

Jordanian reactions to the recent escalations in Jerusalem and the Palestinian territories

At least 53 Palestinians have been killed and 9 Israelis have been stabbed or shot dead since the beginning of October. The newest wave of violence in Jerusalem – the city which is sacred to the three major religions in the world: Judaism, Christianity and Islam – has some observers warning about the possibility of a third intifada. While it is too early to draw such conclusions, it is clear that the old conflict between Israelis and Palestinians has reached another peak.

Jordan is again – as it has done so many times in the past – playing, on one side, the role of a mediator between the Palestinians, Israelis and the United States and, on the other side, being directly involved due to HM King Abdullah of Jordan – direct descendant of the Prophet – being the guardian of the Muslim holy places in Jerusalem. Additionally the high numbers of Palestinians in the country – up to 65% of Jordanians are of Palestinian descent – lead to the escalations in Jerusalem having direct implications on Jordan. Following the violence in recent weeks there have been demonstrations in support of the Palestinian cause around Jordan, demanding strong reactions to Israeli actions. Also a meeting between US Secretary of State John Kerry, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and Jordan's King Abdullah took place in Amman in order to discuss recent events and to find solutions to calm down the situation.

After just having calmed down – a wave of violence had been going through Israel last autumn when Israel ordered a full closure of Al-Aqsa mosque, for the first time since 1967, in response to the shooting of the American-Israeli religious activist, Yehuda Glick – the situation escalated again. More information on past years violent clashes regarding the status of the holy places can be found in the KAS country report "What if the Hashemite guardianship over the holy sites in Jerusalem is seriously changed?"¹

Since mid-September the Temple Mount is once again the epicenter of violence. Palestinian youth have been throwing stones and firecrackers in order to prevent the entry of religious Jews while Israeli police officers have repeatedly burst into Al-Aqsa Mosque. Palestinians justify the violence as reaction to Israel violating the so called "Status Quo" which foresees the Temple Mount being secured by Israeli police from outside and administrated by Muslims from inside. However, due to Israel shifting its access and policing policy at the site – as limiting access to Muslims below a certain age – Palestinians feel that the situation is shifting in an unfavorable direction for them, increasing access for Jews while limiting it for Muslims.

¹ Domingo and Oehring, "What if the Hashemite guardianship over the holy sites in Jerusalem is seriously changed?", 11/27/14, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, http://www.kas.de/wf/doc/kas_39881-1522-2-30.pdf?141209125952, (Accessed on: 10/25/15).

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Events in Jerusalem have direct consequences for Jordan: Firstly, HM King Abdullah of Jordan acts as a guardian of the Muslim holy places in Jerusalem. Article 9.2 of the peace treaty signed between the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan and the State of Israel in 1994 highlights this responsibility: *"In this regard, in accordance with the Washington Declaration, Israel respects the present special role of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan in Muslim Holy shrines in Jerusalem. When negotiations on the permanent status will take place, Israel will give high priority to the Jordanian historic role in these shrines".*² Every action to decrease Jordanian influence on the Temple Mount is therefore counted as violation of the peace treaty.

A second point which is likely to cause a spillover of the conflict is the high number of Palestinians living in Jordan: up to 65% of the Jordanian population is of Palestinian descent. Naturally they feel very close to the Palestinian cause and expect their government to do so as well. In order not to lose the backup of his population the king needs to react to the calls on the streets of Amman. Thereby he finds himself in the constant tension between appeasing his population and not risking its relations to international donors and partners – namely the United States.

Jordan supports a two-state solution and the establishment of a sovereign Palestinian state within the pre-1967 lines, with East Jerusalem as its capital. It was heavenly involved into the talks striving to end the violence in 2014 and has an import role in guarding the Status Quo. Following unwritten agreements non-Muslims are allowed to enter the holy sites but are prohibited from praying. Even though temple mount activists are attempting to change that – as Likud candidate Yehudah Glick in the run-up to the latest elections to the Knesset, who stated that "Prayer is an internal, spiritual act, which an army or police force has no

power to prevent"³ – Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu made it clear that "Israel will continue to enforce its longstanding policy: Muslims pray on the Temple Mount: non-Muslims visit the Temple Mount".⁴ Further Palestinians see it as provocation if large groups of religious Jews or government officials enter the site during Jewish holidays – especially as in the past some have tried to pray. The attempt to do so by agriculture minister Uri Ariel caused great anger among Arab Israelis after social media had spread the video.⁵

The 2014 understandings have not even been able to guarantee peace for a full year. Why? From the beginning they were not sufficient as they were never clear and remained confidential. According to Crisis Group they foresaw that Jordan would restrain Palestinians from using violence in order to prevent Jews from entering the holy sites (especially stone throwing by the youth), while Israel would hinder Jewish activists seeking to change the Status Quo from gaining public support.⁶ Jordan assisted in implementing the Palestinian side of the deal by helping to prevent stone throwers to enter the sites. Nevertheless, not even a year after the talks the situation has been escalated again.

