



**SPECIAL KNESSET BRIEFING:
TEMPLE MOUNT CRISIS; RIOTS IN EAST JERUSALEM**

12.18.14

BACKGROUND:

In the wake of this past summer's war in Gaza, tensions have flared in Jerusalem. While some of the violence has been residual effects from Operation Protective Edge, much of it surrounds the Temple Mount, known by Muslims as Haram al-Sharif. Even after conquering the Old City in 1967, Israel agreed that Muslims should control the Temple Mount. And so while the Israeli Supreme Court technically allows Jewish prayer at the site, it severely restricts visitation and forbids any form of prayer that can be deemed 'incitement' – including Jews moving their lips. Jewish groups have begun to vocally campaign for a change in the status quo, demanding that Jews be allowed to pray at their holiest site. As one movement leader explains: *'When any Jew enters the Temple Mount wearing a kippa, immediately he is surrounded by Muslims, male and female, who scream at you, push you, throw shoes at you, throw chairs at you. They surround you and it can become very frightening.'* Many politicians – including up to half of the Likud party – have joined this campaign. As the politics have heated up, so have the emotions and actions; September and October saw almost nightly rioting in Palestinian districts throughout East Jerusalem.

A brief timeline:

- **Oct 13. Heavy clashes** erupt on Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount between Israeli police and Palestinian protesters angry at Jewish worshippers visiting the site in increasing numbers.
- **Oct 22 & Nov. 5. Palestinian driver rams his car** into people waiting at a Jerusalem light-rail stop. Two Israelis killed both times. Driver shot in both incidents.
- **Oct 29. Yehuda Glick**, a far-right Israeli activist campaigning for Jews to be allowed to pray at Temple Mount, shot and wounded by a Palestinian. On **Nov 7**, his followers staged a protest by marching from the site of his shooting to the Temple Mount area.
- On **November 17**, heavy rioting broke out in East Jerusalem after Yusuf Hassan al-Ramouni - **an Arab bus driver was found dead by hanging in an Egged bus**. Police claimed it was suicide while the family argued it was a lynching by Jews.
- **Nov 18. Four Jewish worshippers and one Druze policeman murdered** in a synagogue in Jerusalem.

UPDATED SITUATION:

1. Yesterday – December 17 – at 1700 EST – a trio of MKs entered the Temple Mount in a public show of force, with an armed escort of 25 policemen. Said **Naftali Bennet (HaBayit HaYehudi) – minister of Jerusalem and Diaspora Affairs**: *'Israel should exert a greater degree of control over the Temple Mount area.'* **Former Deputy Defense Minister Danny Danon (Likud)** triumphantly stated: *'We will change the reality here. The Knesset must affirm Israel sovereignty over the Temple Mount! As we said in '67: The Temple Mount is in our hands!'* **Tzipi Hotovely (Likud)** said: *'There is no Zionism without Zion; no Jerusalem without the Temple Mount. The State of Israel itself is a powder keg in the Middle East and we don't pack our bags and leave. What are you afraid of?'*
2. **Palestinian Authority Chairman Mahmoud Abbas** immediately released a statement in which he said *'we will not allow our holy places to be contaminated. This is an act of war.'* He further encouraged *'all Muslims to prevent Jews from entering the Temple Mount with any means possible.'*
3. By 1900 EST there were riots all over Jerusalem. Jerusalem Police spokesman Micky Rosenfeld said **'rioting began in east Jerusalem neighborhoods of Abu Tor and Shuafat. Rocks, molotov cocktails and firecrackers have been thrown at police.'** In Silwan there was hand-to-hand violence as Arab rioters tried to enter the small Jewish settlement called Beit Ovadia that is surrounded by thousands of Arab residents on all sides. *'They're all thieves'* said Muhammed Shiyoukhi, who lives nearby. *'First they move into our neighborhoods. Now they want our holy site.'*
4. In response, **Yehuda Glick's group HaLiba** marched through the Old City to the Temple Mount. Explained one marcher: *'the status quo must change. The Arab who tried to kill Yehuda Glick wanted to show that the Temple Mount doesn't belong to us. We want to show that it does belong to the Jews. It does not belong to Arabs and terrorists.'* A second protestor compared the status quo to *'Nazi Nuremberg laws. It's totally corrupt and totally wrong. We have every right to be here. The status quo is not holy. The Temple Mount is holy! The time has come for Jews to be able to pray at the Temple Mount and to stop all discrimination there.'*
5. By 2100 EST rioting had spread to the At-tur, Ras al-Amud, and Abu Dis neighborhoods, where police responded with **stun grenades and tear gas**. By this morning, there were Jewish and Arab riots in all parts of the city. Broken windows and tire fires were reported in both East and West Jerusalem. So far, only three fatalities have been reported, but police claim that the city is *'a tinderbox waiting to explode.'*

REACTIONS:

