

The Struggle for De Facto Sovereignty over the Temple Mount

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The events of Ramadan 2022 have illustrated the potential volatility surrounding the al-Aqsa Mosque, and have emphasized again that al-Aqsa and the Temple Mount compound have become a main focus in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In the face of the violence, Israel has waged tactical holding and containment battles, without understanding that this is a new struggle over sovereignty over the Temple Mount. In recent years there has been an erosion of the Temple Mount status quo understandings, particularly with an increase in the influence of extremists – both Muslims and Jews – on events at the compound. Given the Temple Mount's potential for local and regional volatility, Israel should neutralize and restrict inciters of violence and provocateurs who are intentionally working to undermine the status quo at the site. Despite the weakness of the Jordanian Waqf, it is important to again attempt to reach an up-to-date understanding with Jordan and even with the Palestinian Authority regarding arrangements that will ensure order and freedom of Muslim worship and visits by Jews to the compound, and will also deny Hamas an achievement, as the main party inciting and encouraging a fight over control of the Temple Mount.

"The Temple Mount is in our hands," Motta Gur called into his transmitter at the end of the battle over the Old City of Jerusalem in the Six Day War. In time it became clear how charged, volatile, complex, and sensitive this declaration is, religiously, nationally, politically, and culturally. The Israeli government at the time understood the complexity and made a decision that despite the declaration of Israeli sovereignty over all of Jerusalem, Jordan would be responsible for the internal management of the Temple Mount, which is where the al-Aqsa Mosque is located, and Jews would be permitted to visit the Mount, but not to pray in the compound, only at the Western Wall.

The events of the month of Ramadan 2022 have illustrated the potential volatility surrounding the al-Aqsa Mosque, and highlighted again that Jerusalem and especially al-Aqsa and the Temple Mount compound have become a main focus in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In the weeks surrounding Ramadan, the clashes at the compound between Israeli

security forces and Palestinians and Arab citizens of Israel increased and spurred extremists, most of them lacking any organizational affiliation, to commit terror attacks against Jews. The campaigns of rampant incitement on social networks and in the Palestinian media, which were led by Hamas, depicted an alleged Israeli plan to divide the Temple Mount into separate prayer areas and prayer times for Muslims and Jews, similar to the division that exists at the Cave of the Patriarchs in Hebron, which they cast as a violation of the status quo.

The Israel Police acted determinedly and wisely against the violent events, even when it was necessary to insert police officers into the area of the mosque when young Palestinians barricaded themselves there and prepared to throw stones and fireworks, including toward the Western Wall plaza. Despite the intensity of the events, Israel did not close the compound off to Muslim worshippers and continued to allow prayers. No one was killed in the incidents, and there were no “martyrs” whose deaths could have added fuel to the fire and increased the violence. The police forces were restrained in the face of the provocations of Hamas flags raised at the compound, and this restraint enabled holding the prayers of Qadr Night there, attended by over 250,000 Muslim worshippers.

The fighting over al-Aqsa and the fake information about Israel's intentions to change the arrangements regarding prayers at the compound are a motivating force for individuals and groups, the majority of them lacking any organizational affiliation, to commit murderous attacks on Israeli civilians. The axe attack in Elad at the end of Independence Day marked the continuation of the struggle over al-Aqsa, even after Ramadan, with the mobilization to defend it motivating young Palestinians to answer the call of the Hamas leader in the Gaza Strip, Yahya Sinwar, to carry out terrorist attacks with whatever is at hand – a gun, knife, or axe. Hamas spokesman Fawzi Barhoum further clarified that “the action in Elad was a brave act of heroism and a natural response to the violations of the occupation of the al-Aqsa Mosque.”

