

“War Game”: Outbreak of Violence on Temple Mount

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The Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) recently held a war game, which simulated hypothetical events if/when Minister Ben-Gvir visits the Temple Mount again, as he did on January 3, 2023. According to the scenario, at the end of the visit severe violence broke out between Jews and Palestinians, leading to the deaths of two Jews and 19 Palestinians, with dozens wounded on both sides. Among the key insights that emerged from the game: (1) Events on the Temple Mount are influenced by the rhetoric of Israeli politicians and easily strengthen destabilizing elements while weakening restraining elements. (2) The Prime Minister’s announcement that Israel would uphold the status quo while in practice it erodes it is not credible and certainly does not help calm the situation. (3) The Jordanian Wakf has an important role to play in calming the situation on the Temple Mount, and it is essential to restore its centrality. (4) An attempt to change processes of command and control in one fell swoop in order to meet political demands is problematic, leading to friction between forces and use of forces that are not ready for the tasks at hand. (5) Escalation in a sensitive place such as the Temple Mount assumes its own dynamic, and it is essential to examine the strategic consequences of any tactical action.

The Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) conducted a war game – a simulation of hypothetical events¹ if/when Minister of National Security Itamar Ben-Gvir visits the Temple Mount / al-Haram a-Sharif again, as he did on January 3, 2023. INSS researchers and external participants played the actors: the government of Israel, the National Security Council, representatives of the security establishment, the Israel Police, the Kingdom of Jordan, the United States, the international community, young people from East Jerusalem, Arab citizens of Israel, Hamas, the Palestinian Authority, Islamic Jihad, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.

¹ The scenario described below is imaginary and does not depict events that occurred in reality

The Hypothetical Scenario

A few days after his brief visit to the Temple Mount, the Minister of National Security, Itamar Ben-Gvir, visited the compound again and announced, "We are the owners of this place, and everyone will soon understand that." He clarified his intention to extend the visiting hours and the number of Jews permitted to visit the site, and to open the Cotton Merchants' Gate to Jews. Minister Ben-Gvir also announced that he was instructing the Israel Police not to prevent individual Jews from praying on the Mount, since "every Jew has the right to pray wherever he deems proper."

A few hours later, hundreds of Ben-Gvir's supporters came to the Temple Mount, broke through the Police barrier at the Cotton Merchants' Gate, and prepared for mass prayer at the site. A group of Palestinians, mainly young men from East Jerusalem who had previously barricaded themselves in al-Aqsa, broke out of the mosque and rushed toward the praying Jews, throwing sticks, stones, and flares toward them. The Palestinians began posting videos of the clashes on social media, including old and fabricated videos, purporting to show Israeli police officers breaking into the mosque wearing shoes, and called on their Muslim brothers to come to the site and defend al-Aqsa with force. Violent clashes also occurred elsewhere in the Old City.

After a few hours of violence, the security forces managed to separate the two sides and evacuate the Jews from the Temple Mount. The rioting Palestinians shut themselves in al-Aqsa Mosque and Bab al-Rahma (the Gate of Mercy). At the end of the clashes, two Jews and 19 Palestinians were killed, and there were dozens of wounded on both sides.

The next day the Palestinians in East Jerusalem and the West Bank announced the start of the "Battle for al-Aqsa." The Hamas leadership in the Gaza Strip threatened to ignite the "fires of Hell." At mass rallies in Gaza, recordings were played of Mohammed Deif announcing that the Hamas response was ready, and he promised it would be seared in the flesh of conquering Israel. Thousands began streaming from the West Bank along several routes leading to Jerusalem and the Old City and heading for the Temple Mount compound, where they intended to barricade themselves and prevent Jews from visiting and praying there.

Jordan sent Israel a strong message condemning the breach by Jews of the Temple Mount, recalled its ambassador to Israel and demanded that he return home immediately, and announced that it was considering expelling Israel's ambassador from Jordan. The Jordanian government also decided to deny flights from Israel to over its airspace. All the Arab countries condemned Israel, the United Arab

Emirates convened an urgent debate in the Security Council, and the General Secretary of the Arab League called for a swift meeting of countries in the League and invited all Muslim countries to enlist in the defense of al-Aqsa.

