

Testimony before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs
Words Have Consequences: Palestinian Authority Incitement to Violence

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Chairman Royce, Ranking Member Engel and Distinguished Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss the ongoing volatility in Jerusalem. It needs to be handled with supreme caution.

In addressing the situation today, it should be clear that there is no justification for any incitement to violence. When you say that Israel wants to undermine the status of the al-Aqsa Mosque or change the status quo on the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif, it is equivalent to yelling fire in a crowded theater, given the role that such allegations have played in provoking past violence.

As Secretary of State John Kerry said in an interview with National Public Radio (NPR) last Friday, “There's no excuse for the violence. No amount of frustration is appropriate to license any violence anywhere at any time. No violence should occur. And the Palestinians need to understand, and President Abbas has been committed to nonviolence. He needs to be condemning this, loudly and clearly. And he needs to not engage in some of the incitement that his voice has sometimes been heard to encourage. So that has to stop.”

This incitement includes public remarks by President Abbas, during which he said “every drop of blood spilled in Jerusalem is pure. Every martyr will reach paradise and every injured person will be reward by God” and Jews “have no right to desecrate the Mosque with their dirty feet.” Abbas has not renounced these statements, but in recent days, has called for “popular non-violent struggle.” (This is not to say that Prime Minister Netanyahu has not made some questionable statements of his own. Recently, he said that the leader of the Palestinian national movement in the 1940's was more adamant about killing Jews than Adolf Hitler, which has been refuted by Holocaust historians.)

Sadly, the charge that Israel is out to destroy the Mosque is not new. This claim was made in 1929, resulting in riots in Hebron that killed 63 people. More recently, fatal violence surrounding the Temple Mount occurred in 1991 (20 killed), 1996 (87 killed), 2000 (153 killed within the first month), and 2014 (nine killed), when similar allegations were made. I want to be clear that this does not mean that all Palestinians favor this approach. In fact over 400 Jews were saved in 1929, when many found refuge in the homes of Palestinians.

A few things need to occur to ensure that this pattern is not repeated. First, there needs to be an honest acknowledgement that the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif is holy to both Moslems and Jews. Israeli leaders of all stripes have asserted the sanctity of the area to Moslems since the time of the Prophet Mohammad in the seventh century. The reverse has not been the case. Palestinian leadership does not tell its public that the area also has historical significance for the Jewish people.

Ancient Jewish history was defined by the Temple eras – one lasting 410 years and another lasting 420 years. When the Temples were destroyed, so were the first two Jewish Commonwealths, ending in 70 C.E. It took until 1948 or close to 1900 years later for that longing for sovereignty to be restored. At the Camp David summit in 2000, Yasser Arafat famously angered President Bill Clinton by denying that the temples existed – saying they were located instead in Nablus or even Yemen. Clinton reportedly responded that every Sunday School student in Arkansas knew this was not the case. Anyone who has been to a Jewish wedding knows there is a breaking of the glass, which is done to say that even the most joyous occasion is mixed with sorrow, recalling the destruction of those Temples. For close to two thousand years, Jews have prayed three times a day in the direction of the Temple Mount. It is the Zion of Zionism.

The vast majority of Jews in Israel and around the world do not attempt to pray on the Temple Mount. If Jews have not ascended the Temple Mount, it is not because it is not holy but because it is too holy. From 1967 to today, the Chief Rabbinate has forbidden Jews from visiting the area, believing this should only occur during the messianic age. A few radical Israeli activists and even some politicians (including Agriculture Minister Uri Ariel) have recently visited the Mount. They believe that archeology has provided a far more precise perimeter of the Mount, as it existed historically and therefore, they can more precisely avert its exact location. These proponents favor Jewish prayer in what they consider the permitted section of the Mount, but this is bound to lead to bloodshed. Yuval Diskin, former head of the Shin Bet, echoed the view of many who are against Jewish prayer on the Mount, since it is “the most fuel saturated flammable area in the Middle East.” To its credit, the Netanyahu government has refused to change the status quo.

Ironically, this lack of acknowledgment on the Palestinian side was historically not always the case. A pamphlet for tourists visiting the Haram published by the Supreme Moslem Council in 1924 said the fact that al-Aqsa is built on the site of Solomon’s Temple is “beyond dispute.” However, the intertwining of religion and nationalism ensured that this historical acknowledgement was erased. Of course, neither side has to accept the narrative of the other as sacrosanct. Yet, if they cannot acknowledge that the other side reveres the site as they do, violence is bound to continue, as we have seen. Understanding that both sides have religious rights seems to be a prerequisite for calming the situation.

