**The lesson of Aqaba**

[**Dr James J Zogby**](https://www.nation.com.pk/columnist/dr-james-j-zogby)

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If the Aqaba Summit accomplished anything, it demonstrated the inadequacy of US policy toward Israel/Palestine. The Summit, instigated by the US and hosted by Jordan, brought together leaders from Israel, the Palestinian Authority, Jordan, Egypt, and the US, with the goal of reducing Israeli/Palestinian tensions in advance of and during Ramadan and Passover. By failing to address underlying systemic problems, the Summit was futile.

The US proposed, and the parties apparently accepted, a number of worn-out half-measures intended to temporarily reduce tensions. Israel agreed to: a short-term freeze on “discussing” new settlements or demolishing Palestinian homes; a reduction in raids into Palestinian communities; respecting the “status quo” in Jerusalem; and releasing more of the tax monies they collect for the Palestinians (but have been illegally withholding).

The PA agreed to: refrain temporarily from taking their case to the United Nations; improving security cooperation with Israel; and using the additional tax revenues to hire and train (with US support) new security forces to better control the armed resistance groups springing up in the territories. Developments unfolding while the Summit’s participants were meeting clearly demonstrated that these agreements were both inadequate and divorced from reality.

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Palestinians were still reeling from the recent Israeli operation in Nablus that turned into a massacre—killing 11 and injuring over 100 Palestinians. While the Summit was concluding, Palestinian gunmen killed two Israeli settlers who were driving through their village, Hawara. Within a few hours, hundreds of extremist Israeli settlers descended on Hawara, attacking and injuring hundreds of Palestinian residents and torching hundreds of homes and cars. With the installation of the new Netanyahu-led government, undercover raids and acts of settler violence are occurring with greater frequency and impunity. While Israel claims that massive Israeli raids in the heart of heavily populated Palestinian communities are to arrest known terrorists, many of the 75 Palestinians killed and hundreds wounded this year have been innocents—caught in the gunfire or armed Palestinians fighting off the Israeli invaders.

The two Israeli cabinet ministers in charge of the territories are themselves extremists who have often incited other settlers to violence. After the incidents in Hawara, one minister joined lawmakers in his party calling on the village to be “wiped out.” After the Aqaba Summit more deadly raids, shootings, and settler assaults continued. After one Israeli raid killed 6 more Palestinians in Jenin, PA security forces attacked one victim’s funeral procession, objecting to the display of Hamas flags, and reinforcing the Palestinian perception of the PA as “an arm of the occupation.”

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When news of the Aqaba “agreements” became known in Israel, Prime Minister Netanyahu quickly announced, “There is no settlement freeze.” Another minister declared his intention to continue demolitions of Palestinian homes in Jerusalem during Ramadan. One Israeli lawmaker wryly noted, “What happened in Aqaba, stays in Aqaba.” The bottom line is that while the US, Jordan, and Egypt may want calm, the situation in Israel and Palestine is spinning out of control.

The current Israeli government is made up of ideologically driven extremists inclined toward violence and unwilling to recognize Palestinian rights. After decades of US coddling of Israeli governments, the Israelis in power today act with a sense of impunity. They are out of control.

The PA, weakened by their inability to deliver on the “promise of peace” and frequent humiliation by the US and Israel, have lost the respect of angry constituents who now strike back when struck. They too are out of control.

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For the US to assume that the Aqaba proposals would create calm was foolish. Instead of bandaging a festering wound, the US should have used a scalpel on the root problems: the Israelis’ sense of entitlement and impunity and Palestinians’ anger at the ongoing abuse. Only when the US establishes firm red lines for Israel and concrete negative consequences for continued bad behavior will we stop the downward spiral of violence, foster a new direction in Israel’s internal debate, and give the Palestinians hope. Change won’t come overnight. Bad policy has been digging this hole for decades; getting out of this mess will take courage, resolve, and vision.

Until then, it’s safe to assume that we will be witnessing very difficult days ahead.