

Congressional Testimony

Words Have Consequences: *Palestinian Authority Incitement to Violence*

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Chairman Royce, Ranking Member Engel, members of the committee, on behalf of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, thank you for the opportunity to testify.

My testimony will analyze the current wave of Palestinian violence in the West Bank and Israel, with a focus on the recent campaign by the Palestinian Authority to draw attention to the Temple Mount. I will then analyze the role and calculus of the various Palestinian players in the current violence. Finally, I will provide some policy recommendations for this committee to consider.

A Third Intifada?

Mr. Chairman, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict has flared again. The violence can best be characterized as a concerted campaign of knife attacks against Israeli civilians and military personnel, peppered with other attempts at vehicular homicide and even bombings. Since October 1, eight Israelis have been killed while dozens have been wounded in no less than 44 attacks.¹ It's unclear yet whether we can call this a third intifada. For it to be characterized as such, it would require the full backing of Palestinian leaders across the political spectrum. Despite the incitement of both the Fatah and Hamas factions, it's safe to say that neither has committed fully to an all-out conflict right now with Israel. I will explain below why they are holding back.

Temple Mount Tensions

Mr. Chairman, the Palestinian narrative right now focuses on their rage over purported Israeli attempts to change the status quo on the Temple Mount/Haram ash-Sharif, the site holy to both Jews and Muslims. There are troubling signs that this unrest was premeditated. Indeed, it looks like the resumption of the unrest that erupted in June 2014 before last summer's 50-day war between Israel and Hamas. The name given to the unrest, then as today, was the "Jerusalem Intifada." The epicenter of that violence, then as today, was the Temple Mount.²

The Temple Mount is one of the thorniest issues in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. It is a deeply meaningful and holy site to both Muslims and Jews. Keeping the peace at this site has been a delicate issue since Israel conquered the Old City in 1967. The Israelis control the territory, but they have allowed for Jordan, with input from Palestinian religious authorities, to administer the site.³ For years, Israeli law prohibited Jews from praying on the site, but Israel's Supreme Court overruled this in 1993.⁴ In recent years, the number of Jews that have gained access to the site during hours proscribed by Israel and the administering authorities has increased. This includes

¹ "Live Updates: Terror Strikes Israel," *Israel Defense Forces Blog*, October 19, 2015, (<https://www.idfblog.com/blog/2015/10/19/live-updates-terror-strikes-israel/>)

² Jonathan Schanzer, "Jerusalem on a Knife's Edge," *Foreign Policy*, November 10, 2014, (<http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/11/10/jerusalem-on-a-knifes-edge/>)

³ Arab states neglect Al-Aqsa says head of Jerusalem Waqf," *Al-Monitor*, September 5, 2014, (<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/09/khatib-muslim-endowments-israel-jordan-al-aqsa.html>)

⁴ "The Status of the Status Quo at Jerusalem's Holy Esplanade," *International Crisis Group*, Middle East Report No. 159, June 30, 2015, pages 15-16. ([http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Israel%20Palestine/159-the-status-of-the-status-quo-at-jerusalem-s-holy-esplanade](http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Israel%20Palestine/159-the-status-of-the-status-quo-at-jerusalem-s-holy-esplanade))

some Israeli politicians and religious groups who seek to assert Israeli sovereignty.⁵ But according to Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, access to the Temple Mount compound is still overwhelmingly Muslim. Indeed, over the last year, there have been approximately four million entries by Muslims, 200,000 by Christians, and just 12,000 by Jews.⁶

To be clear, the status quo has not changed. Israel controls access to the site as a means to maintain the delicate peace, but it does not involve itself in matters of religious practice or prayer. Yet, over the last year, a disturbing pattern has developed. Palestinian elements, apparently led by the PLO, have led an effort to stoke religious tensions at the sensitive site with wild reports that Israel is trying to "Judaize" or undermine Muslim rights to pray there. At the forefront of this campaign to foment hate is Wafa, a news agency effectively controlled by the PLO. As one Arab newspaper noted, Wafa is one of the Palestinian "governmental media institutions."⁷

In January of this year, the chairman of the PLO's Jerusalem Affairs Department, Ahmed Qurei, warned of an Israeli plan to register the al-Aqsa Mosque as an Israeli state property to be officially run by the so-called Tabu (land registration) office. The Al-Aqsa Foundation for Endowment and Heritage (AFEH) claimed this was setting the stage for a Jewish synagogue over parts of the holy Mosque. Qurei further stated that Israel was "Judaizing" the mosque and rebuilding the "alleged" Jewish Temple. "This is the most serious [action taken by Israel] that jeopardizes the future of the holy city," he said.⁸

