

Why world leaders' bid to calm violence in Israel may not be enough

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October 21, 2015

*(The Christian Science Monitor)* After a month of escalating violence that Israeli and Palestinian authorities have been unable to contain, outside diplomats are trying to quiet tensions that all sides worry could spiral out of control.

With conflicts raging elsewhere in the Middle East—including next door in Syria—and with the self-proclaimed Islamic State now attempting to enter the Israeli-Palestinian fray by posting videos encouraging attacks on Israeli Jews, world leaders are try to halt the ratcheting up of tit-for-tat violence.

Yet as welcome as outside efforts may be in many quarters, any effective and lasting remedies to the uptick in violence will have to come from within, many regional analysts say.

“We now have these new [diplomatic] attempts from Washington, the UN, and possibly the European Union to calm things down, but I’m not sure anyone is going to be able to do the heavy lifting required to change the atmosphere,” said Nimrod Novik, a foreign policy adviser to former Israeli prime minister Shimon Peres.

Required first and foremost are responses from both Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas, but achieving that “is going to be much more difficult than it might have been a couple of months ago,” said Novik, who is also an Israeli fellow with the Israel Policy Forum, a New York-based group that supports a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

A general calm that reigned in Israel and the occupied West Bank despite deepening conflicts in the Middle East was broken last month as rumors spread that Israel was about to alter the status of Jerusalem’s most sensitive religious site: the hilltop revered by Jews as the Temple Mount and also revered by Muslims because it houses the al-Aqsa Mosque.

The mosque is the third holiest site in Islam and also a fixture of Palestinian national pride.

Israel has controlled the site since the 1967 Arab-Israeli war under an agreement with Jordan that allows Jews to visit the site but not to pray there. A recent surge in Jewish visits to the site, plus rising instances of Jews openly praying there without being reprimanded, prompted the rumors about a coming revision to the site's status.

Netanyahu denied the rumors—but also did nothing to quiet a growing clamor from some Israeli political factions, including within his cabinet, for greater Jewish access to the site.

Since then, at least 45 Palestinians have been killed, most shot dead by Israeli forces, in response to a surge of Palestinian attacks—mostly stabbings—that have left ten Israelis dead. Sites venerated by each side have been attacked and burned, and over the weekend the violence took a new turn when an Israeli mob attacked an Eritrean immigrant mistaken as a Palestinian attacker. The Eritrean later died.

On Tuesday, Ban Ki-moon, United Nations secretary-general, arrived in Israel and waded into the rising sea of tensions, saying he understands the Palestinians' frustrations but that he also supports Israelis' right to live in security and free of fears of random attacks on the street.

On Monday, John Kerry, U.S. secretary of state called for "clarity" on the hilltop compound's status and rules as a first order of business.

Later this week, Kerry is expected to sit down with Netanyahu in Europe, before traveling to Jordan and possibly Ramallah in the West Bank, possibly this weekend.

But Kerry, who is no stranger to jumping into frustrating contexts in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, may be entering a situation that is even grimmer than when he launched a personal bid to resolve the conflict in 2013.

Indeed, Novik of the Israel Policy Forum underscores a "demographic and electoral change in Israel" in recent years that has resulted in a greater willingness to confront and even alter old restraints like the hilltop status quo.

At the same time, he cites the rise of a "no hope generation" among Palestinians that is increasingly estranged from any form of Palestinian leadership—and

therefore less likely to heed any leader's calls for calm or restraint.

It is that widening gulf between Israelis and Palestinians that Kerry will confront as he tries to tamp down tensions.