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‘Is this the big one?’: The next intifada could be fuelled over TikTok

By Thomas L. Friedman
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New York: Let’s see, what happens when TikTok meets Palestinian grievances about right-wing Israeli land grabs in Arab neighbourhoods in Jerusalem? And then you add the holiest Muslim night of prayer in Jerusalem into the mix? Then toss in the most emotional Israeli holiday in Jerusalem? And a power play by Hamas to assume leadership of the Palestinian cause? And, finally, a political vacuum in which the Palestinian Authority is incapable of holding new elections and Israel is so divided it can’t stop having elections?

What happens is the explosion of violence around Jerusalem on Monday that quickly spread to the Gaza front, and has people asking: Is this the big one? Is this the start of the next Palestinian uprising?



Smoke rises after an Israeli air strike in Gaza on Tuesday.

The Israeli government, the surrounding Arab nations and the Palestinian Authority all desperately want the answer to be “no” – Israel because it would find little support from a left-leaning White House, let alone the rest of the world, for a big crackdown on Palestinians; the Arab governments because most of them want to do business with Israeli tech-makers, not get mired defending Palestinian rock-throwers; and the

Palestinian leadership because it would expose just how little it controls the Palestinian street anymore.

But unlike the intifadas that began in 1987 and 2000, when Israel had someone to call to try to turn it off, there is no Palestinian on the other end of the phone – or, if there is, he’s a 15-year-old on his smartphone, swiping inspiration from TikTok, the video app often used by young Palestinians to challenge and encourage one another to confront Israelis.

Jack Khoury, an expert on the Arab dynamics of this conflict, put it well in his analysis in Haaretz, writing that the engine of the Palestinian side of the protest “is the popular movement,” which is made up “mostly of the younger generation, which is not waiting for its political leadership – not the Palestinian Authority, nor Arab leaders in Israel or in the Gaza Strip. Over the past few days it has been reported that Hamas is trying to stoke the protest, but the Hamas leadership has no control over the events at all ... and so as the Israeli government sees it, there is no one address or person to turn to in order to hold a political discussion on the situation.”

But what sparked it all? The tinder was a collision of “sacred times” and “sacred territories,” Hebrew University religious philosopher Moshe Halbertal says, and then different actors threw matches to start a raging fire.



An Israeli police water cannon is deployed near the Damascus Gate to the Old City of Jerusalem.

Specifically, this year’s Jerusalem Day – a national holiday commemorating the establishment of Israel’s control over East Jerusalem, the Old City and the Temple

Mount in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, thereby unifying East and West Jerusalem – was celebrated with prayer services at the Western Wall beginning Sunday night.

This Israeli sacred date roughly coincided with Muslims' Laylat al-Qadr, or Night of Power, which fell this year on Saturday. It is considered not only the most sacred night of Ramadan but of the whole Islamic calendar. It commemorates the night when the first verses of the Quran were revealed to the Prophet Muhammad by the Angel Gabriel and is marked by thousands of Muslims gathering at Al-Aqsa Mosque, near the Western Wall on the Temple Mount.

These overlapping sacred dates led to inevitable clashes in the alleyways of East Jerusalem and culminated Monday with the Israeli police raiding Al-Aqsa Mosque. Hundreds of Palestinians were wounded while more than 20 Israeli police officers suffered injuries.

That situation was exacerbated by a long-simmering fight over what Halbertal called "sacred territory." In brief, right-wing Israeli Jews had gotten a court order to evict six Palestinian families who are living in homes on land that was owned by Jews in East Jerusalem before the city was divided in the 1948 war. Indeed, Israel's Supreme Court delayed the decision on eviction because of the violence.

Palestinians argue that it is unfair that Jews can reclaim land or homes they owned in East Jerusalem before 1948 but Palestinians have no legal means to reclaim land they owned in West Jerusalem or anywhere else in Israel before 1948.

Clashes over these sacred dates and sacred spaces would be incendiary enough, but they were also fuelled by scenes on TikTok. In April, some Palestinian youths uploaded a short video of themselves assaulting an Orthodox Jew on public transportation. In response, a far-right Jewish group named Lehava led a march through Jerusalem to the Damascus Gate of the Old City, chanting "Arabs, get out".

The whole mess makes a Gordian knot look simple to untangle. But what is it all telling us?

The most obvious and important point is that a dangerously naive consensus has emerged in Israel in recent years suggesting that Israel basically has the Palestinian conflict suppressed and those Palestinians living in the West Bank and East Jerusalem are basically resigned to living under permanent Israeli control. This consensus was so powerful that in all four of Israel's recent elections, the question of peace with the Palestinians – how to achieve it and what happens if it is ignored – was not on the agenda.

The Abraham Accords engineered by the Trump administration, normalising relations between Israel and the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco – while valuable in helping to stabilise the region – also reinforced the notion that the Palestinian cause is basically yesterday's news. Today's headlines prove the fallacy of that thinking.

By the way, the Biden administration has no interest right now in being forced to react to those headlines. It does not believe the conditions are right for any real progress on the Israeli-Palestinian issue, and the last thing it wants – when its primary focus in the region is trying to revive the nuclear deal with Iran, which is already causing huge tensions with Israel – is to get distracted by having to mediate a cease-fire between Israelis and Palestinians or blunt Iranian attempts to inflame the situation in Jerusalem.

But where do we go from here?

In part that depends on Bibi Netanyahu. Of all the crazy coincidences of this moment, maybe the craziest is that it comes in what could be Bibi's final days as Israel's Prime Minister – after more than 12 years in office. Netanyahu has an interest in seeing his rivals fail to form a new coalition to unseat him. He would like Israel to go to a fifth election – giving him a chance to hang on and maybe avoid jail if he is convicted in his current corruption trial. One way Bibi could do that is by inflaming the situation so much that his right-wing rivals have to abandon trying to topple him and declare instead that this is no time for a change in leadership.

Much also depends on what Hamas chooses to do. Hamas has failed to produce either significant economic growth in the Gaza Strip that it rules or political progress with Israel. And the fact that the Palestinian Authority just postponed planned elections, which Hamas probably would have dominated, means it is stuck.

What does Hamas tend to do when it is stuck? Fire rockets at Israel. But on Monday it did something really unusual. It fired rockets at Jerusalem to try to assume leadership of the brewing uprising there. Israel retaliated by bombing Gaza and reportedly killing at least 35 Palestinians.

Bottom line: This could all calm down in four days as Hamas, Israel, Egypt, Jordan and the Palestinian Authority all find it in their interests to impose their will on the street. Or not. And if it turns into another Intifada, with the street imposing its will on their leaderships, this earthquake will shake Israel, Gaza, the West Bank, Jordan, Egypt and the Abraham Accords.

If that happens, I suggest you download TikTok to follow it all in real time.

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