Several actors are determining the spirit and the intensify of events on the Temple Mount:

- a. Hamas is working to solidify its image as "the defender of al-Aqsa" out of an understanding that the incitement surrounding the Temple Mount will enhance the spirit of "resistance" among Palestinians. Islamic groups who have joined with Hamas and answered its calls contribute to the image that Hamas has overriding controlling of events in the compound.
- b. The Northern Branch of the Islamic Movement in Israel is very active in organizing riots at al-Aqsa. It organized shuttles to the compound with over 100 buses each day during the last week of Ramadan.
- c. Hizb ut-Tahrir, the Islamic liberation party, which is working against both the Jordanian Waqf establishment and the Palestinian Authority, in coordination with Hamas's youth and students' organization, which for its part is active at universities in the West Bank. During Ramadan the party brought hundreds of activists to the Temple Mount, exploiting the inability to isolate the compound.
- d. The coordinating committees of the Palestinian neighborhoods in East Jerusalem and groups of East Jerusalem young people, who have set for themselves the goal of defending al-Aqsa against settlers and Jewish prayer.
- e. The Murabitun, led by Ekrima Sabri, the preacher and leading cleric at al-Aqsa.
- f. Groups of Israelis seeking to demonstrate a broad presence and to pray at the Temple Mount, and also figures who are exploiting the political crisis in Israel and trying to push the United Arab List (Ra'am) to resign from the coalition due to the events surrounding al-Aqsa.

Hamas, by means of cognitive warfare based on leveraging images it has adopted, such as waving the organization's flag at the Temple Mount and instigating mass chanting by Muslim worshipers in honor of Mohammed Deif – the head of the organization's military wing – has presented the events as a "victory" over Israel. At the top of its list of achievements are: strengthening its image as "the defender of Jerusalem"; preventing animal sacrifices by Jews on the Temple Mount; preventing the flag parade from

entering the Old City through the Damascus Gate; undermining the stability of the Israeli government; and furthering "harassment" activity at the Temple Mount, similar to occurrences at the Gaza Strip border. Above all, the events have proven, according to Hamas's spokesmen, that the path of "resistance" is the one leading the Palestinian camp, and the organization has the power to forge a connection between the various arenas of conflict against Israel.

Khaled Mashal, Hamas's leader outside the territories, called for the establishment of a joint "al-Aqsa army" of the Palestinians and the Islamic *umma*. According to him, it is necessary to formulate a strategy of constant struggle that will lead to the removal of Israeli sovereignty at al-Aqsa, in Jerusalem, and later in all of Palestine. In Gaza, in a speech on April 30, Sinwar vowed that the struggle will not end after Ramadan and praised Arab citizens of Israel who came to defend al-Aqsa. Sinwar stated that Hamas is prepared for a prolonged struggle to prevent Israeli police and settlers from entering the area of al-Aqsa, and will not allow the division of the Temple Mount between Jews and Muslims – not in terms of prayer times and also not in terms of prayer areas. He called on the Palestinian people to prepare for the great battle, if the "occupation" does not stop attacking the al-Aqsa Mosque and Jerusalem, when "a regional religious war will take place that will look like a ball of fire throughout the Middle East...including the desecration of thousands of synagogues worldwide."

The Jordanians are following what is happening at al-Aqsa with great concern, due to the fear that the riots could spill over into the kingdom's territory. The Hashemite dynasty is the official custodian of the holy place on behalf of the Muslim world. Since the establishment of the Jordanian kingdom, it has been entrusted with al-Aqsa, and the peace agreement with Israel confirmed its special status in the compound. The Jordanian government is clinging to the understandings called the "status quo" at the Temple Mount, which is the Haram al-Sharif (a site that is holy to Islam and the third most important in the Muslim world), even though they are unwritten and lack legal standing. The Jordanian Waqf, like all of the Muslim streams, does not recognize Israeli sovereignty at the Temple Mount. Since

1967, when the understandings were formulated a *modus vivendi* has developed in which Israel has granted the Jordanian Waqf the authority to manage the worship, sermons, events, excavations, maintenance, teaching, and rules of conduct at the site. It has also been determined that Jews are not permitted to pray on the Temple Mount, and visits by Jews, as well as tourists, are approved during hours determined in advance with the Jordanian Waqf. The task of security has been divided between the Waqf, which is responsible for the territory of the Temple Mount, and the Israel Police, which is responsible for the perimeter security of the compound, and the understanding has developed that police forces will enter the site in cases of disturbances and violation of freedom of worship.

