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The Tension in Jerusalem – Preventing the Eruption of “the Volcano”

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The Nature of the Escalation

The past two months have witnessed a troubling deterioration in the security situation in Jerusalem. This trend has been reflected in rising tension between the Jewish and Arab residents of the city and the increasingly frequent perpetration of acts of protest and violence by residents of East Jerusalem. It is a gradual, ostensibly controlled escalation, but one with the potential to explode due to the cumulative effect of the events in question. Here lies the importance of understanding and containing this dynamic as quickly as possible, without paying a high security or political price.

The deterioration began with the July 2, 2014 murder of teenager Muhammad Abu Khdeir by Jews, depicted as retaliation for the abduction and murder of three Israeli teenagers in Hebron the previous month. The murder sparked widespread unrest among the Arab residents of Jerusalem, who subsequently began protesting and demonstrating within their neighborhoods. These demonstrations were frequently violent in nature and involved the use of Molotov cocktails and stone throwing, which resulted, among other things, in the cessation of the light rail service in a number of neighborhoods, primarily Shu'fat. Another factor contributing to the heated atmosphere was the military campaign in Gaza. A cycle of violence has been plaguing the city ever since. On August 4, an Arab bulldozer driver purposely crashed into a bus and ran over and killed a Jewish yeshiva student. The same day, a gunman on a motorcycle shot a soldier in the Mount Scopus tunnel. This was followed by the August 23 shooting of a young Arab man from the Shu'fat refugee camp and the

September 7 death of an Arab teenager from injuries sustained after being shot by Israeli policemen during a stormy demonstration in the neighborhood of Wadi Joz. On October 22, a baby was killed when a car rammed a crowd at a Jerusalem light rail station, and a few days later a woman who was critically wounded in the attack died. During the same period, Jews launched violent attacks against Arabs, including an attack carried out on July 25 in the neighborhood of Neve Yaakov, in which two young Arabs were critically wounded.

Other factors creating unrest and increasing tension and friction have included the Jewish purchase of homes in Arab neighborhoods and their population by Jews, at the initiative of ideologically motivated Jewish associations. The result has been violent outbursts by Arab residents of the city, who regard these actions as a manifestation of Israeli government policy aimed at seizing control of additional parts of East Jerusalem by establishing facts on the ground and significantly diminishing the Arab character of their neighborhoods.

The same period has witnessed heightened tensions surrounding the Temple Mount, control of which constitutes a sensitive issue with manifold implications. During the Jewish High Holidays, in an effort to maintain security and public order, the police made changes to the entry arrangements at the site, and placed age restrictions on worshipers visiting the mosques for the Friday prayers. In response, the Muslims conducted mass prayers outside the gates, further fanning the flames. The same period witnessed an increase in the size of the Jewish groups entering the Temple Mount and attempting to conduct prayers there. These actions, in conjunction with legislative initiatives by Knesset members, were interpreted as Israeli attempts to change the status quo on the Temple Mount, an impression further reinforced by Israeli Knesset members and government ministers' visits to the site. Not surprisingly, these actions and statements were met by fierce Palestinian resistance. In addition to the fundamental difficulty involved with the religious-based tension, the presence of the Jewish worshipers resulted in limitations on the times and the area allocated to the Muslim prayers and, according to the Muslim worshipers, these limitations were responsible for the intensity of their response. Palestinians—including many teenagers affiliated with the Islamic Movement and Hamas—have repeatedly engaged in attacks on police forces present on the Temple Mount and even set fire to the local police station. However, in contrast to past altercations, the police insisted on giving the

Jewish worshipers an opportunity to visit the Temple Mount during the holidays and refrained from exercising the caution necessary to avoid eruption. This policy generated violent confrontations and incitement, resulting in arrests and casualties on both sides. Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas also addressed the issue, calling for an enhanced presence in the Holy Basin by preventing a Jewish presence there.

Potential Loss of Control and Strategic Damage

The implications of the escalation and the mounting tensions in East Jerusalem may prove significant for Israel on a number of levels. First, in the aftermath of the recent round of violence, the Israelis and Palestinians remain filled with mutual hatred. In addition, both the Israeli and the Palestinian leaderships are saturated by a mutual lack of trust. Following the failure of the last round of negotiations, the political process with the Palestinians is not on the agenda and support for a political process requiring concessions has further declined. Nowhere is this position more prominently reflected than through the topic of Jerusalem. A clear majority of Israelis oppose division of the city in a future settlement. There is no need to delve too far back into the history of the conflict to understand the potential volatility of the city, in which both background and the timing of local events assume extreme importance. In September 1996, the opening of the Western Wall tunnels sparked violent clashes throughout the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, which took a heavy toll on both sides. Ariel Sharon's visit to the Temple Mount during the Jewish High Holiday season in September 2000 was viewed as a provocation and as one of the sparks that ignited the Second Intifada. Nevertheless, the tools required to prevent a serious eruption of the situation in Jerusalem were not prepared in time.

