



PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

Administering the Temple Mount Is a Privilege, Not a Right

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BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 543, July 28, 2017

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The latest complications over the “status quo” on the Temple Mount necessitate a long overdue clarification: the privilege to administer the site, granted by Israel in the wake of its 1967 victory to the Waqf via Jordan, must not be misconstrued as a “right of ownership.” The administrative management of this place of worship, holy for Judaism and Islam, should provide hospitality, dignity, and security to all law-abiding visitors and sincere worshippers respectful of the place, without religious, racial, or political discrimination.

In the sphere of mergers and acquisitions, a poison pill is a stratagem devised to dissuade a takeover by inserting a nuisance factor so consequential as to deter the suitor from acquiring the target.

The West Bank and Gaza Strip were poison pills accruing to Israel from a war it did not start but managed to win. Their lingering nuisance factor continues to impede the establishment of a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace, despite repeated efforts to reach an acceptable agreement, over the last fifty years.

At the end of a short and brutal war, King Hussein regained not the “right” but the *privilege* once again to oversee Jerusalem’s Muslim religious sites. The compound was built by the Umayyad over the rubble of the twice-destroyed holiest-of-holy Jewish sanctuaries, on a historic site that has been referred to as the Temple Mount since the Kingdom of David, around 1000 BCE.

This ambiguity was left to fester on its own for 50 years out of a self-deluding if patient concession in the name of peace and quiet. Unfortunately, it has served only to embolden the sense of ownership of those “administering” it.

Whether they admit it or not, they were entrusted with that privilege solely because of the magnanimity in victory of the democratic Jewish State of Israel.

This steadily growing sense of ownership has served as a tool with which the Palestinian Authority (PA) can follow the Arab street's mood rather than direct it in ways that can promote peace.

The nuisance factor has been also exploited by outsiders vying for greater authority in the affairs of Muslims around the world. Turkey provides a good example. Having gained popularity among many Arabs and Muslims from the "one minute, please" incident in Davos, President Erdoğan allowed rampant anti-Semitism to become intimidating, indeed threatening, to Turkey's long- and well-integrated Jewish citizenry, as if they were still refugees from Spain.

Emboldened by the state's laxity in prohibiting intimidation of that minority, Turkish Islamists' misperceptions of events on the Temple Mount helped to fuel public animosity against Turkish Jews. For their part, Islamist organizations in Turkey have begun subsidizing "touristic pilgrimages" to the Temple Mount for young radicals fluent in Turkish and trained in Arabic prayer, with a mission to create mischief at the site.

President Erdoğan's reluctance to condemn the murders of Israeli police officers shot in the back by Palestinian "martyrs" who had smuggled their arms into the Mosque, and his insistence (shortly after a "very good" phone conversation with President Rivlin) that "the Muslim world cannot remain aloof in the face of the Temple Mount events," raise a question mark on the tenor – and future – of the recent Turkish-Israeli rapprochement.

Along the same lines, Mahmoud Abbas's decision to freeze relations with Israel in response to these events, rather than arrange for trilateral consultations with Israel and the Waqf for improved security, does not exactly enhance the "Palestinian cause."

Following conciliatory gestures on the part of the sovereign power responsible for the security of the compound and its environs, it is urgent at this juncture for all stakeholders – Israel, Jordan, the Waqf, and the PA, in that order - to establish a legitimate and durable "status quo" by differentiating, in both the legal and moral senses, between privilege and right, between autonomy and sovereignty, and between freedom and license.

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BESA Center Perspectives Papers are published through the generosity of the Greg Rosshandler Family