The following month, Wafa cited Qurei warning about assessments made by Israeli engineers and contractors for new archeological excavations under the Temple Mount. In a press release, Qurei said that the Israeli government was trying to "empty the area [of] its indigenous citizens as a prelude to take over the land for the sake of settlement expansion."⁹ The PLO news agency, Wafa, added to the tensions claiming that nearly a thousand Israelis "stormed" the al-Aqsa compound during the previous month.¹⁰

In March, Wafa issued a report stating that Jewish settlers were preparing to storm the al-Aqsa compound. The report alleged, "Jewish groups that define itself by the name of the alleged ancient Temple are preparing for the Jewish holiday Passover by mobilizing the largest number of settlers to enter Al-Aqsa Mosque and perform religious prayers in its yards."¹¹ This was followed by a report that Israeli police, "physically assaulted and beat up [a ten-year-old girl],

⁵ "Sharp Rise in Jewish Visits to Temple Mount," *The Times of Israel*, January 27, 2015.

(<http://www.timesofisrael.com/sharp-rise-in-jewish-visits-to-temple-mount-seen/>)

⁶ Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs website, (<http://mfa.gov.il/MFA/ForeignPolicy/Issues/Pages/Palestinian-incitement-and-terrorism-Oct-2015.aspx>)

⁷ "About Palestinian Media," *Palestinian Media Watch*, (<http://palwatch.org/main.aspx?fi=914>)

⁸ "PA Warns Against Jewish Bid to Annex al-Aqsa Mosque," *Wafa News Agency*, January 14, 2015.

(<http://english.wafa.ps/index.php?action=detail&id=27573>)

⁹ "Israel to Launch New Excavation Work Under al-Aqsa Mosque," *Wafa News Agency*, February 15, 2015.

(<http://english.wafa.ps/index.php?action=detail&id=27854>)

¹⁰ "965 Israelis Storm al-Aqsa Mosque During January," *Wafa News Agency*, February 3, 2015.

(<http://english.wafa.ps/index.php?action=detail&id=27765>)

¹¹ "Jewish Settlers Mobilize for Mass Entry to al-Aqsa Mosque on Passover," *Wafa News Agency*, March 25, 2015.

(<http://english.wafa.ps/index.php?action=detail&id=28145>)

who along with other worshipers chanted religious slogans against a group of Jewish fanatics who entered the Mosque to perform religious rituals.”¹²

The wild and unsubstantiated charges continued through the spring. Wafa in April claimed that, “Jewish settlers...broke into Al-Aqsa Mosque Compound through [the Dung Gate] bridge, and toured its yard under the heavy protection of Israeli police units.” In May, the PLO mouthpiece claimed several Palestinians were arrested “at the gates of al-Aqsa Mosque compound in the Old City for chanting religious slogans to fend off settlers’ attempts to tour the mosque’s yards. The two elders...were physically assaulted by the police before they were arrested.”¹³

During the summer, the Palestinian leadership called for an emergency Islamic summit “in light of latest Israeli escalations at al-Aqsa mosque compound in Jerusalem.”¹⁴ This came on the heels of reports that Israel had seized land adjacent to the eastern wall of the al-Aqsa mosque,¹⁵ and that settlers were continuing “attacks against al-Aqsa mosque,”¹⁶ and insulting the Prophet Mohammed while on the al-Aqsa compound.¹⁷

In September, Mahmoud Abbas complained to the UN General Assembly that, “extremist Israeli groups are committing repeated, systematic incursions upon Al-Aqsa Mosque, aimed at imposing a new reality and dividing Al-Haram Al-Sharif.”¹⁸ Soon after, Hamas declared a “day of rage” in the West Bank. Several Palestinians were wounded in clashes with Israelis.¹⁹ Abbas took this as a cue to warn of an “intifada that we don’t want” if escalations at al-Aqsa continue.²⁰

As violence gripped Jerusalem, Wafa continued to complain that, “Jewish fanatics resumed their provocative visits to al-Aqsa Mosque.”²¹ The rhetoric has only increased, fanning the flames of conflict as Palestinians have taken to lone-wolf style attacks to stab Israelis on the streets.

¹² “Israeli Police Assaults Minor as Settlers Break Into al-Aqsa,” *Wafa News Agency*, March 15, 2015.

(<http://english.wafa.ps/index.php?action=detail&id=28076>)

¹³ “Israel Arrests 14 Palestinians in Jerusalem, Youth in Hebron,” *Wafa News Agency*, May 25, 2015.

(<http://english.wafa.ps/index.php?action=detail&id=28563>)

¹⁴ “Foreign Ministry Calls for Emergency Islamic Summit to Discuss al-Aqsa Mosque,” *Wafa News Agency*, August 31, 2015. (<http://english.wafa.ps/index.php?action=detail&id=29217>)

¹⁵ “Israel Seizes Land Near al-Aqsa Mosque to Establish National Park,” *Wafa News Agency*, August 16, 2015.

