

COMMENTARY

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Nameless and Leaderless in Jerusalem

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Although the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been around for generations, it still has the capacity to surprise. Even the experts are confused by the current violence that has been roiling Jerusalem for weeks now. Is this the long-awaited third intifada? What is causing it? Why is it centred in Jerusalem, not the West Bank? Who is leading it, and why are the principal actors teenagers with household knives? In fact, similar questions were asked at the beginning of the two previous intifadas, and of the Palestinian Revolt during the British Mandate. Why now? What for?

Admittedly, this wave of violence has unique features, but though the world and the context have changed since the Second Intifada ended more than ten years ago, the plight of the Palestinians has not. The Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount is cited by many as the focal point, but there is no leader or organization to ask and no press releases to consult. The traditional players – the Palestinian Authority, Hamas, Fatah – are clearly not in charge. Nor do we see crowds of hundreds or thousands as we did previously, though it seems most Palestinians are supporting “it”, whatever “it” is.

Even in the absence of links to the traditional actors, the conditions that gave rise to the current situation of terror and violence are not hard to discover. Palestinians have exploded in violence at least three times in the last eighty years when they perceived no future for themselves and no control over their lives, and have used whatever weapons were at hand. What is different today is that, in the age of ubiquitous social media, organizations, spokespeople, bulletins, etc. can all be dispensed with. Some are calling it the “smartphone intifada,” since all seems to flow through them.

In 1936, with desperate Jews fleeing Europe and swelling Zionist numbers in Palestine, Palestinians began a three-year revolt, at least nominally under the leadership of the Mufti of Jerusalem, Hajj Amin el-Husseini. It accomplished little, ended in internecine violence, and was an important factor in the much bigger Palestinian Nakba (catastrophe) in 1948. In December 1987, twenty years after Israel won the Six Day War, as settlements were increasing and the Palestinian issue seemed to be sliding off the international agenda, the First Intifada exploded, taking the Palestinian leadership, the Israelis, and everyone else by surprise. It ended in intra-communal violence and the Oslo Peace Process of the 1990s, which both sides now revile as a fraud by the other side.

In September 2000, two months after the failure of the Camp David Summit, the Second Intifada broke out, nominally as a response to Israeli opposition leader Ariel Sharon's provocative visit to the Haram/Temple Mount, but primarily as an expression of frustration, anger, and impatience. It too, ended with horrific destruction and infighting, and no gains for the Palestinians.

Now, with not even the pretence of a peace process on the horizon and the world's attention on Syria, Iraq, and ISIL, settlements growing, and no remotely effective leadership, Palestinians again perceive their situation as hopeless. Add to it the growing Muslim belief that Israel is about to fundamentally change the status of the Haram, and perhaps build a Third Temple, and there is no wonder that this explosion is taking place. It should be noted, however, that although prominent members of Netanyahu's coalition have visited the Temple Mount recently and called for changing its status, there is no credible evidence that the Israeli government would countenance that. But the teenagers who are picking up knives and attacking Israeli Jews are not reading these assurances. Rumour and desperation rule now, and enough Jewish leaders have made enough promises to restore Jewish control on the Temple Mount that many Palestinians, and some Israeli Arabs, have little doubt they will do so.

I lived in Jerusalem during the most violent days of the Second Intifada, but today the fear on both sides seems even greater. Israel is cracking down harshly; about 40 Palestinians and eight Israelis (as of Oct. 2015) have been killed, numbers that will most surely rise in the coming days. Israel is imposing neighbourhood closures and deploying troops in Jerusalem. But it cannot confiscate every smartphone, so there is every reason to believe this is not a limited episode, but rather a new phase of the conflict, whether or not it is eventually dubbed the Third Intifada.

Israelis have generally supported heavy crackdowns on Palestinian violence, and are doing so now. Palestinian President Abbas, despite accusations of incitement by Netanyahu, is apparently also trying to damp it down, though his government is feeble and discredited. History offers no comfort; there is every reason to believe that sporadic and undirected violence will be the theme of the immediate future, and that, unfortunately, it will accomplish little to improve the Palestinians' conditions or advance the prospects of a long overdue settlement.

Israeli repression may work in the short run but only a political settlement can head off a wider wave of violence. The current Israeli government, despite its nominal support for the two-state solution, has shown little interest in reaching a settlement based on the 1967 borders, which is what most of the world expects. France has intimated it would introduce a Security Council Resolution on settlements and the US position is still unclear. There is very little belief that the world community is prepared for the heavy lifting that a comprehensive settlement would entail; however, it is unlikely that more promises or protracted negotiations, without real change, could head off the escalating violence.

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