The Palestinian Authority’s Interest in Keeping the Peace

In mid-November, it appeared as if Israel was headed for a third intifada. Tensions over access to the Temple Mount and settlement activity in East Jerusalem sparked a series of killings and retaliations. Jewish activist Yehuda Glick was assassinated, the Israeli Defense Force killed several unarmed Palestinians during protests, a series of terrorist attacks occurred in Jerusalem involving hit-and-runs and knife attacks, Israeli police shot an Israeli Arab as he fled from them, Israeli Arabs declared a day-long strike, and Palestinians murdered four Jews in a Jerusalem synagogue.

Yet, one month has passed and the violence remains relatively constrained, committed only by the uncoordinated actions of individual extremists. It is remarkable that even with the tension over access to the Temple Mount and settlements in East Jerusalem, combined with the daily stressors of the occupation, that the situation remains relatively peaceful. This is due primarily to the Palestinian Authority’s (PA) rejection of violent uprising and because of the security cooperation between the PA and Israeli Defense Force (IDF). While the PA is facing pressure from elements of Palestinian society to support violence and stop coordinating security with Israel, it remains in the PA’s interest to reject violent uprising.

One main trigger of the violence in November was access to the Temple Mount. Israel has been in control of the Temple Mount (the site of the third holiest site in Islam) since 1967. The religious operations of the site are under the stewardship of the Jordanian government. While Jews are allowed to visit the Temple Mount, they are forbidden under Israeli law from publicly praying there. Doing so would be considered an affront to Islam and the Israeli government enforces the policy preventing Jews from praying there in order to maintain calm. Led by Yehuda Glick, a group of religious Jews were advocating for changing the law. Glick would go on tours to the Temple Mount and intersperse prayers in fake phone calls and tour instructions to flaunt the rule. On October 30, an Arab from East Jerusalem shot Glick in an assassination attempt. Fearing clashes between Muslims and Jews, the Israeli government closed access to the Temple Mount for an entire day. Called a
“declaration of war” by the Palestinian Authority, this action led to heavier protests in East Jerusalem by Muslims and widespread outrage.

Tension has also increased due to Jewish settlement in East Jerusalem. East Jerusalem is a largely Arab community but an increasing amount of religious Jews are moving into the area in order to prevent Jerusalem from being divided in any future peace accord. Most two-state plans include East Jerusalem as the capital of the Palestinian State. The manner in which the Jews are moving into these neighborhood is infuriating the Muslim population. Since the Arab owners will not sell to the Jews – either for religious reasons or fears of reprisals – these Jews have formed shell companies that employ other Arabs to “buy” the houses. The new Arab owners never move in. Instead, groups of Jewish settlers, accompanied by police forces, move into the houses. Additionally, Israel is approving new construction units in East Jerusalem for Jewish families. These construction units, frequently approved by the hardline government, also infuriate the Palestinians.¹

With tension boiling over the Temple Mount and settlement in East Jerusalem, along with the continued occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, it is not surprising that there have been acts of violence. In the course of the last month, Arabs have started engaging in terror attacks against civilians, using cars and heavy machinery to run them over. Jewish extremists set fire to a bilingual Hebrew-Arab school. An Israeli soldier was stabbed to death in Tel Aviv by a terrorist who planned to take the soldier's gun and inflict more damage. A Palestinian was arrested for planning a knife attack on a bus driver; the plan was to cause the bus to overturn. In Ramallah, a Palestinian bus driver was found hanged, leading to accusations of murder by settlers. In the West Bank, a Jewish driver was almost lynched by an Arab mob.

So, why have these incidents and the cycle of violence not led to a third intifada? Certainly the underlying tension remains strong and there are elements of Palestinian society (and Israeli society) that would welcome mass violence. The key to understanding the relative

calm is that the Palestinian Authority has decided to reject violence as their path forward.

The first and second intifada were supported and coordinated by the Palestinian Authority. This time, however, the attacks are being carried out by individuals without coordination by the Palestinian Authority. Hanan Ashrawi, a PA member, characterized the attacks as lone wolf attacks, “Acts taking place in response [to the Israeli occupation] are individual actions. There is no policy.”\textsuperscript{2} Yoram Cohen, Chief of the Shin, concurred with that assessment when he told the Knesset in December that PA President Mahmoud Abbas has no interest in sponsoring terrorism.

The PA goes further than rejecting violence; it actively coordinates security with the Israeli intelligence, passing information about impending attacks to their counterparts and arresting potential threats. In November, the Palestinian Authority security forces arrested dozens of Hamas and Islamic Jihad militants, hoping to deter an escalation of the violence. In addition, the PA barred large demonstrations in its territory in order to prevent potentially volatile situations and to avert clashes with the IDF.