(<http://english.wafa.ps/index.php?action=detail&id=29095>)

¹⁶ “Government: Israel’s Targeting of al-Aqsa Mosque Drags the Region into Religious War,” *Wafa News Agency*, July 26, 2015. (<http://english.wafa.ps/index.php?action=detail&id=28923>)

¹⁷ “Jewish Settler Insults Islam’s Prophet Mohammad at al-Aqsa Mosque,” *Wafa News Agency*, July 28, 2015.

(<http://english.wafa.ps/index.php?action=detail&id=28937>)

¹⁸ “Full Text of Abbas’s 2015 Address to the UN General Assembly,” *The Times of Israel*, September 30, 2015.

(<http://www.timesofisrael.com/full-text-of-abbas-2015-address-to-the-un-general-assembly/>)

¹⁹ “Three weeks of unrest in Jerusalem, West Bank,” *Agence France Presse*, October 4, 2015,

(<http://news.yahoo.com/three-weeks-unrest-jerusalem-west-bank-150836897.html>)

²⁰ “Abbas Warns of Risk of New Intifada if Israeli Escalations at al-Aqsa Continue,” *Wafa News Agency*, September 22, 2015. (<http://english.wafa.ps/index.php?action=detail&id=29377>)

²¹ “Settlers Resume Provocative Visits to al-Aqsa Compound Amid Growing Tension,” *Wafa News Agency*, October 11, 2015. (<http://english.wafa.ps/index.php?action=detail&id=29522>)

In an effort to calm tensions, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu recently ordered police to prevent Israeli ministers and members of Knesset from entering the Temple Mount.²² The Israelis continue to make it clear that even when Jews visit the Temple Mount, they are not to pray there. Israeli security personnel enforce this strictly. However, the PLO continues to fan the flames of conflict. Their problem appears to be the very presence of Israelis and Jews on the Temple Mount.

The Palestinian Leadership

The Palestinian Authority leadership is complicit, too. The quasi-government structure is virtually indistinguishable from the PLO. Mahmoud Abbas, who serves as both PLO chairman and Palestinian Authority president, is now echoing PLO incitement.

In the speech in Ramallah last week, Abbas charged that Israel is working towards a “change in the status quo of Al Aqsa Mosque compound,” adding that he would, “not allow any Israeli schemes aimed at compromising its holiness and Islamic identity to pass.” He stopped short of calling for violence against Israel, but he accused Israel of committing “terrorism against our people, our holy places, our homes, our trees, and the shooting of our children in cold blood as they did with the child Ahmed Manasra and other children from Jerusalem.”²³

Abbas was referring to Ahmed Manasra, a 13-year old boy whom Israeli police shot when his brother ran toward them wielding a knife.²⁴ Ahmed Manasra was not killed. He was taken to an Israeli hospital where he is now in stable condition. Abbas has since walked back his claim.²⁵

Abbas, to his credit, brought an end to the second intifada (2000-2005) by reining in a panoply of violent factions that his successor, Yasser Arafat, unleashed after rejecting a peace deal brokered by Washington to end the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.²⁶ Abbas has since kept a lid on violence, even working closely on security cooperation with Israel.²⁷ But he has at the same time refused meaningful diplomacy with Israel. Instead, he has launched a diplomatic pressure campaign known as Palestine 194, which is intended to isolate Israel and ultimately pave the way for a Palestinian declaration of statehood without negotiating key final status issues with the Israelis.²⁸

²² “Netanyahu bans ministers, MKs from Temple Mount,” *The Times of Israel*,

October 8, 2015, (<http://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-bans-ministers-mks-from-temple-mount/>)

²³ “President Abbas’ Speech: Peace, security and stability will not be achieved unless the occupation ends,” PLO Negotiations Affairs Department, October 15, 2015, (<http://www.nad-plo.org/etemplate.php?id=586>)

²⁴ “Terrorist Abbas Said was ‘Executed’ by Israel Shown Alive in Hospital,” *The Times of Israel*, October 15, 2015. (<http://www.timesofisrael.com/terrorist-abbas-said-executed-by-israel-shown-alive-in-hospital/>)

²⁵ “Abbas’s office walks back 13-year-old’s ‘execution’ charge,” *JTA*, October 16, 2015, (<http://www.timesofisrael.com/abbas-office-walks-back-13-year-olds-execution-charge/>)

²⁶ Roe Nahmias, “Abbas: 2nd Intifada was a Mistake,” *YNet News* (Israel), May 26, 2010. (<http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3894519,00.html>)

