

Rabbis killed at synagogue: Religious tinge of Jerusalem crisis deepens

by [Christa Case Bryant](#)

November 19, 2014

([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) Two Palestinian assailants entered a synagogue in the quiet West Jerusalem neighborhood of Har Nof Tuesday morning and killed at least four worshipers in the single deadliest attack on Jews since tensions in this city began escalating this summer.

The dead were all rabbis.

Such an attack poses a challenge not only to Israeli security forces, but also to leaders on both sides as political tensions take on an increasingly religious tinge.

Israeli officials blamed Palestinian incitement for fueling the passions with incendiary and even anti-Semitic rhetoric. Palestinian leaders, for their part, underscored the desperation of Arab Jerusalemites and frustration over Israeli policies— particularly on the Al Aqsa compound, known to Jews as the Temple Mount.

In recent weeks, a Palestinian pop song and cartoons about running over Israelis, and calls from Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas to defend Al Aqsa by any means necessary, have left Israelis officials exasperated with Abbas, who is also known as Abu Mazen.

“This is the direct result of the incitement being led by Hamas and Abu Mazen, incitement which the international community is irresponsibly ignoring,” Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Tuesday, vowing to respond with a “heavy hand.”

Abbas quickly condemned the attack: “The Palestinian presidency has always condemned the killing of civilians on both sides, and condemns today the killing of worshipers in a house of worship in West Jerusalem.”

But he also criticized Israeli “invasions” and “provocations” at the compound containing Al Aqsa, the third-holiest site in Islam. Amid the worst tensions in nearly a decade, Israel has repeatedly closed the compound, which is also the holiest site in

Judaism, to Muslim men under the age of 40 or 50, even as it has allowed right-wing politicians and activists to visit. Israeli security officials say restrictions on access to the site are to prevent outbreaks of violence. Among the Israeli officials that have been allowed to visit the site are figures known to advocate the rebuilding of the biblical temple, which would require the demolition of the iconic Dome of the Rock shrine and possibly the Al Aqsa mosque as well.

The compound has become an epicenter of frustrations felt by Jerusalem's more than 300,000 Arab residents, whose quality of life has lagged far behind that of Jews since Israel conquered and annexed the eastern part of the city. Water and schools are in short supply, roads and sewage systems are underdeveloped or poorly maintained, and about three-quarters of residents live under the poverty line. Security crackdowns often result in the detention of minors under circumstances condemned by human rights groups.

Many Palestinians say that these aggravated social conditions, not leaders' rhetoric, are the source of hatred and hopelessness that has precipitated a string of recent attacks, including stabbings and cars ramming into crowds of Israeli pedestrians.

"I can say with full confidence, what is happening in Jerusalem today and the last week's serious episodes has nothing to do with Fatah, Ramallah, or Hamas in Gaza, or any outside injection or component or influence," says Mahdi Abdul-Hadi, a veteran academic who has lived in Jerusalem most of his life. "It's purely internal Jerusalemite society—angry, frustrated, and reflecting their current misery on Israelis."

In the past week an Israeli soldier and a settler were killed in two separate stabbing incidents, an ultra-Orthodox man was moderately wounded in a screwdriver stabbing near Jerusalem's Old City, and Sunday night a Palestinian bus driver was found hanged in his bus. Israeli police said it was a suicide, but a Palestinian pathologist at the autopsy disputed their conclusion, fueling rumors of a lynching.

Abbas 'calls for action'

Yossi Kuperwasser, the director general of Israel's Strategic Affairs Ministry, is one of the foremost Israeli voices condemning what he calls Palestinian incitement. His ministry produces quarterly reports on the issue, looking at Palestinian textbooks, school Facebook pages, and official media, as well as other sources.

In recent weeks, he says, Abbas has advanced his formerly passive rhetoric denigrating Jews and the state of Israel to more active encouragement.

“We have to do something about it,” he says. “This is something new because for the first time he calls for action.”

In late October, Abbas made a statement calling for the defense of Al Aqsa by any means necessary, which Palestinian TV aired 19 times in three days.

Several weeks ago, Abbas praised Moataz Hijazi, who tried to assassinate Temple Mount activist Yehuda Glick after a conference advocating separate times for Jewish worship on the Muslim-administered compound. Such worship is currently banned.

Abbas praised Hijazi, who was killed by security forces the next day, as one who had “ascended to heaven as a martyr in the course of defending the rights of our nation, its honor and holy sites.”

Palestinian anger

While Israelis accuse Abbas and other prominent officials and advisers of inciting Palestinians to violent actions, others say they are simply reflecting widespread frustration that is driven in large part by Israeli policies and rhetoric.

Palestinians are increasingly decrying what they call the “Judaization” of East Jerusalem, including infrastructure projects, the creation of national parks, archaeological digs, the influx of at least 200,000 Israeli Jews, and the perceived attempts to change the status quo at Al Aqsa compound as attempts to drive Palestinians from the contested city. As tensions mounted over the past four months, Israel has responded with massive increases in the police force, the use of surveillance drones, and widespread arrests, further angering Palestinians.

In recent months, Palestinians have generated numerous cartoons and a pop song that advocate running over Israelis.

A Palestinian girl was fatally hit by an Israeli settler last month. Since then there have been at least three major cases of Palestinians driving into pedestrians, killing several of them. An illustrated version of the song refers to the intifada of “da’es,” a play on words in which the Arabic word for running over people is almost identical to the acronym for the Islamic State, Da’esh. It shows a speedometer with a bullet as

the arrow at maximum speed.

Meanwhile some see the militant organization Hamas as trying to foment a popular uprising in the West Bank after this past summer's Gaza war failed to bring the group greater leverage. Hamas spokesman Sami Abu Zuhri praised Tuesday's synagogue attack as "heroic," and, according to a translation from *The Times of Israel*, called for similar attacks to "stop the occupation's aggression against Islamic holy places."