

# Words Have Consequences: Palestinian Authority Incitement to Violence

Prepared statement by

**Elliott Abrams**

*Senior Fellow for Middle Eastern Studies*

*Council on Foreign Relations*

Before the

**House Committee on Foreign Affairs**

*United States House of Representatives*

*1st Session, 114th Congress*

## Hearing on “Words Have Consequences: Palestinian Authority Incitement to Violence”

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for this invitation to appear before you today.

The subject of this hearing could not be more important, as we know from the terrorist attacks in Israel in the last few weeks.

What leads a young person, a teenager, to stab or attempt to stab to death someone he has never met? Stabbing is the most intimate of attacks—not setting a bomb for people you will never see, not shooting at a distance, but reaching out to someone inches away from you and taking that person’s blood. The answer, I believe, is the teaching of hate.

“Incitement” is the term we usually use, but hatred is what we mean. “Incitement” means teaching generations of Palestinians to hate Jews by demonizing and dehumanizing them; teaching hate and terror by honoring terrorists; and teaching hate by telling lies about what is happening at the Temple Mount or *Haram al-Sharif* and other Muslim religious sites.

I have read in the press that the killings are the product of poverty and hopelessness among Arabs, or disappointment about the so-called “peace process.” I don’t buy it. There’s no more poverty or hopelessness in October than there was in, say, June or January. Poverty doesn’t explain the timing. Nor do poverty or economic problems explain why you pick up a knife and start stabbing and killing this week.

So, why now? The most logical explanation is Palestinian lies about the Temple Mount, about how Israel is undermining it and attacking it and defiling it. Those lies are being repeated in Palestinian media and worse yet by the top Palestinian leadership. Palestinian Authority President and PLO leader Mahmoud Abbas early on during the crisis that “Al-Aqsa is ours and so is the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. They have no right to desecrate them with their filthy feet.”

Let’s put aside that claim to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, which is absurd. Now, we would not blame Muslims for protesting peacefully a move to defile their holy sites, but that’s an absolute lie. Telling that lie has the predictable effect of spurring violence.

Moreover, once the violence began Palestinian leaders began giving verbal support to it. Abbas himself said “Each drop of blood that was spilled in Jerusalem is pure blood as long as it’s for the sake of Allah. Every shahid (martyr) will be in heaven and every wounded person will be rewarded, by Allah’s will.”

And as you know he then accused Israel of the cold blooded murder—“summary execution of our children in cold blood,” he said—of a Palestinian teen-ager—who was first of all a terrorist who was stabbed two Israelis and secondly is not dead, but is being treated in an Israeli hospital. So instead of calming tensions what we get from Abbas is lie after lie to stoke the tension. I am aware that Palestinian police have worked to stop the violence on many occasions, as I am aware that Abbas has denounced the arson at Joseph’s Tomb in Nablus. This suggests to me that Abbas is against any outbreak of uncontrollable violence in the West Bank, which he rules, but content to see violence spread in Jerusalem and all of Israel.

The background to the current wave of violence is the pattern of glorification of terrorists. Here is perhaps the best, meaning the worst, example, from Palestine Media Watch:

Dalal Mughrabi led the most deadly terror attack in Israel’s history. 37 civilians, 12 of them children, were killed in her 1978 bus hijacking. The Palestinian Authority has turned this terrorist into a

celebrated hero and role model, as schools, summer camps, and sports tournaments are all named after her. Her attack was celebrated by a Fatah spokesman as "the most glorified sacrifice action in the history of the Palestinian-Israeli struggle." [Al-Ayyam, July 13, 2008] Palestinian newspapers also frequently glorify Mughrabi, as in the Al-Ayyam article which described Mughrabi as writing "the most glorious page of heroism in the history of the Palestinian struggle. [Aug. 2, 2009] The PA celebrated the 31st anniversary of the killings with an hour-long TV special, which opened with the narrator glorifying the attack. Advisor to Mahmoud Abbas, Deputy Secretary of the Fatah Revolutionary Council, Sabri Saidam said on the day of the naming of a square in her name: "Every one of us has tried in his own way to express his pride in this Martyr [Mughrabi]." [Al-Hayat Al-Jadida, March 14, 2011]

There are many other examples one could cite, but let me just give one more from the current wave of terrorism.

Muhannad Halabi, who was 19, killed 2 Israelis, Rabbi Nehemiah Lavi and Aharon Bennett, and injured Bennett's wife, Adele, and their 2-year-old son in a stabbing attack in the Old City of Jerusalem on Oct. 3, 2015. Following the attack, he was shot and killed by Israeli security forces. The Palestinian Bar Association decided one week later on Oct. 10, 2015 to award Halabi, whom they called a "heroic Martyr," an honorary law degree and to dedicate its swearing-in ceremony for the next class of lawyers after him.

It is also worth adding that the glorification of terror is not only a problem at the Palestinian Authority, but at the United Nations as well. The invaluable NGO "UN Watch" last week detailed glorification of terror by employees of UNRWA, the UN's agency dealing with Palestinians. UN Watch reported on 9 UNRWA employees who in the last weeks, during the violence, incited more of it by posting banners, videos, and cartoons glorifying the stabbings and killings. UN Watch showed a Facebook page by an UNRWA employee with an image of a man in the Palestinian black and white kafiyyeh holding a knife in the colors of the Palestinian flag and the text: "Stab Zionist dogs." The United States is the largest contributor to UNRWA, so we are in a position to demand that employees who support terror are summarily dismissed. Instead, there is a culture of impunity at UNRWA.

But let's return to the U.S. Government. After Tuesday October 13, when three Israelis were killed, the State Department spokesman said "We mourn any loss of innocent life, Israeli or Palestinian. We continue to stress the importance of condemning violence and combating incitement."

He's right about combating incitement. The problem is, we're not doing it.

This is a bipartisan error: administrations of both parties have, over the decades, decried and condemned incitement but we've never made it a central issue. There has always been some other pressing matter that took precedence: we wanted to get the Palestinians to back a UN resolution or oppose one, to come to the negotiating table, to have a smooth visit, or to hire or fire some official, so the immediate always came before the matter of deeper long-term importance: incitement, which means teaching hatred.

And to be fair to all those administrations, including when I served in the Executive Branch, it is difficult to know exactly what to do. When there are calls to stop the funding of the PA, it is usually the government of Israel that winces. It does not want to see all governmental functions in the West Bank fall back into its lap because the PA collapses.

So what can be done?

Let me suggest three steps. First, close the PLO office in Washington and do not permit the opening of a PA office until the incitement stops. Second, if we cannot usefully stop all PA funding, let's try to stop the illegal personal funding, the corruption, that is rife there. We can demand investigations, or undertake them; you could make it a condition of spending appropriated funds. It is widely understood in the region that since the departure of Salam Fayyad as prime minister almost two and a half years ago corruption has increased steadily. Third, we should keep track of who is doing the incitement, by name, and be sure they are barred from getting visas at least for a period of time.

These steps are not panaceas, but they are better than what we usually do—which is very little or nothing. But we have seen in the last few weeks that teaching hatred and glorifying terror eventually results in acts of terror that reflect hatred.

Thank you for inviting me here today. I look forward to answering any questions you may have.