²⁷ Ben Caspit, “Israeli Security Officials View Abbas as Key to Stability,” *Al-Monitor*, November 13, 2014. (<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/ja/originals/2014/11/idf-abbas-security-cooperation-third-intifada-terrorism.html#>)

²⁸ Jonathan Schanzer & Grant Rumley, “Palestine’s Plan for When Peace Talks Fail,” *The National Interest*, March 17, 2014. (<http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/palestines-plan-when-peace-talks-fail-10061>)

Abbas is now ten years into a four-year term with a government that is widely viewed as irredeemably corrupt. This has made him deeply unpopular among his own people.²⁹ The outbreak of the current round of violence presents the aging Palestinian leader with a gambit. He can back a third intifada and ride the support of his people, but this strategy comes with terrible risk. The accompanying chaos might unleash forces that could overtake him in the West Bank. Moreover, if he openly endorses an uprising as Yasser Arafat did before him, he risks invoking the ire of the Israelis, who could easily topple him.

On the other hand, if he stands down, he can maintain security cooperation in place with Israel, which is key to fighting off the domestic forces that threaten his grip on the West Bank. But in so doing, he loses the opportunity to galvanize the Palestinian people. As it stands now, Abbas fears that his place in Palestinian history will be as a leader who failed to achieve independence for his people.

It is for this reason that Abbas has tacitly embraced the uprising (lauding popular resistance), but he has declined to mobilize the assets of the PLO and the PA against Israel. One could certainly argue that he has done nothing to temper the dangerous environment that has put the Palestinian-Israeli conflict on the edge of another round of violence, but he has not launched a third intifada. This approach, neither here nor there, has managed to frustrate both his own people and the Israelis. It has even prompted a rebuke from Washington.³⁰ It is unclear how much longer he can sustain this approach.

Hamas

Hamas also has one foot in the uprising and one foot out.

On the one hand, Israel's internal security services, the Shin Bet, have fingered the Palestinian terrorist group as a key driver of the stabbings and other acts of violence raging in the West Bank and Jerusalem.³¹ The group's leader, Ismail Haniyeh, has repeatedly called for an intifada.³² In Gaza, where the Hamas is based, dozens of Gazans rushed the Israeli border at the Erez Crossing several times this month, prompting the Israel Defense Forces to fire on the crowd.³³ There have also been rockets fired out of Gaza, eliciting Israeli reprisals.³⁴

²⁹ Khaled Abu Toameh, "Poll: Majority of Palestinians Want Abbas to Resign, No Longer Support Two-State Solution," *The Jerusalem Post*, September 21, 2015. (<http://www.jpost.com/Arab-Israeli-Conflict/Poll-Majority-of-Palestinians-want-Abbas-to-resign-no-longer-support-two-state-solution-417792>)

³⁰ "Kerry Warns Abbas Against Inciting Violence," *Agence France Presse*, October 16, 2015, (<http://www.timesofisrael.com/kerry-warns-abbas-against-inciting-violence/>)

³¹ "Shin Bet: Hamas, Islamic Movement fueling current wave of terror," *The Times of Israel*, October 11, 2015. (<http://www.timesofisrael.com/shin-bet-hamas-islamic-movement-fueling-current-wave-of-terror/>)

³² "Hamas Gaza Chief Calls Unrest a New 'Intifada'," *Agence France Presse*, October 9, 2015, (<http://news.yahoo.com/hamas-gaza-chief-calls-unrest-west-bank-intifada-112057570.html>)

³³ Adel Zaanoun, "Unrest spreads to Gaza as Israeli troops kill six Palestinians," *Yahoo News*, October 9, 2015. (<http://news.yahoo.com/israeli-fire-kills-four-palestinians-clashes-gaza-border-130321090.html>)

³⁴ Fred Lambert, "Israel: IDF launches airstrike in Gaza strip after rockets land in southern Israel," *UPI*, October 11, 2015. (http://www.upi.com/Top_News/World-News/2015/10/11/Israel-IDF-launches-airstrike-in-Gaza-strip-after-rockets-land-in-southern-Israel/1161444596377/)

But, as Amos Harel writes in the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz*, it was Palestinian Islamic Jihad – the smaller and less influential Iran-backed terror group – believed to be behind the border incidents.³⁵ And it's still unclear whether Hamas was connected to the attempted rocket attacks. Indeed, a Salafi group linked to the Islamic State claimed responsibility for Friday's attacks.³⁶ In short, Hamas has prevented the violence from spilling over into Gaza.

The absence of a concerted push for violence out of Gaza can be traced to an initiative, led by Qatar and Turkey, to facilitate the reconstruction of Gaza after last summer's war. As some media outlets have reported, Qatar is now operating in Gaza with multi-million dollar projects.³⁷ It even offered to fund an electricity generating facility – based in Israel – to ensure that Gazans get enough power.³⁸ Turkey's role in all of this has gone rather undocumented, but a senior Turkish official assured me that his country's role was no less significant.