Course of the Simulation

Israel's security cabinet convened in light of the escalation, and after an assessment of the situation, the Prime Minister summarized:

1. Israel's objective is to put out the fire and calm the situation, without affecting Israel's deterrence or the status quo on the Temple Mount.
2. Special attention should be paid to Israel's Arab citizens in order to avoid outbreaks of violence like those during Operation Guardian of the Walls.
3. Provocations should be prevented and Jewish prayer on the Temple Mount should not be permitted.
4. Ministers visiting the site are not breaching the status quo, and it must be made clear to the international media that Israel is maintaining the status quo. However, the Prime Minister said that visits by Ministers and Knesset Members to the Temple Mount must be controlled and take account of the situation and the prevailing sensitivities.
5. Relations with the Kingdom of Jordan are of major importance, as is its special role on the Temple Mount, and he ordered greater coordination with the Jordanian Wakf on management of the site.
6. It is important to preserve the essential role of the Police in maintaining order on the Temple Mount, and quickly implement conditions that will enable the resumption of Muslim prayer in al-Aqsa.

The head of the Jerusalem District Police (part of the Israel Police) complained that the Police had no time to prepare before the Minister of National Security came to the compound and that the police were not aware of his intention to announce a change to the status quo. The Police also had no prior information about young people organizing in East Jerusalem to create disturbances on the Mount. He clarified that by virtue of his responsibility and powers, at this point he was

banning Jewish visitors and Muslim worshippers from visiting the Temple Mount, due to the potential risks to human life. Consequently, the Police stopped a convoy of buses from the Islamic Movement en route to Jerusalem, and with the IDF, blocked the passage of Palestinians from the West Bank to Jerusalem. The police commander also stressed the importance of coordination with the Jordanian Wakf to restore quiet to the Temple Mount. He added that police forces should be deployed at all potential friction points in the mixed cities, although this means significant disruption of the Police's ongoing routine work. The Minister of National Security insisted that battalions of Border Guards in the West Bank follow his orders and be sent to Jerusalem to defend the Temple Mount; the head of the Jerusalem District Police countered that this instruction was not practical for reasons of command and control, training of the units for the special task on the Mount, and the implications for other areas.

Notwithstanding the Prime Minister's commitment to uphold the status quo on the Temple Mount, the regional and international community interpreted Israel's steps as changes in the status quo, the rules of the game in Jerusalem, and the Israel-Palestinian arena overall. Strong objection to Jewish prayer at the Temple Mount complex was relayed, while the Abraham Accords countries decided to lower the profile of the normalization process with Israel; in the Security Council they voted for a resolution calling on Israel to maintain the status quo and for the establishment of a foreign observer team to supervise activity at this sensitive complex. At a meeting between Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman and UAE President Mohammed Bin Zayed, Bin Salman announced that Riyadh was suspending talks with Israel on the promotion of official relations between the countries, and that the events strengthened the Kingdom's position that it will not join the Abraham Accords due to its commitment to the Muslim world, and due to its position as the guardians of the holy places. It was also argued that events of this kind will make it harder for the Kingdom to justify relations with Israel on the Saudi street.

In tandem, the Palestinian Authority, which is weak and losing legitimacy in the eyes of the Palestinian public because of its poor performance and corruption and the absence of any political process, stopped its security coordination with the IDF. The PA used the incident to "internationalize" the conflict and lead moves against Israel in the Security Council. PA President Mahmoud Abbas called for mass protests, even involving friction with the IDF, although without the use of weapons. Groups of Palestinian gathered at sensitive points of contact with the IDF and residents of the settlements on roads in the West Bank, from where they hurled

hundreds of stones and Molotov cocktails. Hamas for its part worked energetically to ignite all the arenas – Jerusalem, the West Bank, and inside Israel (with the help of radical elements among Israeli Arabs), while also sending rockets from south Lebanon – although it sought to maintain relative calm in the Gaza Strip following heavy Egyptian pressure to refrain from upsetting the reconstruction processes there. However, Islamic Jihad, with the encouragement of Iran, launched rockets at Israel's Gaza border communities and Hamas refrained from an attempt to stop it, waiting for Israel's response.

Arab citizens of Israel, worried by the expected measures from the new right-wing government – e.g., discrimination, and the entry of reinforced Border Guard forces into towns – arranged to demonstrate along main traffic routes. These events strengthened the motivation of radical elements (influenced by ISIS) to wage internal attacks and attempt to reach the Temple Mount and even penetrate the Western Wall Plaza, arguing that “if Jews go to al-Haram a-Sharif, then Israeli Muslims will go to the Western Wall.”

