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Istituto Affari Internazionali

## Violence Grips Jerusalem

by Giorgio Gomel

Violence erupted again last week at one of the entrances of the Temple Mount in East Jerusalem (*Har Ha-Bayit*, in Hebrew, *Haram-al-Sharif* in Arabic), the city's most prominent holy site for Judaism and Islam. A sensitive and highly contested place, the Temple Mount has witnessed repeated bouts of violence; most recently in 1990, in 1996, in 2000 – when clashes led to the outbreak of the second Intifada and the long wave of suicide terror against Israelis –, and in 2015 when tensions at the site ushered in a streak of Palestinian attacks followed by reprisals and acts of collective punishment by the Israeli army.

Tensions in the area are compounded by recurrent threats and actions of Jewish zealots who try to visit and pray at the site, despite Jewish law's prohibition of such actions. Some extreme fundamentalists within Israeli society have called for the destruction

of the two mosques located on the Mount plaza in order to make room for the building of a Third Temple on the supposed site of the Second Temple that was demolished by the Romans in the first century CE.

Such provocative actions are viewed, often with exaggerated rhetoric, by the Palestinians as an attempt to alter the status quo in place at the site since 1967, when Israel annexed East Jerusalem while recognizing the Islamic Waqf's administrative authority over the Temple Mount. The agreement, reiterated in the context of the 1994 peace treaty between Israel and Jordan, concerns management and security arrangements: it recognizes the primacy of Muslim prayer rights at the site; stipulates the division of authority whereby the Waqf (a Muslim Trust funded and controlled by the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan) manages the inside of the mosques and

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Israel secures their surroundings; and entry arrangements, whereby the Waqf maintains authority for supervising entry to the compound.

The events that occurred at the Temple Mount on Friday 14 July were very troubling. First, because the attackers were Palestinian citizens of Israel, coming from Umm al-Fahm, a largely Arab city in the Haifa District of Israel, rather than from the West Bank or East Jerusalem. Three attackers entered the compound followed by an accomplice who apparently provided weapons, which the three then used in a shooting attack against Israeli policemen, killing two Druze servicemen before being shot by the security forces. This was an attack in which Palestinian citizens of Israel killed members of the country's Druze minority, itself another troubling dynamic.

Secondly, the attack is significant and worrying because it took place on the Mount plaza. Precisely because this attack followed earlier incidents at the gates to the Old City, and precisely because in all cases police officers were targeted, both the number of attacks and the present escalation on the Temple Mount point to the fact that extremists want to demonstrate that Israel is not capable of maintaining order and freedom of worship at the site. They further reflect the mounting tensions and feelings of abandonment present among Palestinians in the occupied territories.

The immediate response by the Israeli government made matters worse. Israel first closed the Mount and mosques to worshipers and then installed

metal detectors at the entrances to the plaza before reopening the area. The unilateral decision to install metal detectors is particularly troubling. The Mount had to be closed for two days – an unprecedented step – in order to allow for a search of the area. A police search turned up additional weapons: knives, clubs and slingshots, but no live ammunition.

The metal detectors, placed at all eight entrances to the Mount plaza, which for Israel are a standard method of screening visitors, are perceived by the Palestinians as an extension of Israeli control and a change in the status quo agreement. In other words, they signal to Muslim worshipers that Israel has now effectively extended its authority over the compound, infringing on their right of entry.

Following these events, the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem and the Waqf authorities called on imams in the Jerusalem area not to hold Friday prayers in their mosques and instead come to the Old City to protest Israeli actions. Thousands gathered around the city walls for Friday prayers on 21 July, refusing to enter the plaza as long as the metal detectors remain in place. Israeli authorities, bracing for violent protests, erected roadblocks around East Jerusalem's Arab neighbourhoods to impede access to the Old City, while barring males under the age of 50 from accessing the plaza. Jordan, which under its peace treaty with Israel plays a key role regarding the site, lodged a formal protest with Israel, as did Mahmoud Abbas, leader of the Palestinian National Authority. Meanwhile, Hamas and the Islamic

movement in Israel further incited the protesters, and the Fatah movement called on its supporters to take part in a “day of rage”.

Last Friday’s protests quickly turned violent, with fierce clashes between Palestinian youths and Israeli security services. Three young Palestinians were killed with live fire and many more were injured across East Jerusalem and the West Bank. These events were followed by yet another horrendous attack. Three members of a Jewish family living in a settlement in the central West Bank were killed by a Palestinian assailant who had earlier taken to Facebook to write his “last words and testament” before “going to die for Al-Aqsa”, Islam’s holy mosque located on Jerusalem’s Temple Mount. Following a day of protests and killings, Palestinian President Abbas announced a freeze on all contacts with Israel until the government agreed to remove the metal detectors.

What should be done then to secure a modicum of stability, religious tolerance and moderation on the ground in Israel-Palestine and Jerusalem?

It is incumbent upon Israel to calm the situation and prevent a major escalation as well as damage to its relations with the Arab and Muslim world. Muslim leaders and Arab countries – mainly Jordan, Egypt and Saudi Arabia – must also act wisely to prevent further violence and stop a slippery slope that could transform the Israeli-Palestinian conflict into a devastating war of religion.

The attack that took place on 14 July was condemned by Palestinian President Abbas and, to different degrees, by the Arab members of the Israeli Parliament (Knesset). Reactions from Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Morocco were also somewhat restrained, reflecting the fact that Israel now enjoys direct lines of communication with them.

The metal detectors will almost certainly have to be removed. The Israeli army and security services had themselves advised the government to remove them, but the political leadership has to date refused to back down. In any event, metal detectors cannot be realistically used to maintain security at Friday prayers, when thousands come to worship on the Mount in a short time frame. Their presence will make access to the holy sites a long, cumbersome and somewhat humiliating experience for Muslim worshipers, who are already exposed to daily hardships and security checks as a result of the occupation.

While security arrangements will be necessary, these must be conducted in cooperation with the Islamic Waqf authorities, as well as Jordan and the Palestinian leadership. Otherwise, rather than establish security, these measures will become a further source of tension between Arabs and Jews in the city.

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### Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)

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