Second, the escalation in Jerusalem and in the Temple Mount in particular could harm Israel's foreign relations with Jordan and with its other allies, most notably the United States. This year marks the twentieth anniversary of the signing and ratification of the peace treaty between Jordan and Israel, which is of utmost strategic importance to both countries, and has survived in spite of challenges over the years. Nonetheless, one of Jordan's most highly cherished issues is its royal family's religious and historical connection to *al-Haram al-Sharif* (the Temple Mount). Last year, Abbas and King Abdullah even signed an agreement to bolster the defense of the holy place,

confirming Jordan's leadership role in this undertaking. Under King Abdullah's leadership, the Jordanians have not hesitated to voice their opinions regarding the growing tension at the site and to resolutely denounce Israel, including warnings that any changes to the status quo would be considered crossing a red-line, thus endangering the peace treaty. Israel can also be expected to be the target of international critics, particularly in light of the political stalemate, if it is required to use force in responding to the acts of protest or to the demonstrations and violence of the Palestinian worshipers in Jerusalem.

Third, the events in the Middle East, which are currently characterized by instability and ethnic, tribal, and religious struggles, in addition to the war against the Islamic State may lead to the impression that regional and world attention can be diverted from the events in Jerusalem. Dramatic developments on the Temple Mount, however, have the potential to be a game-changer. The religious sensitivity regarding the site may result in an effect that impacts wide circles of people who identify with the site. Throughout the Arab and Muslim world, it may even arouse waves of support of violence.

The Israeli government, the Jerusalem municipality and the Israeli police force have attempted to placate the residents, based on the belief that the calm and status quo in Jerusalem and at the Temple Mount in particular can be restored without addressing the fundamental problems of East Jerusalem and of the Arab neighborhoods in the city. These problems are weighty and complex and should be addressed using a long-term optic that addresses the growing gap between the two parts of the city: the residents of East Jerusalem are in a miserable economic state (approximately 85 percent of the children live under the poverty line); the government and municipal infrastructure and services in East Jerusalem suffer from profound and ongoing neglect; East Jerusalem suffers from a housing shortage, overcrowding, and lack of building permits; the sense of isolation experienced by the Arab residents of the city as a result of the security fence and their fear of losing their Jerusalem residency permits in case of an extended absence from the city. These factors cause frustration, radicalization, and the strengthening of Islamist elements, thus serving as fertile ground for the outbreak of violence.

Recommendations

In the immediate short term, the Israeli government must take decisive action to reduce friction and settle the volatile issues by means of the following steps: 1) an unequivocal public statement by the Prime Minister assuring that Israel will maintain the status quo that has been in place at the Temple Mount since 1967; 2) prevention of provocation by extremist Israeli elements on the Temple Mount, and a simultaneous easing of the limitations on the entrance of Muslim worshipers into the Temple Mount, provided a pledge by the Waqf that this step will not be used to conduct violent demonstrations; 3) an invitation to Jordanian representatives to examine the events at the Temple Mount first hand; 4) firm and resolute treatment of elements fomenting unrest and inciting acts of violence; 5) restraint, in the short term, of the residence in the houses purchased in Arab neighborhoods by right wing Jewish groups.

In parallel, the Israeli government, in conjunction with the Jerusalem municipality, should draw up a comprehensive plan to address the fundamental problems facing the Arab neighborhoods of the city. The Arab residents should be incorporated, to the greatest extent possible, in formulation of these plans and in their subsequent implementation. Substantial improvement of the situation in East Jerusalem will enhance stability and economic prosperity and serve the two competing political approaches regarding the future of the city: the unified city approach, which requires bridging the gaps between the two parts of the city; and the approach which envisions a partition of the city as part of a disengagement from the Palestinians in the event of a permanent status agreement, and therefore believes that improved conditions in East Jerusalem will strengthen the stabilizing elements, prevent the penetration of radical elements that incite unrest and tension, and increase cooperation.