The two countries are strong financial and political backers of Hamas, and have not exactly been shy about their support for Hamas' strategy of violence. But they currently share a few strategic interests with Israel. One is their mutual fear of Salafi groups and Islamic State "wannabes" that could challenge Hamas' grip on power in the Gaza Strip. Another is a mutually destructive war, the end result of which could also potentially unseat Hamas.

With reconstruction efforts underway, Hamas has reluctantly agreed to keep the situation calm in Gaza. It is for this reason we have seen relatively few rockets hurtling into Israeli airspace since last year's war.

Hamas' calculus is also driven by its desire to unseat its political rivals. As journalist Avi Issacharoff recently noted, "Hamas has cleverly managed to position itself as joining the protests of West Bank Palestinians without endangering its own interests."³⁹ Its interests include fanning the unrest in the West Bank in order to foment instability in the Palestinian Authority, which Hamas has long sought to topple. In fact, this was part of Hamas' strategy last summer, when Palestinian protests erupted in East Jerusalem and the West Bank.⁴⁰

³⁵ Amos Harel, "Israel Strikes Gaza Targets After Rocket Intercepted Over Southern Israel," *Haaretz* (Israel), September 30, 2015, (<http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-1.678101>). See also: @DannyNis, "Analysis seems to be that Palestinian Islamic Jihad pushing for military escalation in Gaza, Hamas wants restraint," *Twitter*, October 10, 2015. (<https://twitter.com/DannyNis/status/652909779208306688>).

³⁶ "IAF strikes Hamas targets in Gaza in response to rocket fire," *Israel Hayom*, October 11, 2015. (http://www.israelhayom.com/site/newsletter_article.php?id=28793)

³⁷ Emily Harris, "Why Israel Lets Qatar Give Millions To Hamas," *NPR*, June 18, 2015. (<http://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2015/06/18/414693807/why-israel-lets-qatar-give-millions-to-hamas>)

³⁸ "Qatar announces new projects in Gaza," *Middle East Monitor*, June 3, 2015. (<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/news/middle-east/19026-qatar-announces-new-projects-in-gaza>)

³⁹ Avi Issacharoff, "Terror upsurge's main beneficiaries are Hamas and Israel's Islamic Movement," *The Times of Israel*, October 11, 2015. (<http://www.timesofisrael.com/terror-upsurges-main-beneficiaries-are-hamas-and-israels-islamic-movement/>)

⁴⁰ Isabel Kershner, "Israel Says Hamas Ring Plotted West Bank Attacks," *The New York Times*, November 27, 2014. (http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/28/world/middleeast/israel-says-hamas-ring-plotted-west-bank-attacks-.html?_r=0)

Today, Hamas is active all across the West Bank. The group's West Bank external leadership and its fighters in the territory are mobilized and fighting.⁴¹ Their flags and propaganda are ubiquitous. And there is no reason to think they plan to stop fomenting the violence anytime soon.⁴² The benefits for Hamas are two-pronged. They get to challenge Israel and also undermine their political rival, the Palestinian Authority, which they have tried to unseat for much of the last decade. None of this poses a risk to Hamas' grip on its Gaza enclave.

Social Media

With neither the Palestinian Authority nor Hamas fully committed to the current wave of violence, it is reasonable to wonder how this campaign of lone wolf attacks has been sustained. Social media may be playing a significant role.

One particularly disturbing hub is the Palestinian Dialogue Forum, or Paldf, which has 121,000 Twitter followers, a Facebook page with over 80,000 "likes," and a popular website with multiple chat rooms for Palestinians and their supporters to interact and debate.⁴³ On any given day, the site posts sentiments from across the West Bank and Gaza that eschew peace with Israel.⁴⁴ Since the outbreak of the current round of violence, however, the vitriol on Paldf has reached new lows. It includes drawings of Israeli Jews depicted as monkeys and pigs,⁴⁵ Palestinian toddlers in Gaza wearing Hamas headbands and wielding knives,⁴⁶ and cartoons depicting the al-Aqsa compound as under the control of Israel.⁴⁷ These pictures and cartoons are almost always accompanied by various hashtags, such as "The Jerusalem Intifada," or "An Intifada has erupted," or "The Knife Intifada."⁴⁸

Another disconcerting website is the Palestine Information Center. It boasts a Twitter feed with 76,000 followers, a Facebook page with nearly a million "likes," and regularly posts toxic images with the "Jerusalem Intifada" hashtag. The page's "About" section lists its headquarters in Gaza, and it routinely posts pamphlets from Hamas.⁴⁹