The PA’s decision to counter-violence is due to several factors. First and foremost, the PA is undertaking a campaign to win international support for statehood and has met with early success with several EU member states, including Sweden, Britain, France and Portugal either recognizing a Palestinian State or debating the topic in parliament. The PA is also circulating a resolution at the United Nations for statehood and supporting European plans to call for final negotiations within a limited time (2-3 years). An armed uprising would put the PA’s plan for international recognition, as well as the hundreds of millions in funding from Europe and the United States, at risk. With Israel appearing as the aggressor, the PA is positioning itself as the victim. Jibirl Ajoub, a member of the Fatah Central Committee stated: “We won't do anything. We will continue to behave as a responsible authority in the areas that we control. But we clearly turn to our people for a popular nonviolent uprising

\textsuperscript{2} Elder, Shlomi. “Rajoub: Abu Ein's death will spark uprising, not violence.” \textit{Al-Monitor}. December 11, 2014
so that the world will know that there’s a people that’s suffering, and that it’s time to put an end to Palestinian suffering.”

An armed uprising would give justification for Israel to use military force in the territories. As Gene Sharp writes, a military knows how to fight violent forces but it is ill-equipped to handle non-violent actors. Non-violent movements rely on the moral high-ground in order to receive support from both within the society they are opposing and from the international community.

The international BDS (Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions) campaign against Israel is gaining steam. The BDS movement, which targets universities, corporations and pension funds, relies on Israel appearing as the immoral occupier and the Palestinians as the moral victims. Just as the South African BDS movement succeeded because of a clear moral separation between the apartheid government and the black South Africans, the BDS against Israel relies on a similar moral difference. While the PA is not actively part of the BDS movement, it will benefit from the pressure put on Israel to negotiate, stop settlements, and facilitate the creation of a Palestinian state.

Another reason for the PA’s resistance to armed uprising is that it is in a power struggle with Hamas over control of the Palestinian government. Hamas has been attempting to ignite violence in the West Bank in order to provoke an Israeli response that would weaken the PA or remove Abbas. The arrest of 30 members of a Hamas-affiliated cell in late November revealed plans to kidnap and murder Israelis, rig cars with explosives, and attack Jerusalem’s soccer stadium. A top Palestinian official explained that, “[Hamas] is racing time to ignite the situation in the West Bank.” Statements from Hamas leadership support this view; Hamas political bureau member Mahmoud al-Zahar declared it Hamas’ “sacred duty” to pass along armed resistance to the West Bank. It is clear that the unity government between Hamas and the PA, which expired after its six-month term on

3 ibid
6 ibid
November 30, did little to ease the tension and competition between the two representatives of the Palestinian people.

Palestinian officials also argue that Abbas supports non-violence on principle. They say he opposed Arafat’s use of armed violence during the second intifada and continues to do so today even at a heavy political price. Indeed, Abbas faces opponents who accuse him of collaborating with Israel.

Furthermore, with Israeli elections coming in March, there is more likely to be a moderate Israeli government if there are not continued attacks against Israel. When violence subsides, social and economic issues rise to the top of the political agenda. The left/center of Israel have a better chance to win election on if the issues are high housing prices, income inequality, and the role of religion in society instead of security. More violence could lead the Israeli public to elect a hardliner such as Naftali Bennett of the Jewish Homeland party or re-elect Prime Minister Netanyahu. Bennett has espoused radical proposals (such as annexation of the West Bank) and continued violence could lead the right-wing ideas to gain more traction.

Ultimately, Abbas and his government have little to gain from a widespread violent uprising. Palestine would lose some of its international support for statehood, the BDS movement would be hindered, the Israeli response would be severe and appear justified, and Hamas – the banner-men for violent resistance – would likely gain popularity. It should also be noted that Shin Bet Security Chief Yoram Cohen stated before the Knesset in November, an armed uprising would be the end of Abbas term.

The only way this calculation would change is if the Palestinian people, outraged by IDF brutality or settler violence, demand that their government join the resistance. Yet, even exceptional acts of violence, such as the death of Palestinian Minister Ziad Abu Ein at the

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hands of an Israeli soldier, have not changed the security equation. Abbas resisted pressure by his cabinet to end security cooperation following Abu Ein’s death. 

When Israeli politicians accuse Abbas of incitement, they point to his statements that the closing of the Temple Mount was a “declaration of war” and to violent imagery circulated by PA sponsored schools and media. It is unrealistic, however, to expect a Palestinian leader to not respond with forceful words to the closing of the third holiest Muslim site or to block all hate speech emanating from the territories.

Abbas is 79 years old and his push to gain international legitimacy for Palestine represents his final efforts to help his country through politics. If Labor and Hatnua lead a coalition in the government, he will have a partner for peace. If Likkud or Bayit Hayehudi lead a coalition, then Abbas will need to rely on international pressure. Either way, it is unlikely he will threaten his plan for international support for statehood by supporting armed uprising. For now, while Israel remains a tinderbox with many match-throwers, the PA continues to douse the flames. Israel’s best hope for continued quiet is that Abbas and the PA remain firmly in power since they have everything to lose from a resumption of violence.

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