Jordan has been condemning Israeli action to restrict access to the holy sites from the beginning: On October 2nd in reaction to the closure of Al-Aqsa, the Jordanian government pointed out that it can and will exert all diplomatic and legal efforts to make Is-

² Treaty of Peace between the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan and the State of Israel, 10/26/94, Wadi Araba.

³ Sharon, "Temple Mount activists: Prayer ban for Jews is discrimination", 10/25/15, The Jerusalem Post, <http://www.jpost.com/Arab-Israeli-Conflict/Temple-Mount-activists-Prayer-ban-for-Jews-is-discrimination-430042>, (Accessed on: 10/27/15).

⁴ ibidem

⁵ Zalzburg, "The Crumbling Status Quo at Jerusalem's Holy Esplanade", 10/07/15, Crisis Group, <http://blog.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/2015/10/07/the-crumbling-status-quo-at-jerusalem-holy-esplanade/>, (Accessed on: 10/25/15).

⁶ ibidem

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rael stop its flagrant violations.⁷ Even earlier on September 28th HM King Abdullah of Jordan underlined that "The Hashemite custodianship is a sacred duty. We reject threats to the holy places and the Arab character of this holy city."⁸ At a meeting with UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon on October 22nd in Amman, the king further noted that "reaching a comprehensive and just peace according to the two-state solution is the only exit from regional crises, a goal that requires all parties to exert their utmost efforts in support of achieving the envisioned solution."⁹

The ongoing violence at one of the most sensitive spots in the Middle East has been one of the heaviest threats to the Israeli-Jordanian relations since the peace treaty in 1994. With the Jordanian society greatly supporting the Palestinian cause, it has never been possible to achieve a normalization process or even friendly relations between the two societies. It has remained a cold peace with every incident in Jerusalem, Gaza or the Westbank having its direct consequences on the Jordanian-Israeli relations.

Also the recent outburst of violence has triggered a wave of support in Jordan. Protesters rally around Jordan in solidarity with the Palestinian resistance and to express support for Al-Aqsa mosque. On Friday, October 16th, hundreds of Jordanians marched in downtown Amman from Al-Husseini

Mosque towards Al-Nakeel Square¹⁰ and on October 13th, several universities around the Kingdom organized demonstration in what was described as "The Day of Rage" to condemn the killing of Palestinian civilians in the West Bank and attacks on Al-Aqsa mosque. One student of the Hashemite University, Asem Daraghme, said – what many think – that every Jordanian considers the Palestinian conflict as their own. He further added that "Everything that happens in the occupied lands reflects on Jordan and we as Arabs and Muslims are responsible for it".¹¹

Demonstrations carrying large Palestinian flags and burning the Israeli flag took also place in Shmeisani, Amman on Friday 23rd of October. An activist was cited by the Jordan Times saying that "We want to send a message to the Jordanian government that it must recall our ambassador from occupied Palestine and expel the Zionist ambassador".¹² The national Boycott Divestment and Sanctions (BDS Jordan) movement, which rejects all types of normalization with Israel, especially the Wadi Araba Peace Treaty, has called on Jordanians to intensify boycotting efforts on Israeli products.¹³

⁷ The Jordan Times, "Jordan condemns Israel closure of Al-Aqsa, warns of consequences", 10/02/15, <http://www.jordantimes.com/news/local/jordan-condemns-israel-closure-al-aqsa-warns-consequences>, (Accessed on: 10/26/15).

⁸ The Times of Israel, "Jordan's king: We won't allow threat to Arab character of Jerusalem", 09/28/15, <http://www.timesofisrael.com/jordans-king-we-wont-allow-threat-to-arab-character-of-jerusalem/>, (Accessed on: 10/26/15).

⁹ The Jordan Times, "King warns against change in Jerusalem status quo", 10/23/15, <http://www.jordantimes.com/news/local/king-warns-against-change-jerusalem-status-quo>, (Accessed on: 10/26/15).