⁴¹ Orlando Crowcroft, "Hamas Official: We Were Behind the Kidnapping of Three Israeli Teenagers," *The Guardian*, August 21, 2014. (<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/aug/21/hamas-kidnapping-three-israeli-teenagers-saleh-al-arouri-qassam-brigades>)

⁴² "Hamas Said to be Plotting Big West Bank Terror Attack," *The Times of Israel*, October 17, 2015. (<http://www.timesofisrael.com/hamas-said-to-be-plotting-big-west-bank-terror-attack/>)

⁴³ Palestinian Dialogue Forum website, (<https://www.paldf.net/forum/>)

⁴⁴ Jonathan Schanzer and Mark Dubowitz, *P@lestinian Pulse: What Policymakers Can Learn From Palestinian Online Social Media*. (Washington, DC; FDD Press, 2010).

⁴⁵ @paldf, *Twitter*, October 15, 2015. (<https://twitter.com/paldf/status/654735442848276480>)

⁴⁶ Paldf_inst, *Instagram*, October 13, 2015. (<https://instagram.com/p/8wexhCvLDL/>)

(This is a reference to the Quran, verse 5:60, <http://corpus.quran.com/translation.jsp?chapter=5&verse=60>)

⁴⁷ @paldf, *Twitter*, October 14, 2015. (<https://twitter.com/paldf/status/654275061055000577>)

⁴⁸ "Social Media as a Platform for Palestinian Incitement – Praise for Stabbing Attackers, Threats of Further Attacks," *The Middle East Media Research Institute*, October 14, 2015. (<http://www.memri.org/report/en/0/0/0/0/0/8797.htm>)

⁴⁹ Palestinian Information Center, *Facebook*, October 15, 2015.

(<https://www.facebook.com/palinfo/photos/a.120138181355599.7758.105409946161756/906411819394894/?type=3&permPage=1>)

Hamas maintains multiple official channels via social media to promote its violent ideology. The official Arabic language website of Hamas is updated regularly, and exhorts its readers to take up violence.⁵⁰ With 11,000 followers, @qssamsms is the official twitter handle of the Hamas military wing and its website, www.qassam.ps. Another twitter handle, @HamasInfo, is filled with photos and calls for violence. Interestingly, @HamasInfoEn, its English-language counterpart is far more muted in tone.

Not to be outdone, several social media sites claiming affiliation with Mahmoud Abbas's Fatah faction have incited through violent postings. One such posting on a Fatah Twitter account posted an actual photo of an Israeli stabbing victim in the hospital with the knife still lodged in his neck,⁵¹ while a cartoon depicts a masked Palestinian strumming a knife like a violin with a key to his pre-1948 home, suggesting that nationalist music is made through stabbings.⁵² Still others showed militaristic scenes like Palestinians in battle gear staring at the al-Aqsa mosque,⁵³ or Palestinians destroying Hebrew street signs, suggesting that Israel is being destroyed.⁵⁴ Almost all have used the "Aqsa Anger" hashtag.⁵⁵

The Role of the U.S. Administration

Mr. Chairman, amidst all of this, the Obama Administration has embraced some dangerous rhetoric of its own. To be clear, the White House is not inciting to violence. But it has adopted positions that have arguably led the Palestinians to believe that they are justified in their attacks.

For example, Secretary of State John Kerry last week linked the ongoing violence to Israeli settlement construction. "There's been a massive increase in settlements over the course of the last years, and now you have this violence because there's a frustration that is growing."⁵⁶ But this is untrue. Settlement growth has ebbed to historic lows in the last few years.⁵⁷ But even if settlements were on the rise, it is difficult to understand why the White House would cite this as a justification for violence.

Similarly, State Department spokesman John Kirby linked the violence to Israel's policies on the Temple Mount. "The status quo has not been observed, which has led to a lot of the violence," he said.⁵⁸ In so doing, Kirby appeared to adopt some of the wild claims made by the PLO's news

⁵⁰ Hamas website, (<http://hamas.ps/ar/>)

⁵¹ @fateha1965, *Twitter*, October 8, 2015. (<https://twitter.com/fateha1965/status/652119533734494208>)

⁵² @fateha1965, *Twitter*, October 12, 2015. (<https://twitter.com/fateha1965/status/653820889591582721>)

⁵³ @fateha1965, *Twitter*, October 8, 2015. (<https://twitter.com/fateha1965/status/652019321955352576>)

⁵⁴ @fateha1965, *Twitter*, October 13, 2015. (<https://twitter.com/fateha1965/status/654084832033685505>)

⁵⁵ @fateha1965, *Twitter*, October 8, 2015. (<https://twitter.com/fateha1965/status/652132153610780672>)

⁵⁶ Michael Wilner, "Kerry links wave of terrorism in Israel to settlement activity," *The Jerusalem Post*, October 14, 2015. (<http://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Politics-And-Diplomacy/Kerry-to-visit-Israel-amid-crisis-423892>)

⁵⁷ Chaim Levinson, "Is Netanyahu responsible for rise in settler numbers?" *Haaretz*, October 14, 2015.

