

COMMENTARY

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Before it is too late

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It was always a question of when the Israeli-Palestinian conflict would violently erupt once again, which only proves that, contrary to the prevailing views among a multitude of Israelis, no Israeli government can manage the occupation indefinitely. The current replay of past violent flare-ups points to the dismal failure of Prime Minister Netanyahu's policy.

That said, I do not suggest for a moment that all Palestinians are innocent bystanders; Palestinian leaders, including Abbas, have their share in provoking the unrest. But those Israelis who call on their government to use harsher measures to prevent further escalation should answer a simple question: what happens the day after a successful Israeli crackdown, and where will all this lead to?

They all seem to conveniently forget or ignore that what is fundamentally wrong here is the continuing occupation, which by its own very nature cannot be sustained without paying an increasingly heavier toll on both sides.

The stabbing and killing of innocent Israelis is most reprehensible, and the perpetrators should be brought to justice if they survive the aftermath of their atrocious acts. The Israeli government has the responsibility to take security measures to prevent such criminal acts.

The use of excessive force, however, only provokes more intense violent resistance and fuels the already-existing Palestinian extremism which is not likely to abate, however brutal and forceful Israel's counter-measures might be.

Whether or not the violence was instigated by the Palestinian Authority's unfounded accusation that Israel is changing the status quo at the Temple Mount/Haram el-Sharif is hardly relevant, even if it were true.

If the conflict over the Temple Mount did not instigate the current flare-up, any other incident would have ignited it because the conditions on the ground were ripe for such a violent uprising.

A multitude of Palestinian youths live in abject poverty, are despondent, and have no hope for the future. They feel completely abandoned by their own government on the one hand, and are choked by the Israeli occupation on the other.

The fact, however, that Jerusalem was the flash point is especially worrisome as the city houses the largest number of Israelis and Palestinians living side-by-side. If Jerusalem cannot provide the microcosm of Israeli-Palestinian peaceful coexistence, there will never be peace between the two sides.

When it comes to the use of force, Israel will sooner than later prevail, which may calm the situation, but only temporarily. The general shifting of the Israeli population to the right-of-centre and the enormous power the settlement movement wields make matters considerably worse.

Extremists on both sides will continue to provoke each other, which will only set the stage for the next bloody confrontation if the political status quo and conditions on the ground remain unchanged.

Israel, rather than the Palestinians, will end up licking its wounds, because irrespective of how many Palestinians are killed and how much destruction they sustain, it is a small sacrifice they happily make in their march toward statehood.

The fact is, a handful of knife-wielding Palestinians can cause such havoc among the Israelis, rob them of their personal safety, and make them psychologically vulnerable.

Meanwhile, Israel's image is further tarnished as friends and foes alike view Israel, rather than the Palestinians, as the culprit behind this new wave of violence. The persisting occupation and the expansion of the settlements provide a constant flame, and it takes little fuel to make it a raging fire that leaves terrible destruction in its wake.

Those extremists among the Israelis who really believe that the use of force is the only way to deal with Palestinian violence are living in self-denial, and the complacent among Israelis in general do not want to know the truth, preferring to live the life of false comfort that complacency provides.

Moreover, there is no way to take this Palestinian ‘uprising’ out of the regional context. The Arab Spring and the resulting regional turmoil reminds every Palestinian that fighting and dying for a cause is better than living a life of servitude and hopelessness.

Wisdom dictates that Netanyahu and his right-wing coalition rethink their position and devise a long-term strategy not limited to only stem the current bloodshed, but to prevent the vicious cycle of violence by changing the status quo.

Some Israelis and Palestinians might think that time is on their side. They are dead wrong. Time works on the side of those who know how to seize the moment and are committed to finding solutions to endemic problems, instead of waiting and falsely hoping that they can ride the wave of uncertainty and improve their position over time.

Every intelligent Israeli and Palestinian, and there are many, should speak up loud and clear that there will be no winners in this conflict—only losers.

The losses will transcend material, territorial, or physical control, but inflict far more acute damage: the loss of the moral tenet that frees the individual of the responsibility to do what is right. It is a dreadful curse because it is self-propelling and allows forever more latitude to kill and destroy without any sense of remorse.

The mutual acrimonious charges and counter-charges by Israeli and Palestinian leaders do nothing but instigate ever more violence. If Netanyahu and Abbas really want to end the bloodshed, they must appeal to their respective publics, preferably together, and unambiguously state that they are both determined to end the violence.

The question is, do they have the courage, vision, conviction, or will to do what must be done, as neither side can have it their way or wish the other away.

Israel has every right to exist as a Jewish and a democratic state and should protect that with all of its might. However, being that Israel is by far the more powerful party, it should use that might to change the reality on the ground, because its survival as a true Jewish and democratic country depends on the creation of a Palestinian state.

Given past experiences with Netanyahu and Abbas, I seriously doubt that either can rise to the occasion on their own. But for the visit of Secretary of State John Kerry to the region to have any positive effect, Abbas should accept Netanyahu’s invitation to meet during Kerry’s visit. They must promise that the status quo ante will change and together they will chart a new road to peace before it is too late.

Note: This article was originally published in the web portal of Prof. Ben-Meir and has been reproduced under arrangement. Web Link: <http://www.alonben-meir.com/article/before-it-is-too-late/>

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