¹⁰ Freij, "Protesters rally around Jordan in support of Palestine", 10/18/15, The Jordan Times, <http://www.jordantimes.com/news/local/protesters-rally-around-jordan-support-palestine>, (Accessed on: 10/26/15).

¹¹ Goussous, "University students around Jordan express solidarity with Palestinian resistance", 10/13/15, The Jordan Times, <http://www.jordantimes.com/news/local/university-students-around-jordan-express-solidarity-palestinian-resistance>, (Accessed on: 10/26/15).

¹² Freij, "Jordanians demonstrate in support of Palestinians", 10/24/15, The Jordan Times, <http://www.jordantimes.com/news/local/jordanians-demonstrate-support-palestinians>, (Accessed on: 10/26/15).

¹³ The Jordan Times, "BDS calls for intensified boycott of Israel, supporting Palestinian people", 10/18/15, <http://www.jordantimes.com/news/local/bds-calls-intensified-boycott-israel-supporting-palestinian-people>, (Accessed on: 10/27/15).

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In a meeting on Sunday 25th of October, Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Nasser Judeh, stressed that upholding the status quo in line with previous understandings between Israel and Jordan remains top priority for the kingdom. He therefore welcomed Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's pledge to uphold the status quo as step on the correct path. Further it was added that Jordan supports efforts aimed at bringing back peace and to stop violence.¹⁴ On Saturday 24th of October US Secretary of State John Kerry met with HM King Abdullah in Amman in order to discuss the developments in Jerusalem. They emphasized the necessity of renewed peace negotiations and introduced the idea of 24-hour video coverage of the holy sites. Kerry argued that the cameras will help to provide visibility and transparency and could act as a game changer.¹⁵ However, Palestinians are suspicious of the surveillance, accusing Netanyahu to use the cameras to "monitor and arrest our people".¹⁶ Also cameras do not address the root of the problem and certainly do not provide a durable long-term perspective.

There have been rumors spreading that Israel offered to reduce the number of Jewish and non-Muslim visitors to Temple Mount in order to calm tensions but that this offer was rejected as not going far enough by Palestinian and Jordanian leaders. Until 2000 the entry of Jewish visitors to the Temple Mount was overseen by the Jerusalem Islamic Waqf, which is controlled by

Jordan. With the second intifada the police took over control of the coordination of non-Muslim visitors and have kept doing so since. Now it has been demanded by the Palestinian authority (PA) to return oversight on Jewish access to the Temple Mount to the Waqf in order to calm down the current situation.¹⁷

Ofer Zalberg from Crisis Group in Jerusalem sees the most important action in a free-access-for-all policy and in maintaining the non-Muslim prayer ban. He stresses the importance of a more detailed agreement and of permission which would allow the Waqf to exercise its role more fully. Furthermore, an official Israeli declaration of the importance of Jordan's role in managing the holy sites together with the permission to carry out some symbolic maintenance projects that have long been refused, could act as a signal to Palestinians that Israel does not seek exclusive control and could help to calm the situation.¹⁸

It is certain that Jordan will - as it has done many times in the past - play a major role in peace talks and act as a mediator between the Palestinians, the United States and Israel.

¹⁴ The Jordan Times, "Jordan is keen to coordinate with Abbas", 10/25/15, <http://www.jordantimes.com/news/local/jordan-keen-coordinate-abbas%E2%80%99>, (Accessed on: 10/26/15).

¹⁵ The Jordan Times, "Israel agrees to Jordan's proposal to install cameras at Al Haram Al Sharif", 10/24/15, <http://www.jordantimes.com/news/local/israel-agrees-jordan%E2%80%99s-proposal-install-cameras-al-haram-al-sharif>, (Accessed on: 10/27/15).

¹⁶ Sawafa, "Palestinians suspicious of Al-Aqsa surveillance promoted by Kerry", 10/25/15, Reuters, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/10/25-us-israel-palestinians-idUSKCN0SJ0C220151025>, (Accessed on: 10/27/15).

¹⁷ Issacharoff, "PA, Jordan to tell Kerry they want Muslim control over Jewish visits to Temple Mount", 10/23/15, The Times of Israel, <http://www.timesofisrael.com/pa-jordan-want-muslim-control-over-jewish-visits-to-temple-mount/>, (Accessed on: 10/26/15).

¹⁸ Zalberg, "The Crumbling Status Quo at Jerusalem's Holy Esplanade", 10/07/15, Crisis Group, <http://blog.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/2015/10/07/the-crumbling-status-quo-at-jerusalem-holy-esplanade/>, (Accessed on: 10/25/15).