

The Eruption of Violence in the Palestinian Arena: A Transition from a National Conflict to a Religious Conflict?

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The events that erupted in Jerusalem during the Jewish holidays in the fall of 2015, reflecting what Palestinians feared were Israeli intentions to change the status quo on the Temple Mount, spilled over into Israel, to the border area with the Gaza Strip, and into the West Bank. Palestinian usage of terms related to Jerusalem and the Temple Mount – such as the al-Aqsa or al-Quds Intifada – strengthened the prevailing sense that the religious dimension was the major motif behind the recent escalation and “knife terrorism.” Indeed, most of the stabbing assailants, whose actions have taken the form of “self-sacrifice attacks” (in reference to the high likelihood of their being killed), attribute their decisions to stab and murder Jews to Israeli conduct at the al-Aqsa compound and the blatant offense to the religious symbol that holds such great importance for Muslims.

Most of the incitement in the media and the social networks has also revolved around the issue of al-Aqsa, warning of malicious Israeli intentions to change the status quo at the site to allow Muslims and Jews to pray there simultaneously, similar to the arrangement in place at the Cave of the Patriarchs in Hebron. Palestinian anger has likewise been fanned by the suspected Israeli intention to rebuild the Jewish temple on the ruins of the al-Aqsa mosque. Religious leaders and preachers have aggravated the situation and inflamed the masses in the name of al-Aqsa, using slogans relating to defense of the Muslim holy site, which, they contend, is a Palestinian responsibility. These

messages are readily absorbed by the younger generation, despite the fact that most do not live a religious lifestyle. The strengthening of al-Aqsa's religious dimension has been inspired by the Islamic State – namely, its Islamic propaganda and the calls to fulfill the vision of the restoration of the golden age of Islam, which are disseminated by means of the internet and the social media.

Consequently, it is important to consider whether this religious dimension and inspiration is also indicative of a fundamental change in the nature of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Is the nationalist conflict becoming a religious conflict, or is the religious dimension of the conflict (which has always existed) currently taking on greater significance? And if so, what does this mean?

The emerging profile of the young Palestinian knife assailant from East Jerusalem indicates that the phenomenon involves primarily young people who are disconnected from the realms of education and employment, who are for the most part idle, and who rely on the social media as a primary source of information. These young Palestinians experience ongoing frustration based on their lack of a credible horizon for a better future and on a growing sense of despair on a national level due to the failure of the Palestinian leadership to chart a course toward a positive future. Although the traditional mechanisms of restraint and containment of Palestinian society in East Jerusalem were once able to restrain and contain the violent potential or channel it to other less violent outlets, these mechanisms have been greatly weakened by the changes underway in Palestinian society in East Jerusalem and the West Bank. Not only has parental authority eroded, but the education systems do not function and are characterized by a shortage of classrooms (most young Palestinians taking part in the disorderly conduct have deserted the formal education systems) and a lack of control over the material being studied. In addition, the institution of community elders (*shaykh*) and mukhtars has lost its status and influence. In actuality, it is a population without leadership.

The young members of this sector express their anger and frustration through acts of disorder, knife attacks, and other displays of violence. The reverberations of the attacks have been amplified by the sense of hysteria among the Israeli public (that is, until Israelis grew accustomed to the situation within a few weeks of the onset of escalation), with the assistance of the

media and the incitement underway on social networks. These reverberations have aroused a sense of accomplishment among the young generation. After all, using nothing more than knives, they have succeeded in bringing about a change that neither the adults nor the Palestinian leadership had been able to achieve by means of their strategy of internationalization of the Palestinian issue on the one hand, and popular resistance on the other hand, and that Hamas has also failed to achieve through its strategy of armed struggle.

Despite the religious nature of the recent outburst of violence, al-Aqsa for young people has become symbolic of a nationalist sentiment more than a religious sentiment, and of motivation for violent resistance in the spirit of Islamic State jihad. Terrorism and violence have become tools with which these young people express their desire for change, though they have been unable to define the exact nature of the change they would like to bring about. It is a rebellion against the status quo – both the Israeli establishment and the Palestinian establishment – and an attempt to break free of the reality in which they live in a way that brings with it a sense of pride and spiritual uplifting.

The fact that they use the name al-Aqsa and portray their struggle using slogans calling for the site's immediate liberation from the Zionist infidels is also not indicative of a sweeping process of religionization. The struggle of the young Palestinians involved in the current wave of violence is not being waged in the name of the Qur'an, and its goal is not to make religious ritual, centering on prayer at the al-Aqsa mosque, the formative essence of their lives. Al-Aqsa imbues the nationalist, generational, and cultural sparks of motivation with a religious dimension. Under the influence of the propaganda films of the Islamic State, these young Palestinians share a growing sense that they too are party to something greater, to a new idea, to revival and renewal, all of which have religious elements. What we are witnessing is a secularization of jihad, as the religious imperative becomes a personal and collective incentive framed, *inter alia*, as national resistance.

During the weeks following the onset of escalation, the attacks, which were carried out by individuals acting on personal initiative, maintained a more or less steady scope and frequency. During the same period, demonstrations and clashes between groups of young Palestinians and Israeli security forces decreased relatively rapidly. Among the factors in this development

were the provisions and adjustments made by the Israeli security system. Another was the understanding regarding arrangements at the Temple Mount reached by Jordan and Israel with American mediation, to the almost complete exclusion of the Palestinian Authority. At the same time, Israeli society adapted to the wave of terrorism as characteristic of the regional reality, and the media and public reverberations declined accordingly. These developments enabled the Israeli security system to adhere to a strategy of containment and differentiation between the non-involved population and the knife-wielding assailants and other attackers. Indeed, the decisive majority of Palestinians in Jerusalem have not been involved in the terrorism or violence, and those who have been involved were working against the vital interests of the uninvolved population, which seeks to integrate into the Israeli fabric of life in the city, even if only due to the lack of a better and more promising alternative.

During the initial weeks of the escalation, the violence and the “stabbing terrorism” moved from Jerusalem to the West Bank, with the central locus in the Hebron area, which is characterized by a notable Hamas presence and influence and a high level of friction between Palestinian residents and the Jews in the area. The Palestinian security forces are having difficulty enforcing their authority in the region – particularly when the leadership preaches popular resistance – and typically refrain from direct confrontation with the centers of power. Hamas has been working to encourage the violence and escalation while keeping it separate from the Gaza Strip (with the exception of intentional and controlled friction along the border fence), with the aim of intensifying the chaos in the West Bank, embarrassing the Palestinian Authority and its security forces, and pushing Israel into a confrontation with the local population. Hamas’ overall goal herein has been to destabilize the Palestinian Authority and bring about its downfall.

In conclusion, it is evident that the religious dimension of the struggle over al-Aqsa, in addition to inspiration stemming from the jihadist propaganda of the Islamic State, is channeling the prevailing sense of frustration among young Palestinians, their loss of faith in their leaders, their desire to protest, and their rejection of the existing order into violent energy and the use of knives as a cultural symbol and an expression of their ability to withstand and resist a strong force – the Israeli army and Israeli society. Nonetheless, the

national dimension of the conflict has not vacated its place for the religious dimension; rather, the religious dimension has become a source of inspiration motivating the Muslim population to engage in violent action which, for its part, and with the help of the social media and institutional support – through the glorification of *shuhada* (martyrdom) and the support of their families – has gone viral, thereby encouraging other young Palestinians to turn to terrorism.