While the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif issue has been the primary cause of violence in Jerusalem in the last twenty years, there have been other factors leading to violence. For example, during the summer of 2014, a Palestinian teenager was killed as tensions roiled over the kidnapping and subsequent murder of three Israeli teens, which indirectly contributed to the outbreak of the War in Gaza. Moreover, none of this is to rule out that there are economic factors impacting the violence. Observers believe Israel’s ambiguity in heavily investing in Palestinian sector infrastructure is due to the notion that Israel may yield these neighborhoods in

any final deal with the Palestinians. It is estimated that three-fourths of the 316,000 Palestinians in the city live below the poverty line. Palestinians see their status in limbo, as Jewish neighborhoods in East Jerusalem flourish.

So, what can be done? When such allegations surfaced last year, Secretary Kerry, Prime Minister Netanyahu and Jordan's King Abdullah were able to meet in Amman and defuse the situation. Historically, Jordan has been the Arab Custodian of the Temple Mount. Indeed, this week, Kerry is meeting with Netanyahu, Abdullah and Abbas to see what can be done to diffuse the situation. In principle, Israel, Jordan and the Palestinian Authority all have an interest in quelling instability, which only serves to benefit extremists. While all sides say they do not want to change the status quo, the problem is that the status quo on the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif has not been codified into an explicit set of understandings. If there was trust between Israelis and Palestinians, perhaps verbal understandings would be sufficient, but this is not the case today. The US government can be helpful in reaching a set of understandings between the parties to measure the status quo going forward. Such a three way agreement, between Kerry, Netanyahu and Abdullah, should then be acknowledged by Abbas. Hopefully, such a sense of codification would add a vital measure of predictability to an unpredictable situation.

Israel needs to also find a way to communicate better with Palestinians in East Jerusalem. Israel is sometimes called the start-up nation given the success of its high-tech sector. In the recent war in Gaza, Israel used its high-tech prowess to communicate to Gaza residents. Israel was able to limit civilian casualties by sending text messages to Gazans, telling them to evacuate their homes in advance of airstrikes. If Israel can reach those Palestinians, why can't they text Palestinians in East Jerusalem in Arabic and deny rumors about changing the status quo on the Temple Mount?

Of course, when dealing with an issue as volatile as the Israel-Palestinian issue, there is a tendency to want to throw up your hands in despair. I would kindly caution people against such a move, as there is too much at stake. Since October, ten Israelis have been killed in Palestinian attacks. 26 Palestinian assailants were killed and more than 21 Palestinians were killed by Israelis fire in clashes in Jerusalem and the West Bank. However, the scale of violence has not approached that of the second intifada. Between 2000 and 2004 4,000 people were killed – approximately 3,000 Palestinians and 1,000 Israelis and the number injured was far greater than what we see today.

It reminds us that as bad as the situation is, it could get far worse. Some people might say well let's just cease funding to the Palestinian Authority (PA). Yet, it is important to remember that Israeli and PA security officials are engaged in daily security cooperation that is vital not just for Palestinians, but for Israelis too. This is the view of top Israelis security officials. Benny Gantz, who was Chief of Staff of the Israel Defense Forces until a few months ago, said in a recent speech at my own Washington Institute: "We need to stick to security and give up the dreams, as we would like to have them—all government of Israel have said two-state solution." Similarly, in a 2014 op-ed, Yuval Diskin wrote, "the coordination between the security forces has a significant contribution on the relative quiet" in the West Bank. He called this cooperation better than ever, despite the impasse in peace negotiations since 2007. He said the PA "understands that Israel's security is central to their survival in the struggle with Hamas in the West Bank."

We are approaching the twentieth anniversary of the killing of Israel's iconic premier and 1967 war hero, Yitzhak Rabin. He was known as a hard-boiled realist. Nobody could call him a

dreamy peacenik. Yet, he understood an important insight. The traumas of Israelis and the Palestinians will require them to separate and avoid a de-facto binational reality, a recipe for permanent bloodshed. This insight underscores the need to continue working for separate political entities, one Israeli and one Palestinian, and for dignity for both peoples. We cannot afford to give up. Given the bloodshed in Jerusalem, Palestinians must come to grips with the fact that both peoples do not just have political rights but also a religious connection to the land based on their own history. If that recognition is not reached, I worry that violence will continue to periodically erupt and possibly intensify.