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'The conflict can't be managed in the long term'

Hannes Alpen in East Jerusalem on the current escalation of violence in Israel and Palestine — and what needs to happen for it to stop

Over a thousand rockets have been fired into Israel from the Gaza Strip in the past few days. The Israeli army responded with massive air strikes. This was preceded by weeks of protests in East Jerusalem. Meanwhile, demonstrations are also taking place in many Israeli cities with Palestinian populations. Why has the Israeli-Palestinian conflict now escalated again?

It's true that the news coverage is now focusing on the rockets from Gaza and the bombing of the Gaza Strip. This is war, and the suffering and horror are being reported on extensively. With its rockets on Jerusalem, Hamas took control of the events there and provoked a war. As a result, what fades into the background are the aforementioned protests in East Jerusalem, which were sparked, among other things, by the planned forced eviction of Palestinian families from their homes and the police violence on Haram al-Sharif / the Temple Mount. Moreover, we also now have a new dimension: horrific scenes of ethnically motivated violence between Jewish and Palestinian Israeli citizens in Israeli cities.

What needs to be done to stop the current escalation of violence?

As I said, we are now dealing with several conflicts and forms of violence. The motives for the violence are sometimes different influencing the perpetrators of the violence isn't always possible. In the case of Gaza, Egypt, Qatar, and the UN are trying to mediate between Hamas and Israel, so far without success. But what may seem surprising is that the war between Hamas and Islamic Jihad on the one hand and the Israeli army on the other is more likely to come to a near end because negotiations are taking place between parties who have control over the use of force.

This will be much more difficult with the protests in East Jerusalem and the violence in Israel itself. There, frustration about structural discrimination has built up in the Palestinian community over a long period of time. These were not and are not protests that were controlled "from above". In addition, the overall situation is no longer about protests in solidarity with what happened in East Jerusalem and the attempt by police forces to contain them. On the Jewish-Israeli side, there are also national-religious extremists who have cultivated their racist hatred of "Arabs" for many years. Videos of the atrocities committed by the other side are spread via messenger services and re-ignite the violence. There have been reports of lynch mobs roaming the streets.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict had been pushed into the background by the media for a number of years. Was it also neglected politically for too long?

The Palestinian territories have been under Israeli occupation for 54 years and parts of them, as in the case of East Jerusalem, have been annexed by Israel. The densely populated Gaza Strip has been subject to a strict blockade by Israel and Egypt since Hamas took control over it in 2007. Israel recently deceived itself and the world into believing that the conflict with the Palestinians could be managed in the long term without addressing it at its core. In particular, the establishment of diplomatic relations between Israel and certain Arab states, such as the United Arab Emirates last year, contributed to this illusion.

This diplomatic breakthrough, known as the "Abraham Accords", was preceded by an unprecedented escalation in the Israel-Palestine conflict. In spring 2020, the Israeli ruling coalition agreed in principle to annex large parts of the West Bank, which would forever deny the Palestinians their right to self-determination and the prospect of a Palestinian state worthy of the name.

The extent to which the so-called two-state solution is still realistic is repeatedly called into question by experts. But what are the alternatives? The current violence doesn't give reason to believe the option of peaceful coexistence in one state, for instance, can really work.

One state with equal rights and equal opportunities is a utopia above all because there is only a small minority in Israel who can imagine one single state between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean in which all citizens, including all Palestinians, would be granted equal rights. Such an arrangement would demographically endanger the Jewish character of Israel. There are also still many Palestinians who

associate their right to self-determination with their own statehood. Therefore, it is all the more counter-intuitive that the Israeli government continues to cement the one-state reality.

Since the peace process in the 1990s, the percentage of settlers in the West Bank has increased several times over, to about 650,000 today. The settlements stretch like a network through the entire West Bank and East Jerusalem, depriving the Palestinians of freedom of movement and development opportunities. Because the Israeli government is steadily consolidating its claim to the entire country and making no indication of either granting the Palestinians equal rights or ending the occupation, more and more human rights organisations such as the Israeli organization B'tselem and Human Rights Watch are speaking about a system of apartheid.

What about the Palestinian Authority? It has been rather quiet during the present conflict.

The Palestinian Authority has lost an immense amount of credibility and legitimacy among the Palestinian population. This is mainly due to the fact that the Authority, which was created as a consequence of the Oslo Accords in the early 1990s and was to form the nucleus of a future Palestinian state, has never progressed beyond a very limited degree of autonomy. The Palestinian Authority administers only a small part of the West Bank and must consult with, or ask permission from, the Israeli authorities on almost all issues. This was most recently also the case with the elections for the parliament of the Authority originally scheduled for May 22nd.

Because Israel, in violation of the Oslo Accords, denied the Palestinians the right to vote in elections in East Jerusalem, according to the official justification, the Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas cancelled the elections without further ado. It is an open secret that key officials close to the president were not interested in the elections in the first place because they had to expect to lose power. When Palestinians in Ramallah organised demonstrations of solidarity with the protests in East Jerusalem, these were broken up by Palestinian security forces.

Hardly any Palestinian still believes that the Palestinian Authority will act in their interests and perhaps one day bring an end to the occupation. In the meantime, Hamas, which in recent years had actually lost a great deal of support in Palestinian society – with election polls putting it at only 8.2 per cent – is now presenting itself as the force that does not stand idly by and that takes on Israel. Hamas may well become more popular in Palestinian society, at least in the short term.

What can Europe and what can the US do?

Europe and the United States have no influence over the protests and the hateful violence between Jewish Israelis and Palestinians. Nor do they have much influence on the conflict between Israel and the Islamist groups, Hamas and Islamic Jihad, because they classify the latter as terrorist groups and refrain from contact with them. What Europe and the US could still do, however, would be to use the situation to analyse the fundamental principles underlying their own actions in the Middle East conflict. A return to the formula of the two-state solution without underpinning it with a policy that holds all parties accountable would only perpetuate the conflict.

One possibility would be to prioritise a rights-based approach. This means that the international community would demand respect for human rights for all people between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean, immediately and forcefully. Which "technical" implementation the Israelis and Palestinians agree upon, whether it be a binational state, two-state solution, confederation or the like, should of course be decided by themselves. Under no circumstances, however, should again a "solution" come first, and the protection of human rights be postponed forever until such a solution might be feasable some time in the distant future.

This interview was conducted by Nikolaos Gavalakis.



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