Insights from the Game

Tension between destabilizing elements and restraining elements. Irregular events on the Temple Mount are highly volatile, and elements of chaos might overcome the elements of restraint. The belief in Israel that it will be possible to take control of any incident and the expectations that professional elements will be able to respond in situations where the processes of assessment, command and control, and force readiness are disrupted are not valid. Therefore, there should be an in-depth examination of the possible implications of items in the coalition agreements that if implemented could neutralize the restraining forces inside Israel itself and in the region, and interfere with the functioning of the decision making systems and the security services.

Potential friction between security forces under different commands. The game illustrated the lack of clarity emerging regarding command and control of various security entities, and in particular the direct subordination of Border Guard units to the Ministry of National Security. While the Police asked to use some Border Guard units for assistance in the cities with mixed Arab and Jewish populations and to block access to Jerusalem, the Minister asked them to operate on the Temple Mount, thus disrupting the processes of command and control of the Police. The Prime Minister addressed this issue in the Cabinet discussions and decided not to change the command and control procedures to allow effective handling of incidents, to the displeasure of the Minister of National Security.

Ostensible allegiance to the status quo while in fact it is eroding is not perceived as credible, and certainly is not calming. Ben-Gvir's short visit to the Temple Mount on January 3 was interpreted by all foreign observers as a deliberate provocation, endangering the delicate status quo at one of the holiest and most sensitive sites in the Middle East. The clarifications from Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu about upholding the status quo are not relevant in view of announcements from Israeli Knesset members and ministers, whose positions are known, about intentions to change it. The world is exposed to repeated breaches of the Temple Mount status quo, particularly Jewish prayer there, at least on the eastern side of the compound. Declarations to abide by the status quo are perceived in the worst case as lies and in the best case as evidence that the government is isolated from reality.

Upholding the status quo means assigning a meaningful role to the Jordanian Wakf to calm the situation on the Temple Mount. This view is shared by the government of Israel, the Kingdom of Jordan, and even the Palestinian Authority, although the actual "sovereignty" in the compound is that of the Israel Police. However, steps taken by Israel over the years have weakened the Wakf. For young East Jerusalemites – Shabab al-Aqsa – the old men of the Wakf, like the Palestinian Authority and the Royal Palace in Amman, are weak actors that are unable to defend the Mosque. They are therefore enlisting and prepared to become martyrs in the defense of al-Aqsa. As with the Palestinian Authority, weakened and unable to ensure stability on the West Bank, so too the Jordanian Wakf has become very weak and dishonored, and its ability to control hundreds of rioters on the Temple Mount is minimal. Israel expects the participation of the traditional actors (the Wakf, King of Jordan, Palestinian Authority) in the effort to calm the situation, although their influence grows weaker with each incident on the Temple Mount. In other words, Israel is losing a means of restraint.

Escalation in such a sensitive compound as the Temple Mount has its own dynamic, and any action at the tactical level can have strategic consequences. Even if a tactical incident ends quickly, it could have long term implications. For example, according to the game scenario, the Police decision to stop buses with Arab Israelis traveling to Jerusalem perhaps helped to contain events in the capital, but at the same time encouraged a general sense that Israel denies access to the Temple Mount, and this could motivate radical Arab elements to start riots in cities with mixed populations.

The Palestinian public and Arab populations abroad are strongly influenced by social media campaigns on and are flooded with information, much of it false. The government of Israel must preempt the next incident and invest in

propaganda in Arabic, highlighting the gap between its actual policy and the goals of radical Jewish movements, which are widely disseminated among Arab internet surfers. The government must clarify that it does not intend to change the arrangements on the Temple Mount – to define access and prayer time (there is great fear of the Cave of the Patriarchs format in Hebron) – and show that it is bans and prevents Jewish prayer and sacrifices close to the compound.

The ability to understand that the rules of the game have changed. A recurring problem in war games is the assumption that the players are rational and stick to the existing rules. The scenario did not develop to a situation in which politicians and other players “break the rules.” Therefore, it did not reach a situation of Israeli loss of control of events due to “irrational” actions by players who believe that precisely ongoing chaos serves their interests.