

How War With the Palestinians Triggered Ethnic Violence in Israel

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In mixed towns across the country, Arab and Jewish citizens have turned on one another, with substantial implications for the government formation process and other issues.

Among the scenes of violence playing out between Israelis and Palestinians during the past few days, many are familiar with their other recent eruptions: Israeli security forces confronting Palestinian protesters, Hamas militants firing barrages of rockets at Israeli cities, and Israeli warplanes dropping huge payloads on the Gaza Strip. But something different and, in some ways, more alarming has come to characterize this round of fighting. In several mixed Jewish-Arab towns across Israel, an intercommunal violence has flared, sometimes pitting neighbor against neighbor, Arab citizens of Israel against Jewish ones.

The fiercest of these clashes took place in the central city of Lod, where officials imposed a nighttime curfew after young Arabs burned several cars and synagogues on Tuesday night and targeted some Jewish Israelis in their homes. Israeli President Reuven Rivlin termed the disturbances a “pogrom” by an “incited and bloodthirsty Arab mob.” Nine companies of Israel Border Police forces were redeployed from the West Bank to Lod and other mixed towns to quell the unrest, with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, in a late-night visit to the city, vowing to restore order “with an iron hand.”

By Wednesday night, young Jewish ultranationalists joined the fray and began targeting Arab passersby and Arab-owned shops in several cities across the country. Live footage aired on television showed Jewish men beating an Arab motorist with fists and iron bars in the coastal city of Bat Yam; reports also indicated that a pregnant Arab woman was seriously injured in Lod and a Jewish man was critically injured by a group of Arabs in the northern city

of Acre.

After remaining silent for several hours, Netanyahu issued a late-night video statement, hinting that military forces may be deployed to help the overwhelmed police “eliminate the anarchy.” “You cannot grab an ordinary Arab citizen and try to lynch him—just as we cannot watch Arab citizens do this to Jewish citizens. This will not happen,” he added.

Arab-Jewish violence inside Israel comes amid the bloodiest fighting in years between Israel’s government and militant factions in Gaza led by Hamas. More than 80 Palestinians have been killed and at least 400 Palestinians injured in Israeli airstrikes. The Israeli military said roughly half of those casualties were terrorist operatives, though Palestinians said the majority were civilians. On the Israeli side, at least six civilians and one soldier have been killed, with dozens more civilians injured, by rocket and missile fire.

This escalation followed weeks of rising tensions in Jerusalem and clashes between Palestinian worshippers and Israeli riot police near the city’s al-Aqsa mosque, the third holiest site in Islam. But although the rocket and airstrikes have accounted for most of the fatalities, sectarian clashes inside Israel between Arab and Jewish citizens have begun to dominate Israeli media coverage. “We are witnessing a situation we have not seen before in mixed cities,” Israel National Police Commissioner Yaakov Shabtai said on Tuesday, calling it the worst intercommunal violence in decades.

Arab Israelis, who make up about 20 percent of the population, are citizens of Israel—unlike their Palestinian brethren in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. But Israel has treated them largely as second-class citizens over the years, withholding key resources and underfunding their communities.

Political parties that represent the community have tended to wield little power in Israeli politics, disinclined to join Jewish-led governments in the Jewish state and never actually invited to do so. That trend seemed to be changing in recent months.

One Islamist faction in particular, the United Arab List (UAL), ran an entire campaign ahead of March’s general election on a promise it would take part in Israeli coalition politics to secure long-needed budgetary support, housing permits, and infrastructure improvements. UAL chairperson Mansour Abbas even countenanced backing a right-wing government led by Netanyahu—but the premier’s far-right allies vetoed any cooperation with an Arab-led party.

Abbas then shifted his support to the anti-Netanyahu camp, a mix of parties from the right, center, and left united almost solely by their common goal of toppling the long-serving incumbent. Coalition talks between Abbas and opposition leaders had been moving ahead until the outbreak of hostilities this week.

Abbas suspended the negotiations, though he said it’s only temporary. “It is inevitable that we will return to political talks for the formation of the government after the fire subsides,” Abbas told Israel’s Kan broadcaster on Wednesday. “We have a real opportunity to play an important role in Israeli politics for the sake of our society.”

But not all Israeli Arabs were happy with Abbas’s approach and, in particular, the flirtation with Netanyahu and the Israeli right. Most Arab Israeli politicians and analysts blamed Netanyahu for the heightened tensions at al-Aqsa mosque during the holy month of Ramadan and now escalation in Gaza and intercommunal violence in Israel.

“Arabs want to integrate, but we want real communal equality before integration,” Mohammad Darawshe, an expert on Arab-Jewish relations at a peace education institute in northern Israel, told *Foreign Policy*. “We see the oppression [on the part of the Israeli authorities]...It’s a sign of the failure of Abbas’s approach.”

Abbas called on Arab Israelis to refrain from violence and said protests were “moving in a very dangerous direction.” Ayman Odeh, who heads the Joint List group and is a political rival to Abbas, said the violence was “a grave mistake” and encouraged his community to continue protests “against the occupation and the siege, without harming

property and certainly not human life.”

Issawi Frej, an Arab lawmaker from the left-wing Meretz party and a lone early voice calling for a halt to the rioting, urged community leaders to help end the sectarian violence. “Leadership is tested in times of crisis—all Arab community leaders need to speak out...The silent majority cannot stay silent any longer,” he said to Israel’s Channel 12 television station on Wednesday. “The war with Hamas will end, but what about us? We will still meet at the supermarket, in the hospitals.”

Hamas officials had been urging Arab Israelis to take part in confrontations against Israel. That some members of the community did so was widely seen as a victory for the group. “Your sacrifice is the fuel for the revolution for our people and the liberation of our land,” Hamas spokesperson Abu Ubaida said in a recorded statement on Wednesday.

Right-wing commentators were quick to seize on the timing of the intercommunal violence to score political points—asking rhetorically how it was possible to seat a government with the support of such “traitors.” Left-wing commentators suggested the timing of this latest confrontation was convenient for Netanyahu—just as his opponents in parliament were about to seal a coalition deal that would have ended his long reign as prime minister.

Among those caught in the sectarian violence’s crossfire was Uri Jeremias, a Jewish Israeli chef and business owner in Acre’s predominantly Arab Old City. Last week, Jeremias held an interfaith *iftar* dinner for a few hundred Muslims, Jews, Bahais, and Christians. On Tuesday night, young men threw petrol bombs at his hotel and well-known seafood restaurant, burning the latter down.

“It was two young, frustrated rioters who were incited from outside” the Old City, Jeremias told *Foreign Policy*. “You only need two idiots and a match.”

He said the violence in Acre and across the country has surprised him. “Riots have happened in the past. I wouldn’t be surprised if they happened in the future, but nothing like this has happened before.”

Neri Zilber is a journalist based in Tel Aviv and an adjunct fellow with The Washington Institute. This article was originally published on the Foreign Policy website (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/05/13/israel-palestine-violence-protests-hamas-netanyahu-gaza-west-bank/>). ❖

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