

How to get Erdoğan off the Temple Mount

Moves to check Turkey's growing influence in and around the Temple Mount must take into account the difficulty of proving that Turkish-funded "civil" nonprofits encourage and foster terrorist activity.

Anyone seeking to address the Turkish presence in Jerusalem must begin with the Temple Mount, which is the payload that Turkish leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his representatives in various Turkish nonprofit groups are trying to drop on Jerusalem. Erdoğan's man on the Mount and in east Jerusalem is Sheikh Ekrima Sa'id Sabri, a former mufti of Jerusalem. Sabri identifies both with Turkey and with the outlawed Northern Branch of the Islamic Movement and its leader Sheikh Raed Salah. The Turks and the Northern Branch are Jordan's biggest rivals for Muslim hegemony in Jerusalem and over its holy sites. In light of this, Israel has and will continue to find that it and Jordan have a common interest in keeping Turkey from acquiring more and more influence in the city.

Tens of millions of dollars have been funneled from Turkey to mosques, religious organizations, and dozens of projects in and around the Old City and the Temple Mount in recent years. Turkey supplied the funds to refurbish the Muslim cemetery on the eastern slope of the Temple Mount, to replace the crescent at the top of the Dome of the Rock, to rebuild a storehouse of Ottoman documents on the Mount, to fund excavations to save the Street of the Chain, and dozens of other religious and community projects in the east of the city.

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The problem with these seemingly innocent projects is that there is generally no legal way to prove that they comprise a civil base for violence, incitement, and terrorist activity. Only when there is direct evidence that the civil activity serves violent or terrorist purposes can defense and security authorities – the Israel Police and the Shin Bet security agency – take action. Evidence of links like that has been found when it comes to Hamas, Shabab Al-Aqsa, or the Northern Branch of the Islamic movement. In those cases, courts ruled that civil infrastructure was feeding terrorist activity and ruled to curtail it for that reason.

This is why a new plan from Foreign Minister Israel Katz should be seen more like a declaration of intent and less as an operational plan. For the plan to take effect, defense and security officials who have been dealing with the issue for several years already must supply the top political echelon with evidence. Anyone who wants, for example, to limit the activity of TIKA, a well-endowed Turkish government agency, in Jerusalem will have to first prove that its activity goes beyond the bounds of civil/community service and slides into violence and incitement. Thus far, no evidence of that has been found, although attempts have been made to do so.

The steps the Foreign Ministry wants to take against the worldwide Muslim Brotherhood organization could also turn out to be complicated. It's doubtful whether Israel can point to direct activity by the Muslim Brotherhood. On the other hand, it is definitely possible to identify violent activity by groups or individuals with ideological links to the Brotherhood or its international headquarters in London. Steps have been taken against the Muslim Brotherhood in the past, and we can assume that more will be done in the future. Only recently, two female rioters were barred from the Temple Mount for a period of six months.

It looks like the best way to fight Erdoğan, who is hostile to Israel and trying to buy influence in Jerusalem, is to continue to expose Turkey's ties to Hamas. For years, Turkey has served as a haven for Hamas terrorists and commanders. For years, terrorist attacks or attempted terrorist attacks on both sides of the Green Line have been initiated and directed from Turkish territory. Erdoğan has repeatedly made it clear that as far as he is concerned, Hamas is not a terrorist organization, but the facts on the ground prove differently. Dozens of Hamas cells handled from Turkey have been exposed over the past few years, and the Shin Bet recently reported, "Turkey contributes to the military empowerment of Hamas, through methods that include the SADAT company, which was founded on the orders of Adnan Basha, a close adviser to government officials in Turkey."

This is where Israel has to operate, both operationally and in terms of public diplomacy and traditional diplomacy. The Turkish nonprofits active in Jerusalem are tough to check unless legislative changes can be made that alter the definition of "hostile" activity in Jerusalem, the capital of Israel.

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