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Israel takes aim at Palestinian 'incitement'

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JERUSALEM -- [Israel](#) announced Wednesday it will officially monitor "incitement" by the Palestinians, taking aim at what it says are widespread provocations against the Jewish state that undermine efforts to reach Mideast peace.

The announcement further strained an atmosphere that has grown increasingly tense in recent weeks following the breakdown of U.S.-sponsored Mideast peace talks. Palestinians accused Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of trying to divert attention away from the impasse in the negotiations and its own failures to live up to obligations, such as a settlement freeze.

Israel has long claimed that Palestinian leaders promote - or tolerate - hatred in school textbooks, public speeches and their official media. Israel have especially bristled at maps in schoolbooks and documents that do not designate Israel, and Palestinian TV broadcasts of mosque leaders denigrating Jews.

All this feeds off - and perhaps amplifies - what Israelis consider a hostile atmosphere, reflected in the fact that militants who carried out deadly attacks against Israeli civilians are widely regarded as heroes in the Palestinian territories, and streets and other public domains are often named after them.

Both sides committed themselves to curbing incitement in a 2003 U.S.-backed peace blueprint - the so-called "Road Map," which also calls for a settlement freeze. President Barack Obama has urged the Palestinians to "not look for excuses for incitement" and ensure "they are not engaging in provocative language."

The Palestinians say they have cracked down on official incitement and accuse the Israeli side of engaging in its own manifestations of hostility. They point to statements by extremist religious figures and nationalist politicians who occasionally speak derisively of Arabs.

The dispute underscores another cultural disconnect: Israelis would say radical statements from their side draw widespread criticism from liberal Israelis and the debate becomes a news item in the freewheeling media. They distinguish that from broadcasts on Palestinian state TV, which is linked to the government and goes unchallenged.

Palestinian government spokesman Ghassan Khatib dismisses such arguments. He said Israel "cannot set the definition of incitement unilaterally and then apply it to our side." He said for

the matter to be addressed fairly would require "either a neutral body or both of us (to) agree on what incitement is - and then it has to apply to both societies."

Speaking at Israel's parliament Wednesday, Netanyahu said his government would begin monitoring Palestinian media and compiling an "incitement index." His office said the index will examine "incitement to violence, encouragement of an atmosphere of violence and terror ... and lack of educating hearts to peace."

Itamar Marcus, director of Palestinian Media Watch, an advocacy group that already monitors the Palestinian media, said incitement has increased since peace talks resumed in September. Although the Israeli government's focus is the Palestinian Authority, Israel's ostensible peace partners, Marcus said incitement is broadcast also by the Hamas militants who control Gaza.

Marcus said Palestinian officials have recently claimed that Israel spreads AIDS in Palestinian territories, and his most recent report cites an example of a TV host describing Jaffa, a port in Israel proper, as "occupied area in the occupied territories."

He also pointed to a Palestinian TV show in May showing children singing "I want to carry a machine gun and a rifle. I won't care about you, my enemy, or about the West. And we shall strike Israel, we shall strike Israel."

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas has acknowledged there have been problems in the past, but said he is dealing with the issue. "I can't deny that some of our people make incitement. We want to eliminate this. We have to work on it," he told a group of Jewish American leaders during a trip to the U.S. in September.

Hanan Ashrawi, a Palestinian lawmaker, called the initiative "another Israeli attempt to draw attention away from the (peace) talks" that started in September and swiftly stalled over the Israeli resumption of settlement-building. She said that "there is incitement and discrimination on the Israeli side" as well.

Incitement does exist on the Israeli side but it is not mainstream and is always condemned by the majority of society and in the media.

Israel's ultranationalist foreign minister, Avigdor Lieberman, has repeatedly questioned the loyalty of Israel's Arab minority, pushing attempts in parliament to require them to take loyalty oaths.

Ovadia Yosef, an influential Israeli rabbi, recently said in a sermon Abbas should be struck with a plague and "perish from this world." He later apologized for the comments.

And a main highway that cuts through the West Bank is named after the late Rehavim Zeevi, a far-right politician who advocated transferring Palestinians out of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Zeevi was killed by a Palestinian assassin in 2001.