(<http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/.premium-1.680304>)

⁵⁸ John Kirby, Interview, Daily Press Briefing, U.S. Department of State, October 14, 2015.

(<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2015/10/248215.htm>)

agency mentioned above. Under fire, Kirby quickly issued a clarification. “I did not intend to suggest that status quo at Temple Mount/Haram Al-Sharif has been broken,” he ceded.⁵⁹

Finally, Kirby claimed to have seen “reports of what many would consider excessive use of force.... [Israeli] security activity that could indicate the potential excessive use of force.”⁶⁰ This prompted outrage from Jerusalem, which has struggled to keep its citizens safe from knife attacks. Israeli security has quelled attacks by force, but characterizing this as excessive is hard to fathom. Kirby retreated on this point at a subsequent press briefing, stating, “We have never accused Israeli security forces with excessive force with respect to these terrorist attacks.”⁶¹

Mr. Chairman, if Washington wishes to help Israel quell the violence, such statements are unhelpful. In fact, they could be viewed as justification for the ongoing violence.

This rhetoric also sends the wrong message to other countries around the region, which are now seething. Jordan’s parliament accused Israel of “barbaric crimes”⁶² and protests swept across the country.⁶³ Turkey’s head of religious affairs warned Israel of crossing “a red line for every Muslim living in the region,”⁶⁴ while Tunisia’s foreign ministry released a statement condemning Israel for “a blatant violation of international humanitarian conventions.”⁶⁵

The administration should be working to defuse this anger rather than fanning it.

Recommendations

Mr. Chairman, the road ahead will be challenging, but I offer a handful of concrete steps this committee might consider.

1. **Track and Halt Iranian Cash to Hamas.** While it has encouraged lone wolf attacks through political speeches and the media, Iran has not, to my knowledge, played a direct role in this current round of unrest. However, its longstanding financial ties with Hamas are well documented, including in the most recent *Country Reports on Terrorism* issued by the U.S.

⁵⁹ @statedeptspox, “Clarification from today’s briefing: I did not intend to suggest that status quo at Temple Mount/Haram Al-Sharif has been broken,” *Twitter*, October 14, 2015.

(<https://twitter.com/statedeptspox/status/654456347354906624>)

⁶⁰ John Kirby, Interview, *Daily Press Briefing*, October 14, 2015.

(<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2015/10/248215.htm>)

⁶¹ Michael Wilner, “US walks back criticism of Israel security response to terror wave,” *The Jerusalem Post*, October 15, 2015. (<http://www.jpost.com/Arab-Israeli-Conflict/US-walks-back-criticism-of-Israel-security-response-to-terror-wave-426119>)

⁶² “Jordan’s Parliament Accuses ‘Israeli Enemy’ of State Terrorism,” *The Times of Israel*, October 10, 2015.

(<http://www.timesofisrael.com/jordans-parliament-accuses-israeli-enemy-of-state-terrorism/>)

⁶³ Suzanna Goussous, “University Students Around Jordan Express Solidarity with Palestinian Resistance,” *The Jordan Times*, October 13, 2015. (<http://www.jordantimes.com/news/local/university-students-around-jordan-express-solidarity-palestinian-resistance>)

⁶⁴ “Division of al-Aqsa a ‘Red Line’: Turkey’s Top Cleric,” *World Bulletin*, October 16, 2015.

(<http://www.worldbulletin.net/news/165328/division-of-al-aqsa-a-red-line-turkeys-top-cleric>)

⁶⁵ “Tunisia Denounces Israeli Military Escalation Against Palestinian People – MFA,” *All Africa*, October 13, 2015.

(<http://allafrica.com/stories/201510141003.html>)

Department of State.⁶⁶ After Iran begins to receive \$150 billion in sanctions relief, pursuant to the nuclear deal signed this summer, Hamas stands to benefit. Whether through legislation or through encouraging executive action, Congress must find ways to halt these funds from flowing to Hamas.

