entity that is supposed to prepare the background for these meetings, i.e., the National Security Council. Therefore, it is imperative that a review be conducted that focuses on fundamental issues and principles and Israel's strategic goals. Following the attack on the Temple Mount that killed two Israeli police officers, it was crucial to define clear objectives that at every point in time as the crisis unfolded would guide cabinet decisions regarding the possible benefits and dangers of prospective policies and the actions taken accordingly.

Israel's primary objectives in the crisis were as follows:

- a. Security of the worshippers, visitors, and security personnel at the Temple Mount. In this context, efforts were necessary to ensure that no other weapons were present at the site and to prevent additional weapons from being smuggled on to the Temple Mount.
- b. De-escalation of the event, to prevent the tensions and clashes from spreading to the West Bank and prevent escalation vis-à-vis the Arab and Muslim world.
- c. Protection (i.e., maintaining and strengthening) of relations with states in the region with which Israel has shared interests. This includes maintaining the peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan, and continuing cooperation with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states.
- d. Deterrence: maintaining Israel's image of strength and demonstrating the price in the event of a terrorist attack or any other breach of Israeli security.
- e. Legitimization of Israeli action, with an emphasis on agreement with the US administration.
- f. Israel's sovereignty on the Temple Mount, including Israeli responsibility for what goes on at the site, primarily with regard to security. This objective respects the understandings regarding the responsibility of the waqf and Jordan's status at the site, in place since 1967 and reinforced by the terms of Jordan's peace treaty with Israel.

There are clearly tensions between these various objectives. Correct strategic thinking is necessary to prioritize the objectives and reach the fine balance between them, in light of unfolding dynamics and principal interests. When the crisis at the Temple Mount erupted, it appears that security was initially viewed as the paramount consideration, and insufficient discussion was devoted to other issues. Metal detectors at the site were both placed and removed without any dialogue with the waqf or coordination with Jordan, the Palestinian Authority, or Egypt. This unilateral measure provided Israel's adversaries with a platform to upset the fragile stability at this sensitive place. Hamas, the Northern Branch of the Islamic Movement in Israel, Qatar, and Turkey all sought to escalate the event.

During the second week following the outbreak of the crisis, and certainly following the terrorist attack at Halamish, tension emerged between the respective strategic objectives. On one side was the fear of escalation, the need for containment, and the preservation of Israel's regional alliance with the Sunni states. Against this were security needs and the fear of setting a precedent of surrender under pressure. Paradoxically, the incident at the Israeli embassy in Jordan, in which two Jordanian civilians were killed by an Israeli security guard, enabled Israel to adjust the situation. The Israeli government worked to prevent escalation and to preserve the peace treaty with Jordan and Egypt, while taking risks in the realm of security and sustaining a degree of damage to Israeli deterrence and Israel's partial sovereignty on the Temple Mount.

Against this background, several issues must be probed, in order to prepare for the next crisis. After the attack on the Temple Mount, would it have been preferable for Israel to limit itself to an immediate search of the mosques – where in fact no weapons were subsequently found - and focus its security activity on actions coordinated with Jordan, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia?

Second, could moderate forces among Arabs in Israel, the Palestinian Authority, Jordan, and Egypt have been enlisted in measures to counter the escalation? If the prospects for this alternative were not realistic, and technological solutions were the best option, perhaps less visible measures that can bolster security without the intrusiveness of metal detectors would have been preferable, particularly as most of the worshippers have no part in the violent activity.

Third, was the assessment of the Israel Security Agency (GSS) and Military Intelligence – regarding the possibility of the outbreak of a third intifada or a volcanic eruption in the Middle East as a result of the implementation of security measures at the Temple Mount – well based, or was this an extreme scenario? What more moderate measures could have prevented this assessment from becoming a reality?

The fourth question concerns Israel's steadfastness. To what extent is Israel capable of allowing "non-violent" demonstrations to continue for more than one week? Should the resolve of those protesting Israel's decisions have been examined? In this context, are there measured yet resolute actions to exert profound psychological pressure to compel Israel's opponents to return to the former situation, even without fulfillment of most of their demands? The way in which the crisis was resolved, including their sense of victory, are likely to encourage additional pressure and demands.

Fifth, the issues of timing and coordination with the United States and the degree of US involvement in this type of event should be examined, including the US ability to influence the Sunni states.

Finally, on a deeper strategic level, did Israel consider how its management of the crisis on the Temple Mount would impact on the weightier security challenges it currently faces? In other words, how might Israeli conduct influence more urgent issues such as Iran's regional expansion, a future conflict with Hezbollah, and the attempt to revive the political process with the Palestinians?

The answers to these questions that the cabinet will receive from this review will help Israel contend more effectively with the next crisis that will likely develop sooner or later

- as a result of a loss of deterrence given Israel's capitulation during the recent crisis; the need to curb ongoing incitement; or the desire of the radical axis to exploit developments in the Palestinian arena to escalate the situation in a way that will harm Israel. Looking ahead, it is important that the cabinet instruct the major executive bodies to formulate a better policy for preparedness and prevention, and act accordingly.

In this framework, understandings and mechanisms should be formulated with Egypt and the United States for their involvement in future similar situations. It is essential to repair the relations with Jordan, and share the findings of the review, along with an apology and compensation for the family of the Jordanian killed at the embassy (who is not suspected of attacking the security guard). Viable tools should be developed to administer the Temple Mount in partnership with Jordan and with responsible elements from among the Arab population in East Jerusalem. In tandem, attention should be paid to Jewish extremists, whose acts of revenge are potentially far more volatile than the placement of metal detectors on the Temple Mount. Finally, Israel should formulate a comprehensive political, intelligence, and operational response to the connection between the Islamic Movement in Israel and Hamas and Turkey.

Particularly as Israel's National Security Council – which is responsible for preparing cabinet discussions and integrating the recommendations of the security entities – is understaffed and lacks influence, it is important that cabinet members come to future meetings equipped with an analytical model that includes the fundamental questions that must be asked. In addition, the cabinet must be informed of the conclusions reached following the review of the Temple Mount crisis of July 2017.