

Pyro-Terrorism Fueled by Social Media

Written by Anouk

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Daniel S. Mariaschin

Daniel S. Mariaschin Daniel S Mariaschin is the International Executive Vice President of B'nai B'rith

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The outbreak of fires in Israel is already being termed "pyro-terrorism," as at least 24 persons have been arrested over the past several days in connection to the blazes. With hundreds of homes destroyed (by some estimates, half a billion shekels in damage in Haifa alone) and tens of thousands displaced, the total acreage burned now exceeds that which was destroyed in the Mt. Carmel fires six years ago.

Aiding and abetting those who may have started these fires have been messages carried by social media, praising the outbreak: according to Ynet News, one Tweet said "All of Israel's neighbors must aid it — I suggest they send planes filled with gasoline and rain it down on the burning areas. I want to inhale the smell of barbecue from the Zionists."

According to Haaretz, the hashtag #israelisburning included, among the thousands being sent, one from Fatma Alqu ("What a good day"), and another from Kamil ("Israel burns and I love it! What will you do VS Allah's power you zionist (sic) dirt-bags..."). The Israeli media has published many others, from the Palestinians territories and the Arab world.

While the messages celebrate the wildfires, they also serve to exhort others who might want to join the party. But while this social media campaign is tied to the rash of blazes, the language used is from the same canon that has fueled incitement against Israel and Israelis for decades.

Since the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993, the one constant on the Palestinian side has been incitement. Called upon to end it when the agreement was signed, it has remained a daily weapon deployed by Palestinian political and religious figures, the media and in schools. By now, the incitement roster is well known, including most recently, charges that Israel is poisoning Palestinian water supplies; has no connection (Israel and the Jewish people) to the Temple Mount and the Western Wall; and denies medical care to Palestinian in the territories, a libelous charge if ever there was, given the hundreds of Palestinians treated in Israeli hospitals daily.

Indeed, a Palestinian baby born on the day the Oslo Accords were signed is now a 23-year-old adult raised on daily doses of hatred. So it should come as no surprise that this new (and surely there are others to follow) hashtag campaign is punctuated by the language of hate and a desire to see Israel's end.

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To be fair, the Palestinian Authority sent 50 firefighters to Israel to help extinguish the fires, a gesture which produced many Tweets from Israelis and others expressing appreciation (they joined more than 300 foreign firefighters from many countries, including Russia, Egypt, Jordan, Greece, Cyprus and Turkey). Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called PA President Mahmoud Abbas, to express thanks for the assistance, which the latter described as "humanitarian." The Prime Minister's office also noted that both Jews and Arabs opened their homes to victims of the blazes.

Perhaps the deployment of the firefighters is the gesture that breaks the ice over the stalled peace process. Whether it is, or is simply an aberration, time will soon tell. A new presidential administration will surely have its own assessment about the "process" and more broadly, the chaos and strategic wildfires burning out of control in Syria, Iraq and Yemen and by Iran's unabashed support for terrorism and creeping hegemonism in the region.

The social media incitement and the #israelisburning campaign may not have originated in the PA's Ramallah offices. But the years of incitement emanating from there, spewing out over so many years, provided the tinder for the matches of hatred thrown out on Twitter and Facebook during the course of the wildfires in Israel.

The PA and its leadership, if they were ever serious about a negotiated peace with Israel, have frittered away the past 20 years by, on the one hand, inciting its own people against Israel, and on the other, by counting on international support for the Palestinian narrative. The current hashtag campaign, and its incessant use of the United Nations and its agencies to further the Palestinian narrative, are the fruits of their labor. In the process, increasing numbers of Israelis ask if there is a serious partner for an accommodation — of any kind. Perhaps the fires in Israel and the language of the hashtag campaign are a wake-up call for those who have looked the other way at incitement against Israel. It is not a winning strategy. But past history would not be a cause for optimism on this point.

The social media revolution has given us the ability to immediately reach out to the public, to government officials and to colleagues, family and friends in unprecedented ways. It has also given those who hate the unimpeded opportunity to injure and maim in 140 characters or less, and to exhort others to join the fray, oftentimes, as we have now seen, with violent and dangerous consequences.

The social media campaign connected to the pyro-terrorism that has played out in Israel in recent days is a new strain of a growing virus.

Until now, the Palestinian leadership has seen no need to "educate for peace." It should look at the content of the fire-related Tweets, and contemplate what that nihilistic policy has wrought.