



On the margin

The Palestinian issue is just one of many on the crowded agenda of Mideast governments and nowhere near the top of their priorities

NEARLY FIVE years have passed since a frustrated young vendor in a dusty Tunisian provincial town set himself ablaze and ignited, however improbably, the upheavals that continue to reverberate throughout the region and beyond. One result was the further marginalization of the Palestinian issue, regionally and internationally, to the great frustration of the Palestinians.

Of course, the gap between rhetorical and actual support for the Palestinian cause has always been wide. Nonetheless, the previous Palestinian intifadas did redirect Arab and international attention to the Palestinians' struggle against Israel. So far, however, the current round of Palestinian-Israeli violence has not done so.

This can hardly come as a surprise. Even by current Middle East standards, there have been other more pressing matters in recent weeks: a horrific, suicide bomb attack in Ankara; intensifying Russian (and Iranian) military intervention in Syria; long-delayed Egyptian parliamentary elections; the worsening conflict in Yemen between Saudi-led forces and Houthi rebels... and the list goes on and on.

To be sure, the renewal of Palestinian-Israeli violence has received wide coverage and generated much commentary in Arab media outlets. Palestinian insistence that the violence is a direct outcome of Israeli policies is universally accepted. As in the past, Palestinian youth are heralded as heroes who are willing to take their fate into their own hands, while political leaders dither.

Beyond this general consensus, however, there are significant differences that reflect the myriad divisions that continue to tear at the fabric of the region. Islamic State jihadis embraced the new round of violence and moved quickly on social media platforms to promote the escalation of murderous attacks on Israeli Jews. In doing so, they made a special point of distinguishing themselves from Palestinian organizations – Fatah and Hamas – whom they condemn as failed collaborators.

A Lebanese commentator in the leftist al-Akhbar newspaper wrote a lengthy diatribe against the so-called moderate Arab regimes, primarily the Gulf states, whose pro-Palestinian rhetoric, he said barely camouflaged their eagerness to do business with Israel, including the purchasing of advanced weapons systems. The critique demonstrated the continued existence of regional lines of division first made obvious in the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah war, which Sunni Arab states blamed Iran for instigating.

Occasionally, other voices have been heard, as well.

According to MEMRI, the Washington-based Middle East Media Research Institute, an Egyptian television host expressed his concern that the methods being used by the Palestinians to express their rage at Israeli occupation were the wrong ones. "What's the story with all the knives?" he asked. "How can you knife a person walking down the street and say 'This is resistance'?" Doing so, he said, constituted a repetition of the mistakes of the past, which led the



Members and supporters of the Islamist party Hizb Ut-Tahrir rally in Tripoli, northern Lebanon, in support of Palestinians and against Russian and US intervention in Syria, October 16

Palestinians "into the hands of collaborators, or traitors, or of groups that paddle in the Palestinian cause, or of the Islamic movement that has nothing to do with patriotism."

And a complete outlier was a Kuwaiti columnist in the daily al-Watan, who dared to suggest that Israel had a right to defend itself against "Palestinian knife terrorism" and "incitement." (The paper quickly removed the article from its website.)

The Arab government most concerned with the renewal of Palestinian-Israeli violence is, of course, Jordan. Given its immediate geographical proximity, its large Palestinian population (at least 50 percent), and its status as custodian of Jerusalem Islamic holy sites as per the Jordan-Israel 1994 peace treaty, any adverse developments, particularly in Jerusalem, carry the potential for spilling over into Jordan and destabilizing the country. With its hands full with many hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees and trying to insulate itself from the threat of the Islamic State to its north, this is the last thing Jordan needs.

Hence, King Abdallah has been quite vocal in criticizing Israel's actions on the Temple Mount, warning against any damage or alteration to the city's historic and religious heritage sites, initiating an emergency meeting of the UN Security Council to discuss the issue, and acting to bring US pressure on Israel to calm the situation.

For the moment, then, the Palestinian issue is just one of many on the crowded agenda of Middle East governments and, apart from Jordan, nowhere near the top of their priority lists.

But the holy sites of Jerusalem remain a flash point, and any real change in the status quo on the Temple Mount, let alone damage to the al-Aqsa mosque, would be a game-changer. ■

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