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MIDDLE EAST

Amid Jerusalem Clashes, Israeli and Palestinian Leaders Try to Make Their Case

By ISABEL KERSHNER SEPT. 18, 2015

JERUSALEM — Mahmoud Abbas, president of the Palestinian Authority, called Pope Francis to brief him on the “ongoing Israeli aggression in occupied East Jerusalem, and particularly against Al Aqsa Mosque.”

Benjamin Netanyahu, the Israeli prime minister, told the United Nations secretary general, Ban Ki-moon, that “Israel is acting against the violence on the Temple Mount” and “is strictly maintaining the status quo, Palestinian incitement to the contrary notwithstanding.”

The efforts by both leaders to make their case to the international authorities came on Thursday night, against the background of this week’s clashes at Al Aqsa Mosque compound in Jerusalem. There, Palestinian youths who were holed up inside the eighth-century mosque with stones, fireworks and other devices clashed with police officers as part of an effort to deter Jewish visitors to the site during the Jewish New Year, Rosh Hashana.

The fighting on the ground was matched by fighting words at the top, as Israel harshly criticized Mr. Abbas for videotaped remarks he made in Arabic this week in which he appeared to glorify Palestinians who were killed or wounded in the battle for Jerusalem. He said: “Al Aqsa is ours, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher is ours, it is all ours. They have no right to defile them with their filthy feet, and we will not allow them.”

Responding to the video, Dore Gold, the director general of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, said Thursday: “Today the world is divided between those trying to undermine religious coexistence and those trying to protect it. By saying that the ‘filthy feet’ of Jewish visitors to the Temple Mount desecrate it, Mahmoud Abbas has now clarified on which side he stands.”

The videotaped remarks were broadcast on Palestinian television on Wednesday, and the video was distributed by an Israeli monitoring group, Palestinian Media Watch, on Thursday. They were also posted on Mr. Abbas’s official website.

Tensions have simmered on and off for more than a year over the sacred plateau that is revered by Jews as the Temple Mount, the holiest site in Judaism, and by Muslims as the Noble Sanctuary, the third holiest site in Islam. The latest bout of violence in the compound began Sunday and continued over three days.

Palestinian political and militant factions had called for a “day of rage” on Friday to protest what they called the Israeli “incursions” into the compound. Palestinian protesters clashed with Israeli forces at familiar friction points across East Jerusalem and the West Bank.

Yet despite the high-pitched rhetoric of the leaders and growing international attention, the scattered confrontations remained relatively low key. Thousands of Israeli security forces had been deployed, but most Palestinians chose to stay at home.

The United Nations Security Council issued a statement late Thursday expressing “grave concern” over the escalating tensions and calling for “the exercise of restraint, refraining from provocative actions and rhetoric, and upholding unchanged the historic status quo” at the site.

Under a decades-old arrangement, the site is administered by the Islamic Waqf, under Jordanian custodianship, while Israel controls security. Jews and tourists are allowed to visit the site, but Israel maintains a ban on non-Muslim prayer there.

A recent push by some nationalist religious Jews, including politicians in Mr. Netanyahu’s governing coalition, for more access and prayer rights has fueled Palestinian fears that Israel secretly intends to change the status quo and divide

the site — an assertion that Mr. Netanyahu has repeatedly and vehemently denied.

Thousands of Israeli police officers fanned out across East Jerusalem on Friday, where confrontations took place in several predominantly Palestinian neighborhoods. Clashes also broke out in the West Bank near the Qalandia crossing that separates Ramallah from Jerusalem, in the tense city of Hebron and other areas.

At Qalandia, masked Palestinian youths threw rocks at Israeli soldiers, who responded with tear gas and rubber bullets. Some Palestinians said live ammunition had also been used.

Saed Imtair, 16, from the nearby Qalandia refugee camp, said, “We are here to demonstrate against Israel’s plans of dividing Al Aqsa Mosque.” Mr. Imtair said he and his fellow protesters were also angry with Mr. Abbas and the Palestinian Authority “for not doing anything to stop them and not even calling out for the Palestinian people to resist.”

Several Palestinians were reported wounded in the confrontations. In the East Jerusalem neighborhood of Jabal Mukaber, three Israeli border police officers were slightly wounded by a firebomb hurled into their vehicle by Palestinians, according to the police.

Later Friday, a rocket fired from Gaza landed in the Israeli border town of Sderot, damaging an empty bus but causing no injuries, according to the police.

Rami Nazzal contributed reporting from Ramallah and Qalandia, the West Bank.

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