- At 0900 EST the **Arab League** convened an emergency virtual meeting of the 22 member nations, releasing a statement in which it said that *'Israel has reached a red line at the Temple Mount.'* Citing a statement by Prime Minister Netanyahu that he *'cannot forbid members of Knesset from visiting the site,'* the League demanded that *'the time has come for Israel to relinquish control of security at the Temple Mount since it clearly cannot control its own people.'* Arab League deputy chief Ahmed Ben Hilli called on Arabs and the international community to *'put a stop to Israeli occupation of Islam's holy site.'*
- **Hamas** released a statement shortly thereafter exclaiming: *'The Jews have touched the Temple Mount. This will lead to results with untold consequences.'*
- **King Abdullah II of Jordan** – whose country administers the Temple Mount – warned that the situation could put the Israel-Jordan peace treaty in jeopardy. He vowed to *'confront Israel over the Temple Mount.'*
- **The United States** urged all sides to *'exercise restraint in the Holy City'* and said it was working with Israelis, Palestinians and Jordanians to try to restore calm. Secretary of State John Kerry has flown to the region and will convene meetings between all parties. Said President Obama: *'When I wanted to visit the Temple Mount last February there was intense pressure from the Arab world that I not go near the site or else I would provoke conflict. I listened to them. Perhaps Israel should too.'*
- Within the Members of Knesset, there is much anger, but no consensus. While members of HaBayit HaYehudi, Likud and Yisrael Beitenu increasingly call for Israel to take control of the entire Temple Mount, other factions disagree. **Labor leader Yitzchak Herzog** maintains that *'we do not need to be able to pray at the Temple Mount. Jerusalem should be a model of an open, diverse, interfaith city. We control the Western Wall, they control the Mount.'* **Meretz leader Zahava Gal-On** agreed: *'The Temple Mount is a powder keg waiting to explode. No one doubts that Jews have the right to ascend the Temple Mount, but there is a difference between having a right and exercising it. We do not want to blow up relations between Israel and the Muslim world, and torpedo diplomatic negotiations.'* Said **Justice Minister Tzipi Livni (Hatnua)**: *'The eyes of the entire world are on Jerusalem. We do not want the conflict to move from a national one to a religious one.'*

OPTIONS:

The long-term issue of authority over the Temple Mount has finally been brought to a head. The Israeli government is deeply divided over what action should be taken regarding the Temple Mount, but regional and international pressure will not make it possible to avoid the issue any longer. Staring an international religious conflict in the face, Israel faces one of the most difficult situations in its history; its enemies are fully capable of manipulating the situation for tremendous gains, and its allies may be powerless to stand in the way. **Israel is in a position of weakness.** It faces three main options:

OPTION 1: STAND FIRM: Israel has faced international pressure before. It can face the growing storm head-on by rewriting the law so as to end the discriminatory practices and allow Jews to pray at their holiest site. Some argue that Israel should just take full control of the Temple Mount, extending Israeli authority to all of East Jerusalem in practice and not just in name, as is currently the situation. This would satisfy the popular sentiment within the growing nationalist and religious movements in the country exemplified by HaBayit HaYehudi, parts of Likud, Yisrael Beitenu, and perhaps some of the religious parties.

Variables:

- The **international fallout** would be tremendous. No country – not even the United States – would defend Israel. Many in the diplomatic community would probably call for Israel to abandon even the status quo and cede all authority over the area to any number of other parties. The net result might be worse than it was when all this began.
- Voices from the **Israeli left** would be loud in opposition. With an election on the way, the political discourse in the country could become extremely contentious at a time when unity is needed to face an external threat. The situation could even turn the upcoming elections into a one-issue vote. For some parties, that could save their election. For some, it could ruin it.
- Perhaps most importantly, the **internal unrest** would increase. With riots already in full swing in Jerusalem, and more threatened in Hamas-ruled Gaza and the PA-ruled West Bank, there is significant fear that the country could be on the verge of a **third intifada**. Under this option, the army maintains that parts of the reserves would need to be called up, and **martial law** and mandatory curfews would need to be imposed on key areas such as East Jerusalem, Chevron, and Bethlehem (during Christmas!) further deepening international disapproval.

OPTION 2: DEFUSE THE SITUATION: Israel could immediately **cede authority** over the Temple Mount to Jordan or to a multi-national group. Just last month PM Netanyahu asked King Abdullah to take a larger role in administering the site, asking him now to take over permanent control and removing Israel from the situation would defuse the situation.

Variables:

- As volatile an issue as the Temple Mount is in the wider region, it is even more volatile in Israel itself. Surrendering control of the holiest site in Judaism could well start a **civil war**.
- On an internal political level, PM Netanyahu would lose all credibility as a right-wing politician, and would surely **lose the upcoming election**, and perhaps even the leadership of the Likud party.
- While ceding authority over the Temple Mount is exactly what the various Arab groups want, providing them with that victory without getting anything in return would be a significant defeat that may not ultimately further the peace process. It would create **a new status quo** in Jerusalem without negotiations and without getting anything in return, establishing a precedent that would not be productive for Israel in the long run.

OPTION 3: DIPLOMATIC COMPROMISE: Israel could attempt to pacify the international clamor by quickly **passing several laws** that would allay Muslim fears. For example, they could ban MKs from making public visits to the Temple Mount. They could ban Jews from visiting the Temple Mount, even while still maintaining security over the area. In this way, they could show the Arab world that they are acting in good faith while not losing everything in the process. However, this compromise has no guarantee of succeeding, and which politician wants to be the one to tell the people of the Jewish State that they cannot visit the holiest Jewish site?

Variables:

- Many of the issues for option 2 could still persist in option 3. Then again, maybe they wouldn't. Essentially, option 3 is a gamble; it might mollify the Arab world, but it might not. However, the difference would be that Israel would be far more likely to **muster American and European support** for option 3, and that could eventually force the Arab world to fall in line with the plan.
- The most significant obstacle would be within Israel. The right wing parties are already upset about the status quo; several steps backwards would drive their rhetoric up a level, especially in an election cycle...unless they could be convinced that this is the only way to maintain **a modicum of control** over the Temple Mount so that they could return to fight another day.
- This option might still require a strong **army presence** in the streets for a few days or even weeks and may still not prevent an uprising.

NEXT STEPS:

Israel is not in a strong position. Jerusalem is burning and the international world is descending on the Knesset. Something must be done quickly. The various political parties must cobble together enough of a coalition to pass a measure that will address all the issues. President Reuven Rivlin has suggested that a **unity government** might be in order; political pundits have suggested that some **political opportunists** may take advantage of the situation to cause the government to fall to a motion of non-confidence. Parties such as Likud could split over