2. **Pressure Turkey and Qatar to Stop their Support for Hamas.** Pressure on countries like Turkey and Qatar will be key to constraining Hamas, both politically and financially. Their status as U.S. allies has allowed them to support a terrorist group without coming under the same scrutiny as other state sponsors of terrorism. Congress should not let this stand. As Secretary of State John Kerry stated in 2009 when he was a U.S. senator, “Qatar... cannot continue to be an American ally on Monday that sends money to Hamas on Tuesday.”⁶⁷ The same goes for Turkey.
3. **Target the PLO.** The root of the tensions on the Temple Mount can be clearly traced back to the propaganda of the PLO’s news agency Wafa. The PLO is technically the peace negotiating body for the Palestinians. In reality, it is an impediment to peace. It is a bloated organization that lacks transparency and has consistently stymied diplomacy with Israel rather than accept compromise. Congress should consider punitive measures until the PLO halts its incitement. More broadly, it should rethink its recognition of this bloated body that has outlived its usefulness.
4. **Investigate the PNF.** The Palestine National Fund is often viewed as the main financial body of the PLO.⁶⁸ The PNF receives funding from the Palestinian Authority budget, to which America contributes some 20 percent annually.⁶⁹ The PNF has in the past used its funds to “to help families of ‘martyrs,’ and to educate refugees, as well as funding Palestinian media organs.”⁷⁰ Congress should determine whether the U.S. directly or indirectly funds the PNF, and take action accordingly.⁷¹ The United States should not be contributing to PLO incitement.
5. **Put a Stop to the Palestine 194 Campaign.** As Israel labors to defend itself against Palestinian terrorist attacks, the Palestinian Authority claims that the response constitutes war crimes, and they have thus vowed to turn to the International Criminal Court.⁷² This is part and parcel of the Palestine 194 campaign, which is designed to both delegitimize Israel and

⁶⁶ U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Counterterrorism, “Chapter 3: State Sponsors of Terrorism Overview,” *Country Reports on Terrorism 2014*, (<http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2014/239410.htm>)

⁶⁷ John Kerry, “Restoring Leadership in the Middle East: A Regional Approach to Peace,” Remarks at the Brookings Institution, March 4, 2009. (www.brookings.edu/~media/Events/2009/3/04%20leadership/0304_leadership.PDF)

⁶⁸ “Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO),” Embassy of the State of Palestine in Malaysia, (www.palestineembassy.org/plo.html)

⁶⁹ “PA 2013 Draft Budget Excludes Fuel Revenues,” *Ma’an News Agency*, April 6, 2013. (www.maannews.net/eng/ViewDetails.aspx?ID=576647)

⁷⁰ “Jaweed al-Ghusein: PLO Treasurer Kidnapped by Arafat,” *The Independent*, August 27, 2008. (www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/jaweed-alghussein-plo-treasurer-kidnapped-by-arafat-909610.html)

⁷¹ For more see: Doron Peskin, “Abbas and the Mysterious Multi-Billion Dollar Fund,” *Ynet* (Israel), October 19, 2015, (<http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0.7340.L-4713280.00.html>)

⁷² Khaled Abu Toameh, “Abbas Accuses Israel of ‘Aggressive Offensive’ Despite Day of Palestinian Terror Attacks,” *The Jerusalem Post*, October 14, 2015. (<http://www.jpost.com/Arab-Israeli-Conflict/Abbas-accuses-Israel-of-aggressive-offensive-despite-day-of-Palestinian-terror-attacks-424969>)

pave the way for unilateral declaration of statehood at the United Nations. Washington right now appears ambivalent about the PLO-led campaign. Reports suggest that the White House may even back some of these diplomatic maneuvers.⁷³ This is a reward for bad behavior and must not stand. Congress should consider legislation that clarifies the U.S. position on this dangerous campaign.

- 6. Prepare for Palestinian Succession.** Washington must pave the way for the orderly exit of Mahmoud Abbas and his clique. After a decade of corruption and poor governance, he lacks the ability to lead. This was made abundantly clear by his half-hearted stance on Palestinian violence. One can even argue that the stagnation in Palestinian politics has added to the frustration on the street. New parties and new leaders must now be given an opportunity to emerge. However, the PA currently lacks legitimate political challengers, not to mention a clear plan for succession. As my FDD colleague Grant Rumley notes, now is the time for Washington to help Palestinians make plans for the future.⁷⁴

Conclusion

Mr. Chairman, there are many aspects of the current conflict that I did not have time to address today. If I have missed anything you wish to discuss, I am happy to answer your questions.

On behalf of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, I thank you again for inviting me here today.

⁷³ Akiva Eldar, “Will US endorse French UN resolution on Palestinian statehood?” *Al-Monitor*, May 18, 2015, (<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/05/israel-palestine-diplomatic-process-us-un-resolution-france.html#>)

⁷⁴ Grant Rumley, *The Race to Replace Mahmoud Abbas: Understanding and Shaping Palestinian Succession*, FDD Press, September 2105. (http://www.defenddemocracy.org/content/uploads/publications/Rumley_Understanding_Palestinian_Succession.pdf)