



# PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

## **This is Not the Third Intifada**

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** As hard as it may be, the delicate balance between exercising force and exercising restraint must tip in favor of restraint. Israel must be sure to avoid steps that could make tensions boil over. Having said that, counter-terrorism measures should be applied unequivocally, and the elimination of terrorists, even those wielding knives instead of firearms, must be unanimously backed by all echelons. On the diplomatic level, it is important that the current escalation wanes without a Palestinian achievement, especially when it comes to the Temple Mount. Israel's strategy has to make it clear that violence reaps no rewards.

Contrary to what some media reports would have the public believe, the current unrest, troubling as it may be, does not echo past Palestinian uprisings. Israel must opt for restraint whenever possible, to avoid playing into Palestinian propaganda.

The recent security escalation is difficult and frustrating. The violent riots, especially those in which protesters clash with Israeli security forces, cast serious doubt on the possibility of peaceful coexistence. Inflammatory headlines and fervent media reports seem to exacerbate the situation by blowing it out of proportion.

Israel is currently facing five different types of security incidents: Terrorist attacks involving firearms, stabbing attacks, violent riots, the stoning and firebombing of vehicles, and attempts to breach the Israel-Gaza Strip border.

Attacks by terrorist cells using firearms have been few, with the brutal murder of a Jewish couple traveling on a Samaria road, and the shooting of passengers on a bus in Jerusalem representing the height of this effort so far.

There has been an increase in the number of lone terrorists carrying out stabbing attacks, as dozens of them have been recorded over the past few weeks. The main cluster of these attacks has taken place in Jerusalem, but the past week has proven that nowhere in Israel, from Afula in the north to Kiryat Gat in the south, is immune. The majority of incidents left their victims wounded, but the Jerusalem attacks have so far claimed six lives.

The past few weeks have seen mass protests in Judea and Samaria and in other parts of Israel, where hundreds of rioters clashed with security forces while throwing stones and firebombs at them, chanting anti-Israel slogans and burning Israeli flags.

The Palestinian Authority seems to be trying to curb these events in Palestinian cities and across Judea and Samaria. There has also been an increase in the number of stoning and firebombing incidents targeting vehicles traveling on Judea and Samaria roads, and in smaller numbers on roads adjacent to Arab towns in Israel. The majority of perpetrators in these cases are minors.

Since the recent wave of unrest has begun, there has also been an uptick in attempts by both individuals and groups of Palestinians to breach the Israel-Gaza security fence. These incidents are contained, for the most part, by Hamas. One cannot point to one specific reason as the catalyst that sparked the current unrest, which is most likely the culmination of several unforeseeable factors.

Signs that tensions were reaching a boiling point were evident for a while, most notably over the surge in stoning and firebombing incidents in Jerusalem, which developed into actual attempted murder only over the past few weeks.

The familiar Palestinian theme of "Al-Aqsa is in danger" played a key role in provoking the recent rampage, as did the incessant incitement by the Islamic Movement's northern branch and by Hamas, which is echoed by the Palestinian Authority.

Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to view the recent wave of terrorism as the successful result of well-spun incitement. We must review these events with respect to the overall tensions in the Middle East, agitated by radical

Sunni groups, and especially the Islamic State group, whose increasing grip on parts of the region has captured the imagination of Palestinian youth.

The growing friction with settlers across Judea and Samaria, the horrific arson attack in Duma whose perpetrators have yet to face justice, and statements by Israeli politicians advocating a change in the status quo on the Temple Mount all affect the Palestinians' sense of frustration.

Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas' "end of the Oslo Accords era" speech at the U.N. General Assembly last month has most likely fueled this frustration as well, as has the overall sense of lawlessness on the Palestinian street, now dominated by violence-craving mobs, devoid of any ideology or forethought.

This atmosphere is most prevalent in east Jerusalem, perhaps because the Palestinians living there have no sense of the Palestinian Authority's rule on the one hand, while on the other hand, Israel's rule has been eroded and rendered ineffective.

This complexity makes it difficult to predict what tomorrow will bring, but keeping things in perspective is important nonetheless. Firstly, the current situation is clearly very different from the Second Intifada, when, at one point, 122 Israelis were murdered in the span of a single month. Two weeks into the current wave of terrorism Israel mourns seven victims, and while each person is a world unto itself, the difference in the number of victims cannot be ignored.

Secondly, while the Palestinian uprising of the early 2000s was marked by suicide bombers and shooting attacks, the majority of the recent attacks have been lone terrorist incidents and mostly stabbing attacks. This proves that the Shin Bet security agency has got a solid hold on the situation on the ground, which enables it to thwart terrorist plots before they are realized.

The nature of the protests is also different than it was 15 years ago. At the time, Israeli security forces were fending off thousands of Palestinians in each demonstration, while this time the biggest protest so far numbered about 500 people. The same can be said of the Arab protests in Israel.

What sets this wave of terrorism apart from the Second Intifada is that it comprises 95% cold-weapon attacks, and 90% of the perpetrators reside in and around east Jerusalem.

It is important that the current escalation wanes without a Palestinian achievement, especially when it comes to the Temple Mount. We must avoid fueling tensions on the already volatile site, so the government and the police are doing the right thing by limiting access to it. However, once order is restored, the status quo should be resolutely enforced. Israel's strategy has to make it clear that violence reaps no rewards.

Unlike the Second Intifada, the current wave of violence does not warrant a military operation. We must spare no effort to minimize casualties among innocent Palestinians. A high number of civilian casualties who, while being incited or promoting incitement do not take an active part in acts of terror, will do Israel more harm than good and may even cause the situation to spiral out of control.

As hard as it may be, the delicate balance between exercising force and exercising restraint must tip in favor of restraint. Having said that, counterterrorism measures should be applied unequivocally, and the elimination of terrorists, even those wielding knives instead of firearms, must be unanimously backed by all echelons.

This wave of violence is complex because it involves lone terrorists, who operate independently and without direction, and are driven by social media and the Gaza-based media.

This is a stressful situation that requires patience, endurance and nerves of steel, so to avoid taking the wrong action. We have to make sure to avoid steps that could make tensions boil over. Fanning the flames is not only unnecessary, it is very dangerous.

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