However, in recent years two developments have taken place that indicate a deviation from the status quo: first, more Israelis visit the Temple Mount and even seek to pray there, and indeed, Jewish groups and individuals have engaged in prayer despite the prohibition; second, the Jordanian Waqf, like that of the Palestinian Authority, has considerably weakened and lost its ability to control the site, and many extreme actors have entered the resulting vacuum, chiefly the Northern Branch of the Islamic Movement and young people from East Jerusalem. In response to recent events, Jordan has submitted a document to the US administration with a demand to restore the status quo according to Jordan, meaning full Muslim management of the Temple Mount via the Jordanian Waqf, which would have the authority to decide who enters, when they enter, and how many enter the compound, along with a prohibition on Jewish prayer.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The increasing incitement and riots at the al-Aqsa compound during Ramadan 2022 have motivated terrorist attacks by individuals and pairs, in which 19 Israelis were murdered. At the same time, Israel has succeeded in preventing a large-scale deterioration and escalation in Jerusalem, as well as in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. In the regional context, despite the rise in the public criticism of Israel, the strategic partnership with Arab countries has not broken down, and world attention has not been diverted from the war in Ukraine toward Jerusalem.

That said, Israeli policy has failed on several counts. On the strategic level, Israel has waged tactical holding and containment battles, without understanding that this is a new era of struggle over sovereignty at the Temple Mount, and that struggle encourages terrorist attacks by terrorists without an organizational affiliation. In addition, Israel has not exacted a toll from Hamas, which fuels and encourages the escalation events. On the tactical level, there have been three failures: entry permits were given to masses of Palestinian young people and among Arab citizens of Israel, despite signs indicating their intention to cause riots. The Israeli government did not present the arrangements reached with Jordan and the Waqf on the eve of Ramadan, which were violated by the Muslims and thus enabled accusing Israel of violating the status quo, and tension was created between the countries. Moreover, the Israeli government has refrained from clashing with political and other forces in Israel that seek to strengthen Israeli sovereignty on the Temple Mount via entry and mass prayer by Jews.

Israel needs to be ready for an ongoing struggle over control of the Temple Mount, based on the understanding that the potential volatility at this sensitive site will increase following every incident, holiday, or special date. At the same time, it must prepare for the expected consequences of imposing sovereignty and order at the compound – encouraging terrorist attacks and challenges to its regional and international standing. It is necessary to restrict the activity of destabilizing forces, drive a wedge between them, and neutralize them. On the Muslim side, the main problem is the lack of a responsible leadership that would represent all of the elements. The Jordanian Waqf as well as the Palestinian Authority, which Israel has kept out of Jerusalem and the Temple Mount, lack influence, are unable to impose order and calm, and cope with the groups that do not respect their authority, just as they do not accept Israel's authority and are willing to clash fearlessly with police forces.

Israel must act with determination and restrict the entry of destabilizing figures into the Temple Mount, both Muslims and Jews. At the same time,

it is important to attempt to update the understandings with Jordan regarding freedom of Muslim worship at the compound, along with ensuring order and stability there, by virtue of the agreements between the countries and to achieve legitimacy for future measures. In addition, Israel should discuss with Jordan the integration of the Palestinian Authority in the Jordanian Waqf, thus denying Hamas an achievement as an most influential actor. The arrangements must focus on imposing stability and calm, ensuring the safety of Muslim worshippers at al-Aqsa and Jewish worshippers at the Western Wall, and with permitting Jews to visit the Temple Mount at defined times, with a commitment to prevent Jews from prayer at the site. If effective understandings are not reached with Jordan, Israel should consider, for a limited period, a complete closure of access to the compound – to both Muslims and Jews.

Regarding Hamas, the optimistic assessments in Israel regarding its supposedly having become more moderate and the possibility of reaching quiet understandings with it have again been proven wrong. Hamas is successfully exploiting the differentiation between the Gaza Strip, where calm and routine are maintained, and the rest of the regions, which from its perspective constitute arenas of struggle, and it is encouraging an escalation of the terrorism in them and from them – Jerusalem, within Israel, the West Bank, and southern Lebanon. Hamas must pay a price for this incitement, and the time has come for Israel to utilize its technological superiority to disrupt the organization's channels of influence, incitement, and agitation.